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'Babies' beyond cute

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NCR Today

Just in time for Mothers Day, French documentarian Thomas Balmès ' new film "Babies" or Bébé(s) opened on Friday.

"Babies" follows the first year in the life of four babies: Ponijao, from Opuwo, Namibia, Africa;



Bayarjargal () from Mongolia, Asia; Mari, from Tokyo,

Japan; and Hattie from San Francisco, California.

In interviews, Balmès says that he was commissioned to make a "wildlife documentary" about babies. His interpretation of the assignment begins just before the birth of each child when we meet the mothers in a state of immediate expectation. Each child's umbilical cord is cut, and they (one boy, Bayar, and three girls) begin their life's journey outside the womb.

Media makers, especially advertisers, know that nothing attracts human eyeballs like the face of a child, or a child playing with an animal. All the children have some contact with animals, but Ponijao from Namibia and Bayar from Mongolia, grow up with more than the family cat or dog. In fact, Ponijao grows up in dirt, like our ancestors did for hundreds of generations before we became sanitized and civilized. I

will admit to being worried about Ponijao, but towards the end I noticed what looked like a vaccination scar on her arm.

"Babies" is a celebration of life, especially the relationship between mothers and children. Siblings are included, but the fathers have a minimal role to play. In fact, Ponijao's father never makes an appearance. The film has a very primal feel to it as we see the mothers nursing their infants and interacting with them. Pooping and peeing must be shown, naturally. But these activities are presented naturally, and the audience chuckles, acknowledging shared experiences. Ponijao's mother cleaned her daughter's poop, left on her arm when her little girl climbed into her lap, with a dried cornhusk. There are no disposable diapers in this village.

The children explore their bodies and mothers and siblings gently push their hands away and redirect their attention. There is no shame in "Babies"; it is a celebration of human life and love.

What is especially engaging is watching each child's personality develop. I asked two others who their favorite child was, and all of us chose Bayar from Mongolia. He has the courage of his youth and is afraid of nothing. Hattie is rather "sober" in demeanor. Mari is determined. Ponijao is not above biting her sibling to get what she wants and she learns consequences at an early age.



In one rather ironic juxtaposition of scenes, Hattie is with

her mom at a gathering of "earth mothers" in San Francisco. The children stand in front of their mothers in a thoroughly modern room as the women chant that the earth is their mother and will care for them. Hattie bolts for the door, as if trying to escape. Perhaps she wants to join Bayar and Ponijao in the great outdoors, where the earth and great outdoors is pretty much all the people have.

Students of child development are sure to find the cultural ethnographic nature of the film interesting. Much of what child psychologists Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) observed in their work is confirmed in "Babies." Kids develop in the same stages, they learn language from the close dialogic relationship with the mother especially -- and they all whine the same way.

"Babies" is very National Geographic in its presentation (perhaps because of the wildlife nature of the assignment given to the director), but there is no narrative commentary, other than the images and how they are assembled. The filmmaker's camera is still and the children seem unaware that it is even there. There are no pans or close-ups. We join the flies on the walls to watch these children during their first year after birth. Director Balmès wisely leaves the commentary or the meaning of the film to be determined in that space between him as the artist, and us, the audience -- not unlike that relationship between a mother and child who communicate through gaze and language.

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For those who are interested in the theology of the body, I think this film, that so respects the human body

and human bonds, will inspire contemplation and conversation.

At the end, we get to see each of the children at four or five years of age. Wonderful.

See if you can stop smiling as you exit the theater. There is so much more to "Babies" than cuteness, but that charm goes a long way.

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