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birth/rebirth

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Abstract

This is a film review of *birth/rebirth* (2023), directed by Laura Moss.

Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred (Oxford University Press, 2016); Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film (Routledge, 2012); and Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy: https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567

birth/rebirth (2023), dir. Laura Moss

There is more than a touch of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to this modern day set horror parable about the lengths anyone might go to in order to salvage, and even re-create, a child. Having had a daughter through IVF, and with an all-consuming job as a hospital maternity nurse, Celie (Judy Reyes) has reached an impasse in her life when the six-year-old girl who is the center of her universe dies unexpectedly of bacterial meningitis, without even the chance to say goodbye. The hospital's failure to produce the body raises her suspicion, and she traces the shifty pathologist, who didn't exactly give her a convincing explanation as to the whereabouts of her child's corpse, back to her apartment where she has the shock of her life to find her comatose daughter betubed and still alive—reanimated, no less—on the pathologist's bed.

Rather than contact the authorities that foul play has occurred, she realizes that the pathologist's obsession since childhood with bringing the dead back to life is actually the only way she can experience her daughter again. Cue all kinds of medical malpractices involving the

botching of medical records so as to bring perfectly healthy pregnant women into the hospital in order to extract amniotic fluid and other genetic materials in order to sustain the body of the young girl—who does indeed awaken from the dead, but the little girl who returns is not quite the same as she was before and, like Frankenstein's monster, has become a macabre and brutal facsimile of her former self.

This itself raises all manner of philosophical questions, as recently explored in *Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio* fable about whether the appearance of a dead child is tantamount to personal continuity and physical identity, a set of questions also known to audiences familiar with *Face/Off* and the Steve Martin comedies *All Of Me* and *The Man With Two Brains* which are replete with questions of whether there might be a discontinuity and mismatch between physical form and the thoughts, memories, personality and behavior that we associate with that person. As Paul Badham wrote in the 1970s, "If it is logically possible for me to exist in another body then my personal identity is not to be identified with my body as an externally recognisable entity, but rather with my internal, self-aware consciousness or mind."[1] For Terence Penulhum, also, "if the necessary connection is not between bodily identity and personal identity but between personal identity and memory, then it might be that a disembodied person might be said to be the same as some pre-mortem person because he might remember events and actions in his previous existence."[2]

None of this is exactly at stake in *birth/rebirth*, however, where it is the pathologist, Rose, played with intensity and commitment by Marin Ireland, who, as the creator of the hideous, reconstructed girl is the one with whom the little girl most closely allies—which is ironic considering her own palpable lack of maternal instincts. Indeed, we first meet Rose as she offers a random man in a bar to let her masturbate him in the toilet, only then to impregnate herself with his sperm with a view to harvesting the fetus for the stem cells needed to bring back the dead. The

point of no return is reached and the film's greatest selling point is in the way it tries to reconceive the Frankenstein myth through the lens of a feminine perspective on motherhood.

However, we don't really feel the emotional grief that Celie undergoes and why she would put other pregnant women at risk, as she allies her project to Rose's outrageous scheme in order to sustain the version of her ostensibly deceased daughter who is now crawling zombie-like around Rose's apartment. The question at the heart, and which is answered in the chilling finale, is whether a comatose zombie is better than having no daughter at all, and what surprises is the way in which these two very different women effectively end up co-parenting Frankenstein's monster, with their very different personalities and experiences of motherhood strangely complementing one another.

[1] Paul Badham, *Christian Beliefs about Life after Death* (London & Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1976), 100.

[2] Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 14-15.