





CAST

Lori Lethin as Joyce Russel
Melinda Cordell as Mrs Brody
Julie Brown as Beverly Brody
Joe Penny as Mr Harding
Bert Kramer as Sheriff Brody
K.C. Martel as Timmy Russel
Elizabeth Hoy as Debbie Brody
Billy Jacoby as Curtis Taylor
Andy Freeman as Steven Seton
Susan Strasberg as Miss Davis

CREW

Directed by Ed Hunt
Produced by Gerald T. Olson
Screenplay by Ed Hunt and Barry Pearson
Director of Photography Stephen Posey
Edited by Ann E. Mills
Music Composed and Conducted by Arlon Ober

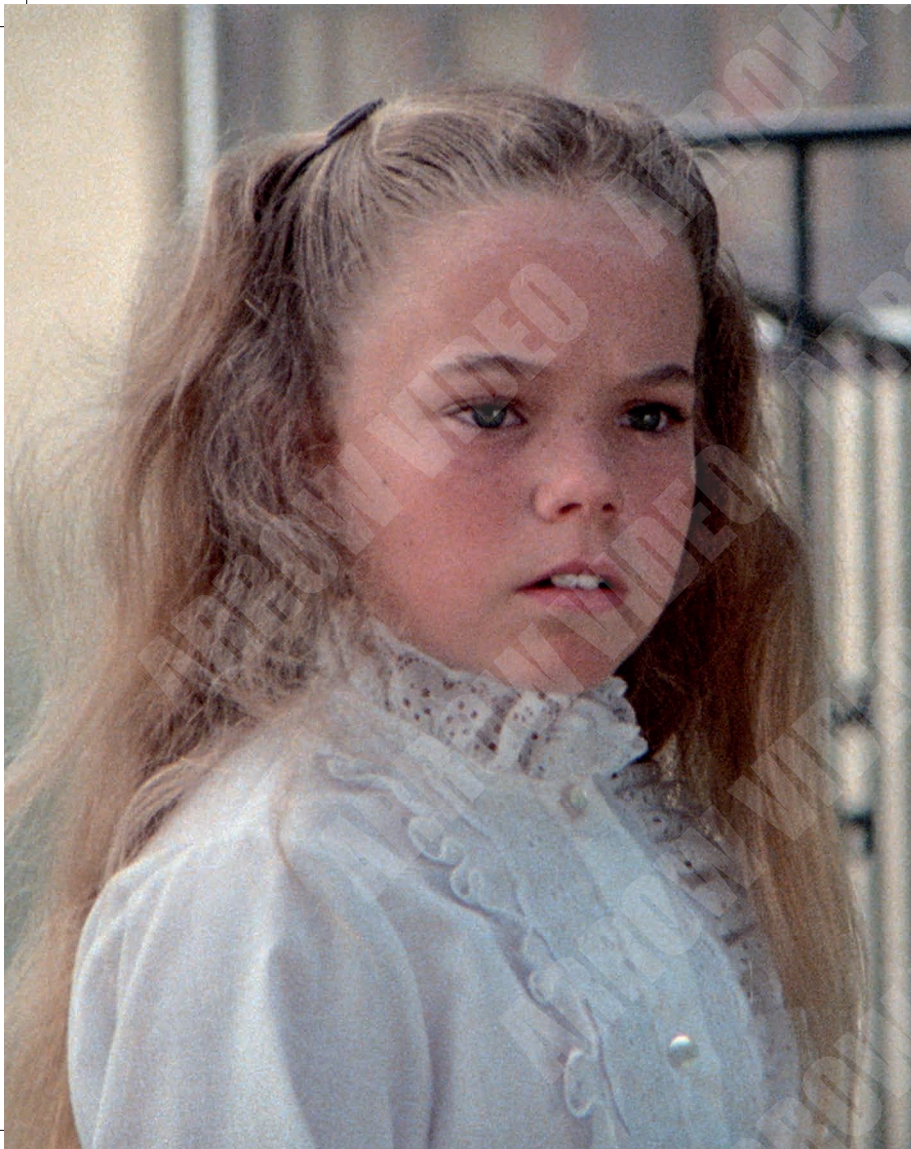
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BORN UNDER A BAD MOON: CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION IN 'BLOODY BIRTHDAY'

by Lee Gambin

During the eighties, there were a number of movies that featured a monumental solar or lunar eclipse which influenced the course of action that was to unfold – as well as birthing some sinister malevolence that would cause great distress for multiple characters peppered throughout each narrative. In one of Disney's rare horror outings, *The Watcher in the Woods* (1980), the motif of the eclipse is used twice – once as a harbinger of chaos and then as a backdrop to an attempt to restore the natural order. In popular fantasy films *Dragonslayer* (1981) and *Ladyhawke* (1985), the eclipse plays a major plot point in the progress of characters moving forward and embracing varied experiences, whereas, in the Faustian rock 'n' roll musical horror hybrid *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) from director Frank Oz, the total eclipse of the sun sees the unholy birth of a man-eating plant soon to wreak havoc on the residents of the impoverished Skid Row.

Here in Ed Hunt's thoroughly entertaining *Bloody Birthday*, three children are born at the same time under a rare eclipse and each child is driven by a relentless desire to do major damage to suburban-dwelling residents unaware of such inexplicable monstrosity. In what would be a fitting tribute to John Wyndham's chilling *The Midwich Cuckoos* – and in turn, a lovingly conceived homage to the film adaptation of that story, *The Village of the Damned* (1960) – Hunt's film embraces the evil child subgenre of horror where the featured monster is a prepubescent juvenile who terrorizes unsuspecting adults. However, what Hunt's film smartly employs is a wonderfully concocted marriage between the evil child subgenre and the incredibly popular game-changing subgenre of the slasher film. This is established in both the early sequence in *Bloody Birthday* where horny teenage lovers are

killed in a brutal manner (by an “unseen” murderer – or murderers) and also by the way the film was marketed and pitched as a traditional slasher film. The campaign and poster art showcased that magnificent iconic image of the severed hand sticking out of a birthday cake which rang similar in theme and tone to the 1981 Canadian slasher classic *Happy Birthday to Me* – both films employing the celebratory birthday party theme. Therefore, sharing similar tropes of films such as J. Lee Thompson’s class resentment slasher, many of the victims in *Bloody Birthday* are teenagers – sexually active and oft-naked nubile teens – who are slaughtered by the three sociopathic children with swift precision and sick glee. Director Hunt also features a sturdy and resourceful heroine who combats the demented pintsized troublemakers, and also makes her a nurturing older sister to a little brother who is continually threatened by the terrifying trio.

Set against a warm and inviting suburban landscape (the film was shot in Pasadena – which is where John Carpenter’s *Halloween* [1978] found its home, standing in for America’s great Midwest), the film is thematically invested in astrology and the New Age philosophies that come with such “higher learning”. The aforementioned heroine of the piece, Joyce (Lori Lethin), is acutely interested in “the way of the stars”, and in an early scene she is seen doing the astrological chart for her little brother Timmy (K.C. Martel) who, incidentally, is initially set up as a perceived threat (creeping up on his sister with a large kitchen knife kept in frame for most of the sequence), which establishes the fact that the film is readily happy to present children as creepy, silent assailants. Of course, Timmy is not a menace, but he is, fleetingly at least, a suspect, after the town’s sheriff gives a lecture on neighbourhood safety and informs the children about the two local teens killed the night before. Joyce interrogates Timmy (“Where were you last night?”) and even between the loving connection shared between older sister and kid brother, there is a palpable cultural divide – in *Bloody Birthday*, children have created a secret world that remains elusive to their teenage and adult counterparts.

The use of astrological interpretation as a backbone to this difference in perception and cagey hidden “worlds” is a much more subtle thematic catalyst for the violence that ensues, as opposed to the far more blatant use of elements of “Beowulf” as seen in the fun but flawed Troma release *Beware! Children at Play* (1989), which uses the myth of Grendel





as a source of inspiration, linking Anglo-Saxon ritualistic killings to feral children slaying the likes of unfortunate adults. Four years earlier, the excellent Australian film *Fortress* (1985) has Rachel Ward as a school teacher read the story of Grendel to her students who have been through an ordeal and forced to combat a violent gang of kidnapers, but here in *Bloody Birthday* the use of an ancient connection made between the influence of the solar system and the anarchic sadism of the three children is quietly developed and allows enough room for some inspired set-pieces, similar to how Tobe Hooper weaved astrological intervention into his masterpiece *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), which would be a generational inversion to *Bloody Birthday* in that Hooper's picture has a rural backwater family dismembering the future "children of the revolution". In *Bloody Birthday*, it is learned that every twenty years there is a conjunction that is "bad" where lives are mapped out before birth – with the stars designing the trajectory of life; malevolent and demented life in the form of three psychotic children.

The three nasty killer kiddies are Debbie (Elizabeth Hoy), a Rhoda Penmark type complete with golden locks and an angelic smile who seems to be the ringleader of the trio; Steven (Andy Freeman), the youngest of the group, who remains quite silent but deadly; and Curtis (Billy Jacoby), a manipulative maniac with a penchant for firearms reminiscent of made-for-TV film *A Little Game* (1971). Credited as Billy Jacoby but now known as Billy Jayne, the actor comes from a family of very talented performers, one being his older brother Scott Jacoby, who would make a terrifying impression as the titular tormented teen in the unsettling made-for-TV classic *Bad Ronald* (1974). These three child stars from *Bloody Birthday* follow in the great footsteps of past evil children in film history, such as Scott Jacoby's excellent turn as the boy living between the walls of his dead mother's house, the previously alluded to Patty McCormack creation from *The Bad Seed* (1956), to the chilling performance from twins Chris and Martin Udvarnoky in *The Other* (1972).

Some of the most electric deaths in *Bloody Birthday* are saved for the authority figures of the piece – namely the sheriff and Susan Strasberg as their teacher, who revels in playing a stern and unfeeling bitch and delivers one of the best lines in the film: "Just because you all have the same birthday, doesn't mean that you're special." This is a terrific commentary on children at a certain age and their bizarre egos; a true observation of the primal



monstrousness of children. The film celebrates this primal ugliness in child behaviour and unnerving glimpses at opportunism such as the image of Debbie selling spots for the boys to watch her elder sister, Beverly (Julie Brown), strip. With Beverly established as the sexually free character and her counterpart Joyce as the sensible character, it is clear that the former will get a grisly death scene which is nicely linked to the use of the peephole used for voyeuristic intentions by her younger sister's friends. However, teens and adults are not only up for the slaughter – young Timmy is constantly in jeopardy and under threat at the hands of Debbie, Steven and Curtis, and there is a sequence involving him being trapped in what seems to be a discarded refrigerator, which brings to mind a strange phenomenon amongst children who would “get stuck in emptied fridges” and suffocate to death. This would be the very focus of the Very Special Episode from the much-loved American sitcom *Punky Brewster* entitled “Cherie Lifesaver”.

However, the most memorable sequence in this inspired horror gem is an entire showcase of gaslighting at its most awful. In a great centrepiece of the film, Curtis makes Joyce believe that he has used ant poison in the icing for a birthday cake that most of the residents of the town will be eating. Prior to this, a smart throwaway line acts as a sideline insight into what is to come: the idea of “fake news” and the eventual desperation to be believed. Joyce poo-poo's Beverly's interest in Hollywood tabloid magazines, to which Beverly remarks, “Well it's all true!”, and the idea of any news being believed is something that will be the propelling force for the actions of the film's heroine for the rest of the duration of the picture. The gaslighting of Joyce is nicely juxtaposed with imagery of the ghoulishness of the three children who open their many presents like ravenous hyenas. Secondary to this showcase of gluttony is the presentation of the “healthy” children eating cake in what would be a nice precursor to the advent of a “grunge aesthetic” with bands such as Babes in Toyland and Hole in the nineties using imagery of children's parties, dolls and birthday cake (a trapping of white suburban culture) in their music videos. The frenzy and weird politics of children's parties is also something that cinema has used as a catapult for dark territory, and in the film noir classic *The Locket* (1946) it is a flashback to a little girl's party that jettisons a series of grim events, while in Vincente Minnelli's magnificent seasonal favourite musical *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), little Margaret O'Brien and the pint-sized residents of the featured halcyon town celebrate Halloween by terrorizing aging neighbours





and starting a bonfire burning the wares of adults. When little Margaret O'Brien pleases the other children by desecrating houses and attacking an elderly school master, she is christened "The Most Horrible" and relishes in this. She screams it and shouts it and is so filled with glee that she most certainly becomes the most horrible. In *Bloody Birthday*, the "most horrible" exist outside the private realm of childhood games; here they are as gaslighting sociopaths, and, through the masterful direction of Ed Hunt along with his gifted editor Ann E. Mills, the tension builds between the suburbanites chowing down on what could be poisonous cake and Joyce anxiously telling them not to eat it. In many ways, the scene sings similar to Roy Schieder screaming at swimmers to get out of the water in *Jaws* (1975) – "Don't eat the cake!" is a descendent of "Get out of the water!"

Another stunning achievement in the film is a great performance from actress Melinda Cordell as Debbie's supposedly traumatised mother, who keeps up a grieving façade throughout the film until the final big reveal in the closing scene. She continually masters a charade of overwhelming despair and yet delivers subtle transitions in a terrific moment when she is behind closed doors contemplating. There are also nice little visual nods to masterworks such as the Spanish horror masterwork *Who Can Kill a Child?* (1976), a testament to the urgency of sex for the teens playing against the sheer relentless and aggressive violence of the children and the complex psychological evaluation of children without "a conscience" and a great condensation of perception and realisation summarised by unpretentious scenarios and dialogue such as "What are you, some kind of little ghoul?"

Ed Hunt's evil child/slasher hybrid is an engaging tribute to cinematic sociopathic monstrosities, and even in the most casual snippets of conversation between characters, many inferences and acuties can be made. For instance, when Beverly mocks her little sister Debbie and refers to her as "angel face", one cannot help but think of the sublime Otto Preminger noir *Angel Face* (1952), starring Jean Simmons as a sociopathic and psychotic teenager, hellbent on killing her parents with the help of the entrapped Robert Mitchum.

Lee Gambin is a writer and film historian who has written the books Nope, Nothing Wrong Here: The Making of 'Cujo', We Can Be Who We Are: Movie Musicals of the 1970s and the soon to be released 'The Howling': Studies in the Horror Film and Hell Hath No Fury Like Her: The Making of 'Christine'.





ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Bloody Birthday has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono audio.

The original 35mm interpositive element was scanned in 2K resolution on a Lasergraphics Director at EFilm, Burbank. The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London. The original mono mix was restored from the best existing audio material.

All materials for this restoration were made available by Janet Schorer and Jan Willem Bosman Jansen/Ignite Films.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films
R3Store Studios: Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Andrew O'Hagan, Rich Watson, Jenny Collins
EFilm: David Morales
Deluxe Audio Services: Jordan Perry

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Blu-ray Mastering & Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Artist **Timothy Pittides**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Chris Alexander, Robert Blair, Michael Felsher, Ken Gord, Joseph Henson, Ed Hunt, Nathan Johnson, Justin Kerswell, Jim Kunz, Lori Lethin, Rhodes Mason/Internet Video Archive, Janet Schorer and Erik Threlfall.



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