



Everybody loves...
BABIES

Babies Discussion Guide

Director: Thomas Balmès

Year: 2010

Time: 79 min

You might know this director from:

Happiness (2013)

A Decent Factory (2004)

FILM SUMMARY

When *BABIES* director Thomas Balmès was asked to describe the methodology behind capturing four babies from birth through their first year, he said, “I’m really trying to do documentaries where the viewer is observing an idea that he had himself and to understand something out of that.” Without employing voiceovers or subtitles of any sort, *BABIES* offers a chance for us to consider which factors influence and shape a character.

BABIES introduces us to Ponijao from tribal Namibia, Mari from futuristic Tokyo, Bayar from rural Mongolia, and Hattie from urban San Francisco. Captured on film from the moment they are born within the comfort and familiarity of their homes, surrounded by parents, caretakers, siblings, pets, and the wider community, these four newborns take us on a year-long ride complete with humility, laughter, adventure, discovery, heartbreak, and speculation.

What makes a baby a baby? What are the essential elements of our formative years? What can parents control, and when are they completely powerless? How have developments in the Western World both enhanced and hindered our parenting skills, our access to intuition? *BABIES* challenges us to answer these questions on our own, with nothing more than the filmmaker’s editing decisions as a guide.

Similarities and differences can be spotted in all four babies. There is a red thread of love, however. Being cherished, cared for, honored, and valued within these families ties the story together, providing a rich and meaningful cinematic journey for people across the globe.

FILM THEMES

Life is a universal concept. When viewed through the eyes of various cultures, the manner in which life is lived may diverge, but the powers inherent in each individual connect us across the globe.

UNIVERSALITY OF LIFE

Rural, urban, developed, developing: the first year of life in a Mongolian yurt is different than one spent in a high-rise apartment in Tokyo. But fundamentally, we are all the same. Each baby reaches the same milestones of smiling, crawling, babbling, or grabbing at similar times regardless of the language they hear, the food they consume, or the stimulus to which they are exposed. They are all preoccupied with the same daily needs of sustenance, comfort, and love. Once an individual's basic needs are met, the miracles of life unfold for everyone, no matter where they live in this world.

EXTERNAL WORLD, INTERNAL SELF

Caretakers can control some of the external factors that influence the children under their care. Placing or removing certain objects, providing nutrition, passing on one's interpretation of life through actions or by intervening at difficult crossroads, parents often set out to steer their children in a certain direction, yet so much remains beyond their control. Each individual is born with a spirit that is arguably unique. *BABIES* offers visual proof that the primary role of a parent is to not silence the songbird within each infant, but to provide a stable foundation on which each baby can find their own singular path.

BUSY VS. BOREDOM

Boredom is the antithesis of the modern, developed world and is often equated with failure, inability, and a lack of creativity. Busy is the keyword of our days, and in *BABIES*, this translates into toys and classes, distractions, interactions, a constant stream of stimuli provided by parents who are always on the go. This busyness, however, has not yet plagued the developing world, which relies on the age-old notion of passive time, acknowledging the buzzing of a bee, the sensation of a stone, or the humdrum of the midday hour as learning tools. For babies who are given blocks of unscheduled time, happiness sometimes seems more readily theirs.

OVER VS. UNDER PROTECTED

Ponijao chewed on a dirt-covered bone. Bayar climbed naked on a rusty barrel in a field of roaming cows. A First-Worlder might ask, Where were their parents? Where is this child's safety net and protection? But consider this: there are negative implications to overprotection. Some children are never granted the freedom to make their own mistakes, but are hovered over and guided through pre-selected experiences. Parents in the developing world who go about their daily duties and allow their children to experience the world on their own terms care for their children as well as their gear-equipped First World counterparts.

“I felt sorry for Mari; I wish she could see a nice horizon, she can't be always inside. We see the huge, beautiful views of our country; that's why our kids are usually raised close to nature, to grow up calm and humble people. And sometimes very naïve.”

Mandakh, Bayar's mother

“The lesson I came away with is pretty much anything is the right thing to do if you do it with the right spirit.”

Frazer, Hattie's father

FILM FACTS:

- The U.S. is one of three North American countries that also has 14 territories in the Pacific and Caribbean regions. As the world's largest importer of goods and the 2nd largest exporter, the U.S. economy is fueled by an abundance of natural resources and high productivity. 319 million people call the U.S. home, making it the 3rd most populous nation. The average American lives to age 78, a figure that is on the decline due to increased obesity.
- Namibia is located in southern Africa and borders the Atlantic Ocean, Angola, Zambia, Botswana, and South Africa. Agriculture, herding, tourism and mining are the basis of the economy. The average Namibian lives to age 52, one of the lowest life expectancies in the world. It has a population of just over 2 million. The Himba tribe, to which Ponijao belongs, is the last nomadic tribe of Namibia and computes their wealth according to the number of their cows.
- BABIES director Thomas Balmès has 3 children and is raising them in Paris, France.
- Rather than water, Namibian women use red ochre, a natural earth pigment, to wash themselves. Men occasionally use red ochre but mainly bathe in water, as they wear less clothing.
- Only 1.4% of U.S. babies are born at home or in a birthing center. The remaining are delivered in hospitals or clinics.
- 95% of deliveries occurred at home in the 1950s in Japan. That number has now dropped to 2%, with the remainder of births now taking place at hospitals and clinics.
- Mongolian Bayarjargal, according to Balmès, was "the champion in terms of amazing scenes."
- Mongolia is a landlocked country in east-central Asia, bordered by Russia and China. The 19th largest country in terms of landmass, it is the most sparsely populated independent country in the world, with a population of just under 3 million. 30% of the population is nomadic, with herding animals as the main source of income. The primary religion is Tibetan Buddhism, and the average Mongolian lives to age 68.
- Japan is an island nation in East Asia known as the Land of the Rising Sun. Japan has the world's 3rd largest economy, and with its great industrial capacity is home to some of the most technologically advanced producers of vehicles, electronics, machine tools, ships, chemical substances, textiles, and processed foods. Over 126 million people call Japan home, and with the 2nd highest life expectancy in the world, the average Japanese lives to age 84.
- In Namibia, 28% of children are still breastfed at age 2. In Mongolia, that rate rises to 65%. A Mongolian saying states that if a male nurses until age 6, he will become a great wrestler.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to be touched by it and discuss these topics.
2. Lend a hand to the [Kids First Fund](#), which supports children that are abused, neglected, or abandoned all over the world, focusing on countries where resources are limited.
3. Become involved with WAHA - the [Women and Health Alliance International](#) - which works to improve women's and children's health, particularly regarding childbirth and infancy.
4. Opt for giving your time and undivided love to children over material objects.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.