

SHOOTING THE ULTIMATE TABOO



Tough choices: the character of Alice in *Hollow*

The overwhelming pull of addiction versus the prospect of motherhood provides the hook for *Hollow*, a short film by the award-winning London film director Rob Sorrenti. **Michael Simpson** looks at how the highly stigmatised dilemma of being a drug-addicted mother has been portrayed on film.

Condemned by the then US presidential candidate Bob Dole as glorifying heroin use, Danny Boyle's 1996 film *Trainspotting*, which followed the fortunes of a group of heroin users in late 80s Edinburgh, attracted its fair share of attention.

While it would claim to be outlandish and transgressive with its stylish roster and culturally laden wit, the film contained enough of the misery and desperation to suggest that heroin addiction is not chic or subversively cool.

Lead character Renton's poetic liberation is met head on in the street by the sudden turning of his bowels, while Mother Superior's quest for a vein takes

him below the waist, ultimately costing him his legs. However it is Tommy, the well adjusted one with the girlfriend and clean flat, whose end is the darkest, contracting HIV even as Renton receives the all clear despite, as he says, "several years of addiction right in the middle of an epidemic."

The film's turning point – where the stylised highs tumble into stylised lows, the over active camera work is pared down, and the clambering rush of Iggy Pop's *Lust for Life* is replaced by the dreary seediness of another Iggy tune *Nightclubbing* – comes with the sudden death of Baby Dawn. Lesley, the baby's

mother, has a brief but significant role in the film. She is the one who discloses early on that a hit of heroin "beats any fucking cock in the world." She says this even as a forgotten Baby Dawn giggles and tumble rolls in the next room. The hard edge of the scene, however, is Renton's offer of a hit to Lesley, after one himself, begged for by the grieving mother. Only then does she calm down.

Though Lesley does not feature in the film again, the theme her character raises is an interesting one. The word junkie is uncomfortable for many reasons, often implying a kind of dehumanised detachment where the

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individual has lost their sense of self, and now, beholden to heroin, acts on craving and impulse. There is a succinct, tabloid simplicity to this view that becomes even more pronounced when the 'junkie' also happens to be a woman. Taking leave of your senses is one thing, but to completely abandon the needs of another is something else entirely.

Plenty of other films have touched on this subject matter. Two in particular, *SherryBaby* and *Clean*, released within a couple of years of one another, take up the perspective of a mother trying to reconnect with her child after a period in prison. The contrast between the two couldn't be starker, one 'white trash' the other, inexplicably, a gleaming toothed former presenter on a channel not unlike MTV. However, the themes of cleansing and redemption are strongly laid out in both films. *Sherry*, in time honourable Western fashion, undergoes a Native American ritual, while her celluloid counterpart Emily overcomes her difficulties with a flight to Paris and back.

Both are unsatisfying for many reasons. The journey that each

character has to make is obvious from the beginning. Similarly, both of their children are living seemingly contented lives with relatives. For the most part, both mothers have it their own way. Drug addiction is overcome through sheer maternal resolve. The other pieces, such as employment and housing, are swiftly put to together with help from the supporting cast. For all the edginess of the subject matter, the films correspond to a basic story telling principle. Though there are no sunsets, the happily ever after is satisfyingly delivered by the time the credits roll, even if the viewer does have to accept certain caveats.

Were it this easy, it is hard to imagine how an organisation like Project Prevention, which has paid to have drug addicted mother's sterilised, could find any traction. While its mission may have stalled in the UK, Barbara Harris, its founder, has endured as a compelling media figure both in the broadsheets and the tabloids. Her longevity is easy enough to explain. Though we may have strong ethical reservations regarding Harris' aims, it would be impossible for any decent minded person to not feel deeply disturbed by the thought of children born into impoverished homes possibly locked, as the sector refers to it, in a cycle of dependency.

Hollow tackles the issue of addiction head on. The director was drawn to the issue by an article he read in 2007. The piece, he said, "described the heart-breaking ordeal babies suffer". Though he found the stories deeply shocking, there was one positive he could take from the piece. "As I became more aware of the circumstances surrounding heroin addiction, I was touched by the journeys that the mothers themselves undertake."

This became the focus of the film. Alice and Marcus are two lovers blighted by their battle with heroin. All we see of their lives is a grey, drearily insulating flat, devoid of any furniture. However, they are dramatically brought out of their isolation when Alice discovers that she is pregnant. The numbing weariness of their addiction is briefly supplanted by the joy of expectation and parenthood, leading the two to resolve to overcome their destructive existence and look to begin the process of rebuilding their lives.

Hollow sets out a simple premise then – even in the throes of addiction, surely the hope and promise of motherhood is enough to bring about change in a woman's life? Simple solutions seldom are however, and Alice, like

her partner, is unable to stop from relapsing. This situation, sadly, is not uncommon. Much emphasis has been placed on pregnancy to act as a catalyst for pregnant women to give up drugs. Indeed many, with utmost sincerity, will say that giving up drugs is what they want to do.

Addiction is not so easily overcome, however. With this in mind, it's probably worth remembering that as many as 27 per cent of women still smoke when they come to give birth. Though it might be a stretch to compare a nicotine habit with the lifestyle chaos that can result from severe heroin dependency, there are nonetheless well founded risks attributable to smoking that are unobserved by a sizable portion of new mothers.

In abstinence, as Alice is in the film, the urge is even more powerful. The neuro-psychiatrist and former government advisor David Nutt describes these feelings as akin to a 'deep-seated memory' which, as anyone with the six month cigarette craving can attest, are possibly "the most powerfully positive ones a person may ever experience." The pull of relapse, then, is strong even when faced with the responsibility of bringing a child into the world.

Significantly, *Hollow's* Alice does not take the easy way. After her relapse she makes the decision to give up her baby for adoption, and, in the final scene of the film, resolves to seek treatment. Director Sorrenti says he hopes *Hollow* "gives audiences hope that people who have lived in the dark can turn their lives around."

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For a link to video clips of the film, information on screening *Hollow*, or licensing the film for your group or training, email: info@futuretimepictures.com and put "Drugscope inquiry" in the subject line.

