



ROOTS, RITUALS AND PHANTASMAGORIA

A Warning to the Curious + Baby

A Ghost Story for Christmas:

A Warning to the Curious

Producer: Lawrence Gordon Clark
Production Company: BBC
Adapted by: Lawrence Gordon Clark
[Story] by: M.R. James
Camera: John McGlashan
Designer: Geoffrey Winslow
Sound: Dick Manton
Cast:
Peter Vaughan (*Mr Paxton*)
Clive Swift (*Dr Black*)
Julian Herington (*archaeologist*)
John Kearney (*William Ager/ghost*)
David Cargill (*boots*)
George Benson (*vicar*)
Roger Milner (*antique shop owner*)
Gilly Fraser (*girl at cottage*)
David Pugh (*station porter*)
Cyril Appleton (*labourer*)
BBC1 tx 24.12.1972
UK 1972
50 mins
Digital

Beasts: Baby

Directed by: John Nelson Burton
©/Production Company: ATV
Produced by: Nicholas Palmer
Senior Floor Manager: Bill Goodall
Production Assistant: Dolores Shine
[Written] By: Nigel Kneale
Senior Cameraman: Bill Brown
Lighting Director: Peter Dyson
Senior Vision Control: Jim Reeves
Vision Mixer: Carole Legg
VTR Editor: Peter Charles
Designed by: Richard Lake
Sound Director: Bob Woodhouse
Cast:
Jane Wymark (*Jo Gilkes*)
Simon MacCorkindale (*Peter Gilkes*)
T.P. McKenna (*Dick Pummery*)
Mark Dignam (*Arthur Grace*)
Norman Jones (*Stan Biddick*)
Shelagh Fraser (*Dorothy Pummery*)
ITV tx 6.11.1976
UK 1976
51 mins
Digital

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SIGHT AND SOUND

When you're in the mood, there's nothing quite like a 1970s British 'curiosity killed the cat' creeper. Don't mess with weird effigies and cursed relics buried in the ground or walls of your new home. *A Warning to the Curious* is particularly effective in its quiet and menacing atmosphere, as an archaeologist goes hunting for a mystical crown buried somewhere along the Norfolk coast.

By contrast, *Baby* brings relationships, children and hysteria back into frame. A young couple move to the countryside and discover a creepy, mummified animal in the walls. The wife's concerns are all but ignored by her pragmatic husband, played to an agonising tee by 1970s *Quatermass* star Simon MacCorkindale.

A Ghost Story for Christmas: A Warning to the Curious

In January 1972, the critics were unanimous in their praise of the first *Ghost Story for Christmas*, which paved the way for Lawrence Gordon Clark to begin work on his next M.R. James adaptation, *A Warning to the Curious*. Shooting began later that autumn, in Wells-next-the-Sea and Happisburgh, Norfolk, rather than the story's original setting of Aldeburgh in Suffolk (rendered as 'Seaburgh' in the original), with Clark again directing his own screenplay and using the same BBC crew as the previous year.

Written in the aftermath of the Great War, and first appearing in the *London Mercury* in 1925, 'A Warning to the Curious' is not only one of M.R. James' final stories but also one of his greatest. With many years' writing experience behind him and the loss both of friends and pupils during the First World War, the quiet Cambridge don takes the reader – each step skilfully rendered with a masterful economy of words – deeper and deeper into the terrible heart of East Anglian legend. Clark's screenplay, whilst changing the original story in small but significant ways, retains the core elements and translates them perfectly from page to screen.

In the text, Paxton is a young, rather forlorn figure, caught in a web of superstition and dread far beyond his control: a young man stumbling upon occult and dangerous knowledge without thinking through the consequences of his meddling, even as his fatal mistake slowly dawns upon him. However, in the film the character is an ambitious older man, recently unemployed and eager to make a mark upon the well-educated and closed circles of archaeology; an amateur trying to beat the experts at their own game. In the interests of clarity, Clark also chose to reduce the number of characters in his film to two, rather than the three presented by James; the original plotline is elliptical and occurs twice removed from the story's narrator (a classic 'this happened to a friend of a friend of mine' tale). Whilst this approach makes perfect sense in prose it is of little use in film, where the viewer is transported straight to the heart of the story via the detached, perhaps even complicit, point of view of the camera.

Shot on 16mm colour film by the technically gifted John McGlashan and featuring a chilling and effective soundtrack recorded by Dick Manton, a sense of isolation is integral to Clark's adaptation of 'A Warning to the Curious'; the eerie loneliness of the Norfolk coast, a part of England then, as now, far from

ROOTS, RITUALS AND PHANTASMAGORIA

Dead of Night + A Winter's Dale

Mon 2 Sep 20:40; Sat 14 Sep 12:30

Little Otik Otesánek

Wed 4 Sep 20:15 + intro by musician and Starve
Acre composer Matthew Herbert; Sat 21 Sep 17:45

Don't Look Now

Tue 10 Sep 20:45; Thu 26 Sep 20:50; Sun 29 Sep 18:10

A Ghost Story for Christmas: A Warning to the Curious + Beasts: Baby

Fri 13 Sep 18:15

Eraserhead

Fri 13 Sep 20:45; Tue 1 Oct 21:00; Mon 7 Oct 18:10

Screenplay: White Lady + intro by filmmaker and season curator Daniel Kokotajlo + Children of the Stones (episode 1)

Mon 16 Sep 20:40

The Shout + Lonely Water (aka The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water)

Wed 18 Sep 18:10 + Q&A with filmmakers Daniel Kokotajlo and Mark Jenkin; Sat 21 Sep 15:00; Wed 2 Oct 20:50

The Hunger

Thu 19 Sep 20:35; Sun 6 Oct 18:10

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the modern world and its sodium-lit scepticism. The cold blue skies, autumnal hues and barren, wide-open sands with their wind-bent treelines transport the viewer to a place out of time, where the omnipresent past is felt only in the ganglia or seen from the corner of the eye. It is these ominous meeting points, between land and seascape, that are the true stars of Clark's film and its effectiveness, despite the constraints of a tight budget, is due directly to the skills of his crew. Indeed, the director has always been vocal in his belief that both McGlashan's atmospheric photography and Manton's distinctive and memorable soundtrack are as responsible for the potency of *A Warning to the Curious* as his own contributions, a viewpoint even the most casual viewer would find hard to discount.

Clark's inspired casting – of Peter Vaughan (then best known for his appearance in *Straw Dogs*, 1971) as the ill-fated Paxton and Clive Swift as the helpless Dr Black (reprising his role from the previous year's *The Stalls of Barchester*) – was also crucial to the film's success. Their understated performances lead the viewer into the suspicious heart of Seaburgh, a coastal community still tied to the legends and superstitions of long dead ancestors and wary of any outsiders, however benign or curious.

Adam Easterbrook, 'A Warning to the Curious' in *Ghost Stories Vol 2*, DVD booklet (BFI, 2012)

Beasts: Baby

In 1974, writer Nigel Kneale parted company with the BBC, his main paymaster for over two decades and the producer of his groundbreaking dramas from *The Quatermass Experiment* (1953) to *The Stone Tape* (1972). *Murrain* (*Against the Crowd*, tx. 27/7/1975), his first script for ATV, used an isolated and superstitious farming community as a setting to explore ideas of witchcraft. Little recognised at the time, *Murrain* was an atmospheric and intriguing work, which contained the seeds of the following year's compendium, *Beasts*.

Taking as their loose theme man's relationship with animals, *Beasts'* six dramas were modest in scale and budget, but they made the best of their limited resources and were driven by Kneale's distinctive imagination.

One of the themes of the stories is dysfunctional or fractured relationships. *Baby*, almost a companion piece to *Murrain*, centres on a young expectant mother and her vet husband, whose dream new life in the country is imperilled by the discovery, entombed in a wall of their home, of a hideous mummified creature – apparently a curse. As the mother's morbid obsession with the creature grows, so too does the gulf between her and her selfish, insensitive partner.

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk