

BEGOTTEN



A film by E. Elias Merhige

Critical Praise

"One of the most important films of modern times."

- *Susan Sontag*

"The ultimate achievement of this hallucinatory masterpiece is to compel us to experience rather than witness... the atavistic mindsets and ferocious rituals of humanoids thousands of years ago. Obsessional, nightmarish, flamboyantly unsettling, it invades our subconscious, dragging —however much we resist— our own primitive fears and unacknowledged desires to the surface."

– *Amos Vogel*

"If you're squeamish you should avoid this like the plague; others may find it hard to shake off the artistry and originality of this visionary effort."

- *Jonathan Rosenbaum, Chicago Reader*

“Astonishing.”

– *Tim Highsted, ICA*

Synopsis

Begotten has no characters in the ordinary sense. Its final credits name three principal figures:

God Killing Himself.

Mother Earth.

Son of Earth — Flesh on Bone.

The entire film is what those names do to each other and to the earth.

God Killing Himself tears open his body and dies. Mother Earth rises from what remains and takes his seed into herself. She gives birth to Son of Earth — Flesh on Bone. He is cast into a barren world, seized by the Nomads, tortured, killed, and briefly returned to life by his mother. The Nomads destroy her too. The Robed Figures gather what remains of mother and son, grind their bodies down, and return them to the soil. The ground flowers.

The Completed Photographic Body

For more than thirty-five years, *Begotten* circulated in versions that carried its force but not its complete photographic body.

Now, for the first time, the sketch has become the painting.

Nothing has been cleaned up or modernized. The image has simply arrived at the form it was always meant to possess: blacks with weight, whites with force, and grain breathing as atmosphere.

Four Years, Frame by Frame

Begotten was shot in black and white on 16mm reversal film, then rephotographed frame by frame through neutral-density filters. The process took four years and roughly ten hours of work for every finished minute.

The image was worked by hand through repeated exposure through neutral density filtrations until the grain itself began to move like an atmospheric condition, thickening the dark and tearing open the light.

Passed from Hand to Hand

The first public life of Begotten

When *Begotten* was completed, E. Elias Merhige brought the film to New York distributors specializing in art-house cinema. Rejection followed rejection. The film seemed to arrive without a category they could use, a precedent they could name, or an obvious path to an audience.

With nowhere else to turn, Merhige looked west.

He sent a VHS tape across the country to Edith Kramer, then director of the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley. It was less a submission than a message in a bottle, addressed to someone who might recognize what the film was before asking where it belonged.

Three weeks later, Kramer called. She told Merhige that *Begotten* was original and remarkable. Then she asked whether she might share it with several people in San Francisco.

She did not ask how the film could be marketed. She asked permission to place it before other eyes.

That act of recognition began *Begotten*'s first public life.

Kramer showed the film to Peter Scarlet, then director of the San Francisco International Film Festival. Scarlet called it a masterpiece and passed it to Tom Luddy. Luddy, in turn, showed *Begotten* to Chris Marker, Donald Richie and Susan Sontag.

All three responded strongly, but Sontag became an active force in the film's passage. She brought *Begotten* back to New York and projected it in her living room for approximately twenty close friends. Among those watching were Elliott Stein, Phillip Lopate and Annie Leibovitz.

For one evening, Susan Sontag's living room became *Begotten*'s first New York cinema.

The response did not remain inside that room.

Elliott Stein wrote two pieces on *Begotten* for *The Village Voice*, including one titled “He Begat.” Word began to circulate that Sontag regarded the film as a masterwork. What had begun with a solitary VHS sent across the country was becoming a quiet groundswell.

That gathering of attention reached Larry Kardish and Jytte Jensen at the Museum of Modern Art, who programmed *Begotten* for MoMA’s Cineprobe series.

The screening sold out. Approximately ninety people remained on a waiting list for standing room.

Karen Cooper, director of Film Forum, was in the audience. She had heard of Sontag’s response to the film. At Cineprobe, she encountered *Begotten* for herself and decided to bring it to Film Forum for its New York theatrical release.

Robert DiMatteo was also present. His encounter with the film became “Future Primeval” in *Film Comment*.

The Film Forum engagement carried *Begotten* into a wider public conversation. Janet Maslin wrote about it in *The New York Times*. J. Hoberman addressed it in *The Village Voice*. Richard Corliss returned to the film three times in *TIME* that year, ultimately naming it among his Ten Best Films of 1991.

This was not a campaign engineered from above. It was a chain of recognition.

One person saw the film, believed in it, and placed it before another. Edith Kramer opened the first door. Peter Scarlet and Tom Luddy carried it forward. Susan Sontag created a private circle of witnesses. Elliott Stein gave the film critical language. MoMA gave it a public encounter. Karen Cooper gave it a theatrical life. Film Forum and the critics who followed carried it into the larger culture.

Each encounter created the conditions for the next.

A VHS sent in isolation became a private projection in Susan Sontag’s living room, a sold-out screening at the Museum of Modern Art, a theatrical engagement at Film Forum, and a work of national critical attention.

And all of this happened through versions that carried *Begotten*’s force but could not carry the complete depth of its photography.

The film had already made its history through an image that had never been fully seen.

The new restoration does not overwrite that first life. It completes its visual passage. For the first time, the image can become equal to the life the film had already lived.

Begotten did not survive because the culture knew what to call it.

It survived because, one witness at a time, someone recognized it and passed it on.

E. Elias Merhige

E. Elias Merhige is a filmmaker whose career has moved from radical independent cinema to Academy Award-nominated international production without surrendering the singularity of his vision.

In the mid-1980s he founded Theatre of Material in New York. From that company came *Begotten*, photographed on black-and-white 16mm and rephotographed frame by frame over four years. After struggling to find conventional distribution, the film found an early advocate in Susan Sontag, who screened it privately and helped carry it into international film circles.

Merhige's second feature, *Shadow of the Vampire*, starred John Malkovich and Willem Dafoe and received two Academy Award nominations, including Dafoe for Best Supporting Actor. Dafoe's performance also won the Independent Spirit Award and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association prize.

Merhige then directed and produced *Suspect Zero* with Cruise/Wagner Productions, founded by Tom Cruise and Paula Wagner, starring Aaron Eckhart, Ben Kingsley, and Carrie-Anne Moss.

He later extended the world begun in *Begotten* through *Din of Celestial Birds* and *Polia & Blastema: A Cosmic Opera*, completing a cycle more than three decades in the making.

Selected Production Credits

*Written, Directed, Photographed,
and Film Effects*

EDMUND E. MERHIGE

Principal Figures

God Killing Himself
Mother Earth
Son of Earth — Flesh on Bone

Story Consultant

Tom Gunning

Art Direction and Special Effects

Harry Duggins

Costumes Designed and Executed

Celia Bryant
Harry Duggins

Assistant Directors

Timothy McCaan
Lance Harkins

All Other Life Provided by Theatre of Material

James Gandia
Garfield White
Arthur Streeter
Daniel Harkins
Michael Phillips
Adolpho Vargas
Erik Slavin
Terry Andersen

Wardrobe Assistant

Kim Dorman

Field Coordinator

David Merhige

Technical Crew

Rob Schmidt
David Tomere

Restoration Credits:

Begotten was restored in 4K from the original 16mm negative and optical soundtrack. Scanning, restoration, and final grading were completed at FilmScan & more in Munich, Germany, under the supervision of filmmaker E. Elias Merhige.

Selected Stills





Nobody has settled on what to call *Begotten* since it first appeared.

That was never the problem.

It is the reason to see it now.

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