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in Bresson's *Mouchette*, the anonymous battles and tournament crowd in Bresson's *Lancelot du lac*, and the flirtatious "cruising" of the heroine in a car by the hero in a plane in Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*. If it adds up to less than any of those pictures, and less than *Videodrome* or *Naked Lunch*, this is basically because a story that admits neither characters nor development in the ordinary sense depends on only a few poetic metaphors and nuggets of emotion. As prophecy, it's suggestive but limited. ■

BLOOD LUST

HABIT

★★★

Directed and written by Larry Fessenden

With Fessenden, Meredith Snaider, Aaron Beall, Patricia Coleman, Heather Woodbury, and Jesse Hartman.

By Joshua Katzman

The vampire movie is an enduring subgenre of the horror film, the myth having long ago departed eastern Europe to cross the Atlantic to America as well as other points on the globe. It's a fairly amazing migration considering that, to a large degree, the origin of every vampire movie is Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a mediocre, somewhat turgid novel written around the turn of the century. Yet Stoker's fever dream of the predatory undead has stoked the imaginations of myriad writers and filmmakers throughout this century.

Several years ago Francis Ford Coppola attempted to get back to the source when he made *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, a visually haunting film with a fine lead performance by Gary Oldman. But Coppola was unable to strike a balance between the story's inherently campy elements and its

more serious, straightforward side. Quirky and uneven, Coppola's *Dracula* garnered mixed reviews. But it did seem to spark an interest among maverick filmmakers in reimagining the vampire myth in a contemporary American setting.

Larry Fessenden has breathed new life into the old corpse with his low-budget independent film *Habit*, a stark, chilling parable that takes place in and around Greenwich Village. Yet possibly as a result of the poor box-office showings by other recent vampire movies—Michael Almereyda's *Nadja* and Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction*, for example—Fessenden has been unable to find a distributor. Though *Habit* initially played at the Chicago film festival in 1995, it's only now appearing at Facets Multimedia, where it will show for two weeks.

Fessenden succeeds to the degree he does largely because he envisions vampirism as a metaphor for the character disorders of the film's protagonist, Sam (played by Fessenden himself to both chilling and comic effect). Among other things, Sam is predisposed to alcoholism, sexual obsession, and self-mutilation. *Habit* downplays most of the camp elements associated with vampire films to focus on compulsive behavior, and as such has more in common with *Leaving Las Vegas* than *Dracula*.

Made for about \$200,000, *Habit* has virtually no special effects and relies on very few of the images typically found in vampire movies. It opens with Sam going through some old family photographs at his recently deceased father's apartment, one of which shows him as a boy with a can of beer in his hand. He's just broken up with his live-in girlfriend, Liza (Heather Woodbury), who moved out in the hope that Sam would get a handle on his drinking and other problems once he was left alone to face himself. Instead he goes to a Hal-

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loween party given by his best friends Nick and Rae (Aaron Beall and Patricia Coleman), their names an homage to director Nicholas Ray, who spent his career mining the veins of obsession and compulsion. Ridiculously adorned with a Cyrano de Bergerac nose and plume, Sam meets the hauntingly beautiful Anna (Meredith Snaider), who first glimpses him drunkenly mopping up a puddle of grog he's spilled. They leave the party together, but Sam realizes he's accidentally taken someone else's jacket. When he goes back to exchange it, he implores Anna to wait for him. She says she will, but when he returns she's gone.

Sam starts to obsess about the mysterious Anna, who gave him what turns out to be a bogus phone number. At the club where he works as a manager, he discusses her with his friend Lenny (Jesse Hartman), who interrupts Sam to reveal that he's

recently met a mystery woman of his own, telling Sam how the unnamed woman took him to a boat on the river where they had torrid sex all night long. But something is wrong with Lenny's appearance: instead of glowing, he looks weak and sickly. Sam hardly notices, however, because he's so preoccupied with Anna.

Attending a street fair with Nick and Rae one night, Sam goes to get some beer, and while in line he turns to find Anna smiling up at him, reappearing just as suddenly as she'd disappeared. They take leave of Nick and Rae, who are waiting for Lenny. Anna convinces Sam to ride the ferris wheel after he mumbles that he has a "thing" about heights, and in a particularly disturbing scene shot on an off-kilter angle, we watch them go round and round, the ferris wheel seemingly wobbling off its axis as Sam becomes increasingly distressed. Later they make out in Battery Park, where at one point Anna bites him on the mouth. Sam wakes up disheveled, with blood smeared on his lower lip, to find that it's morn-

ing and Anna has again disappeared. Slowly he rises from the ground while people on their way to work bustle by in the background.

Part of what makes *Habit* so effective is the narrative's intensely subjective course. We're in Sam's head seeing what he sees, or what he imagines he sees, as his drinking gets worse and his relationship with Anna deepens. We bear witness to his pathetic downward spiral, which plays out with the inevitability of water spinning down a drain. There's a documentary look to the film, greatly abetted by Frank DeMarco's hand-held camera, which bumpily mimics Sam's shuffling, drunken gait or follows him with turbulent tenacity as he races desperately through the streets and subways of New York. This starkly realistic, pared-down approach renders Sam's predicament that much more horrifying; the viewer doesn't have the safety zone, the distance, created by the usual special effects and stylization of horror films.

Fessenden punctuates his visual treatment with a number of haunting

night scenes, resonating like so many dreams throughout the film: images include a trio of brightly lit nude women being photographed on the steps of a building in the Wall Street district; a car that's plowed into a fire hydrant, water spewing skyward from its crumpled hood, with a lifeless child nearby; a person dressed as the devil for Halloween waiting to cross at an intersection; and a pack of growling dogs rambling through Central Park. Fessenden convincingly blends these images into the narrative flow, yet they have a cumulative impact, like signposts marking Sam's descent into madness.

Interestingly, Fessenden depicts the three principal female characters—Anna, Rae, and Liza—as strong and prepossessing. They have a fairly clear idea what they want and don't want, and they're not willing to tolerate much bullshit from men. Sam and Nick, on the other hand, are a couple of alcoholic children, intelligent and witty but consumed by bitterness and cynicism. Both appear to have vague artistic ambitions, but

they're too mired in ennui and disaffection to do much of anything but drink and riff on their ideas.

Beneath Sam's cool East Village persona is a lonely, all-too-willing victim for the rapacious Anna. After several highly charged sexual encounters with her, Sam is hooked, a junkie who also realizes that what's making him feel so good is exacting an increasing toll on his health. Bites soon tattoo his body like track marks, the sores and scabs left by a heroin addict's needle. Finally Sam can do little more than fearfully acknowledge his own inability to extricate himself from Anna's grip. When she makes yet another abrupt appearance, at a memorial for Sam's father, one of his father's colleagues is visibly shaken to be introduced to her. Later he leaves a message on Sam's answering machine—but it doesn't even register on Sam when he plays it back. He's already in the soup, flailing. In the spin that Fessenden gives the vampire flick, we're all ultimately our own worst enemies, ushering in the agents of our own demise. ■