Movie Review: 'The Informers' is bleak and amoral; too bad it's not good

by Zachary Woodruff

Bret Easton Ellis needs a new decade. The author of "Less Than Zero" made his literary fortune dissecting the nihilistic 1980s as if it were a good-looking corpse â€” the Great Gatsby with hair mousse. But the filmed adaptation of "The Informers" finds Ellis with his dullest blade, peering into the hollow souls of several upscale Los Angelenos and finding that, yes, rootless, spoiled and amoral people tend to be unhappy. Is that really all there is to the '80s?

There's nothing wrong with a cinematic expose of spiritual vacancy if it's done with a little style. The posh poolsides and cocaine carouses of "Less Than Zero" (1987) inspired both pity and class envy while showcasing Robert Downey Jr.'s talent for portraying drug addiction (though it's not clear he was acting). The 2000 adaptation of Ellis' "American Psycho" marked the emergence of Christian Bale's really dark side (his Batman resembles a flying hamster in comparison), eliciting nervous laughter and disgust as an investment banker's materialism turns homicidal. Even the uneven "Rules of Attraction" (2002) had fun taking James Van Der Beek's wholesome "Dawson's Creek" image and turning it on its Frankensteinian forehead.

But "The Informers" suffers from a lack of nerve. Don't the synth-pop videos, Ray-Ban sunglasses, frosted hairstyles and garish androgynes of the 1980s call for a little camp and exaggeration? Instead, Australian director Gregor Jordan (working from a screenplay by Ellis and Nicholas Jarecki) treats the '80s setting with somber self-importance â€” anthropology without showmanship. What ought to be an amusingly Altmanesque set of crisscrossing stories veers listlessly toward Paul Haggis' pretentious "Crash."

Wouldn't you know it, "The Informers" also begins with a crash â€” one ending the life of a random richie-rich type. At the funeral, the victim's late-teenage friends bask in apathy, but feather-haired Graham (Jon Foster) has murmurs of self-awareness: Aren't I supposed to feel, like, really sad? Graham's existential crisis deepens when his blond girlfriend (Amber Heard, who's naked so often you barely recognize her in clothes) has three-way and four-way sex without his usual participation. Graham twinges with doubt: Aren't I supposed to feel, like, really jealous? It's as if James Spader's wealthy-jerk character in "Pretty in Pink" had started developing a conscience.

Unfortunately, "The Informers" has a built-in shallowness, dividing its time among small vignettes that tend to culminate with someone catching a clue. There's the harried Kim Basinger, who tries to forgive her movie-producer husband (Billy Bob Thornton, setting a dour tone that infects the whole film) as he pines for his newscaster mistress (pallid pixie Winona Ryder). Basinger's got her hands full: When not helpfully injecting heroin into Thornton's love muscle, she's copulating the pain away with her son's Billy Idol-maned

buddy.

How can you cast both Kim Basinger and Mickey Rourke, whose early careers simultaneously exploded with "9-1/2 Weeks," yet never put them in a scene together? Rourke portrays the film's nastiest character â€” a skeevy, van-driving child abductor â€” in the most blase way possible, as if he got lost on the way to a DVD release party for "The Wrestler." Playing his twitchy/sweaty brother, Brad Renfro struggles over the decision to release a little boy Rourke has tied up in the bathtub. You wouldn't think this could present a dilemma for any sentient human being, but the film's moral landscape is all Los Angeles valley, all the time.

"The Informers" draws a vague symbolic link between Renfro, who cuts his palm, and New Wave singer Bryan Metro (Mel Raido), who slices his hand on a broken liquor bottle. As the movie's occasional mascot of debauchery and disaffection â€” a strung-out Iggy Pop/Peter Murphy type who greets friendly groupies with his fists â€” Raido's character is reminiscent of the rocker in "Love, Actually," if that film had been titled "Self-Loathing, Definitely."

The least integrated of the stories follows the Hawaiian vacation of a father (Chris Isaak, resembling a creepy Alan Thicke) who vainly aspires to become the pickup wingman for his bitterly estranged teen son (Lou Taylor Pucci). All does not go well, which comes as no surprise considering Bret Easton Ellis' bleak view of the era's sexual licentiousness. "The Informers" even goes so far as to leave one of its characters dying AIDS-stricken on a beach â€” the least subtle metaphor ever devised for the 1980s. What a relief to have that wretched movie, er, decade behind us.

"The Informers." Rated: R. Running time: 1 hour, 38 minutes. 1.5 stars.

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