Intensity of over- indulged rich lost in translation to film

**LESS THAN ZERO**


By PETER DUNN

What kind of film does one expect when the author of *Less Than Zero* himself requests that you take the book to the press preview? What kind of film does one expect when one friend raves that the book on which it is based, dealing with the excessive lives of the nouveau riche, is "shockingly easy to relate to" while another complains that it is empty, hollow, and devoid of substantive content? What kind of film does one expect when it is preceded by a strong anti-crack advertisement narrated by Rae Dawn Chong? Such are the questions one asks when one enters the theater to see *Less Than Zero*.

Bret Easton Ellis' book *Less Than Zero* relates the life of the idle filthy-rich kids of Los Angeles, as one returns for college vacations. In the film version of *Less Than Zero* the film only half succeeds, so that a major part of the movie seems like mere filler. But worse, in pandering to current societal pressures to downplay the Miami Vice allure of drugs, the intensity and vigor has been lost in the translation.

Director Marek Kanievska has tried to form a tale of fall from the grace of childhood innocence, somewhat in the same manner as *The Falcon and the Snowman*, and again the background of a brightly lit high school life and youthful high aspirations sets up the ensuing slide. But where the book held that the entire group of spoiled rich kids no longer gave a damn about life, the film concentrates this complex into one character, Julian (Robert Downey, Jr.), while Blaire (Jami Gertz) is less a slut and Clay (Andrew McCarthy) is almost a saint. By softening these last two characters, the feeling of an all pervading loss of direction is lost — the intensity of a separate world is diluted.

While this satiric world is lost in the narrative, Kanievska tries to reproduce it through his camerawork. The visual effects are at times stunning but are mostly unsuccessful: there is an all too obvious alternation throughout the film between azure blue and fluorescent red lighting, but these alternating changes never indicate any mood or theme changes — they occur essentially at random. Kanievska is also fond of circular while tracking in to transfer that intensity to the screen.

The film version of *Less Than Zero* fares poorly on both these counts: in trying to mold itself into a linear plot, the film only half succeeds, so that a major part of the movie seems like mere filler. But worse, in pandering to current societal pressures to downplay the Miami Vice allure of drugs, the intensity and vigor has been lost in the translation.

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While Kanievska's hand seems at times shaky and the translation from print to screen is less than satisfactory, *Less Than Zero's* dialogue and acting are its worst faults. McCarthy, Gertz, and Downey all lack fire even in the film's sense of those words; these kids are supposed to be disinterested and fed up with life, but even in portraying that attitude they fail to be convincing. All three deliver their lines as if they were reading the script for the first time, with Gertz bringing the worst culprit, although the bland and inane dialogue might be just as much to blame. In addition, the film is populated with characters who tend to post rather than act, as if statues were more enticing than animated. *Less Than Zero* does not fail on all counts but does fail to live up to the expectations raised by the book. The film loses much of the ferocity of the book, and the acting and script leave much to be desired. Marek Kanievska's directing is beautiful and enthralling but at the moment is mostly form with little content — his style requires a direction in which to focus his energies.