

Fresh Blood

By Amy Taubin

Michael Almereyda is girding himself for the opening of *Nadja*, his now-from-New York female vampire film that has more to do with such historic (and hysteric) maps of the unconscious as Dreyer's *Vampyr* and André Breton's surrealist novel *Nadja* than with Anne Rice. Almereyda's previous films—*Twister*, his windswept comedy of Midwestern *l'amour fou*, and *Another Girl Another Planet*, his pixelvision transposition of Godardian romance to the East Village—were never released theatrically, although they generated lots of press on the festival circuit. Some critics, including yours truly, think he's one of the most exciting young directors around. Others have reservations.

Scarfig down a sandwich in the Time Cafe, Almereyda is trying to focus on things about *Nadja* that make him happy. There's the MPAA's explanation of why they gave *Nadja* an R rating. "They said it was for 'scenes of bizarre vampire sexuality,'" he says, looking, as usual, like a bizarre vampire himself—although more morose than rapacious. I guess the scene where Elina Löwensohn (as Dracula's daughter or maybe just your average East Village exotic) goes down on Galaxy Craze (who plays the Lucy character, or maybe just a restless young married) and drinks her menstrual blood was a bit upsetting to them. But since this particular scene is shot in pixelvision—which, when transferred to 35mm, has the blown-

out but sharp-edged quality of ancient black-and-white nitrate stock—its sensuousness is more abstract than specific. *Nadja* plays like a dream: the sex is all in your head, which doesn't mean you don't feel it in your body.

He's also happy that *Nadja* is the first fiction film that David Lynch has produced (outside his own). Lynch had gotten Propaganda Films involved in financing *Nadja*. But when Almereyda lost his "name" actor shortly before shooting was scheduled to begin last summer, Propaganda withdrew, and Lynch, unwilling to see the film go down the tubes, stepped in with his own money. Though the budget was only a few hundred thousand dollars, *Nadja* is as elegant a film as it is economical in both conception and execution. Its rapturously tatty look has to do with the combination of 35mm and pixelvision. When Almereyda cuts to a pixel vision image, it's as if the world were sliced open and we see from the inside out.

"I never thought of pixelvision as a gimmick," he says. "It's allowed me, as a filmmaker, to survive, so I tend to think of it as an enchanted, life-saving medium. And I just like fooling around with the camera, using it as a sketchbook. But I wouldn't mind putting it away if I could get on to other things." (He's currently wrapping up postproduction on a pixelvision documentary shot at and about Sundance.)

Almereyda hardly expected, when he dropped out of Harvard to jump

start his filmmaking career, that a decade later he'd be known as the prince of pixelvision. "I was intent on making Hollywood movies, large scale spectacles. I had something in mind like Fritz Lang's German films, or the kind of thing Tim Burton pulled off recently. But my old ambitions have collapsed and I'm ready to accept Roger Corman as the guiding light. With any luck, I can hit the ground running and make a few rapid-fire genre movies, movies that are urgent and tossed off, like pop songs."

Among the genre pictures he has on his agenda are an adaptation of *The Mummy*. Trimark, an indie company looking to upgrade its profile, came to him with the idea. "It would be a female mummy, of course." Also in the planning stages are a film about Amelia Earhart and a beach party picture called *Satellite Beach* that the Shooting Gallery is committed to producing although they haven't raised the money for it yet. "It would have big surfing scenes," he says, and then, as if sensing my disbelief, "and it would have some other things that would make



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it stranger." And he would still like to make the film about Edgar Allan Poe that he's been working on for years. Some elements of the Poe project bled into *Nadja*, particularly the idea of the doppelgänger.

"I don't want the movie to be seen just as an AIDS metaphor. It's about a more general fear of death or separation. Talking about vampires is a

way of talking about how people need and use each other. One of the main subjects in Breton's *Nadja* is identity—the book's first sentence is 'Who am I?'—and he's great at describing the particular feeling of cities, the feeling of walking down the street and being alternately lost and found. It's not standard alienation he's describing, but a more jangled up, thrilling sense of possibility. The feeling that life is open, irrational, magical. A search. That, at any rate, is how a vampire might see it. Cities are places where vampires can convince themselves they're alive and well."

While waiting to see how *Nadja* performs in theaters (which will determine how fast he can get his next film off the ground), Almereyda's gone back to his "day job" of writing scripts for other directors. He's currently working on a script for Tim Burton, a small film that he plans to make after he's finished *Mars Attack*.

Of all Hollywood directors, Burton is probably the one to whose sensibility Almereyda is closest. I get the feeling that Almereyda is trying to figure out how Burton manages to be weird and commercial at the same time. "I'm looking forward to making heaps of money for people," he says. "I just haven't gotten around to it yet." ■