

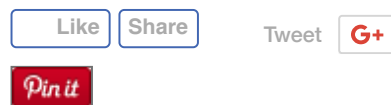


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LAST DAYS

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Jul 15, 2005



Reviews

If you're not up for hardcore art fare, you may want to skip *Last Days*, Gus Van Sant's latest experiment with cinematic language, a meditation on isolation, death and loss. Sharing the same DNA as *Gerry* and *Elephant*, this anti-narrative-with-a-vengeance records the final daze of a troubled young rock musician named Blake (Michael Pitt). As in the two earlier films, Van Sant wraps his imagination around real-life events, in this case the mysterious demise of Kurt Cobain. The director's marvelous colleagues, DP Harris Savides and sound designer Leslie Shatz, deploy images, bells and rock songs to produce an emotional landscape, but few clues are offered as to what afflicts Blake. As it did in Cannes, the film will likely divide viewers, striking many as a self-indulgent wallow, others as a rewarding envelope-pusher. In fact, it combines elements of both.

Hunker down for a long preamble which follows Blake, disheveled and muttering, as he wanders the woods adjoining the grand but dilapidated stone mansion he shares with equally grungy groupies. Back in the house, he dons a woman's black dress, cooks up macaroni and cheese, picks out a rock anthem on his guitar (the song composed by Pitt), never emerging from his fog. Magician Ricky Jay's cameo as a detective adds little. In a welcome injection of humor, two Jesus freaks try to convert Blake's housemates. Even funnier, a Yellow Pages advertising salesman arrives to sell Blake ad space. The scene of the salesman earnestly making his pitch, seemingly unaware that his listener is out of his gourd, also dramatizes human blindness to others' distress.

It's hard to judge Pitt's performance in standard terms, since he's unintelligible and only half visible under a curtain of blond hair-but he generates a certain pathos, perhaps because Van Sant, another Pacific Northwest icon, appears to identify with Cobain. The real star of the film, however, is the

exquisite sound design-which often includes background noises picked up by stereo mikes-layered over unconnected images to startling effect. Especially resonant are the bells and voices of Hildegard Westerkamp's musique concrete composition "Doors of Perception" (also used in *Elephant*), which accompany Blake's last moments in a greenhouse, lending the film a dark poetry all its own.

-Erica Abeel

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