

L.I.E.

NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS REVIEW

IndieWire, April 6, 2001

If Michael Cuesta's assured Dramatic Competition entry "L.I.E." exudes an especially vivid sense of place, it's because the director himself came of age off Exit 51, in one of the deceptively leafy arterial suburbs bordering the Long Island Expressway that makes for one of America's more notorious middle-class sprawls. Cuesta blurted out the off ramp number of his childhood during a Q&A session following Sunday's screening of the film, prompting fellow Long Islanders in the audience to shout back their own.

Such is the dreamy, magnetic pull of the "L.I.E.," which in Cuesta's brave filmmaking debut becomes less a badge of pride or nostalgia than a living, breathing malevolent entity that sucks the life force out of 15-year-old Howie Blitzer's once idyllic suburban childhood. Teetering on the railing of a freeway overpass in the opening scene, the not-quite-formed Howie (Paul Franklin Dano) recounts how the busy thoroughfare claimed the lives of pop singer Harry Nilsson, film director Alan Pakula and even his own mother, in a deadly car accident the previous year. Unsupervised and heavy with longing, Howie robs houses with his marauding chums while his vain contractor father Marty (Bruce Altman) spirals into corruption, promiscuity and rage; he's a smug, white-collar Joey Buttafuoco who likes to do it doggy style with his gym-toned girlfriend in open windows for all to see.

Howie's cocky best friend Gary (Billy Kay), a pierced and tattooed pin-up type from the sticks, secretly swaps sex for cash with neighborhood pedophile Big John (Brian Cox), a sixtyish former Marine who leads a decent family life on the surface but actively prowls the rest stops off the "L.I.E." for sexual contact with adolescent boys, peddling himself as "the best cocksucker in the whole Western hemisphere." Howie gets lured into Big John's seedy web after he and Gary steal weapons from the old man's basement; Gary fences one of the guns, steals Marty's stash of embezzled cash and splits for California after promising Howie they'd escape Long Island together. There's a mild homoerotic subtext to Gary and Howie's friendship that keeps you guessing in all the right moments.

Left to answer for Gary's misdeeds, Big John offers immunity in exchange for sexual favors -- something Howie refuses but later reconsiders after his life takes another dismal turn. When his father is whisked off to Federal prison for embezzlement, Howie turns to Big John for the paternal attention he can't get through obvious

channels -- something the old man offers without recompense, sparking an ambiguous friendship that's one of the film's many off-kilter surprises.

What could have been the standard hysterical depiction of a depraved chicken hawk running amok in the 'burbs becomes in the hands of Cuesta a triumph of audacious, astutely wrought character development. We're enticed into viewing Big John as vaguely sympathetic despite his lurid taste in lanky Long Island boys. There's a delicate moment when Howie, in the throes of loneliness, sprinkles kisses on the older man's faded Marine Corps tattoos. Later, John retreats to the solemnity of his living room where he croons a mournful version of "Danny Boy" at the piano, looking like some fallen saint on a pedestal. A pedophile with a conscience? Yeah, and it works to devastating effect.

As much as "L.I.E." lays on the teen nihilism, it skirts exploitation and over-excess, opting for a quiet ambiguity that lingers at the margins of the story and emerging when you least expect it. The low-budget drama mines the same terrain as "Over the Edge," Jonathan Kaplan's underrated 1979 classic of suburban adolescent ennui, only it never feels like a Cheap Trick song writ large. And its muted "look closer" message is delivered with an elegant restraint that's drowned out by freeway noise and the narcotic sprawl of tract homes in the distance.

Shot in a confident, dreamy style alternating between dumpy oil-stained parking lots and sleek, white-tiled middle class homes, "L.I.E." careens from the grotty to the antiseptic often within the same scene, capturing the wide swathe of the suburban lie and its often deceptive possibilities. Big John's dark, brown-and-gold hued ranch home is so thick with distaste you can almost smell the fetid shag carpet. It's a gothic lair to rank up there with Miss Havisham's, the polar opposite of the Blitzer's hollow dream home of clean lines, empty spaces and perfect feng shui.

Thanks to a thoughtful, nuanced script by Stephen M. Ryder, Michael Cuesta and Gerald Cuesta, and a stand-out performance by Dano, the unshaped kid who finds structure in the most alarming of places, "L.I.E." hovers above the pack of traditional youth-gone-wrong coming of agers. It will probably find both fans and foes in its awkward journey toward distribution, but movies that tell the truth rarely have an easy coming-of-age themselves.

[http://www.indiewire.com/article/ndnf review heavy traffic cuestas truthful coming-of-ager l.i.e](http://www.indiewire.com/article/ndnf+review+heavy+traffic+cuestas+truthful+coming-of-ager+l.i.e)