

A Film Review of ‘Thumbsucker’

Mari Sasano

6th of October, 2005

THUMBSUCKER

Directed by Mike Mills, Starring Lou Taylor Pucci, Tilda Swinton, Vincent D'Onofrio, Keanu Reeves, Vince Vaughan

There is so much talk in the self-help genre about “healing.” But if you look around you, there is much more value placed on NOT recovering: alcoholics are told that they are addicts for life, abuse victims lash out, broken hearts are nursed for years on end. People are actually more comfortable when you don’t recover, dysfunction becomes a quick label that they use to understand you and your motives. We understand pain and suffering, we hold it to ourselves like a security blanket until it defines who we are.

Thumbsucker, on the surface, appears to hold up another example of dysfunction in suburbia. Justin Cobb (Lou Taylor Pucci) is a shy 17 year old who still sucks his thumb. Flip open your Freud for Dummies: it’s a regression into childhood during troubled times. His parents seem to be drifting apart—Mike Cobb (“He doesn’t like it when call him dad. It makes him feel old”) is living with a failed pro football career, and his wife Audrey (Tilda Swinton) obsesses over TV hunk Matt Schramm (Benjamin Bratt). Macho asshole father who doesn’t go to his son’s debate matches, and silly, shallow mother. Right? Justin’s stereotypically awful attempts to recover (hypnotism and surfer wisdom from his new agey orthodontist (Keanu Reeves), followed by Ritalin) actually screws him up, only to give him a kick in the pants in the RIGHT direction.

With the film’s vaguely churchy Polyphonic Spree and Elliot Smith soundtrack, it’s not surprising to find a turn the other cheek philosophy at the heart of Thumbsucker. Justin’s coming-of-age reveals to him that his parents are desperate and flawed, that a girl that he loves has less than noble intentions, and that adults—even his awesome orthodontist—are as Clueless as he is. And instead of reacting in anger (don’t only babies wish adults to be all-knowing?) he becomes compassionate—and in the knowledge that we’re all damaged and in-progress somehow, that the appearance of normality is a fraud, he joins the rest of humanity.

Reel World Cinema Series

Garneau Theatre, Thu, Oct 6, 7 pm

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