

My Name Is A By Anonymous

One of the most frightening films of the 1980s was **River's Edge**, a true-life horror story starring Keanu Reeves, Crispin Glover, Lone Skye and Dennis Hopper. In it, the body of a girl is killed by her dimwitted boyfriend is left to decay near the spot local misfits gather to smoke pot and drink beer. None of the teens considers it their duty to report the death, or even the location of the corpse, which is an open secret among a growing number of their friends. Once seen, it's impossible not to recall **River's Edge** whenever one reads a news article about a particularly grisly crime committed by kids willing to trade their freedom for whatever thrill derives from murder. Shane Ryan's similarly disturbing **My Name Is A By Anonymous** likewise is based on shockingly mindless murder, this one being the Alyssa Bustamante case, which took place in 2009, in Cole County, Missouri. Apparently, the 17-year-old killer took the life of her much younger neighbor, simply to experience what if felt like to watch someone die. Ryan takes a slightly different tack, by examining the killing of a cheerful 9-year-old girl through the eyes and backgrounds of four California girls trapped in a teenage wasteland of their own device. Outside of their homes, the girls don't look any more alienated or depressed than the average SoCal Goth wannabe. The biggest negative influence in their lives could be the cold reality of having next to nothing to do in dusty Saugus, except throw rocks in a dry river bed and use the cameras on their cellphones to document their every move. Positive role models are nowhere to be seen and any aspirations they might have for the future don't extend much further than the restaurant franchises and discount outlets that line the Interstate. That could all change if one of their videos went viral on YouTube, but even the least of them knows the odds against that happening.

It's inside their threadbare homes, however, where the girls encourage their inner demons to come out to play. When they look in the mirror, all they see is their pain and emotional insecurity staring back at them. All of the teens are self-destructive in one way or another. They cut themselves and feign suicide by putting their fingers to their head and cocking their thumbs. Two, at least, have been abused sexually by the men to whom their mothers are currently married. One is so severely bulimic that she has begun to enjoy the pain that comes from regurgitating what little food she eats. They distort their pretty young faces with grotesque makeup, which becomes smeared when their tears begin to flow. Nothing suggests to viewers that any of them would find relief, catharsis or anything else in the murder of a beautiful and trusting child. It could be that they resent her as-yet-unspoiled happiness or, knowing she'll probably end up like them, want to spare her their agony. Ryan doesn't attempt to make excuses for the girls' actions or suggest they might have turned out differently if they'd grown up in Boulder or Milwaukee. The only real hint comes in the title of one of two full-length re-edits included in the DVD package — "The Columbine Effect" — and, even then, there is no stockpiling of weapons or conspiratorial activities. As was the case in the actual Bustamante killing, the older girls didn't look ahead to weigh their options or consider what life might be like for as a child in a prison built to house adults. Ryan leaves those questions for us to answer. In a very real sense, **My Name Is A By Anonymous** is about the horror of everyday life in a America that no longer works and rewards corruption as much as it punishes unfounded optimism. Stylistically, everything from co-star Teona Dolnikova's atonal musical score and Arturo Guerrero's ominously bleak cinematography, to Ryan's razor-sharp editing, contribute to the palpable sense of dread that covers the movie like a sheet. The fact that the movie is going out straight-to-DVD has nothing to do with its quality and everything to do with its bleak subject matter. The set includes the alternate version, a deleted scene and a pair of interesting shorts.

- Gary Dretzka

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