

TEENS GOING ON REAL:

VERSIONS OF REALITY IN *AMERICAN TEEN* AND *GOING ON 13*

Since the advent of reality television, the entire notion of “the real” has been scrambled, remixed, and mashed up before our eyes. It often takes a huge dose of media literate acumen to discern the faux from the authentic, and even then, fantasy, fame, and fiction intermingle. Even in feature-length documentaries, the rules of storytelling sometimes stretch to fashion a coherent narrative out of the chaotic pieces that define real lives. As far back as Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), the documentary genre has always toyed with staging, performing, and recording notions of “the real.” In YouTube land, where dancing, camera mugging, crying, and karaoke-singing by “real” people warrants continual upload, what does it mean to “get real?” With independent and big time distributors of documentary programming vying for viewers, fiction and truth often interweave and blur in the interests of constructing a coherent storyline or creating tantalizing “spin.”

In the case of two recent acclaimed documentaries about teens, *American Teen* (2008) by Nanette Burstein and *Going on 13* (2008) by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan and Dawn Valadez, the versions of teen reality couldn’t be more diverse. Burstein headed to Warsaw, Indiana, to document five real teens during their senior year of high school, while Guevara-Flanagan and Valadez stayed close to their home turf in the San Francisco Bay Area to film four multicultural girls, over the course of four years, as they entered adolescence. Both projects had to grapple with similar questions: how “real” is it to train cameras on teenagers every day for ten months, or intermittently for four years? What happens when pre-teens and teens open up for the lens? Is it possible to capture an authentic perspective, a glimpse of truth, or will they default to a borrowed script?

American Teen derives stylistically from MTV’s *The Real World* (2000) and the explosion of reality programs that have dominated cable and network programming ever since its debut. With a budget of \$5 million, gleaned from Burstein’s proven track record and an Academy Award nomination for co-directing *The Kid Stays in the*

Picture (2002), the stakes for Burstein’s return investment exceeded a debut effort. With the explosive success of Michael Moore’s documentaries *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), among others, expectations for the art form have changed significantly, impacting the way they are marketed.



In *American Teen*, the viewer observes the parties, school hallways, living rooms, break-ups, love affairs, and social dramas of five teenagers on the verge of graduation in a predominately white, conservative, Christian, midwest town. While the camera crew is “invisible,” everyone plays to the lens, and the premise of the project depends upon the suspension of disbelief, and a universal buy-in to the “reality” of the unfolding melodramas. *This is what teenagers do. This is how they compete, backstab, whisper, and crush on each other.*

Despite the documentary label, the *American Teen* “characters” are drawn from any number of teen fiction flicks or sitcoms: the jock, the geek, the princess, the heartthrob, and the rebel. In fact, one of the publicity posters copied the posse configuration of *The Breakfast Club*, circa 1985, while publicity materials referenced *Juno* (2007) far more than Frederick Wiseman’s landmark 1968 documentary, *High School*. The entire premise of the film—a quintet of “real teens” from Anywhere, U.S.A.—hinges on stereotypes developed in Hollywood teen dramas over the last twenty years, from *Pretty in Pink* (1986, directed by John Hughes) to *Mean Girls* (2004, directed by Mark Waters).

Hannah Bailey, the rebel arty girl of *American Teen*, manages to transcend typecasting most effectively, largely because she's positioned outside of the box at the outset. Born into a conservative midwest middle-class town, she breaks the rules in all the cool ways: fronting a band as singer/songwriter/guitarist, best-friending her guy bandmates, attending art classes, and vowing to ditch Warsaw for film school in San Francisco. In the land of bland posers, Hannah stands out as the heroine to root for.

Yet the deck appears to be stacked against her. Her divorced parents lack support for her vision, and her mother's downer bipolar personality strikes back as Hannah attempts to strike out on her own. The onscreen maternal pronouncement, "You're not special," sums up far more about

destroy queen-bee script as she pulls the collective social strings, struggles with family secrets and extreme pressure from her father to uphold the family's Notre Dame legacy.

Not much is revealed for the heartthrob jock, Mitch Reinholt, who arrives on the scene midway through the film as a cross-clique romantic foil for Hannah, leaving gaping questions about story thread manufacture. Did any of these scenes evolve naturally? For that matter, in a media-saturated universe, how many of the now familiar American adolescent bullying and romance melodramas depicted in *American Teen* emerge from true impulses and how many are borrowed from *Gossip Girl*? For many mainstream teenagers, celebrityhood, even as short-term ruler of the hallways, remains



the difficulties facing teen dreams than a textbook on girls' self-esteem. Add the lack of family support to a penchant for falling in love with heartbreaker guys, and Hannah teeters at times on the edge, unable to attend school, which threatens her breakaway graduation plans.

Over the course of the ten months, the other "American Teens" manage to transcend complete stereotyping with their own humanizing struggles. The jock, Colin Clemens, is challenged when his dad, who sidelines as an Elvis impersonator, puts so much emphasis on the athletic scholarship outcome that he begins to miss shots at the hoop, leaving him vulnerable to poor reviews by talent scouts. The geek, Jake Tusing, is convinced that a girlfriend will solve his insecurities, which puts a gender twist on packaged romance, a form of brainwashing that frequently derails self-confidence in girls. Even the mean girl, Megan Krizmanich, who follows a dis-and-

a goal tantalizing enough to risk personal integrity by spreading pernicious rumors, photos, and emails. In *American Teen*, Megan wields her power to destroy the reputation of a girl foolish enough to send a boy a compromising photo. But where did these ideas originate, and is it the role of the filmmaker to watch idly by as these destructive scenarios unfold?

With a Documentary Directing Award in hand from the Sundance Film Festival, the film was distributed to general cinema audiences in summer 2008 by Paramount Vantage, complete with theatrical trailers, Q&A press junkets for the teens, screen splash at the multiplex, and interviews in the *LA Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and the blogosphere. Given the celebrity treatment afforded these documentary "stars" during their spotlight moment, any questions about authenticity will likely never be resolved.

One year after the film's release, the majority of the cast has disappeared from internet view. Only Hannah, now a film student at State University of New York at Purchase, appears to have designs on furthering her link to Burstein as a film mentor. Today she continues a blog where she posts student films and dialogues about her travels and film world internship experiences, extending the self-portraiture style gleaned from her time as an "American Teen."¹

Going on 13, a 73-minute feature documentary distributed by New Day Films, broadcasts nationally on PBS stations this fall with definitive grassroots street cred. Over the course of four years, on another side of real, Guevara-Flanagan and Valadez followed

Going on 13 chronicles the transition from late girlhood into early adolescence, often termed a female loss-of-power phase, most notably by the American Association of University Women's seminal study "Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America" (1991) and Mary Pipher's bestselling *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994). As Guevara-Flanagan explains in an interview with Jen Stuller on the *Bitch* blog *Ink-Stained Amazon*:

[W]hen girls are still children, they are on an equal footing with boys in terms of academic and athletic confidence and participation. They have spunk! Then puberty hits and all hell breaks loose. And in many instances, schools and teachers unknowingly contribute to this invisibility of girl in the classroom,



four multicultural girls during their transition to high school. While researching the documentary, the filmmakers interviewed hundreds of girls from Bay Area schools. They discovered "distinct archetypes: the tomboy, the girl with a perpetual crush, the student who would never dream of defying authority, and the one who was happiest being 'different.'"²

While inspired by Michael Apted's *Seven Up* series (1964–), as well as Tina Di Feliciano and Jane C. Wagner's 1997 documentary *Girls Like Us*, which followed four Philadelphia-area girls from ninth to twelfth grade, a fresh approach resonates in *Going on 13*, with time-lapse sequences and an animated composition notebook, where girl doodles and sketches vibrantly come alive. The pages of the notebook flash by as a visual metaphor for the four years of collapsed time covered by the documentary.

by ignoring them because they are not disruptive or raising their hands or not encouraging them enough. We wanted to see how this concept played out by following the same girls during their critical time period from childhood to teenhood, but also to see how lower income and girls of color adhered or strayed from this concept. Most of the research done around that time was focusing on middle class white girls."³

Unlike the players in *American Teen*, who uphold the dominant rules of teen looks and fashion, the girls in *Going on 13* expand our definitions of "the beautiful" by revealing resiliency, strength, sincerity, insight, and verbal prowess as they grow up under the lens. Given that mainstream media often depicts girls of color as a "troubled" population, watching the ways these multicultural girls navigate their entry into adolescence is, by turns, both revelatory and celebratory.

Ariana, a spunky, outspoken African American girl raised by a single mother, refines her articulate, college-bound dreams as she deals with school, boys, and her mother's remarriage. Esmeralda, a Mexican American from a large family, shares secrets and rebellious interests in fashion and boys as she plans her ideal Quinceañera party. Isha, a first-generation immigrant who works after school in the family liquor store, spends summers in her native India, and struggles to integrate her family's traditional Hindu values with American ones. Rosie, a mixed race Latina who discovers her own writer's voice as a way of coping with her parents' divorce and her mother's chronic depression caused by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, eventually starts a literary magazine.

Because these girls' encounters with daily reality do not play out in mainstream media, they did not have default scripts to depend upon as they bravely face the camera. The result is fresh, intriguing, and poignant dialogue built on emerging trust in the filmmakers and their intentions, which are clearly rooted in the girls' best interests. This multilingual dialogue, sprinkled with subtitled Spanish and Hindi as well as English, reveals worlds of truth about growing up female in a culture where stereotypes increasingly fall short.

Throughout the course of the documentary, the girls were given cameras and encouraged to produce their own films and video diaries. While some of this footage found its way into *Going on 13*, the majority of it screened in "Four Rooms," a unique multimedia installation at ProArts Gallery in Oakland, California, that opened after major filming for the documentary was completed.⁴ Each girl created a "bedroom" in the gallery where their own edited films played on computer monitors. The well-attended exhibition provided a unique public forum for the girls to display their videos, and a means to express themselves creatively outside the context of the documentary. Once Ariana, Esmeralda, Isha, and Rosie learned to ask, "How do I Look (Through the Lens)?" versus "How Do I Look (in the Mirror)?," their worldviews transformed.

Guevara-Flanagan and Valadez's genuine concern for the girls depicted onscreen resonates throughout the project. Their creativity, resourcefulness, and commitment to them is amply documented on the *Going on 13* website⁵ and continues as the girls head to college. While Burstein spent ten months filming and getting to know her subjects for *American Teen*, and a subsequent two years to release, Guevara-Flanagan and Valadez dedicated not only four years to production, but an additional four years to editing, fundraising, and distribution.

As part of the promotion for the September 2009 PBS screenings of *Going on 13*, ITVS funded a short video dialogue between the filmmakers and two of the girls, Ariana and Esmeralda, now both 18, which can be found on YouTube.⁶ The video intersperses images of the girls at age 9 in response to questions they recently posed to the producers about why they were chosen and their favorite parts of the process. The girls' confident auras have no doubt been enhanced by their long-term involvement with a project where their thoughts and creativity were not only documented, but highly valued as key collaborative elements. Through the film's national PBS broadcast and lineup of community and educational screenings, the portraits

of Ariana, Isha, Esmeralda, and Rosie will now reach a multitude of viewers, with a definitive impact on expanding definitions of the ways girls grow up, transcend stereotypes, and find their own way to be strong, vocal, and real.

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NOTES 1. See <http://hannahbailey.wordpress.com>. 2. See www.goingon13.com/statement. 3. Jen Stuller, "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon: An Interview w/Directors Kristy Guevara-Flanagan and Dawn Valadez," Ink-Stained Amazon (August 26, 2009); available at <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/girl-you%E2%80%99ll-be-a-woman-soon-an-interview-w/directors-kristy-guevara-flanagan-and-dawn-valadez>. 4. "Four Rooms" was on view at ProArts Gallery in Oakland, California Oakland, CA, July 1–August 31, 2005. 5. See www.goingon13.com. 6. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilgC7jyqFe4.

