PROJECT MUSE®

American Teen dir. by Nanette Burstein (review)

Lyell Davies

Middle West Review, Volume 1, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 163-165 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0000>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/578252>

Media Reviews

American Teen, dir. Nanette Burstein, 2008.

American Teen is a feature length documentary that depicts the lives of five midwestern students over the course of their final year at Warsaw Community High School in Indiana. Stylistically polished and reportedly made with a production budget in the region of \$2 million, *American Teen* was designed to join the roster of early twenty-first century documentaries that seemed to show that nonfiction film could compete with fiction at the box office. Noticeably dramatic in the story lines it presents, featuring animated sequences depicting the thoughts of the film subjects, and employing elements of film language seen in fiction films (such as crosscutting and point of view shots), *American Teen* teeters between documentary, fiction film, and reality tv. The film thus illustrates the tendency of many recent documentaries to stretch the conventions of nonfiction filmmaking.

Over the year in the lives of the five students depicted, romantic relationships are formed and fail, pranks are played, college applications are submitted, and some of what the future may bring for the teens is revealed as graduation day looms. The film veers closest to fiction in the way it boxes each of its teenage subjects into an archetypal onscreen role, thereby aligning each with characters seen in Hollywood's high school or teenage bildungsroman films. The academically gifted and popular Megan is presented as the spiteful, spoiled, prom queen; pimply Jake is a videogaming geek whose onscreen life revolves around the search for a girlfriend; Colin is a charismatic basketball star who overcomes doubts and setbacks to win games for his school and earn an athletic scholarship to college; Hannah is a sensitive, rebellious artist, with overbearing parents and values that are too liberal for solipsistic, small town Warsaw; and Mitch, good looking and easygoing, is the thoughtful, sensitive jock. Taking a more distanced

view, the film is infused with another larger archetype: by labeling the five white, Indiana high schoolers as “American” teens, the film replicates the pernicious notion that a midwestern white picket fence experience is the quintessential American norm and essence.

When Paramount Vantage purchased *American Teen* for distribution, it further emphasized in its marketing and promotional efforts the stereotypical roles assigned to each of the five teens. One advertising poster was directly styled on a poster for the coming of age drama *The Breakfast Club* (1985). This poster featured *American Teen*’s subjects posed and dressed as the characters from this earlier fictional film, and the five teens were labeled as “[a] heartthrob, a princess, a jock, a rebel and a geek.” Film critics responding to *American Teen* also embraced the idea that the documentary was linked to fiction films depicting teen or high school life; one remarked that “*American Teen* is as funny as *Napoleon Dynamite*, as touching as *Juno* and may even be better than *The Breakfast Club*.” Others critics drew comparisons between *American Teen* and such films as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), or *Superbad* (2007), among many others.

If the film’s inability to return a profit at the box office is any measure, the efforts to position *American Teen* as an addition to the corpus of Hollywood’s commercially successful high school genre dramas failed. But the treatment of the five at the center of the film is revealing of our society’s expectation of white, middle class teens when they appear on the cinema screen. Sociologist Robert C. Bulman argues that teenage coming of age and high school dramas commonly fall into three subgenres.¹ These are: films depicting urban high schools populated by troubled poor or minority youth who are inspired to heroically take charge of their lives following the intervention of a charismatic (and often white) teacher or mentor; films depicting suburban high schools where white middle class youth break with the prevailing social norms by rebelling against teachers or other authority figures to express their individuality; and films depicting working or middle class students who enter posh, privileged schools and then prove themselves to be more worthy than the spoiled, rich kids they encounter there. In promotional materials, *American Teen* was pushed to fall within the second of these sub genres—a role in which it does not succeed.

Among the five individuals depicted in *American Teen*, there is no quirky, comic book Enid Coleslaw of *Ghost World* (2001), no mature-beyond-her-years Juno MacGuff as seen in *Juno* (2007), nor any of the other wise, white teen movie protagonists who engage in incisive acts of onscreen rebellion,

righteous pranks, and deliver rapier witticisms. Therefore *American Teen*, without intending to do so, draws our attention to the fictive, ideological, and ultimately racially loaded way that Hollywood's teen and high school dramas depict teenagers: Minority youth are commonly depicted as a threat to society that must be tamed, while middle class white teens are portrayed as paragons of sophisticated "expressive individualism"—to use a term employed by Bulman. Despite being positioned to fulfill the latter of these roles, the five teenagers seen in *American Teen* do not fit the part. Instead, while each is admirable in their individual way, they also make mistakes, orchestrate childish pranks, and rely on their parents for guidance and affirmation as they navigate their paths toward adulthood, sometimes clumsily. In short, they behave like actual teens, not the Hollywood version. If we look beyond *American Teen*'s forced drama, stagey formal construction, and marketing hype, then we see that director Burstein has unintentionally delivered a documentary that debunks the formulaic, fantasy scenarios of the high school film genre it was positioned to join. Along the way, in its best moments as a documentary, *American Teen* delivers a modestly revealing exploration of life as it is experienced by a group of quite ordinary, white, middle class high school seniors in a small town in the Midwest.

Lyell Davies

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

New York City

NOTE

1. Robert C. Bulman, *Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture* (New York: Worth Publishers, 1985), 18–23.

God Loves Uganda, dir. Roger Ross Williams, 2013.

Throughout *God Loves Uganda* (2013), director Roger Ross Williams spotlights the transnational connections between the American Midwest and the rest of the world. In this case, the relationship is primarily expressed through a contemporary form of Christian missionary work that many critics would characterize as *neocolonial*. For example, in some scenes, we see young white evangelicals gesticulating rapturously at the International House of Prayer (IHOP), a megachurch in Kansas City, Missouri, while a Christian rock band plays on a well lit stage. In other scenes, young Ugan-