

## TELEVISION

## Rage Against the Machine

PAUL BRAVMANN

## AMERICAN HIGH

"**B**ustin' Out," episode six of R.J. Cutler's breakthrough reality TV series *American High*, opens on 17-year-old Morgan Moss pointing a pistol at his mother's head and barking demands: "Say what a nice child I am on camera. Now." It's a chilling moment, despite the fact that the pistol in

question fires only paintballs, and despite the knowledge (if one has followed the show at all sequentially) that the Moss family is a high-functioning team of caring individuals—especially when it comes to dealing with screwball Morgan.

Post-Columbine America has every right to be sensitive when the topic turns to teenagers. Sociologists inform us that the "generation gap"—the psychodemographic rift that was assigned a name in the mid-1960s—is wider than ever. Blame Sony PlayStation and Eminem and *Maxim*. Blame the presence of narcotics in our schoolyards. Blame, as former President Clinton did at last May's White House Conference on Teenagers, the fact that families don't sit down to dinner together anymore—at least not often enough to countervail the influence of toxic culture. Or that when they do sit down to dinner (according to a recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation), two-thirds of families with school-age children leave the television on.

This doesn't have to be a bad thing. This summer PBS is rebroadcasting *American High* in its entirety, giving teens, parents of teens and our largely teenophobic population a second chance to grapple with and maybe even understand one another better, through the potent (at least in this case) medium of documentary TV.

*American High* is an obsessive chronicle of the lives of fourteen upperclassmen, mostly seniors—jocks and band

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geeks, a pierced punk rocker, a couple of delinquents by default, no cheerleaders—at suburban Chicago's Highland Park High School. Executive producer Cutler chose Highland Park for its receptivity to his vision for the project, which included not only an entire academic year of on-site filming but an addition to the school's curriculum: A video-diary class taught by producer Jonathan Mednick. The 800 hours of self-reflexive footage shot by Mednick's chosen students, plus an additional 2,000 hours (documenting everything from earnest powwows in the girls' room to out-of-control keggers to senior prom) shot by Cutler and his crew, are the raw material for *American High*.

It's hard to imagine the blood, sweat and tears it must have taken to cut this quantity of tape into thirteen twenty-two-minute episodes. But Cutler managed it. Superbly. The end result is a multifarious collection of coming-into-adulthood stories that rub shoulders with one another and trip gamely over one another's limbs as they unfold side by side, week after week. Each story is, in and of itself, a vivid and affecting slice of life-on-the-verge. Shuffled together, they form a discursive epic of both the inner and outer struggle of the Misunderstood American Teen.

The video diary excerpts are, as intended, a revelation, a chance for Cutler's subjects to rage against their parents and the societal machine, wax philosophical or get up close and personal. Morgan breaks it down for us: "These are your teen years... you're supposed to go wild...have unprotected sex...go pick fights, stay out all



night, look at the stars." Regarding that little thing called "life," Sarah, a doe-eyed redhead, deep in the thrall of a Turgenev-esque first love, says, "It's this road we're all traveling on. I have no idea where my road is going to take me." (From the mouths of relative babes, this and other, similar platitudes are strangely moving.) Robby, the chronically good-natured lacrosse player, tells the story of when his buddy Brad (another featured student) came out to him: "His eyes were absolutely, totally lost... He was like so scared. And I'm like, y'know what Brad? That's cool. I still love you."

A testament to Mednick's instruction, the diaries also often pack a whopping cinematographic punch. In one particularly effective tableau, Kiwi, Highland Park's champion field-goal kicker, records a moment of (literally) naked truth. Slumped in half-shadow, microphone taped to his bare chest, he describes a gut-deep fear of turning 18, brought on by missing a crucial post-touchdown point. Says Cutler of Mednick, "He never discussed content with them. What he discussed with them was form, formal expression, the expressionism of where you place the camera or what light does... It's not like he said to Kaytee [a budding singer-songwriter, unlucky in love], 'Wrap yourself in red when you're talking about being heartbroken.'" Mednick's students learned their lessons well. The pictures prove it.

In contrast to the talk-to-the-camera nature of the diaries, Cutler and his crew are both everywhere at once and nowhere to be found, as they collect the Home Depot's worth of narrative nuts-and-bolts from which the framework of the series is constructed. Cutler learned his doc-chops from D.A. Pennebaker, one of the medium's old masters, as a producer on Pennebaker's Clinton campaign saga *The War Room*. Like Pennebaker's films, *American High* is firmly rooted in the tradition of *cinéma vérité*, in which the capture of spontaneous action is the prime directive, interpretive narration is eschewed and the presence of the filmmakers deliberately obscured.

One of rawest, realest stories Cutler documents is that of Pablo, the self-described "poetically inclined hooligan," a sweet, deep kid from the wrong side of the tracks. Over the course of many episodes, we watch Pablo confront the blunt economic realities of his broken home (one tragic scene shows him begging his estranged father for the change from their not-so-Happy Meals). In a midseries moment, Pablo, fresh from a viewing of Kubrick's

*Full Metal Jacket*, tells his mom that he's thinking about joining the Marines. It reads as a joke. Not long after, however, he appears at a recruitment office, acs the aptitude test and is told that his numbers qualify him for any job the corps has to offer. On the drive home, he comes to his senses: "I thought [the Marines] would be a great place to write poetry," he says. "If I went to war...I'd probably go AWOL." Case closed. But in the penultimate episode, after a vicious fight with Mom, he returns, grimly determined to muster up. "This is going to be my declaration of independence," he says. One breathes a sigh of relief when, after failing the drug screening, he's thrown back into the muddle of civilian life.

Later, Cutler proves that he is not entirely beholden to the principles of classic *vérité*. "We're working with people who are pioneers in this area," he says, "but we've all learned that rules are made to be broken." In the final episode, flouting the noninterference ethic of the genre, Kaytee (who speaks mostly disparagingly of her formidable musical talent) is spirited off to a professional recording studio. Headphones fitted snugly over her ears, a look of pure joy on her face, she lays down track after wax-worthy track as her parents watch, bewildered, behind soundproof glass. "The lovely thing is that you wouldn't normally do it," says Cutler, "and if you did do it, you wouldn't tell anybody about it. But maybe the truth is that in Kaytee's junior year of high school she met this group of people that were making a documentary series and it had this impact on her life... It's not that they turned her into an artist. It's a much more symbiotic experience."

It's just this sort of reverent irreverence that makes watching *American High* such a pleasure. Cutler's love of his work, and of his teen subjects, is everywhere detectable. From the punk-pop theme song that blares, "We walk the halls of life/See the things that we wanna see/Be what we wanna be/Wherever I go I search for me," to the company credits that end each episode: "Actual Reality Pictures," splashed across the screen while a helium-altered voice squeals, "Hey man! Trust me, dude!"

On a more critical note, one could argue that Cutler's love has blinded him to some of the more unpleasant aspects of teen life. The brutal cliquishness of high school is barely addressed. And the oft-crushing tedium of classes disappears via a postproduction hat trick—the number of minutes devoted to student-teacher interactions can be counted on one hand.



Hopped up on Cutler's distilled and purified *Bildungsromane*, older viewers might (as I was) be temporarily brainwashed into thinking that adolescence is something they'd jump at the opportunity to re-experience.

The series closer is a graduation double-episode in which art and life converge to offer up a grab bag of terrific moments. Prom queen Anna is held hostage and forced to listen to a ballad of reconciliation performed by her remote, chastity-fixated father, a gesture that backfires horribly. His treacly Stevie Wonder stylings leave her scrambling for the edge of the familial nest. Pablo, reduced to almost-tears when the graduation planners refuse to let him wear a Greco-Roman wreath in lieu of the standard-issue mortarboard, recovers quickly. "Next week is senior prank time," he announces, "and from the heart of hell I stab at thee!" Morgan, lacking Pablo's sense of timing, spends graduation eve in jail for vandalizing school property. Barred from the ceremony, his parents photograph him in cap and gown, holding his case number against his chest. And then there's Allie, battered survivor of the college application process and her parents' ugly divorce, whose last hurrah is easily the most symbolic. Having barely squeaked by grade-wise, she proudly displays her diploma for the camera. "Nobody can tell me I didn't damn graduate," she says. "I'm closing the chapter to high school, and I walk away, and then there's a new beginning." As she turns to make her exit, she runs headlong into a metal post.

*American High* ran into its own rude obstacle on its way into the big, bad world. The first four episodes, commissioned by Fox, ran last year during what Cutler describes as the network's "summer from hell." Airing opposite the CBS juggernaut of *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, *American High*—perhaps too real for the "reality TV" market, with its lack of hard-bitten contestants scrabbling after prize money and its non-escapist obsession with the high-stakes game of life itself—was quickly squashed. Much to Fox's credit, however, it paid for the remaining episodes and promised not to stand in Cutler's way if he found a new home for the show.

Enter PBS, which, according to Gerry Richman, VP of national production for Twin Cities Public Television, was thrilled to offer asylum to *American High*. TPT, the affiliate in charge of packaging the series, has done a bang-up job, holding town hall meetings at which Morgan and Kiwi have been special guests, and maintaining a website ([www.pbs.org/americanhigh](http://www.pbs.org/americanhigh)) that of-

fers everything from cast photos (suitable for locker posting) to a detailed curriculum for Mednick's video-diary class. (The "station finder" link will take you to the website of your local public television station, where a schedule for summer reruns of *American High*, which started in mid-July, can be found.)

Teen viewership spiked dramatically for PBS when it premiered the series back in

April, and the network hopes to build on this success by creating more smart, youth-friendly programming. *An American High 2* is also in the works. Says Cutler, "We're hoping to continue into the second season with an inner-city school, and instantly the contrast will provide all kinds of answers." Answers to what Richman rightly calls the "monumental mystery" of high school. Answers that our country sorely needs. ■