



Putting The Class Back In Reality TV

R.J. Cutler's *Freshman Diaries*

Sarah Stanfield

It doesn't seem so long ago that *The Real World* debuted, launching the era of "reality TV." But with *Survivor* in its fifth incarnation this season and *The Real World* having seemingly run out of major U.S. cities in which to place its characters (its current installment has its subjects living in Paris), the genre is approaching middle age. Some critics think it should be put out to pasture: they feel its low-grade spawn—the *Joe Millionaires* and *The Bachelors*—have degraded the quality of television ruinously.

Yet there is a gulf the size of a small country between the documentary-style *Real World* and the sensationalistic, over-produced *Joe Millionaire*. One attempts, à la cinema vérité, to let its subjects drive the narrative rather than manipulating "plots." The latter sets up its scenes in an obviously calculated manner.

Freshman Diaries, the latest entry into the real-

ity TV pantheon, falls into *The Real World* camp. Following the lives of a group of freshman at the University of Texas at Austin from move-in day to final exams, it was created and executive produced by R.J. Cutler. Cutler has quite a few reality TV credits under his belt: he produced the ABC reality series with Roseanne, executive produces *American Candidate*, a reality series in which the public will choose a people's candidate to run for president of the U.S., and executive produced *American High*, which follows high school students (that show won an Emmy in 2001). His new show looks to provide viewers a sort of mirror into one of the most crucial periods in a young adult's life: being away from home for the first time.

Looking For Answers

"While filming *American High*, what we discovered about high school seniors is that at that moment their lives are really about understanding who they are. I was curious about how that

Teenage Angst and Indie Filmmaking in *thirteen*

Cinematographer Elliot Davis is accustomed to working on big-time Hollywood fare—*Forces of Nature*, *Out of Sight* and *Next Best Thing*—but in his own words, "I'm much more interested in socially conscious films." When first-time filmmaker Catherine Hardwicke was preparing to shoot *thirteen*—a gritty, neo-verité story about Tracy, a seemingly innocent teenage girl who is led into temptation by Evie, her popular, sexually promiscuous friend—Davis jumped at the chance to work on the project.



Although *thirteen* was not shot on digital video, Davis originally considered the medium because the film is so performance-driven. But it was director Hardwicke who eschewed video. "Catherine was really hooked into the texture of film," says Davis. Besides, Davis thought that since they were going for a highly stylized, "disintegrated" look, they would have more options in post if they shot on film. "Because film has more resolution, when we digitized it, we could do more things to it."

With a budget of roughly \$1.5 million, Davis and Hardwicke chose to shoot on Super 16, then manipulated the negative using a digital intermediate process before taking it back to 35mm for the theatrical release. "I think that texture was the key thing," says Davis when describing the look of the film, which he calls "hyper-real expressionism."

thirteen starts off roughly one-third desaturated, hits maximum saturation around the time Tracy and Evie become close friends and then gradually becomes more desaturated until the very end, when the film looks almost monochromatic.

The basis for *thirteen's* gritty, grainy look was already in the film, with Davis shoot-



ing on Kodak 7279 (Vision 500T), pushed one stop. The desaturation was done in post, during the digital intermediate stage, which was completed at Technique, a Technicolor subsidiary that operates out of Los Angeles. Colorist Trent Johnson manipulated the color in a manner that Davis describes as "the digital equivalent of a bleach bypass" and made it grainier.

thirteen was shot over 24 days with no pick-ups. "I call it cinema of the machine gun," says Davis. "That's what the camera felt like. It felt like the film never stopped rolling through it."

—Elina Shatkin



played out once kids go off to college," says Cutler of his reason for creating *Freshman Diaries*. He was especially interested in how the sudden freedom college life affords helps students form their identities: "We wanted to see how that freedom impacts their search for identity. Sure enough, we discovered all sorts of answers."

Finding those answers came through a special approach. In typical documentary style, Cutler had two production crews follow the freshman around throughout the year. The crews would shoot the students three weeks out of every month. Students are seen doing just about everything one would expect of college freshman: drinking, studying, making out, breaking up, and experiencing a variety of emotions.

What's less typical of the production is its use of video diaries: production staff gave students Sony PD-100 DV cams and told them to record video diaries of themselves on a near-daily basis. Students would meet with producer Ben Brand once a week to review their technique.

"The process of the video diaries itself was critical because it provides a window into the kids' experience—their emotional life, what's going on with them—in ways that our camera crews can never really capture," says Cutler.

Besides helping the students with their own processes of self-discovery, Cutler says the use of video diaries affords more intimacy between the subject and the audience. "We're providing a more intimate connection. It's a more intimate show. If you compare the kind of work that we do to either documentaries that don't avail themselves of this diary process or reality shows, there's

a whole different level of intimacy."

Video diaries also helped Cutler and the production crew avoid interfering too much with the natural flow of the narrative: "We kind of extend the cinema vérité philosophy that the subject is your collaborator to the point where we really have the subject drive the narrative by virtue of what he or she provides in the video diaries," explains Cutler.

In post, the video diaries are letterboxed. "They're set apart because they represent the interior monologue [of the students]," says Jonathan Chinn, supervising field producer and director of photography for the show.

Less Is More

For the non-video diary footage, production crews employed Sony DSR 570 cameras. "We used both mini DV and full-sized DV cam tape and found the DSR 500 series to be extremely reliable and sturdy out in the field," says Cutler. "We've done a number of shows with them." In postproduction, crews film-looked the DV tape for a look Cutler says is perfect for the show. "I love the combination of the DV cam and the film look and what it gives you. You get rich color, you get rich texture, you get rich grain. There's very little else on television that looks like it," he says.

As for technique itself, Cutler and Chinn say it's very straightforward. "The shooting style is pretty much just standard documentary style, just straight observational style," says Chinn. "There isn't a lot of trickery that's going on. It's pretty much straight shooting," says Cutler.

In fact, "less is more" is the philosophy of the *Freshman Diaries* crew. Crew members avoid interacting with the students they are shooting as much

as possible and situations are rarely lighted. "I would say 99 percent of the time, we're not using lights," states Cutler. "We're relying on natural light, whether that's indoor or outdoor, although there are occasions in which we're going to throw something really small on a situation. We'll go to opening up the lens as much as possible, letting in as much light as possible."

Post, however, is an entirely different ball of wax. Viewers of *Freshman Diaries* will pick up right off the bat that at several points in each episode, the film speeds up and slows back down again. Cutler says this represents college students' view of time: "There are some months that go by in the blink of an eye and there are some days that seem to take years to go

by," he says. "So you'll see in our episodes a lot of speeding up and slowing down. Even within the same scene, you'll see

somebody kind of—suddenly everything's moving very quickly—and in the next beat, it's all slowed down, and then it's returned to normal time.

We do that a lot in order to convey the emotional reality of what's going on."

One of the main challenges Cutler and his team faced in editing was how to deal with intercutting between the video diaries and the other types of footage. Cutler didn't want to use cutaways (i.e., jump cuts). "Because we're relying on the video diaries [to achieve a certain theme], cutaways are only going to feel phony."

Instead, Cutler and his crew employ flash frames.

Offline editing was done primarily on Avid



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Producer R.J. Cutler (left)

Unitys. The systems are in-house, at Cutler's California-based production company, Actual Reality Pictures. "We're on an Avid Unity system, which allows us to share all our footage among different machines," says Cutler. "We have seven bays operating simultaneously."

A Year In The Life...

From first shoot to final edit, *Freshman Diaries'* 10-episode season took about 15 months to complete. Unlike scripted shows, crew members couldn't plan for certain "moments" or scenes. "The way we make our decisions on any given

day has to do with what's going on with the kids' lives, what's going on in other kids' lives—it's a complex matrix of different factors that we're weighing constantly," explains Cutler. The footage was being constantly screened both in the field and back at Actual Reality, however, to see what kinds of themes were developing. "There's a constant communications loop where the two principal questions being asked are, What did we see today? and What are we hoping to see tomorrow? Decisions are made in relation to the answers to those questions."

No matter what ends up happening, Cutler is confident *Freshman Diaries* is in no way your garden-variety reality series. In fact, he refuses to be a part of the critical fray over the genre: "I'm not responding to criticism of other people's shows. For a number of years, we've been doing this kind of work, which is taking the very principles that defined the cinema verité movement going back to the early 1960s and applying them to series production." Take that, *Joe Millionaire*!

Sarah Stanfield is Managing Editor of Digital TV-Television Broadcast and Sports TV Production.

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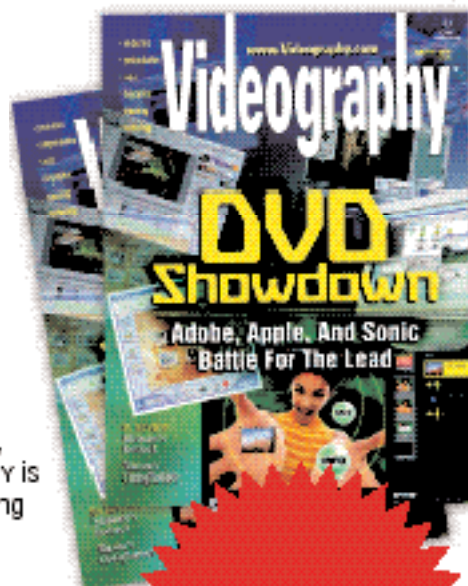
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