

FILM REVIEW / In the way that all great documentaries do, *Talk 16* brings its subjects

into the consciousness of the viewers, reminding us of the way we all looked before our masks hardened

Vulnerable, scary, comic, charming: they tell the truth about being 16

BY RICK GROEN
Film Critic

BLENDING the technical finesse of fiction with the brute power of fact, *Talk 16* does what all great documentaries do — the people and events spill out of the frame and leak into our consciousness, where they stick. Yes, the camera selects and shapes and even distorts those events, but because they unfold in the "real" world, a great documentary seems to have an implacable claim on the truth. *Talk 16* is no exception, and the truth it tells, like all truths, is a various thing — hopeful, depressing, fascinating, frightening, compelling.

Reminiscent of Michael Apted's work in Britain, the idea that sparked the film is basic enough — trace a year in the life of five 16-year-old girls. For practical reasons, co-directors Janis Lundman and Adrienne Mitchell confined their search to Toronto where, from an initial sample of 350, they selected their socially representative quintet: Astra, the blond street kid; Erin, the upper-class WASP; Lina, the ingenuous daughter of Russian immigrants; Helen, the overachieving offspring of Korean parents; and Rhonda, the fast-talking extrovert of Guyanese descent.

Using techniques that range from eavesdropping *cinéma vérité* to talking-head interviews, Lundman and Mitchell pick up the fivesome at the dawn of the nineties — New Year's Eve — and follow them through the ensuing 12 months, through the birthdays and the proms and the boys and the bravado. All except Astra are still in school — she has traded in her middle-class roots for a succession of flea-bag apartments and tattooed tough guys. Fluidly intercutting, the film flits from girl to girl (they don't know each other), and then unites them at the end — a symbolic union, because what emerges is a composite portrait of teen-aged life that highlights not the obvious social differences but the touching psychological similarities.



The teens of the documentary *Talk 16*: to some extent, they're all acting.

TALK 16

DIRECTED BY JANIS LUNDMAN
AND ADRIENNE MITCHELL

Starring Astra, Erin,
Helen, Lina and Rhonda

Rating: ★★★★★

The most striking similarity is precisely what makes these kids such terrifically cinematic subjects — to some extent, they're all acting. Trapped in that half-way house between the assurance of the child and the complacency of the adult, teenagers act out of necessity — they try out voices, roles, even personalities. When Rhonda does so literally, auditioning for the school play and angrily concluding, "I didn't like the part; I couldn't act to it," her comment serves as a neat metaphor for the whole group. For example, Helen is acting out her parents' dreams — excelling at school, at church, at

work — while Astra, just as assiduously, is acting out her parents' nightmares — dealing in sex and lies and torpor.

However, at some point they all drop the façade, and what we see behind the mask is not the emerging adult but the huddled child. Like the troubled Erin poking through her "junk drawer" and absently fondling a plastic Santa ("It's just childhood stuff I don't want to give up"). Or Astra's disappointed face in the wake of her bittersweet 16th birthday party, the bleached-blond toughness suddenly melting into the innocent pathos of a little girl lost. Or, most poignantly, Lina after her "first time"; Lina after she "did it in the weeds" with a boy arbitrarily chosen for the task, gaining a big dose of experience and a bad case of poison ivy in one fell swoop; Lina itching and looking perplexed and wanting to apologize (but to whom?) and settling for a sad smile and a rueful

aside: "Going to the dentist was more fun — two seconds, over."

The parents exist in the film as they do in the girls' lives — they're stolid figures at the edge of the frame, boundaries that are sometimes constricting and sometimes comforting. But they at least have their roles more or less defined. Not so the kids. *Talk 16* masterfully captures the awful state of flux that is a teen-ager's lot, a metamorphic state that leads to desperate acts and desperate acting, to self-inflation and self-loathing, not knowing whether you're caterpillar or butterfly. No wonder that teen-agers, unlike the professional adult, can't suspend their disbelief even in their own performances. That's what makes them so vulnerable, so scary, so comic, so charming — so truthful. And that's precisely the truth that leaks into our consciousness here — the joy and the travail of being 16, the way we all looked before our masks hardened.