

Other Media Reviews

Eighth Grade. Dir. Bo Burnham. Screenplay by Bo Burnham.
Perf. Elsie Fisher, Josh Hamilton, and Emily Robinson. A24, 2018.

Eighth Grade (2018), written and directed by Bo Burnham, follows the awkward attempts of a teenage girl to force herself out of her shell before she officially becomes a high schooler. For thirteen-year-old Kayla (Golden Globe nominee Elsie Fisher), this involves posting motivational videos to her YouTube channel, forcing herself to attend a pool party, and googling “how to give a blowjob.” *Eighth Grade* offers a contrast to darker coming-of-age movies featuring female protagonists, such as those trending in the 1990s and early 2000s: *Kids* (1995), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), *The Virgin Suicides*, (1999), *American Beauty* (1999), *Thirteen* (2003). Instead, *Eighth Grade* offers a female character who is essentially safe despite dabbling in risky behavior. *Eighth Grade* is notable for its deftness in arousing viewer anxiety about young women in two important spheres: sexuality and technology. We watch lonely Kayla trudge through her last weeks of eighth grade with cell phone in hand, taking staged selfies as part of her wake-up routine and exhorting the imagined audience of her YouTube channel to “Be yourself.” As *HuffPost*’s Anna Krakowsky puts it, “we recognize Kayla as someone we sympathize with, but also someone we want to protect—who is loose in a new world too large even for us to control.”

So, what does that new world—our new world—look like? And for the grown-ups in the audience, why is this new world such a looming threat for the teenage girl writ large? One answer might be found in real world research on teens and sexuality. Despite having more access to pornographic material than maybe any generation before them, teens are having less sex (Twenge). Indeed, as researchers begin to ask the “why” questions around this issue, they’re finding that easy access to porn may actually be one cause of the decline in sexual contact among teens. And of course, the other possible cause is the decline in any-sort-of-contact-whatsoever among teens. Above all, *Eighth Grade* gives viewers an opportunity to meditate on the true risk of technology for our heroine: isolation. Night after night we watch Kayla’s bedtime routine: lights out, ear buds in, laptop open. Kayla’s screen becomes our screen and we are left feeling the queasy aftermath of an

Internet bender: a toxic mix of Instagram, streaming television, and YouTube tutorials.

Even the official representatives of Kayla's future self (the high schoolers she gets to hang out with at the mall on one fateful day) fear that Kayla is part of a "different generation," one in which technology surely ended her childhood too soon:

TREVOR: When did you get Snapchat? What grade?

KAYLA: Fifth grade.

ANIYAH: Wait, so were kids like sending each other like nudes in like fifth grade?

TREVOR: She's seen dicks in fifth grade! She's like wired differently.

After half a movie's worth of anxiety about what will happen to dear Kayla, we encounter our fear in the mouths of older teens and find that it sounds hysterical. Perhaps we shouldn't be so worried after all. Consider this: Kayla seeks the attention of her crush by pretending to have a "dirty photos folder" on her phone but never ultimately does anything with him; she practices her blowjob technique on a banana but never on a person. In the end, we discover a teenage girl who is notable for her kindness and who (gasp!) believes in God, and (double-gasp!) is actually capable of connection: with bubbly Olivia who she shadows during the annual eighth grade visit to the high school, with earnest Gabe who is the cousin of mean-girl Kennedy but who trumps Kayla's awkwardness by tenfold (he starts their "first official hang out" by showing off his archery certificate from camp and then asking if she believes in God), and most importantly, with her dorky-but-genuinely-loving father in what is the most gratifying relationship of the film. Amid the constant threats of alienation and sexualization we are also left to feel that perhaps Kayla is simply lucky to have made it safely out of middle school.

The world of teenage risk set up by Burnham finds its unique identity in a standout scene when Kayla takes a ride home from the mall with an older boy she just met. All the classic narrative signs are there: a teenage boy and girl unexpectedly left alone in his car, they end up in the back seat, he asks her to take off her shirt—and she says "No." And there we hold our breath. We hold our breath because we've seen this set up so many times before: this is where our heroine will be victimized. Instead, what happens next, or what doesn't happen, is what sets *Eighth Grade* apart: there is no rape scene.

What does it tell us that this feels radical? That a movie in which the adolescent female lead takes risks and yet is safe feels like a breath of fresh air? One of the impacts of the #MeToo movement is that we are suddenly encountering far more stories of sexual violence in our everyday lives. If we're going to fully reckon with our true stories of trauma, perhaps we are even more grateful now for stories of safety. If the risks our real-life Kaylas faced were truly limited to the perils of wearing the wrong bathing suit to the pool party or the pressure of choosing the right emoji for the mean-girl's new profile pic, we would all breathe a long-overdue sigh of relief.

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Works Cited

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- Twenge, Jean M. "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198.

"Chapter Twenty: The Mephisto Waltz." *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, part 2, episode 9. Dir. Rob Seidenglanz. Teleplay by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. Perf. Kiernan Shipka, Ross Lynch, and Lucy Davis. Warner Bros. Television. 2019. *Netflix*.

The two-part finale of Netflix's *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* condenses all the supernatural strangeness from the show's former nineteen episodes into a satisfying conclusion. Throughout its two installments, alongside the show's satanic and magical fantasies, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (henceforth *Sabrina*) has