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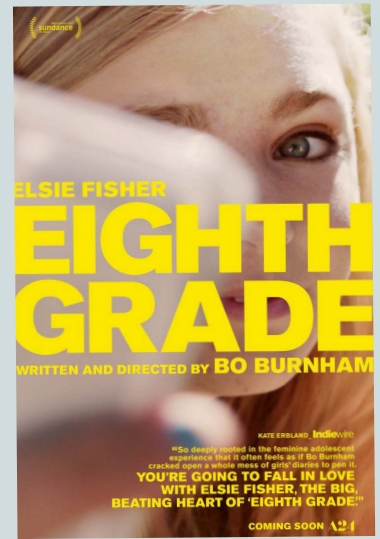
CPYU (D) REVIEW

By Walt Mueller

"Eighth Grade" Directed by Bo Burnham

Background/summary:

Acclaimed by critics after premiering in **January 2018** at the Sundance Film Festival, this comedy/drama was written and directed by 27-year-old comedian Bo Burnham. The film follows the social struggles of **13 year-old Kayla Day** (played by Golden Globe nominated Elsie Fisher) during her last week of classes before graduating to high school. Burnham wrote the film as a reflection on his own **difficulties with anxiety** while growing up.



film

(D)iscover

WHAT IS THE MESSAGE/WORLDVIEW?

- The film opens with 13-year-old Kayla creating an advice video for her YouTube channel in an effort to gain followers. The great irony is that nobody views her videos, and the shy/awkward middle-schooler who has been voted **"Most Quiet"** by her classmates is offering advice on the topic, **"Being Yourself"**. Her offline self navigates trying on a variety of selves in her effort to find her place in the social pecking order.
- A normal teen who doesn't fit the acne-free perfect-body stereotype girls aspire to in today's culture, Kayla is painfully and even realistically awkward as she poses, curates, and fabricates in search of that perfect image to project on social media. Appearing confident when alone and in front of the camera, she is the exact opposite in real-life scenarios with peers.
- Raised by a single father who works hard to connect with his changing daughter, Kayla struggles to make peace with her real self in a world that values the idealized online self. Her father struggles to encourage her to find her identity in who she is rather than who the peer group thinks she should be.
- As Kayla navigates the school hallway, the classroom, and a fellow student's pool party, she quickly sees how shallow relationships can be in a peer world lived out mostly online. Girls tend to focus more on their smartphone screens than on each other. Boys tend to focus on their emerging sexual desires while pondering entry into a world where boys are sexual consumers and girls are objectified into sexual providers. All of this feeds Kayla's ongoing battle with social anxiety.
- In an effort to pursue her crush on Aiden, Kayla discovers that he is interested in nude photos and oral sex. Having never engaged in either, Kayla examines the possibility but is quickly revolted by what she discovers about both, and takes the high road without ever pursuing either.
- Still, Kayla finds positive encouragement in three relationships. Her father never stops pursuing opportunities to teach and encourage his daughter, even in spite of her frequent push-back. Twelfth grader Olivia does nothing but accept and affirm Kayla during a high school preview day. And Gabe, an awkward and naive male peer who is interested in conversation and friendship, offers a positive, innocent, and endearing relationship opportunity.
- As graduation arrives, Kayla gains confidence to openly rebuke the shallowness of many of her peers. In a moving scene, she initiates a ritual with her father to burn mementoes of her past, while encouraging her future self to persevere through the difficult times that the rest of her adolescence is sure to bring.



Walt Mueller is the President and Founder of the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding.

(D)iscern

HOW DOES IT STAND IN LIGHT OF THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE/WORLDVIEW?

- Good story-telling is story-telling that portrays truth, even when that truth is ugly. We live in a fallen and broken world where all creation is groaning for redemption (**Romans 8**). Things are not the way they are supposed to be. **Eighth Grade** portrays the brokenness of the early- to mid-adolescent stage in ways that are true to the current adolescent experience, and which do not glorify or minimize sin. This is good, tender, and relatively accurate story-telling.
- While technology, smartphones, and social media are good gifts of God when used in ways that glorify God and promote human flourishing, the reality is that all-too-often kids become dependent on and addicted to technology. When this happens our relationships and selves diminish rather than flourish. Regardless of age, we seek acceptance and find our identity in a false self made in the image of what others think we should be.
- The Scriptures point from Genesis to Revelation to the fact that we have been made by God for a relationship with God. Our identity is to be rooted in who we are as sons and daughters of God. It is for our sakes that God made Jesus to be sin in our place, so that when God looks on us what He sees is the righteousness of God (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). Ultimately, our identity and security are to be found in who we are in Christ.
- The most repeated commands in the Bible are **"Do not be afraid"** and **"Do not fear"** (365 times). With adolescent anxiety and fear on the rise, Kayla muscles her way through it to a more positive outcome. When her fear of the high school preview day mounts, she turns to God, asking him to make it **"a really good day."** God calls us to cast our cares and our burdens on Him (**1 Peter 5:7**).
- Kayla offers a model for resisting temptation. For the Christian, God promises to provide a way out of temptation so that we do not fall into sin (**1 Corinthians 10:13**).
- Today's teens struggle intensely with comparison and jealousy thanks to the extra-added pressures related to portraying a flawless self on social media. We are commanded to avoid coveting what others have (**Exodus 20:17; James 3**).

(D)ecide

WHAT DO I DO WITH IT?

- While the film garnered an **"R"** rating (one short scene of implied masturbation, mention of oral sex in slang terms), it offers a realistic and tender portrayal of middle-school life in today's world. After generating fair warning, invite parents, grandparents, and youth workers to view and discuss the film together. Identify issues along with Gospel-centered strategies for addressing those issues in ways that equip kids to navigate the difficulties, obstacles, and opportunities.
- The temptation for those of us who have navigated our own middle-school years is to perhaps react by accusing kids of over-reacting to realities that we might know are relatively easy to handle (relative to the real-life issues of adulthood) or are temporary in nature. Don't cave into that temptation. Be sensitive by seeing life through Kayla's eyes, and then responding with respect for where kids are in the developmental process. The things that might be insignificant to us are monumental and seemingly insurmountable to them.
- Use the film as a discussion-starter on the effects of social media on kids and relationships in today's world. Spring off of a viewing to develop social media borders and boundaries which can be integrated into families and the lives of kids.