

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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"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

maintained a queer sensibility, one that has resonated with audiences who identify as LGBTQ+.

A quick search online about Netflix's supernatural teen show yields several pages about the queer community's response to the show. Much appreciation exists for *Sabrina*'s queer characters, such as the trans male character Theo, the pansexual warlock Ambrose, and the general sexual fluidity of most of the witch and warlock characters. The queer appreciation for *Sabrina* might be best summarized by *Nylon*'s Sesali Bowen, who suggests the show resonates through its presentation of intersectional queer experiences and through symbolism suggestive of queer allegory. The amount of queer characters often allows the show to become much queerer than what this writer's Netflix categorizes as "gay shows," which seems to be the streaming service's classification for any identification under the LGBTQ umbrella. *Sabrina*, meanwhile, serves the queer community through its queer characters' actions and through the camp aesthetic that permeates the show.

Near the beginning of "Chapter Twenty: The Mephisto Waltz," the show's most powerful antagonist, a particularly sexy Satan, makes a dramatic entrance through the fog wearing only a thong loincloth. The emphasis on Satan's body as he approaches the camera is not just a reminder of the show's homoerotic tendencies—Nick Scratch also spends a good deal of time shirtless in the back half of *Sabrina*'s episodes—but also as a performative nod to audiences that this will, indeed, be one of the show's queerest hours.

In "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag defined camp as a sensibility of aestheticism, exaggeration, and stylization (105). Sontag noted that camp was born one of two ways: either through naïve camp, which arises without intention, or deliberate camp, which is campy by design (110). As evidenced by Satan's sexy entrance, *Sabrina* certainly sits in the latter categorization, which, to counter Sontag's claim, does not make it any less satisfying (110). In the seventies, Jack Babuscio revisited camp, identifying it as a specifically gay sensibility of irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor (122). Each of these identified elements, which tend to play with and parody gender constructions, allow camp to be more than "specifically gay": camp is queer.

No sequence in the finale is more indicative of the show's campiness than in the Queen of Hell coronation at the finale's climax. First, it must be addressed that the climactic sequence is, indeed, a coronation, a theatrical and performative ceremony. As Satan sits on his throne of skulls, waiting for his legions of demons to witness Sabrina's crowning, Sabrina descends the stairs in an elegant gold gown

and begins to sing “Masquerade” from *The Phantom of the Opera*. Satan looks longingly at her, seemingly proud of her musical talents. As Sabrina begins to twirl in the ballroom, masked attendees—who were supposed to be demons, though Satan does not notice—enter the ballroom and sing alongside her. Why the song, “Masquerade?” Plot-wise, Sabrina has hidden her friends and family behind masks to help cast a spell and defeat Satan. Satan, perhaps a fan of the theatrical himself, views this performance gleefully. Narratively, the brief musical number serves no purpose. It is a theatrical spectacle, but more than anything, Sabrina’s entrance mirrors the self-aware entrance of Satan at the beginning of the episode. Does the fact that “Masquerade” is of a little narrative significance matter? Of course not, because the sequence does not take away from the effectiveness of the show, it increases it, specifically when viewing it through a queer lens. *Sabrina*, with its self-aware use of dark-fantasy aesthetic to express contemporary gender and sex concerns, uses this camp sensibility in both an artistic and political way.

The finale opens with a prologue narrated by and depicting Lilith as she serves as Satan’s handmaiden “in the beginning” of the universe. Lilith, the first woman and witch, spent the beginning of her eternal life serving Satan, with the promise that she would one day sit alongside him as the Queen of Hell. The prologue’s focus on Lilith indicates the finale will serve more as a conclusion to her storyline than to the titular character, a welcome shift as it allows more screen time for Michelle Gomez’s seductive performance. Lilith manipulates nearly all the various characters in the cast, but through her relationship with Sabrina, she finally chooses the light side of the battle—or lighter (after all, these are witches using dark magic from Hell)—against Satan and helps defeat him. Yes, this is so she can become the Queen of Hell as she has always wanted, but Lilith deserves the title and recognizes that just because serving a man is what she has known, does not mean it is all she can know. Lilith’s female-focused story is complemented by the arcs of other supporting women, such as Prudence, daughter of the coven’s misogynistic patriarch, and Aunt Zelda, the coven’s soon-to-be High Priestess. In each of the storylines concluded in *Sabrina’s* finale, women break free from the men who have attempted to contain them. Some might argue that these plots are too “obvious” in their feminist agenda, but that is the thing about camp media: it is not supposed to be subtle.

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Fiasco, Bully Pulpit Games, 2009.

"...life is a game we play."

– Noel Gallagher

If you believe, like me, that all the works of our imaginations are as real as the material world in which we are forced to pay rent—well, you cannot find a better lathe for creating worlds than Jason Morningstar's brilliant, awkward, messy, disastrous, and ultimately compelling storytelling game, *Fiasco*. Designed to create a ludic representation of the caper films of Joel and Ethan Coen, *Fiasco* allows players to inhabit, engage with, and eventually be burned by the worlds found in darkly comic films such as *Blood Simple* (1984), *Fargo* (1996), and *Burn After Reading* (2008), as well as Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* (1998).

Each of these films presents a narrative catalyzed by deeply flawed protagonists: morally, intellectually, or socially (and often a combination of all three) bankrupt yet determined to set an inevitably doomed, poorly-conceived plan into motion. *Fargo*, of course, offers the story of an impotent car salesman whose plan to fake his wife's kidnapping ends with corpses being fed into a North Dakota wood-chipper; *A Simple Plan* features three "friends" of varying moral turpitude attempting to abscond with \$4 million of lost drug money. Again, antics involving a spiraling body count and the deconstruction of a small Minnesota town's moral compass ensue.

Fiasco lovingly recreates the semantic and syntactic elements from these films, translating their cinematic representation into a ludic one. The game, billed as a “a game of powerful ambition and poor impulse control,” focuses on storytelling, and the enjoyment (or moral lessons, existential mediation, nihilistic conclusions) that players receive will depend on their willingness to fully cooperate as storytellers. Like other role-playing games (RPGs), the story and experience are only as good as its authors (i.e. the game’s players) make it. Unlike a traditional RPG, however, *Fiasco* involves no “dungeon master,” and every player is equally responsible for and complicit in the creation of the game’s story, action, and denouement.

The game is designed for 3-5 players, each of whom chooses a player character (PC) who inhabits one of the worlds offered in *Fiasco*’s playsets—the geographic backdrop of which provides unique tables and charts based on specific cinematic backdrops. The standard *Fiasco* rulebook features four unique playsets: “Main Street” (a sinister, southern American gothic landscape), “Boomtown” (for debacles in the old west), “Tales from Suburbia” (a tableau to explore the greed and vice concealed by the banality of mid-America), and “The Ice” (for recreating debacles in a remote, ice station in the Antarctic). Expansions for *Fiasco*, released by Bully Pulpit and by enthusiastic fans online, offer several more worlds in which to play.

After establishing a backdrop, players roll six-sided dice to select specific “needs” and “relationships” for their characters, even before they are fully defined. Nearly every element that players can choose from is directly lifted from a dark caper film. For instance, in the “Main Street” playset, players can choose “to get rich through a misplaced suitcase of cash” as a need and “mutual keepers of an ominous secret” for relationship (both allude to *A Simple Plan*). Morningstar designed each of these elements to place PCs in webs of intrigue, greed, lust, and deceit that recall their cinematic inspirations. Once these relationships and ambitions are in place, players finally define their characters, thereby developing the diegesis of the game and its major conflicts.

Gameplay revolves around roleplaying through “scenes” wherein each character takes turns acting as the central figure; like any RPG, players engage with other players while in character, exploring how each character responds to the heightening tension that results from the myriad combinations of relationships and ambitions codified during set-up. In each scene, the central character must either decide the outcome of an event, without knowing how the scene will arrive at that resolution, or determining how a scene will begin, without knowing how it might

resolve itself. *Fiasco's* mechanics accurately recreate both the tension and the anxious anticipations of its cinematic antecedents; I have yet to play a single game in which I knew how a scene would progress or where I was not madly curious about its actualization. The higher level of investment (and immersion) that players provide their characters is necessary for compelling scenes. Furthermore, because of the darkly adult subject matter of the game (and the films it's based on), players should expect to encounter potentially disturbing scenarios.

For instance, in one game, I played as a broken drug dealer who murdered his father, a professional golfer, with help from his brother, played by another character. Because scenes in *Fiasco* need not unfold in chronological order (who put Tarantino in my Coens?), I got to roleplay my character before the murder and thus explore the abuse and romantic rejections that turned him into a social pariah and unrepentant felon. In another game, I played a Harold Camping-esque cult leader determined to uncover an apocalyptic secret in the Arctic. Scenes often revolved around my miserable attempts at proselytization and conversion. Every scene not only allowed me to develop my character, but to move them inexorably toward the brutal conclusion that awaits most (but not all) characters in *Fiasco*.

In all the dark capers that inspired Morningstar's game, the best laid plans of the protagonists—whether stealing money from drug dealers or blackmailing a government official (a la *Burn After Reading*)—go disastrously awry. This is represented during *Fiasco's* "Tilt" phase, which happens in the middle of the game. In this phase, players choose from a list of "complications" meant to recreate the PC's lack of agency in a universe that seems to conspire against them. Morningstar's game is specifically designed for players to feel the same sense of inevitable impotence experienced by the characters in the films, and after playing a final set of scenes, players resolve the game by rolling dice to determine their character's fate. My cult leader, abandoned by the cruise ship's company, found himself marooned in frigid northern waters, wailing for an absent apocalypse that had betrayed him (perhaps I modeled him too closely on Harold Camping). I have yet to finish a game without considering the trials, tribulations, and unfortunate consequences with which I burdened my characters. I continue to meditate on my own complicity of creating these conspiratorial alternate worlds and populating them with unscrupulous, if also hopelessly credulous, patsies. Morningstar's game invites that type of introspection while promoting an uncommon engagement with the worlds it creates.

Academics are likely to find *Fiasco* compelling in several ways: for media theorists, analyzing the game's translation of a cinematic experience into the ergodic text of a game provides a fantastic study in media transmigration, as well as a validation of Marshall McLuhan's adage that "We impose the form of the old on the content of the new. [The malady lingers on.]" As Gary Gygax translated early 20th Century pulp fantasy fiction novels into the RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*, Morningstar faithfully adapts screen texts to the gaming table. For quantum theorists and existential philosophers, meanwhile, the surfeit of alternate worlds that *Fiasco* requires its players to create provides enormous insight into how we understand our material plane (and attempt to come to terms with our own lack of agency within it).

For all fans of play, however, *Fiasco* is just a lot of fun.

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