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HC 421
Music and Film
Assignment 3
Eight Grade

Eight Grade: Why Anna Meredith's Score Almost Misses the Mark.

I can only imagine how daunting it might feel to stare at a blank sheet of paper with the expectation that you were going to produce a movie score. The sheer number of sounds at your disposal is overwhelming, not to mention the different ways they could be applied. Does guitar or bass work better here? $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{7}{8}$? Two clicks louder on the symbols? And we haven't even begun to consider the producers and directors all inundating you with different visions or expectations. With this perspective, I have the utmost respect for anyone that can produce music, from nothing, that works in a movie as well as Anna Meredith's score works for Bo Burnham's *Eight Grade* (2018). That being said, I think it could have worked better.

Eight Grade follows 13-year-old Kayla as she navigates her last week and a half in middle school. It unfolds in generally the same way as other coming of age stories, but in a more grounded, honest (often too much so) way. Viewers who are at all removed from the forging ground that is middle school will find all their worst teenage nightmares revived to haunt them. As the Guardian [put it](#): "In [*Eight Grade*]'s weird, floating sense of detachment and alienation, as if witnessing the world while listening to music on earphones, there is a hint of dark movies...in which we feel as if we are sleepwalking towards something truly horrible."

This sense of detachment is key to the film's power. It stems from the way *Eight Grade* indirectly but impactfully addresses the role of technology in modern childhood. Viewers are made to note the stark contrast of Kayla's cultivated, controlled, confident online persona with her shy, quirky, imperfect self. We are invited to 'sail away' on a mind numbing trip through Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook quizzes while avoiding our problems, and are forced to watch in horror (from realizing we would have done the same) as Kayla Googles how to give a good blowjob. The themes of technology, the way it's changed the social landscape and heightened the stakes of teenage tomfoolery, are ever present in *Eight Grade*.

Complimenting, forwarding, and enhancing them is Anna Meredith's score. Completely digitally created, and with an up-beat, synth-y, pop-y, yet slightly impersonal sound, Anna Meredith's music does a lot of legwork setting the tone and aesthetics of the film. Its overtly digital origins highlight the technological theme. As Bo Burnham explains in [an interview](#) with Build, this was by design. The synth-pop sound is easily molded to communicate everything from the heart-piercing anxiety of attending a party where you're friends with no-one, to the euphoric, tingly elation of seeing your crush, but also maintains that slight reserve and distance, conveying strong emotion without falling into sad violin/piano-happy plucky mandolin tropes. The score's unified sound smooths out the rollercoaster of emotions that is *Eight Grade* while

adding some sense of intrigue underscored by a hint of crippling dread that *feels* like middle school.

At this point you might be thinking ‘well Noah, that sounds like a lot of praise for an essay whose title is verging on negative (I said ‘almost!’)’ and you’re right. As my title implies, *Eight Grade*’s score does hit the mark. All I’m saying is, it doesn’t do so handily.

Where the score almost lost me was in the choice of synth sounds. I found the aesthetics slightly off. Each of the myriad electronic sounds available to creators comes with its own affect and, at least for me, certain ones have been cemented in pop-culture as belonging to certain times. When the opening theme came loud and strong as Kayla walked into school, I suddenly found myself reminiscing about the eighties (even though I was born long after they ended). To my brain, the synth pad chosen for *Eight-Grade* sounds like it would have been used to make a pop song 35 years ago. It continuously tugged me ever so slightly out of the movie and even out of the present. That this wasn’t something only I might have experienced is evidenced by the main famous song which was included in the soundtrack: Enya’s ‘Orinoco Flow’. That song was released in 1988 and it melded seamlessly with the score Anna Meredith composed 30 years later.

While an electronic pad does fit with *Eight Grade*’s technological theme, it has to have the right sound. In our in-class interview with Anna Meredith, she explained how she wanted to infuse her synth score with some warmth. I think she succeeded, but the warmth came from nostalgia. This nostalgia worked slightly against the movie’s goal of addressing the risks of new technology because it pulled us back to the time when phones we connected to wall and computers were the size of washing-machines, letting us briefly escape the uncertainty and fear of Instagram and YouTube. While the score does so many things right, I think a more modern set of sounds, with perhaps a little less warmth, would have melded better with the movie’s themes. The perfect score to *Eight Grade*, if such a thing exists, is still composed by Anna Meredith, but sounds more Daft Punk and less Depeche Mode.