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8 Mile

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8 Mile

Abstract

This is a review of *8 Mile* (2002).

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Somewhere near the middle of rapper Eminem's new film, *8 Mile*, it dawned on me why I was uneasy. I had looked forward to the "semi-autobiographical" coming-of-age story by the Detroit hip-hop artist who once claimed that "God put me on earth to piss people off." I expected some good prophetic cultural critique. Unfortunately, *8 Mile* replicates the conventional myths and rites of marketed adolescence. Hip-hop hope succumbs to Hollywood hype.

8 Mile celebrates Eminem as a hero, in the vein of John Wayne, Captain Kirk, and Luke Skywalker. He conforms to what John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett have recently described as the "classical monomyth" in *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Eerdmans, 2002). Throughout the film, Eminem must prove himself as a rapper. He fails at first, literally rendered silent in a hip hop duel against a rapper from a gang ironically called "The Leaders of the Free World." But by the end of the film, Eminem prevails. He silences his (black) antagonist, revealing his own poverty credentials in a stunning string of poetic self-lacerations, and then exposing his antagonist as a prep school gangsta' wannabe. Eminem may seem an unlikely hero, but in a culture that refuses to take social systems seriously, his portrayal in *8 Mile* reinforces the romantic convention of the heroic individual who surmounts all obstacles to win his salvation, or at least a little peace and respect.

Even more troubling than this conventional plot-line in the film is the way it might function as an “initiator fantasy” for viewers. Ronald Grimes has penned a cogent appeal, in *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (California, 2000), for religious folk to attend to the global problem of initiation rites. With his help, we can see how *8 Mile* is a two hour testament to just how troubled American culture is on this matter.

Throughout the film Eminem longs to get his big break--to get a recording contract or to buy some time in the studio to cut a “demo.” That the viewer knows that Eminem will realize his dream makes this desire seem salutary. But for most viewers, of course, this desire is a fantasy. Grimes explains: an initiator fantasy is “compensatory, growing out of what we lack, what we are unable to own, or own up to.” The simple fact is that most rappers--no matter how talented--simply won’t win in a society whose systems are stacked against them. Grimes continues with the grim conclusion: “Because it is a way of avoiding responsibility, [an initiator fantasy] destroys the possibility of authentic cross-cultural interaction and interreligious communication. When a group *fantasizes* its initiations, it should expect trouble.”(111)

Now, *8 Mile* grossed \$54.8 million on its first weekend. That’s a lot of potential trouble. And the trouble does not come from the profanity, racial politics, misogyny, or street crime in the film--although all of those things are disturbing

enough. The trouble with *8 Mile* is that it mirrors the theology of the market that reduces young people to their roles as producers or consumers, as victims or victimizers in a world where words are effective only in the currency of curses.

If the film thus offers glimmering examples of the fascinating hybridity, and indeed the Word-driven hope, of hip hop itself, it finally subsumes that hope to hype. *8 Mile* reveals the Word struggling to articulate and resolve the inherited contradictions of a culture divided by age, gender, race, and class--but silenced before them all by the myth of the heroic individual.