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Eighth Grade: Found Footage and Found Story

Kaleb A. Liermann
Grand Valley State University, liermank@mail.gvsu.edu

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Through the grain of a cheap web camera, Kayla Day's pre-teen face appears. She introduces herself to an undefined audience. The shot starts out tight on her eyes – anxious energy popping the lids open, her eyebrows earnestly bobbing up and down with every syllable. As she continues struggling through her rehearsed honesty, an impossible movement occurs (given the device recording her): the camera tracks out from this absurdly close framing to the actual view that Kayla's laptop is capturing. She concludes her social media entry with a cute catchphrase and cuts the recording, transporting viewers out of her laptop and into her darkened room, supplying the spatial context of her makeshift studio. In the first few minutes of *Eighth Grade* (2018), director Bo Burnham establishes the complex relationship his film will have with reality. *Eighth Grade* makes use of select found footage techniques in conjunction with traditional formative elements to create Kracauer's ideal found story of the twenty-first century.

The realist theory of Siegfried Kracauer is an excellent lens through which to view *Eighth Grade*. All of Kracauer's cinematic concerns sprang from the desire to use the camera to create a sense of reality, but the matter was not as simple as only considering documentaries as cinema and disregarding all forms of fictional film. In fact, Kracauer established the two tendencies, realist and formative, whose interactions and counterbalancing helped form the ideal film ("Basic Concepts)". The realist tendency favors narrative and formal choices that establish and explore spatial and temporal reality. Long takes of uninterrupted action and non-fantastical subject matter serve the realist tendency well. The formative tendency is expressed

when a film constantly cut between shots and points in time, manipulating the

space-time continuum in order to tell an implausible story.

In coining the concept of the "found story," Kracauer acknowledges the spectrum

most films fall on between these two tendencies. In Kracauer's eyes, the found story is the

ideal narrative of a film – a story that could or did happen and is told by a camera interested

in exploring the reality framing the narrative.

Kracauer's concept of the found story at first seems already achieved by the relatively

recent sub-genre of found footage. These films, through their anchoring to cameras within the

diegesis, are from the start inherently tied to the story space. But problems occur: the camera,

now more plot device than recording material, quickly gets in the way of telling a story. The

need to justify non-diegetic choices within the diegesis, such as why characters are filming, why

the footage is so clear, and why every character seems to be a professional cinematographer,

distracts from the plot. Forced cuts to convenient security cameras, grainy footage, and a

jumbled mess of shaky camera as respective "solutions" only distract the viewer further.

Much like its protagonist, *Eighth Grade* is self-conscious enough to creatively sidestep these problems. The use of the actual found footage within *Eighth Grade*, though not the only element contributing to the "found footage" realist feel, is of course the first to

consider. The film is segmented by small looks and listens into the "Kayla's Korner" YouTube

channel, in which Kayla offers endearingly innocent platitudes to whoever will listen about

matters such as "being yourself" or "growing up." The performance within the frame of the

laptop is not that of actress Elsie Fisher portraying Kayla – it is Kayla's performance of an

idealized version of herself, more suitable for consumption by the masses than the quiet, anxious Kayla we see hunch through the hallways of her middle school throughout the meat of the film. Ironically, the "found footage" is less trustworthy than Burnham's "constructed" camera reality.

Kracauer defined the camera reality as "'…physical existence', or 'actuality' or loosely just 'nature…'" ("Basic Concepts" 148). It was the exploration of natural space that was paramount to accomplishing this camera reality. Kracauer defined two major functions the camera relies on in order to recreate these realities: recording and revealing.
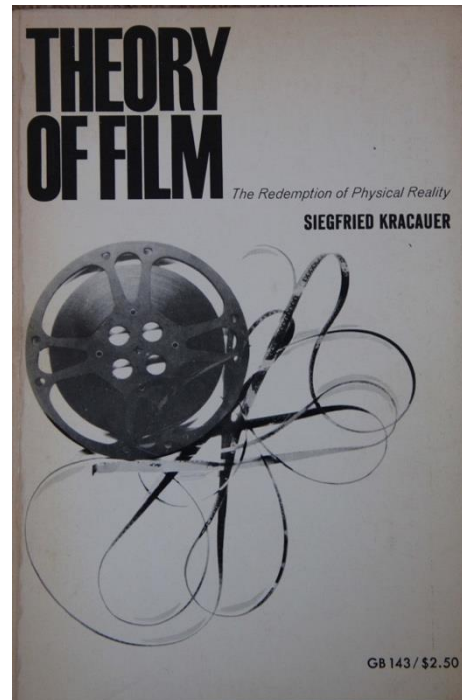
The recording function is exactly as it sounds, but Kracauer's emphasis is on what can be recorded in order to create a deeper appreciation of the space placed in front of the camera. Since cinema is the only art form capable of recreating movement, movement in all its forms is chief amongst these concerns ("Establishment" 262). One important aspect to Kracauer was the camera's own uninterrupted exploration of space, or "the dance" ("Establishment "263). Many of *Eighth Grade*'s long takes truly become a dance – upon entering her school for the first time, we track behind and circle around Kayla, examining the overwhelmingly erratic, stuffy, pastel space in which she finds herself. A motif occurs of long-take tracking shots in which Kayla fights her way through uncomfortable situations such as entering the pool party and confronting Kennedy at graduation.

Even unmoving, Burnham's camera avoids cutting as much as possible. The last half of the dinner scene between Kayla and her father is a stationery, uninterrupted wide shot which

allows a full appreciation of the modest table at which they're eating. The muted set lighting

contrasts with the solitary brightness of Kayla's phone. Most importantly, our eyes are forced

to flit back and forth between the two Days as their fast-paced bickering overlaps, economically

setting the tone for the relationship at the center of this story. This framing is used repeatedly in

two-person conversations, such as when Kayla meets Gabe in the pool or Emily at the

high school.

Another concern of recorded content in *Eighth Grade* is Burnham's use of dialogue in

service of characterization. Every interjection, ellipsis, and hesitation from the middle school

characters was scripted (Sandberg). While writing the film, Burnham experienced plenty of

"found footage" on his own – he watched countless videos like Kayla's: vlog entries posted by

pre-teens, all of whom had no more complex views than Kayla (View). In addition, Burnham

accentuated the rhythm of the barely-fluent middle-schoolers by casting much of the film with

non-professional child actors who essentially portray themselves at the very middle school they

attend (Kimmel).

On the other hand, in revealing, the camera allows us to discover reality from points of

view we wouldn't normally be able to achieve. One such discovery is what Kracauer calls

"blind spots of the mind." These are elements in the image that "habit and prejudice prevent us from noticing" in our day-to-day lives ("Establishment" 268). Burnham's camera is obsessed with Kayla's

imperfections. Multiple close-ups and harsh lighting constantly remind us of her acne. Just

before the pool party sequence, she's wearing a neon-green, one-piece swimsuit that squeezes out her remaining baby fat in an unflattering design. The shape of her silhouette is accentuated by the glaring light pouring in through the patio back door.

The revelations of Burnham's camera are equally concerned with what we don't see. Burnham treats the world he's built in a non-reverential fashion. Many of the shots feel like accidents. Near the beginning of the film, Kayla's principal enters the stuffed classroom, explaining the procedure of the yearly superlative tradition. For much of his dialogue, he is completely blocked from our view behind one student's hair. Though we later learn that this girl is sitting in front of Kayla, we're unsure whether or not this is a POV shot—we never see Kayla staring dejectedly at the back of her classmate's head. For a moment, we're simple documentarians, having our own experience of the space, most likely separate from Kayla's.

Kracauer's beliefs concerning the formative side of the spectrum were not completely adversarial: the found story could be served by "the intervention of the film maker's formative energies in all the dimensions which the medium has come to cover" ("Basic Concepts" 157). *Eighth Grade* keeps such interventions to a minimum. One major example is the film's overall shallow depth of field: Kayla, stuck in her own head, is always separated from the blurry action around her. The non-diegetic soundtrack provides a commentary on Kayla's world that creates a deeper emotional realism; while the film takes the matter of what being in middle school looks like very literally, the erratic electronica forever on loop in Kayla's mind is what being a middle schooler feels like. Finally, in regard to editing and the space-time continuum, there are

multiple moments throughout the film in which we are treated to a montage (in the American sense) laid over the audio of one of Kayla's vlogs. The interaction between sound and image in these instances, while unrealistic, creates an important juxtaposition between the life Kayla is performing on the internet and the reality she actually inhabits.

Burnham could have created a plasticly-fashioned tale of middle school drama saturated in formal elements designed to make every frame an ode to some beautiful, well-articulated

"middle-schooler." Or it could have been a clunky found-footage film taking place only in front of the camera of a laptop or cellphone with no interest in exploring space or time in any inventive way, claiming its realism only from the grainy composition of "Kayla's Korner." Luckily, Burnham made ample use of both sets of tools available to him, finding his own way into Kayla's world.

We thought that with found footage, we had discovered the found story. In *Eighth Grade*, we learned that we were looking in the wrong place all along.

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