

The business of glorifying backwardness

8 Mile, directed by Curtis Hanson

By David Walsh
13 November 2002

Eminem, born Marshall Mathers (hence “M & M”) in Kansas City, Missouri in 1972 and raised in Michigan, is a white rap singer who has known considerable commercial success over the past several years. His life has loosely inspired *8 Mile*, the story of a rap artist in Detroit struggling for recognition. (*8 Mile* refers to the avenue that separates the city of Detroit from its northern suburbs.)

The film is a carefully packaged effort (with more than \$50 million in box office receipts on its first weekend to show for it), produced by Brian Grazer, a canny Hollywood veteran responsible for *Splash*, *Kindergarten Cop*, *Liar Liar*, *The Nutty Professor*, *Nutty Professor II* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, among other contributions to cinema culture. Director Curtis Hanson has presided over the making of *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, *The River Wild*, *L.A. Confidential* and *Wonder Boys*, among others. Screenwriter Scott Silver’s credits include *Johns* and *The Mod Squad*.

In the opening moments of *8 Mile* Jimmy Smith Jr. (Eminem), known as “Rabbit,” hits bottom. First he fails miserably in a rap “battle,” during which each contestant has 45 seconds to formulate a rhyming attack on his opponent. Having broken up with his girlfriend, with whom he left his automobile, he is obliged to move in with his mother (Kim Basinger) in a trailer park. Rabbit’s housing and transportation problems threaten his job at a grimy auto parts plant.

The film follows the rapper over the course of a week, as he meets and breaks up with a new girl; deals with the promises and manipulations of a would-be music promoter; confronts numerous family crises; through adversity, deepens his relations with a group of friends; and, all the while, steels himself for another rap battle, at which he triumphs over a collection of absurdly villainous opponents. Offered a partnership in operating the contests, Rabbit explains that he has to pursue a career on his own and heads off down the darkened city street.

There is relatively little in *8 Mile* that is not essentially stereotyped or clichéd. The film’s story is an updated

version of a tried and true Hollywood formula: demonstrating uncommon grit and determination, a poor boy, in the face of a variety of temptations and obstacles, makes good. Most often the “boy” (or girl) has been an athlete (particularly a boxer) or musician/performer: *Rocky*, *Purple Rain*, *Flashdance*, *The Jazz Singer*, *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, etc. (More critical works, which question either the price or the very nature of “success” in American life, also exist, such as *Body and Soul*, *Champion*, *Raging Bull*, *A Star is Born*, *What Price Hollywood?*, *The Sweet Smell of Success* and others.)

Such an exercise in wish fulfillment is intended ultimately to keep alive a belief in the possibility of individual initiative and maintain faith in the viability of the social order, even under conditions of extreme economic difficulty. It tends to reinforce the illusion unendingly sown that America is a land of unlimited opportunity for those fortunate and persistent enough.

Hanson’s film is largely a middle class fantasy about a semi-lumpen existence. While certain images accurately capture Detroit, a city ravaged by decades of corporate exploitation and governmental indifference, the overall result is a caricature, a threatening, post-apocalyptic urban landscape meant to frighten (and excite) the average suburbanite. The film embodies, in its own way, the process by which the rap scene bottles the supposed urban threat and offers it for sale to the vicarious thrill-seeker, black and white. Contrary to rumor, there is hardly a *less* authentic musical form at present than commercial rap. It is, however, a source of vast profits for record companies and a layer of entrepreneurs.

Which is not to say that Eminem and other rap artists have no talent. On the contrary. Eminem shows considerable gifts, including as an actor.

Talent is one thing, a genuine musical and social contribution is another. Talent is not disconnected in the end from the content of the work produced. No one in *8 Mile* advances a single profound or truly unexpected thought. The rapping is almost entirely devoted to tearing down one’s

adversary in the most degrading fashion. The lunchtime factory sequence is noteworthy in this regard. Far from articulating social grievances or encouraging solidarity against a common enemy, the rapping factory workers viciously insult one another, Eminem among them. Meanwhile his relations with his supervisor/employer continuously improve. Flashes of genuine rebellion appear in *8 Mile*, but they are few and far between. The film's conclusion is thoroughly conformist and predictable.

In this regard, it is necessary to dismiss with contempt the claims of various liberal and radical commentators that Eminem and others like him epitomize the spirit of working class rebellion. Notoriously representative of this trend, *Rolling Stone* contributing editor Mim Udovitch in the *New York Times Magazine* in February 2001 ("Visible Man") extolled Eminem's two CDs as "great works of art." She wrote that the Detroit rap artist "comes from the world that is not supposed to exist, the world of the white underclass." She asserted that "there are, as he says, millions who are just like him, who cuss like him, don't give a [expletive] like him, dress like him, walk, talk and act like him and, based on his sales, feel like him. That is: they feel incredible anger."

Udovitch and her co-thinkers will have to explain how Eminem's obscenity-laden fantasizing about raping his mother, killing his wife and stabbing homosexuals (conveniently airbrushed out of *8 Mile*) advance the cause of the "white underclass" or anyone else. People who construct apologies for such material are preparing to apologize for much worse. Udovitch coyly describes Eminem's lyrics as "offensive," without caring to go into detail.

She goes on to say, "I like offensive art and basically would like to see popular music provoke class warfare." Can she be seriously suggesting that Eminem's inchoate outpourings will provoke "class warfare"? Ignorance, political irresponsibility and wishful thinking come together here. Beyond that, vulgar radicals of this type like nothing more than to glorify and encourage backwardness. The celebration of Eminem is in reality a titillating confirmation of the radical's view of the oppressed as brutish, violent and immune to socialist politics.

One might be cynical enough to add that the creation and promotion of new musical stars, which may involve giving them a radical gloss, is also very much in the interest of the ex-counterculture hucksters who run *Rolling Stone* magazine.

The social contradictions of American society generate a great deal of anger, not all of it by any means progressively directed or motivated (as the recent experience of the Washington sniper shootings tragically demonstrates). There are extremely oppressed layers whose moral destruction or

semi-destruction is revealed by the extent to which they pursue, in caricature and parallel form, the aims of the ruling elite: the ruthless and selfish accumulation of wealth and status. We are not obliged to share the superficial view that lumpen social layers possess an inherently revolutionary character. History has generally demonstrated the opposite. Such segments of the population often become ferocious defenders of the status quo as the working class begins to move and think independently.

Certain critics argue that *8 Mile* is groundbreaking for its presentation of the role of class in American life. Dave Kehr writes in the *New York Times*, for example: "It's rare for a Hollywood movie to name itself after a barrier or a border zone. Hollywood prefers to imagine America as a permeable, open society, where, by dint of application and talent or simply as a consequence of 'having a dream' and pursuing it, citizens can cross both geographical and economic dividing lines with fantastic ease.... In studio movies, most Americans seem to live in sprawling, Spielbergian suburbs, frozen in an idyllic upper middle class existence, where the rows of identical split level houses suggest that there are no real differences in income, and indeed, no real underclass to escape from and no elite class to which to aspire."

There is some truth to this, but the last sentence gives the game away. If, as Kehr suggests, "Mr. Hanson insists on the divisions within American society," it is because, in the first place, those divisions have grown so malignant that ignoring them entirely has now become an impossibility. The American film industry has chosen to recognize class divisions for one purpose: to render their treatment as harmless to bourgeois society as possible.

As Kehr makes clear, the aim is not to preach "class warfare," but to promote popular illusions in "escaping from the underclass" and "aspiring to the elite." No wonder he concludes, in relation to *8 Mile*, "Class and race end where the individual renews the old dream of America, here dressed in the baggy jeans of hip-hop."

"The old dream of America." It could hardly be clearer.

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