

American Splendor (2003)

“Ordinary life is pretty complex stuff.”

Credits:

Director: Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini

Screenplay: Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, based on the comic books of Harvey Pekar (*American Splendor*) and Joyce Brabner (*Our Cancer Year*)

Cinematographer: Terry Stacey

Cast: Paul Giamatti (Harvey Pekar), Hope Davis (Joyce Brabner), Judah Friedlander (Toby Radloff)

Background:

American Splendor is a hybrid work (part non-fiction, part fiction) from the documentarists Berman and Pulcini. Probably as a result of the recent popularity of documentaries (*Capturing the Friedmans* and Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*) as well as the interest in comic books and their creators (*Crumb*, *Ghost World*), the film was a popular and critical success, winning the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival and the International Critics Prize at Cannes. It also belongs to a spate of successful films beginning about a decade earlier—*Slacker* (1991), *Crumb* (1994), *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), *Ghost World* (2001), *Adaptation* (2002), *Sideways* (2004)—that depict dropouts, dorks, and “losers” and for which *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984; a sequel currently in development), cited in *American Splendor*, is the *ur-text*.

Cinematic Aspects:

The film's hybridity is most strikingly underscored by the presence of the real persons—Harvey, Joyce, Toby—appearing on the sound stage alongside the actors playing them in the narrative. This documentation of the making of the movie is compounded by the archival footage of Harvey's appearances on television with David Letterman, the various comic book drawings of Harvey, and the re-creation of the stage play *American Splendor*. The different status of these images, of course, raises the question of who is the “real” Harvey Pekar. In addition, this layering of narrative lines suggests the problem of organizing “ordinary” life into art.

Terry Stacey's cinematography—using filters and degraded film stock—captures both the surprising open spaces of a large, depopulated city like Cleveland (which has become something of its own “ghost world”) and the brown earth tones of the economically depressed urban landscape. Note the subtlety with which this gritty look gives way to somewhat brighter, clear images towards the end of the film.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does the film comment on the myth of success in America? Is there a political point to *American Splendor*? Consider, in particular, Harvey's last appearance on the Letterman show.
2. Are the filmmakers unconsciously guilty of the same exploitation and condescension toward Harvey as Letterman is portrayed as being? The same question might be applied to the presentation of Toby.