American Splendor (2003)

“Ordinary life is pretty complex stuff.”

Credits:
Director: Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcin
Screenplay: Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcin, 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 Pulcin. 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),
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.