

Ghost World (2001)

“I think only stupid people have good relationships.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Major Credits:

Director: Terry Zwigoff

Screenplay: Terry Zwigoff and Daniel Clowes, based on Clowes’s comic book

Cinematography: Affoso Beato

Cast: Thora Birch (Enid), Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson), Steve Buscemi (Seymour), Brad Renfro (Josh), Illeana Douglas (Roberta), Bob Balaban (Enid’s dad)

Background:

Ghost World is director Terry Zwigoff’s follow-up (against all advice!) to his award-winning feature documentary, *Crumb* (1995), about the underground comic book illustrator Robert Crumb. (The drawings in Enid’s sketchbook are by Sophie Crumb, the artist’s daughter.) Thora Birch was coming off the success of her performance in *American Beauty*, while 16-year old Scarlett Johansson was on the threshold of stardom (*Girl With a Pearl Earring*, *Lost in Translation*).

The film deconstructs both the long-standing genre of the standard teen movie and the more recent spate of blockbuster movies based on popular comic books (*Superman*, *Batman*, *Spiderman*) or video games (*Super Mario Bros.*, *Lara Croft*; *Tomb Raider*).

Cinematic Qualities:

Ghost World generally adheres to the aesthetics of the comic book (or graphic novel, to use the highbrow term): primary colors (although Clowes’s original was drawn in monochromatic blue), head-on symmetrical compositions, episodic structure and blackouts between scenes, glib dialogue. Occasionally, however, Zwigoff and cinematographer Affoso Beato go for more atmospheric, painterly images such as the tracking shot looking into various apartments in the opening credits sequence or the equally moody crane shot of Enid walking down the sidewalk after Seymour turns her away on the night of the student art show.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the meaning of the film’s title?
2. Enid certainly knows what she doesn’t want to be, but she has yet to discover what she does want. Does the movie suggest what might be her eventual career path?
3. Is there a serious point to the “Coon Chicken” digression? Before answering too readily, consider the underground sensibility of the film’s creators.
4. How does this film differ from scores of other low-budget teen comedies?
5. *Ghost World* is decidedly open-ended. Does the film cop out on the relationships and social issues it explores?
6. In a film that is so imbued with the spirit of ridicule and post-modernist pastiche, does *Ghost World* find anything enduring about modern life worth upholding?