

SLIDE

Non-fiction, documentary and adaptation:

Use AS to argue for an understanding of autobiography as a transformative and adaptive process in itself: where selection, point of view and multiple other narrative devices are used to fictionalise the real

- Christian Metz writes that “documentaries should have always been the stuff of adaptation of non-fiction writing”
- But rarely discussed in context of adaptation theory as:
 - Not the way that documentaries are produced
 - Not part of methodology of documentary studies

Will try to reclaim autobio for adaptation studies, using William Labov’s oral storytelling categories and second wave of adaptation theory (going beyond fidelity and embracing intertextuality and the Derridean notion of textual *aporia* – i.e. the impossible yet inevitable promise of experience contained in a text).

Will argue that themes of the *American Splendor* comic and the movie’s pick up and exploration of these, together with its use of a comics aesthetic, allows this ‘drama-documentary’ to coexist in an intertextual relationship with the entire body of work that makes up the *American Splendor* story, rather than being outside it and ‘about it’.

SLIDE American Splendor

Harvey Pekar’s comic book *American Splendor* tells the story of ‘our man’ across four decades, giving us his observations on everyday American life. It’s a brilliant combination of the universal experience and the individual human condition, as Harvey offers us his acid opinions on everything from shopping queues to politics.

Range of underground comics artists and the flexibility of the visuals attached to Pekar’s instantly identifiable voice makes it an excellent example of adaptation in action.

Award-winning body of work crosses media. Series ran for nearly 40 years 1976-2011 (self-published; Dark Horse; DC Comics)

Various awards including the 1987 American Book Award (for the first *American Splendor* anthology) and the 1995 Harvey Award for Best Graphic Album of Original Work (for *Our Cancer Year*).

Plus spin-off collections e.g. *The Quitter*, which details Harvey’s early life (DC Vertigo: 2005), and further posthumous works such as *Cleveland* (ZIP Comics & Top Shelf: 2012). There have also been three *American Splendor* theatre productions (1985, 1987, 1990) and 2003 movie, which won first honours at the Sundance Film Festival and the Writers Guild of America Award for best adapted screenplay.

SLIDE: Adapting life: the *American Splendor* comics

However, *American Splendor* isn’t lifted straight from everyday life, but is a carefully constructed comic, which adapts everyday experience into a familiar narrative shape. Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) linguistic study of oral storytelling identifies six core categories that people use when ‘storifying’ their own life/experience. These are: abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation and coda. What is interesting about *American Splendor* is the way it uses all these categories very self-consciously in both

word and image: making its storytelling processes overt so that these processes in fact become the main focus of the story, rather than the anecdote itself.

Opening and concluding pages here. First thing to be aware of: like all narratives this story is selected (as is the point at which we join and leave it), reshaped and book-ended.

Setting the scene: Harvey's wife Joyce has gone to San Francisco to visit a medical specialist and stay a few days with her sister, leaving Harvey alone with his foster daughter, Danielle.

Not only does the opening sentence serve as the abstract (which Labov and Waletzky claim should signal that the story is about to begin by way of a short, summarising statement) but also flags this up with its comment 'setting the scene'. The second half of the sentence proceeds directly to the orientation, answering questions of time, place, who is involved and so forth, which the following sentences add to.

Danielle and Harvey have never been alone together and Harvey does not relish his role as boss of the household. He has doubts about how much the sixteen year-old Danielle will respect him with Joyce, the leader of the family, away. Danielle has just come back from a weekend in Tennessee with a boyfriend which she feels pretty good about. She rode seventeen hours each way to get to Memphis, and is not likely to be easier to deal with when she's sleep deprived.

These later sentences flag up the complicating action(s), which the story then proceeds to detail: Danielle goes out later than promised and doesn't answer her phone; Harvey has not been paid by the NY Times for a story he wrote; Phoebe the cat goes missing; Harvey is concerned his book sales are falling; Danielle sneaks out of the house and then returns.

The resolution (the final key event, often the last of the narrative clauses that make up the complicating action) takes place on the final page, as Harvey stands triumphantly with hands on hips, and a thought bubble reads: 'Whew, well I got the problems with *The Times*, my book sales and Danielle straightened out. I sure feel a lot better than I did a couple hours ago.'

Evaluation has also taken place at various stages throughout the narrative, as Labov's linguistic model allows: for example when Harvey explains to Danielle 'You can go anywhere you want [...] Just please tell me so I know what's going on. You know I'm a compulsive worrier, and I'll worry about you if I have no idea where you are.'

A final evaluation and the coda conclude the story in the final three panels, as Phoebe the cat returns at 3am to wake Harvey, who asks: 'Phoebe, where'd you come from? All these problems pop up and then get solved in about 24 hours. Wow!' This statement both clarifies the point of the story (evaluation: that problems appear and are resolved) and signals its end through a generality (which is Labov's definition of the coda).

As Joseph Witek points out, *American Splendor's* postscripted morals often feel tacked on with deliberate irony and a stories frequently end on 'an offhand moral' or a 'reflective/ambiguous note' (Witek 1989: 123, 133). As Pekar says: 'plot means nothing to me' (cited by Witek 1989: 135) and this attitude reinforces the personal and autobiographical nature of his tales. Draws attention to the construction of the story.

SLIDE

Harvey Pekar's overt reflection on his morals and the conspicuous narrativising process he uses are a type of *ironic authentication*, where the appearance of honesty is given by denying the possibility of the same or emphasising inauthentic elements about the text (such as the 'tacked on' morals).

This process is also apparent in the visual aspect of *American Splendor*, where our protagonist is a shifting image, due to being drawn differently by various artists. A standard approach would be for Pekar's cartoon persona/narrator to provide continuity while the stories offered variety; however this is frequently subverted in *American Splendor*.

Although the text is idiosyncratic and strongly narrated, our narrator remains multiple and variable. Witek (1989: 123) draws attention to the use of 'multiple fictional autobiographical personae', including: 'Harvey Pekar', 'Herschel', 'Our Man', 'Our Hero' and 'Jack the Bellboy'. However, even when our protagonist is most clearly identified with/named directly as 'Harvey Pekar', the visual collaboration of *American Splendor* undercuts this.

'Pekar's aesthetic of aggressively humdrum realism struggles against the tide of decades of comic-book fantasy and escapism' (Witek: 1989 128). Just as the mundane content *American Splendor* goes against traditional comics genres like the superhero, so too does its use of visual style. The basis of cartooning lies in stereotyping (the use of physical features to represent personality), and so such images have frequently been used in comics to engage viewers, sustain interest and create familiarity and immediacy ('it is inherent to narrative art that the *requirement* on the viewer is not so much analysis as *recognition*' Eisner: 38).

The depiction of Harvey by completely different artists, often appearing in the same collected volume, both refutes and sustains these ideas about the use of comics art. In a sense, it is similar to long-running superhero series, where different writers and artists will have a well-publicised 'run' on the title, with obvious stylistic variations. Like its narration, though, *American Splendor* takes this one step further by making the variation overt and commenting upon it. For example in 'A Marriage Album' (*American Splendor* #10) Joyce Brabner (Harvey's wife) visualises a range of 'Harveys' before meeting him for the first time, as her only knowledge of Harvey is taken from the comics themselves. She reflects on her anxiety, while the text reincorporates some of the different artistic ways he has been represented into a single panel, shown here.

SLIDE: *American Splendor* movie (2003)

Ambitious '*drama documentary*' made by documentarians Berman and Pulcini – uses storytelling conventions of the documentary genre alongside a comics aesthetic and narratology (e.g. animated sequences and illustrates frames).

It mixes media and techniques from an array of different genres: interviews with the 'real' Harvey Pekar (in a white studio with no furnishings), footage from previous television appearances e.g. on the David Letterman show, dramatisation with Hollywood actor Paul Giametti playing Harvey, cameo appearances from other 'real' characters playing themselves (such as Harvey's co-worker Toby Radloff) and re-enactments of other versions such as the *American Splendor* stage play are all woven together to make a documentary whose claims to realism rest entirely on the use of ironic authentication.

Interrogates and problematises notions of reality and the representation of experience. Pulcini comments: 'we're playing with the idea of reality versus nonreality, what's real and what's not, and all of that that interests us as documentary filmmakers' (West et al. 42).

PLAY MOVIE 2m30

Comics style and content (superheroes and also the panels used in intro), overt explanation of comics background

Multiple 'Harveys' of the comic sustained by movie (Daniel Tay (child), Paul Giametti, Pekar himself, Donal Logue (in the *American Splendor* stage play clip shown) and multiple animated version(s)). Even the 'real' Pekar is complicated by inclusion of clips from his appearances on *Late Night with David Letterman* in the 1980s and 1990s – given that this is twenty years previously, is this the 'same' person as our self-conscious narrator? These animated, acted and actual versions of Harvey are used 'in a way not unlike how a documentary would use all available footage and materials' (Sperb: 124).

Key scenes also duplicated and revisited multiple times in the film. After seeing Harvey and Joyce's disastrous first date (as dramatized by Paul Giametti and Hope Davis), we later see the couple in the theatre watching this scene being re-enacted (by stage actors Logue and Shannon).

Consequence of this according to Sperb is that it simultaneously makes *American Splendor* 'an antithetical act of documentation, because it is an autobiography which resists a central, implied assumption of autobiographies—there is no single, definitive Harvey to reclaim narratively' (Sperb: 124).

SLIDE

There are also translations of key scenes from the comic which *already* contain their own reflexivity and multiplicity, such the panel where Joyce imagines multiple Harveys. In the movie this becomes a mixed-media scene that merges animation and acted footage.

Other scenes similar: for example, a scene between Paul Giametti and Judah Friedlander (playing Toby Radloff) where Radloff wants to go and see *Revenge of the Nerds* play at a cinema. Radloff (who has appeared in Harvey's comics for decades) in fact starred in the low budget, cult horror films *Killer Nerd* and *Bride of Killer Nerd* during the 1980s and so their argument (Harvey claims these films are about middle-class characters, not actual nerds, and Toby shouldn't bother going) has meta-significance, as Harvey self-reflexively states: "Those people on the screen ain't even supposed to be you. . . . [T]his *Revenge of the Nerds* ain't reality."

Sperb therefore argues that *American Splendor* movie 'foregrounds Harvey as always in a state of simulation' and that in so doing it celebrates the 'unrepresentability of Pekar's life' (Sperb: 124).

'multiple deconstructive asides' (124) e.g. scenes of Pekar reading his voice-over direct from the script in an all-white room, and his comments, which frequently expose the technical processes behind constructing the film (such as 'you should be able to cut something together from that'). Showing Harvey reading the script (and admitting he has not read or rehearsed it!) is a '*staging* of his real presence' (Sperb: 137).

The film's approach relies upon acknowledging and exposing this at every opportunity, and its closing scene – a tacked-on happy ending – breaks down the barriers between the different versions of the characters at a party where different versions interact:

...the camera tracks from Paul Giametti in his final take over to the real Harvey Pekar conversing with Toby Radloff off-camera at the catering table. Hight argues that these cuts and combinations explicitly rupture the fourth wall of both the narrative sequences and documentary sequences. The film then closes in a typically reflexive manner, with a shot of the cover of the comic *American Splendor: Our Movie Year*, which, of course, Pekar has written about his experiences around making the movie.

SLIDE Comic: *Our Movie Year*:

The collection *American Splendor: Our Movie Year* reprints a number of Pekar's freelance pieces reflecting on various aspects of his movie experience. There is the retelling of the overall *American Splendor*; stories that focus on Harvey's post-movie experiences (promotion, celebrity); unrelated stories (Harvey's car breakdown, his cat's visit to the vet) a series of one-off strips called 'Lost and Found' that focus on various writers, movies, musicians; 'Liner Notes' which discusses the movie's soundtrack and so on. The *American Splendor* movie story is also retold multiple times with different collaborators, written to promote the movie for different publications, such as *Empire* film magazine, and so each retelling has a different focus. Between them events are revisited and revalued: for example Harvey sees Al Gore on his flight and in one story is impressed (13) while in another tale this proves completely irrelevant (86).

Just as comics are used to shape the aesthetic of the movie, so in this collection we can see the use of televisual styles, such as MTV in the story 'Hollywood Reporter' which tells of Toby Radcliff's rise to fame. After mentioning his work with 'Big Harv', and conducting a short interview about his 'socko' new film *Townies* the story concludes with Radcliff facing the reader, gripping the edge of the panel with his fingers, and breaking the fourth wall to announce: 'Yeah, my next movie will be called *Fanboy*. It'll be about a crazed comic book fan who follows this comic writer around.' (22) (see figure 3). In the same way, panels from the 'Liner notes' story resemble a CD album cover as shown here.

Similarly, images from the movie are drawn back into the comic, again emphasising the artificial nature of both media. The choice of scenes drawn (i.e. juxtaposing actor and character) provide the comic with options 'to assess the characters from more than one standpoint' (Pekar: 15), just like the movie. At a wider level, though, this is also exactly what this comic as a whole offers – a series of stories told and retold, each capturing a slightly different element of the movie experience, even when they deal with the same exact events. In this way both the movie and its comic become incorporated *into* the *American Splendor* story rather than being 'about it' or 'outside it'.

SLIDE: *American Splendor* and adaptation

American Splendor the film displays the inadequacy of early adaptation theory such as Geoffrey Wagner's (1975) division of adaptation into the three categories of translation, commentary or analogy, as *American Splendor* is not an easy fit for any of these.

What is being adapted here? Is it the events of Pekar's life, or (more accurately) his interpretation of his own experiences, with all the complications of subjective perspective that this awareness brings?

Witek claims that Pekar's stories become 'increasingly self-reflexive' as the series continues: and that the body of work goes far beyond the comics themselves. All of its narratives (videos of the *Letterman* show, the comic itself, news or magazine articles about the comic or film release) bring different nuances, and Harvey's life is perhaps best defined as a 'nexus' they revolve around, rather than being the stable referent of the tales (Witek: 143)

American Splendor requires us to apply a richer notion of intertextuality as argued for by many theorists of adaptation studies (Sanders, Albrecht-Crane, Cutchins). Texts like the *Letterman* television show, its repeat within the movie, the framing scenes with Giametti, and its reinterpretation into the drawn comic book are cross-fertilised by their interactions and recontextualisations.

Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins (20) argue that notions of fidelity are insufficient to understand the texts such as these. Instead, they suggest, we must examine the complex relations between texts-as-satellites. This seems epitomised by the *American Splendor* body of work.

In this way, *American Splendor* represents the Derridean *aporia* of texts as containing a promise that is impossible yet inevitable. As Sperb (139) claims about the movie: '*American Splendor* is an autobiography which wishes deeply to document an experience it senses is always—in some way—removed.'

The processes of comics creation aid in this by allowing removal from the writer's experience: as event becomes script which in turn is reinterpreted by a variable artist for the page, and this is echoed in the movie whose use of direct address and multiple actors problematises Pekar's position in a similar manner. Is he writer, subject, narrator, or commentator? The corpus of *American Splendor* thereby becomes a self-conscious interrogation of what constitutes 'real' life and the methods available to adapt and represent it.