

**The transformations of Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*:  
'Ordinary life is pretty complex stuff'**

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Harvey Pekar's comic book *American Splendor* tells the story of 'our man' across four decades, giving us his observations on everyday American life – and, in the case of *Our Movie Year*, the not-so-everyday. It's a brilliant combination of the universal experience and the individual human condition, as Harvey offers us his acerbic opinions on everything from shopping queues to politics. Throughout its run it has been illustrated by a stellar range of underground comics artists, including R. Crumb, Kevin Brown, Greg Budgett, Sean Carroll, Sue Cavey, Gary Dumm, Val Mayerik, and Gerry Shamray. The flexibility of the visuals attached to Pekar's instantly identifiable voice makes it an excellent example of adaptation in action, as this article will discuss.

Much has been written on the power of autobiography and the benefits of understanding this type of writing as a transformative and adaptive process in itself: where selection, point of view and multiple other narrative devices are used to fictionalise the real (e.g. see William Labov and Joshua Waletzky's (1967) oral storytelling categories and Allan Bell's (1991) application of these to news stories. This article discusses the specific challenges of narrating 'real life' in comics and documentary film, focusing on Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* (both the comic book series and the 2003 movie). It will explore the conventions used in both to argue that the themes of the *American Splendor* comic and the movie's exploration of these, together with its use of a comics aesthetic, allows this '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'.

The award-winning body of work that makes up *American Splendor* crosses media and exceeded all expectations. The series has run for nearly 40 years (Harvey Pekar/various), published between 1976-2011 (self-published; Dark Horse; DC Comics) and has won 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*). There are also two larger graphic novels: *Our Movie Year* (Ballantine Books, 2004) and *Ego and Hubris: The Michael Malice Story* (Ballantine: 2006). Two of Harvey's other graphic novels can also be considered spin offs and part of the American Splendor universe: *The Quitter*, which details Harvey's early life (DC Vertigo: 2005), *Our Cancer Year* (written with his wife Joyce Brabner, Four Walls Eight Windows: 1994) 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 a movie (2003), directed by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, which won first honours at the Sundance Film Festival and the Writers Guild of America Award for best adapted screenplay.

Harvey Pekar's entry into comics came about through his friendship with Robert Crumb, who was the first artist to illustrate *American Splendor*. The two met in Cleveland in 1962 when Harvey was working as a hospital clerk for Veteran's Administration and Crumb was working for the American Greeting Card Company. A shared love of jazz records and Crumb's encouragement led Harvey to start writing his own scripts, and their first

collaboration, a one-page comic called 'Crazy Ed', was published in 1972 in *The People's Comics*. Harvey would collaborate on various pieces with a range of artists over the next few years, and the first issue of *American Splendor* was finally published in 1976. The comic ran consistently after this, maintaining strong sales, and finding its own niche both in terms of being a steady independent title, and a known place for new artists to get their work seen. By selling back issues it could hit 10,000 (as much as *Classics Illustrated* in the mainstream trade) and Harvey seldom allowed a comic to go out of print (Buhle 2010). As Paul Buhle points out, Justin Green had introduced the autobiographical comic with *Binky Brown* (1972), and the 'artist-self' could be found in many underground comix of the time. But even within this genre, Pekar was unique – he worked a 'boring' job and wrote about 'ordinary folks'. What made Harvey's work unique was not just that his characters were 'psychologically credible', but that 'they were and remained mostly people out of everyday life, destined to remain unknown to anyone but their friends.' (Buhle 2010: 193)

### **Narrative: construction and reflection**

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.

Take this example from *American Splendor: Another Day*, the verbal narration to which begins as follows:

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.

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.

'Yawn'

Harvey is kind of a control freak, and his first day with Danielle has not gone all that well. They make an agreement which Danielle doesn't adhere to strictly.

Like all narratives, then, this story is selected (as is the point at which we join and leave it), reshaped and book-ended. 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. The story then proceeds to the complicating action(s): 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 taken place at various stages throughout the narrative, as this 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 (coda).

Here, narrative distance is also used to extrapolate themes and meaning and to comment on the events themselves. However, the creation of an ideological subtext (for example of everyman Harvey struggling against social norms such as age, gender, large corporations, and so forth) is resisted by Pekar's simultaneous assertion of individuality (Witek: 149). Harvey's tales are so excessively inward-looking, for example reflecting on his own personal reasoning, faults, differences, temper and so forth, that we (the reader) resist the temptation to make him into *us*. Charles Hatfield echoes this point, arguing that: 'Thus autobiography in comics, as in prose, often zeroes in on the contact surface between cultural environment and individual identity.' (2005: 113) As such, autobiographical comics, unlike many of the genres more commonly published in the comics medium, can be read as 'a literature that pushes people into their lives rather than helping people escape from them.' (Hatfield 2005: 113)

However, and 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); an attitude that reinforces the personal and autobiographical nature of his tales. These are stories about conjuring atmosphere, about response and evaluation, and seldom really about the humdrum event itself. The scenario is realised through Pekar's musician's ear, which allows him to use the poetic rhythm of daily speech to reinforce the universalities of his experiences, rather than generalising his values or events by using historical or critical distance (Witek 1989).

### **Visualisation: objectifying the self**

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 his works, where our protagonist is a shifting image, due to being drawn differently by various artists. Critic Charles Hatfield discusses a number of underground comics creators who use

similar tactics to reinforce the truth claims of their work, including Daniel Clowes ('Just Another Day'), R. Crumb ('The Many Faces of R. Crumb') and Jamie Hernandez ('Love Book'). Hatfield's discussion centres on the use of 'successive selves' by these creators, who produce multiple, contradictory versions of themselves on the page (Hatfield 2005: 117-124).

Visual mobility is something that *American Splendor* makes great use of throughout. 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. As Paul Buhle argues: 'Harvey was forced (but also allowed) to work with all kinds of artists, across every possible generational and other barrier, thus creating in his own way a comic art with extraordinary breadth and complexity' (2010: 191).

'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). Critic Scott McCloud puts forward a similar argument, claiming that the level of detail and artistic style directly affects universality and narrative identity: 'The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to *describe*.' (McCloud 1993: 31)

Both Eisner and McCloud are of the first wave of comics creators-turned-critics, and their ideas and theories tend towards privileging the visual in this way. Other creators such as Art Spiegelman have argued that comics in fact have the power to *individualise* and *dismantle* stereotypes, by using sustained narrative to undercut expectations (cited in Hatfield 2005: 115).

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. *American Splendor*, however, takes this one step further by making the variation overt and commenting upon it in its own text. For example in 'A Marriage Album' (*American Splendor* #10) Joyce Brabner (Harvey's wife) visualises a range of 'Harveys' before meeting Harvey for the first time, as her only knowledge of him is taken from the comics themselves (figure 1). She reflects on her anxiety, while the text reincorporates some of the different artistic ways he has been represented into a single panel.

Charles Hatfield (2005: 115) comments that 'Objectification of the self, through visual representation, may actually enable the autobiographer to articulate and uphold his or her own sense of identity' and the cartoon image therefore offers unique way for the comics creator to externalise their subjectivity. It is the seeing of the protagonist by the reader that objectifies him enough for his story to go beyond subjectivity. Hatfield claims that Harvey Pekar's creative process in particular 'precisely mirrors this transition' (117): as Harvey draws stick figures then passes these to artist to realise, as noted. This process allows Harvey to use his writerly skills 'to abstract his own character, in the form of simplified diagrams and nuanced dialogue' (117). Hatfield ultimately uses this observation in support of his own theory: that it is comics' tensions (here between visual/verbal; although Hatfield's theory defines this tension as just one of four) which allow this self-referential type of representation and encourage intertextual or metatextual commentary.

*American Splendor* certainly does not simplify the concept of narrative identity. As Harvey asks himself at one point: 'Am I some guy who writes about himself in a comic book called *American Splendor*? ... Or am I just a character in that book?' (Pekar and Brabner, *Our Cancer Year*) McCloud's treatment of narrative identity offers the fairly simplistic argument that the abstraction of cartooning allows greater engagement with characters seen on the comics page: 'When you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the *cartoon* – you see *yourself*.' (1993: 36) By contrast, the Harvey Pekar's of *American Splendor* reinforce the tension between the individual and their environment by being both aggressively individual yet also multiple and adaptive. These multiple realisations of Harvey (and other characters) as drawn by so many different artists also allow a myriad of different responses to the character, as is commented upon by the *American Splendor* movie, which uses storytelling conventions of the documentary genre alongside a distinctly comics narratology, as will now be discussed.

### **Comics conventions on screen? Documentary and adaptation**

It is surely not an accident that the *American Splendor* movie opens with an assertion of identity, as we are introduced to 'our man' as a pre-teen boy out trick-or-treating with his friends (all dressed as comic book superheroes while Harvey has no costume). In response to the confused homeowner's questions: 'And what about you, young man?' 'Who are you supposed to be?', Harvey replies 'What about what?' 'I'm Harvey Pekar. [...] I ain't no superhero, lady. I'm just a kid from the neighborhood, all right?'

Written and directed by documentarians Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, this ambitious movie 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, dramatisation with Hollywood actors, 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. *American Splendor* is a 'drama documentary' (Hight: 180) that uses a collage of techniques to 'make[s] stylistic forays into comic-book aesthetics, including animated sequences and illustrated frames' (West et al: 40), although it also revolves around a central emotional storyline: that of a love affair between a man and his comics and

what that brought him. However, here too it ironically follows the tone of the overall corpus, as some critics found the ending 'trite and incongruously upbeat.' (West et al: 40) – recalling the 'offhand' and 'ambiguous' endings Witek identifies in Pekar's comics.

This is a documentary that interrogates and problematises notions of reality and the representation of experience; as Pulcini comments: 'we're also 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). The movie offers us multiple 'Harveys' (Daniel Tay, Paul Giametti, Pekar himself, Donal Logue (in the *American Splendor* stage play clip shown) and 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 – is this the 'same' person as our self-conscious narrator? The 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). However, a consequence of this is that it simultaneously makes *American Splendor* 'an 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).

Alongside multiple Harveys, key scenes are also duplicated and revisited multiple times in the film. After seeing Harvey and Joyce's (played by Giametti and Davis) disastrous first date, we later see the couple in the theatre watching this scene being re-enacted (by Logue and Shannon). There are also translations of key scenes from the comic which *already* contain their own reflexivity and multiplicity, such the panel shown at figure 1 above which becomes a mixed-media scene that merges animation and acted footage in the film (figure 2). These tensions interrogate notions of experience and narrative identity, which Charles Hatfield argues are the broader issues at work in *American Splendor*: 'how we fashion our very selves through the stories we tell. Who is Harvey – creator, creation, both?' (109) However, these questions are also addressed within the story proper, as in the scene near the end where Harvey, midway through cancer treatment, asks himself: "Who am I? [...] Am I some guy who writes about himself in a comic book called *American Splendor*? ...Or am I just a character in that book?' This is taken from *Our Cancer Year*, allowing the real-life comic to exist 'paradoxically and literally -- both inside and outside the film.' (Sperb: 127).

Other, more light-hearted scenes serve a similar purpose: 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). He also notes 'multiple deconstructive asides' (124) for example 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'). Director Pulcini comments: 'We wanted a very different style for the documentary parts of the film. We decided that would be the place where we'd have a very artificial look, where we'd create a comic book panel look, with very vibrant colors and just a few well-placed items in the frame amidst a lot of empty, white space.' (West et al: 42). Showing Harvey reading the script (and admitting he has not read or rehearsed it!) is a 'staging of his real presence' (Sperb: 137).

Just like Harvey's comics, which always introduce his character with subjective referents such as 'our man', '*American Splendor* never offers a fixed point for the act of documentation.' (136) Listening to the real Harvey Pekar describe his character in third person situates him 'both inside and outside the character' (Sperb: 131) Director Pulcini comments that: 'We also thought it [using Harvey as narrator] would give Harvey the opportunity to debunk the whole idea of making a movie about him as we made it, which is very true to *American Splendor*.' (West et al: 41) Craig Hight (2007: 193) also notes that Joyce Brabner's voice in the interview sections of the film provides another critique of Pekar's work as 'selective' and 'negative'.

In this sense *American Splendor* can be read as a postmodern 'attempt to obliterate some supposed central truth and replace it instead with the surface of images' (125) However, it is also an interrogation of the nature of identity: a '*socially antithetical autobiography*, which documents Harvey's experience by resisting overt claims to definitively representing his experiences.' (Sperb 128-9, my emphasis) It asserts a divide between Harvey's aesthetic life and his biographical life; while simultaneously asserting that neither can be mastered by an *outside* observer (Sperb: 125). As such, it seems appropriate that the film ends with a reassertion of the 'real' characters of Harvey, Joyce, Danielle, Toby and other friends, as the movie's wrap party is staged for the camera. Hight (2007: 197) notes that at this point the boundaries between the different formats collapse, as 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. The following sequence shows Toby being photographed while talking in (scripted) voice-over about his friendship with Harvey. These cuts and combinations, Hight argues, 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.

### **Movie conventions on the page? *American Splendor: Our Movie Year***

So it may seem that life becomes comic becomes film becomes comic once again. However I would like to instead suggest that neither the comic or the film have final authority within the *American Splendor* oeuvre. The collected *American Splendor: Our Movie Year* reprints a number of Pekar's freelance pieces reflecting on various aspects of the movie experience. The theme that runs through the whole collection is a dichotomy between Pekar's amazement that people like the movie and his ongoing fears that that even cinematic critical acclaim will not translate into the extra work or money he claims he so desperately needs.

The stories in the collection all connect with the film, albeit sometimes in tenuous ways. There is the retelling of the *American Splendor* history at its widest level (Pekar works as a filing clerk, he meets Robert Crumb, they become friends and Crumb offers to illustrate some of Pekar's scripts, critical acclaim follows); 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 is followed by a series of individual pieces focusing on the musicians featured. Just as comics are used to shape the aesthetic of the movie (for example in the clean set used for the 'real' Pekar and his voiceover, which confirms to Michael Cohen's (2007) ideas regarding a comics aesthetic in *Dick Tracy*), 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).

Within this collection the *American Splendor* movie story is also retold multiple times and with multiple collaborators. There is a ten-part strip ('The American Splendor Movie' by Harvey Pekar with Mark Zingarelli); a six-page story for a national magazine ('My Movie Year' by Harvey Pekar with Gary and Laura Dumm); and multiple stories about the post-movie experience, such as Harvey's trips to Cannes and Sundance film festivals, Great Britain and so forth. These are written for different publications, including *American Splendor* the comic, *Empire* film magazine and so forth, 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).

Similarly, images from the movie are drawn back into the comic (see figure 4), again emphasising processes of simulation and simulacra. These options 'to assess the characters from more than one standpoint' (Pekar: 15) are exactly what the collection 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'.

### ***American Splendor* and adaptation**

Walter Metz writes that 'If one stops to think about it, documentaries should have always been the stuff of adaptation of non-fiction writing' (2007: 311). However, as an adaptation of *fictional* writing (as demonstrated above through analysis of the way Harvey shapes his tales), *American Splendor* the film displays the inadequacy of early adaptation theory. Geoffrey Wagner (1975) divides adaptation into the three categories of translation, commentary or analogy, but *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?

The *American Splendor* movie crosses categories and comments upon Pekar's comics techniques by *analogously translating* them into film. Its use of ironic authentication to create a type of interrogated realism illustrates the interesting postmodern condition of fictional truth, linked by Mark Currie to narrative identity and defined as follows: 'When I tell my own story, I must deny that I am inventing myself in the process in order to believe that I am discovering myself' (1998, 131). *American Splendor* shows the process of invention in this way, as a process of discovery. 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)

As such, *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. They both produce art and affirm difference. Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins (20) argue that creation and reaction cannot be grounded in reality and 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 allow, of course, for 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 still further – is he writer, subject, narrator, or commentator? *American Splendor* thereby becomes a self-conscious interrogation of what constitutes 'real' life as its texts explore multiple possibilities of representation. Perhaps then they are best understood as a multi-directional interaction between Harvey and his audience, as we are all encouraged to reflect with, and about, 'our man'.

#### **List of illustrations:**

**Figure 1: A Marriage Album, *American Splendor* #10**

**Figure 2: Equivalent still from film when they meet at airport**

**Figure 3: Radloff single panel in *Our Movie Year* p22**

**Figure 4: *Our Movie Year* p15 (whole page)**

#### **Abstract:**

*This article uses adaptation theory to examine the transformations of Harvey Pekar's everyday life in the comic and movie versions of American Splendor. It begins by explaining the comic's fascinating history: it sprang out of a friendship with Robert Crumb and Pekar's*

dissatisfaction with his own life and has been drawn by various artists since the 1970s. The article then demonstrates the relevance of formal storytelling categories (Labov, Bell) through analysis of *American Splendor: Another Day*, with specific reference to scene-setting; start and end; selectivity; reflection/moral; distance in narrative; direct address and commentary.

The article then considers the 2003 movie (dir. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini), which won first honours at the Sundance Film Festival in addition to the Writers Guild of America Award for best adapted screenplay. It discusses the way in which the movie uses conventions of the documentary genre and uses adaptation theory (McFarland, Hutcheon) to argue that the changes made are integral to this reclassification. It contrasts these genre techniques with the ways in which the movie acknowledges the presence of the comic through stylistic and other strategies.

It concludes by considering the resulting comic *American Splendor: Our Movie Year* and the ways in which this again adapts the content of the movie. It argues that as a consequence the movie becomes incorporated into the *American Splendor* story (as also seen at its end with close-up shot of the comic's cover) rather than being 'about it' and outside it.

### **Biography:**

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