

May 2015

# Comics as Film, Film as Comics: The Examples of Alan Moore, Daniel Clowes, and Harvey Pekar

Rachel A. Atherton

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, ratherton@siu.edu

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## Recommended Citation

Atherton, Rachel A., "Comics as Film, Film as Comics: The Examples of Alan Moore, Daniel Clowes, and Harvey Pekar" (2015).  
*Honors Theses*. Paper 378.

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COMICS AS FILM, FILM AS COMICS:  
THE EXAMPLES OF ALAN MOORE, DANIEL CLOWES AND HARVEY PEKAR  
Rachel Atherton

A thesis submitted to the University Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Degree

Southern Illinois University  
May 7, 2015

This project adds to the ongoing study of adaptation in media, specifically adaptation from graphic novels or comic books to film. The body of work on novel to film or novel to stage adaptations is considerably larger than that of comics to film. In recent years, however, comics have begun to be recognized as able to transcend the label of “childish” or “mass culture” to make meaning on a level with the novel or play. The comic book and comic book-film adaptation have exploded in popularity in accordance with that increase in recognition. This project examines three sets of graphic novels and their film adaptations. *Watchmen* (1986-7), written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, is considered a classic among graphic novels; its movie, directed by Zack Snyder (2009), remains remarkably faithful to the graphic novel, despite Moore’s unwillingness to work on or support the movie. *Ghost World* (1993-7), written and illustrated by Daniel Clowes, has garnered favor as a unique account of the growing up of two girls between high school graduation and the rest of their lives; its film adaptation, created by Terry Zwigoff and Clowes (2001), makes pivotal changes to great success according to the requirements of the film medium. *American Splendor* (1976-2008), written by Harvey Pekar and illustrated by a number of artists including Robert Crumb, has reached cult status as a comic book about everyday life; its film adaptation, directed by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini (2003), and featuring Pekar himself as narrator and actor, blurs the lines between comics and movies by actively using pieces of each medium all at once.

The comic and film mediums share similarities that make it natural for one to be translated into the other, certainly more so than prose and film. A comic, comprising panels that use word and image simultaneously to create a moment in time and space, can easily function as a storyboard for a film; the only change needed to translate from a comic page to a film scene is to make characters move and to add sound. Unlike a novel or a play, a comic already includes

images, and the form of the text included in each panel can dictate how a line should be spoken or what a sound effect should be. The size, shape, and location of a panel can even indicate how long a moment should be, translating into the length of time a camera should linger on a subject in film. Despite these obvious physical similarities, however, there are other realities of the comic and film mediums that preclude direct translation.

In comics, the panel can be standard, including word and image, and requiring readers to bring the two disparate elements together. Things like voice and sound are still left up to the imagination, but font, size, color, and placement of text within the panel all guide the reader in the imagining. Ioannidou calls the comic “a very self-conscious medium that does not stress credibility and verisimilitude,” instead preferring “artificiality” in the displayed (in drawings) perceptions of illustrators (233). It is also possible to use the comic panel itself in highly nonstandard ways. In *Watchmen*, parallelism between pages on either side of the middle of a chapter creates symmetry in a pivotal moment (e.g., the assassination attempt on Ozymandias) (Moore V.14-15). In *American Splendor*, panels are sometimes almost entirely filled with text as Pekar seems to speak directly to the reader, with only an image of his head and shoulders to indicate that it is indeed Pekar speaking. Panels can be large or small, take lots of time or none at all; pacing of a comic is still partially up to the reader, who must, in a loose sense, collaborate with creators to make sense of the text in a way that film does not typically require.

Film, unlike the comic book, is a curated experience. Directors and producers decide how long each scene will be and how long the camera will linger over a given subject. Actors dictate the sound of characters’ voices, and give definite emotional interpretations to written lines that may have previously been ambiguous. Film audiences are as a result of those qualities less actively or collaboratively engaged in the consumption of the text. Film can often be

characterized as “amusement that is intended for passive consumption” (Ioannidou 232), and is typically a more popular medium than comics because of the safety of its passivity and familiarity.

Comics, often published serially, are sometimes episodic rather than continuous. In that way, they are closer to television than film. A movie, one and a half to two and a half hours of continuous action, must follow a general plot line from the beginning through the middle and into the end; film does not have the luxury of showing one scene, ending it with a full stop, and beginning a new scene that is largely unrelated to the previous throughout the entire product. Something must happen in a movie and must happen quickly. The commercial reality of film, additionally, is that a movie requires a great deal of money and time to create, therefore requiring the movie to achieve a certain amount of commercial success. This fact also strengthens the need in movies for an overarching plotline, and further specifies the types of plotlines that can be used; familiar ones like the mystery plot, the revenge plot, the family romance plot, and the quest plot are easily recognizable to an audience and are attractive in their familiarity. Rather than uphold a balanced ideal of society, film’s constructed stages maintain “social structures of an urban, industrial, and apparently profit-driven society” (Ioannidou 232). These common backbones of movies, however, allow interesting and meaningful issues to branch off of them, encouraging uniqueness, while still offering audiences a known that will draw them into theaters.

Adaptation itself bears defining. Julie Sanders defines an adaptation as a text that offers “commentary on a source text” (18), often “adding hypothetical motivation” for characters or “voicing the silenced and marginalized” (19). Alternatively, Sanders says an adaptation can “constitute a simpler attempt to make texts ‘relevant’ [...] to new audiences [...] via the processes of proximation and updating” (19). Robert Stam, film and adaptation scholar, claims

that rather than simply classifying a text (often, and in this paper, a film) that adapts an earlier work as a somehow lesser derivation of the first text, adaptation studies attempts to place texts and their adaptations in dialogue with one another. Stam eschews “fidelity” in adaptation from one text to another in favor of “translation” from one medium to another. A novel is different from a film which is different from a comic book, and rather than criticize a film for failing to exactly recreate a comic book, Stam advocates for adaptation studies scholars to recognize adaptations as texts in their own right and in their own medium, influenced by and influencing their sources.

### ***Watchmen***

Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986-7) is a critically acclaimed tale of deeply flawed superheroes after they stop fighting crime and the degenerate world in which they live. At times heavily pessimistic, at times brightly optimistic, *Watchmen* blends the lives of civilians and superheroes with pages from Hollis Mason’s tell-all book about the original superhero group, the Minute Men, and pages from a separate but parallel comic called *Tales from the Black Freighter* to create a rich, engaging version of New York City, 1985.

The movie version of *Watchmen* (2009) is not as critically acclaimed. Unlike many book-to-movie adaptations, however, *Watchmen* stays almost entirely faithful to its source text. Some sequences are lifted straight from the graphic novel, perhaps most notably the initial murder of the Comedian and the display of his famous bloody smiley-face pin in the street. The main actors look as though their characters were drawn in the graphic novel with the actor specifically in mind. Some elements of the graphic novel are missing from the movie almost entirely, namely the news kiosk scenes and the *Tales from the Black Freighter* sections that match up with these scenes, as well as the sections of Hollis Mason’s book, Rorschach’s police

department file, and other interstitial material that shows up between chapters in the graphic novel. Perhaps most interesting, though, is the only change in the actual plot line that occurs in the translation of *Watchmen* from graphic novel to movie: the end.

In the original graphic novel, the villain is one of the former Crimebusters, Ozymandias. He clones an alien-looking monster from a psychic man's brain and teleports it to New York City, killing half the population there and inflicting madness on others around the world. His crime, however, pulls the world back from the brink of nuclear annihilation and ushers in a new era of peace, leading the remainder of the Crimebusters to keep their silence (all but Rorschach, who Dr. Manhattan kills before he gets fifty yards from Ozymandias' Antarctic complex) (Moore VII.23-24). Snyder's movie, however, changes the weapon from a monster clone to Dr. Manhattan himself. While Ozymandias is still the orchestrator of the whole event, Dr. Manhattan becomes the object to be feared, the common enemy that unites the planet, and instead of Earth beginning to fear aliens from other planets, the news reports just after the incident place the blame on "the super man."

*Watchmen* as a graphic novel pulls off the interstitial material: the infixes between chapters, the civilian scenes at the news kiosk, and the tiny background details (repetition of imagery and brand names, etc.) in a way the movie version cannot. The movie is confined to a set range of time that is standard for movies, and as it is at its core a superhero, action, mystery movie, there is little time for the "extras." What portions of these "extras" are present seem like nods to fans rather than integral parts of the movie; someone who has read Moore's *Watchmen* will notice and appreciate them, but someone who is simply watching the movie without prior experience will not lose out by not understanding these visual references. The news kiosk events help amplify and parallel the mounting tension and aggression felt throughout *Watchmen*'s Earth

as the graphic novel approaches its end, but the movie's use of music and swift pacing performs some of this function instead.

Each version of *Watchmen* honors its medium and takes advantage of that medium's strengths. The movie copies the graphic novel to the extent that it is possible, aside from that particular twist at the end. The graphic novel, on the other hand, takes advantage of its relaxed pacing; it forces the relaxed pacing, even, to include information that pushes readers to make connections and draw their own conclusions. The movie selects and includes in adapted visual form only the important parts of this information (the parts that are relevant to the central plot line), since it cannot burn valuable minutes of screen time making viewers read large blocks of text. In Snyder's film, the Minute Men (not central to the action-right-now narrative) are sidelined, hinted at by Hollis Mason and shown during the credits in various snapshots that readers will recognize but first-time viewers may think of as filler or introduction material. The movie tells the story it is aiming to tell, picking one line and following it, rather than encouraging readers to gather up three or more threads of narrative at the same time to follow them throughout the text. Snyder does manage the flashbacks, though, that take place during the Comedian's funeral — still, these match up with the main narrative and are much less involved with the Minute Men narrative that the movie keeps as separate and low-profile as possible.

Even with the aid of music, motion, and performance, elements the comic medium cannot provide, *Watchmen* as movie cannot portray the growing stress and the sudden burst of compassion shown just before half of New York is obliterated like the graphic novel can. The investment of time and energy into the side story of the news kiosk owner, the boy who is forever reading comics without buying, the women on the street, and the other civilian characters not involved in the grand machinations of governments or geniuses that occur in the book gives



context and poignancy to the compassion near the end, when the kiosk owner tries to shield the boy in their last seconds.

Moore's comic is far more suited to including multiple parallel narratives than Snyder's film adaptation. The parallel plotlines of the remaining Crimebusters and the civilians at the news kiosk mix with the extra or inner narratives – the *Black Freighter*, the Minute Men through memory and Hollis Mason's book, excerpts from Rorschach's psychologist's notes and home life – to create a thickly woven and extraordinarily detailed world. Even the background details, like signs and businesses, could be categorized as a kind of parallel narrative. The Gunga Diner franchise within *Watchmen* replaces McDonald's and Burger King, serving as both familiar (fast food) and foreign or alienating (Indian food rather than the more stereotypically American hamburger). Billboards and signs carry the Veidt name, surrounding the reader constantly with Ozymandias' presence. Posters for a concert at Madison Square Garden advertise the bands Pale Horse and Krystalnacht, alluding to the pale horse Death rides in the Book of Revelations and the night at the beginning of World War II when Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues were vandalized and destroyed and Jewish people were persecuted, beaten, and killed – in short, the end of the world. While the movie version attempts to include much of these small details, it is hard to afford them the same import as in the graphic novel; where a reader can set their own pace, a movie viewer is led along by the pacing of the movie, which is itself bound by time constraints. These parallel narratives all contribute to the culmination of the graphic novel in Ozymandias' massacre-by-clone and the fight in Antarctica that eliminates Rorschach and Dr. Manhattan, building up to one moment of incredible tension broken by the cloned creature.

Moore's *Watchmen* takes full advantage of the comic medium to execute these multiple concurrent narratives; the level of detail achieved in the book is one that has been attained by

few, if any, films. A comic, consisting in essence of multiple single-shot panels, allows readers to focus on each individual image rather than watching action in a movie go by faster than they can take in details like the names of the bands on a poster or the brand name on a billboard. Readers can take the time to digest an excerpt from *Under the Hood*, Hollis Mason's book about the Minute Men, or examine Rorschach's drawings in his case file. It is also possible to tell some of these narratives at the same time, as happens when both the news kiosk and the *Black Freighter* show up on the same page, the events in one paralleling the events in the other (Moore IIX.25). This almost split-screen method of storytelling functions clearly and effectively in *Watchmen* as a graphic novel, but implementing it in the film to any real degree would be impossible.

While *Watchmen*'s rich detail in graphic novel form is incapable of being fully translated into film, much of the meat of the text translates extremely well. *Watchmen* is a classic example of fidelity in translation between media, evident throughout the movie in scenes like the opener. The fight between the Comedian and his killer (later revealed to be Ozymandias) is replicated in the film almost exactly as it is drawn in the graphic novel, even down to the accentuated impact noises and split-second slow motion shots that imitate the onomatopoeia and single-frame panels of a comic book. The iconic smiley-face button, splashed with blood, can also be seen dropping onto the street just as it does in the comic; in one of the last scenes of the movie, the smile appears again on the shirt of a junior reporter, smeared with some blood-colored condiment exactly as shown in the comic, replicating the initial smiley face appearance.

Actors in the film are cast to look as identical to their comic book counterparts as possible; Silk Spectre II (Malin Akerman) and Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley) look as though they were initially drawn with those particular actors in mind. Interestingly, many of the actors

in *Watchmen* are not A-list stars, much like the *Watchmen* characters themselves. Unlike Batman or Spiderman, roles that have been revisited multiple times in many different incarnations in both comics and film and that are universally famous, *Watchmen* characters are only ever featured in the original *Watchmen* and the few prequel volumes. No decades-old franchise surrounds the graphic novel and no iconic previous roles appear with regards to the actors cast. Just as actors appear to be mirror images of characters drawn in Moore's *Watchmen*, dialogue within the film is often lifted directly from the pages of the comic, as well. Rorschach's voiceovers as he reads his journal entries aloud are near word-perfect, as are Dr. Manhattan's memories of his creation and Ozymandias' lines in the big reveal at the end of the film. While a casual viewer may not notice the high degrees of similarity, the almost literal translation of *Watchmen* – at least, the main plotline – is obvious to those viewers who are also familiar with the graphic novel.

Just as the graphic novel can employ techniques that do not work in a movie, the *Watchmen* film is able to accomplish things that the graphic novel cannot. Many of these have to do with the fact that a movie is just that, a moving picture, whereas a comic book is forced to use panels. Rorschach's "face," for example, is far more effective in the movie than in the graphic novel. Instead of a shift that occurs in the gutter between panels, the mask Rorschach wears can move freely and the audience can watch the unsettling movement of it; sometimes it looks like a face, with an approximation of mouth, eyes, and nose, but at other times the mask shifts to something completely alien. Rorschach as a character is simultaneously identifiable and unsettling, and the shifting of his mask – his "face" – evokes a more visceral reaction to that part of Rorschach that is *other* than the comic portrayal can.

Dr. Manhattan is also more effective in certain scenes in the movie than in the book. His explosion on the television set following an interview gone wrong is one example. The rising tension in Dr. Manhattan himself is better conveyed with body language as well as with the rising noise levels from the crowd; while the scene is filmed, like much of the movie, almost exactly as drawn in the graphic novel, the added pressure from the noise and encroaching crowd of reporters and spectators draws more empathy from the audience than the graphic novel's version can. Dr. Manhattan's glass watch-palace on Mars is also more impressive in the film. The movie creates the palace in a more three-dimensional and real sense than the book, and seeing the gears in motion gives a stronger impression than is otherwise possible. Additionally, when juxtaposed with the destruction Dr. Manhattan is shown to be capable of, the palace provides a counterpoint of creative energy that comes off more positively than in the graphic novel.

Despite the impressive level of fidelity in translation from graphic novel to film, Dr. Manhattan proves to be the crux of the film's one major deviation from the graphic novel. The ending – specifically the massacre of half of New York City – is really the only substantial difference. In the graphic novel, Ozymandias uses a cloned monster, which he passes off to the public as an alien, to wipe out “half the city” and affect psychically sensitive people around the world (Moore XII.10). In the film, Ozymandias skips the monster and uses Dr. Manhattan instead – Manhattan and Laurie return from Mars, and somehow that return causes the explosion that kills half the city. Each ending provides the same result; the United States and Russia turn their attention to a greater enemy and back off from mutually assured destruction, the world moves toward peace, the remnants of the Crimebusters agree to keep quiet about Ozymandias' role to save the peace, Rorschach refuses to keep quiet, and Dr. Manhattan kills him.

Why, then, should the film change the graphic novel's events at all? Perhaps to set itself apart from the original text, or maybe to avoid the connections to psychics, the strange collection of missing people, and the *Tales from the Black Freighter* that are not featured in the movie as they are in the graphic novel. Since the film necessarily omits these recurring clues from the graphic novel, the cloned monster's appearance would not make sense as it was explained in the original text, and Dr. Manhattan is substituted as the next closest method for accomplishing the same ends. It could also be just as simple as the thought of a sequel; a character as super-powered as Dr. Manhattan would easily overshadow the other remaining members of a hero team for *Watchmen II* (Nite Owl, Ozymandias, Silk Spectre). Putting responsibility for the destruction of New York on his shoulders effectively clears him out of the way and precludes the possibility of his return in a sequel, opening space for a story of the remaining Crimebusters coming together, possibly with new original characters, to fight crime once more. Given the consistent trend in recent years towards comic book movies with plots centered on establishing a team, this seems like a distinct possibility. It could be that the film's creators wanted to stay away from the big alien monster trope that is classically comic book and works in the graphic novel, but that they did not feel would be appropriate in the film.

Snyder's *Watchmen* could also be one of the many superhero films that have tried to distance themselves from the idealized, perfect hero character. By making Dr. Manhattan the instrument of destruction, the world turns against him instead of against an outside threat like a hostile alien race, and the remarkable distance with which he treats the erasure of hundreds of thousands of human lives helps the audience do the same. Also present in the film adaptation (but not the graphic novel, as it was published beforehand) is the American memory of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. The

destruction of New York City by strange alien could easily be interpreted as a reference to those attacks; Dr. Manhattan's connection with the atom bomb, however, keeps the sequence of events firmly grounded in the alternate 1980s Cold War of the graphic novel. Whatever the reason, the film's end sequence is not as different from the book as it might seem; while the weapon is different, Ozymandias is still the culprit and the other heroes still agree to maintain silence to keep the peace, Dr. Manhattan disappears and Rorschach is killed, and Rorschach's journal shows up in the junk pile for a newspaper looking for something to print.

The *Watchmen* film adaptation, while certainly extremely faithful to the original graphic novel, makes changes to suit its needs as a film rather than as a graphic novel. The kinds of parallel narratives that are used throughout the graphic novel are impossible to achieve in the time and visual constraints of a film. An action film, especially, must maintain a quick pace, precluding the possibility of using the same case files, book chapters, and comic books (*Tales of the Black Freighter*) as the graphic novel does.

### ***Ghost World***

Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* (1993-7) is about liminal space. The title itself points to a place between the living and the afterlife – a border or a boundary. The action of the graphic novel takes place in the lives of two teenagers over the course of the summer after their high school graduation. The teenagers, Enid and Rebecca (Becky), hover between high school and college or work, between child and adult, between mandated structure and freedom of choice, between dependence and independence. *Ghost World* is unique in its treatment of a pivotal moment for which there is no manual, no guide. America does not have a ritual the young person undergoes in order to emerge an adult on the other side. There is no standard method of growing up in those few months of no man's land between past and future; everyone experiences

the strangeness and discomfort of that time, and that makes *Ghost World* relatable and successful.

Victor Turner, known for his work on liminal space and ritual, calls liminality a “stage of reflection” where formerly held ideas are considered in new light (53). In a formalized ritual, such as the manhood rites practiced among tribal cultures in Africa, Turner says, this reflection period is defined by ritual actions and shifting public perceptions of the initiate. In *Ghost World*, however, no set ritual defines Enid’s and Rebecca’s experiences. The same sort of reflection occurs as Enid and Rebecca remember their childhood, however, and look towards the future. They test the expectations of adulthood, Enid especially with her forays into different identities: punk, college student, sexual being. She chooses to “haunt the margins” of her life with these characters (Flanagan 153). In the end, however, Rebecca is the one who seems successful in her transition to adulthood, with a job, a partner in Josh, and an apartment, whereas Enid leaves town on a bus without fulfilling her own quest for adulthood.

The graphic novel *Ghost World* was serialized as part of a larger publication for its initial release and was later compiled into one volume. As a result, this iteration of *Ghost World* is episodic in a lot of ways – though there is a unifying plot line and characters usually recur, chapters end in one place and the next begins somewhere else, an unknown amount of time later, and events are usually largely unrelated. Throughout the comic, more tidbits are revealed: Enid and Becky are both attracted to Josh, their friend; Enid is somehow attached to a toy she received from an unknown boy in the fifth grade; Becky is still embarrassed about a boy she dated years ago.

Clowes’ graphic novel often uses sex and sexuality to talk about liminal space. The girls’ shifting relationships with Josh are one avenue; Enid and Becky are free enough with him to

write him a ridiculous and sexual note upon finding him out of his apartment (56), and Enid is comfortable enough to make Josh accompany her to a sex store (33), but at the same time, both Enid and Becky believe that Josh would want to have a romantic relationship with the other girl. This involvement with Josh is also juxtaposed with the recurring reminders, either through other people or through Enid and Becky themselves, that they are close enough friends for others to perceive them as lesbians in a romantic relationship. Enid even suggests that they become “lesbos” at one point, frustrated with trying to find a boyfriend; Becky rejects the idea, but the implications for the interconnectivity of platonic intimacy and sexual intimacy remain (31). Additionally, Enid explains her failed attempts at sexual fantasies; they all end up becoming one of her old teachers, she admits (32). The graphic novel also includes a chapter that largely consists of retellings of Enid and Becky’s first sexual experiences. Both girls talk about their experiences relatively matter-of-factly, despite the vulnerability they inspire and the horror Enid displays when she believes Becky has told someone else her story (35-39). This episode creates a strange mix of vulnerability in sex, agency, and ownership of experience; while the girls’ first times may not have lived up to their imaginations, they were able to express sexual agency, and the experiences are theirs and are highly personal.

Much of the graphic novel takes place in a diner where Enid and Becky watch patrons, judge them, ridicule them, and at one point even follow them. Over the course of the graphic novel, the diner is used as a convenient setting where many different people and perspectives converge, making it a crossroads for the girls to observe the adult world around them, exchange knowledge, and test ideas about other people and about their own growing adulthood. Enid finds a couple in the diner that she is sure are Satanists, and she and Becky watch them and make fun of them in the diner more than once before choosing to follow them to the grocery store and



ridicule their purchases – a cart full of Lunchables – once there. Similarly, an acquaintance of Enid’s introduces the girls to a pedophile he has befriended for an article in his magazine, and the encounter quickly turns into the girls taunting the pedophile and the man who introduced them. The pattern changes, however, with the waiter the girls dub “Weird Al.” They ridicule his hair, his voice, his face, in front of him rather than from the privacy of their own booth. Later, however, after the girls’ prank call to the missed connections man, Enid regrets the whole idea and leaves a larger tip for Al than usual; while she cannot change hurting the pranked man, she can change her attitude towards Al, and doing so shows an increase in empathy and sympathy from Enid (46).

Even outside the diner, the girls make everything a joke, something to be ridiculed and laughed at. They distance themselves from everything they see, especially when they identify with it in some way; for instance, Becky at one point says that a boy not far from their table “gives her a total boner” (Clowes 26). Enid shuts her down instantly, criticizing the boy and Becky’s taste, and rather than defending herself, Becky throws the notion away without further argument and changes the subject. Becky allows herself to be sexually vulnerable in that moment, but draws back into herself almost instantly at the slightest hint of challenge, denying that vulnerability in a pattern that extends throughout the graphic novel. Enid and Becky cut each other constantly, seeming cruel and critical despite their obvious closeness. This seems to be the basis for their friendship, the lashing out at others to avoid looking at themselves, along with the sheer length of time they have spent together and the major life events they have weathered together (the death of Becky’s parents, Enid’s father’s numerous divorces and marriages).

Enid and Becky's relationship begins to change earlier on in the graphic novel, but one of the most pivotal examples is the fiasco with the missed connections man. Enid prank calls a man who placed an ad in the paper, pretending to be the blonde he advertised for, asking him to come to the diner that Enid and Becky frequent (Clowes 45-6). The girls (and Josh) then wait and watch for him to arrive. Enid is the only one excited about this plan, as Becky grows uncomfortable and Josh is only there reluctantly. After the man leaves, having figured out what the kids had done, Enid comes to the same realization Becky had – that hurting people should not be fun. Even so, the damage has been done, and Enid's general consistency down a path of ridiculing the world as well as her secrecy regarding the possibility of her leaving for college drives a wedge between her and Becky. Enid, after losing the college prospects she'd had, follows through on her desire to leave on a mysterious bus and reinvent herself. On her way, she is able to recognize Becky as a beautiful young woman, separate from the girl she'd been (80). Becky has emerged from the liminal space of summer; Enid is still trying. In the end, their separation is the natural effect of changes that occur after children grow up and are no longer obligated to spend school days together.

While Josh, a shared love interest in the graphic novel, is a factor in Enid and Becky's separation, he is not the cause. Terry Zwigoff's 2001 movie adaptation of *Ghost World*, however, expands on one incident – the missed connections prank call – and twists the plot to fit the man, Seymour (Steve Buscemi), into the movie as a pivotal character. Many of the plot elements from the graphic novel remain in the adaptation, and a great deal of the core emotional resonance is preserved, but the growing-apart that is so key in the graphic novel is, in the movie, largely to do with a man.

The *Ghost World* film is restricted by the time limit of a movie and by the need to make money. Whereas Clowes self-published *Ghost World* as part of a larger serialized collection, making it independent from time or length constraints as well as from financial constraints, the film cost considerably more to make than a comic book and, like any movie, needed to sell tickets. While a largely actionless story about two teenage girls growing up would hardly draw moviegoers, a more familiar romance plot serves to attract audiences. The major change in plot and structure between the graphic novel and the film adaptation, then, works as a commercial tool to create a viable film out of a graphic novel that does not translate into the movie medium as *Watchmen* does.

In changing the plot to follow Enid and Seymour, however, *Ghost World* is not trivialized or downgraded. The film, while it requires a linear and recognizable plot arc to act as a sort of spine, uses scenes separate from the main “spine” of the film to examine other issues. For instance, the addition of Enid’s summer school art class introduces a discussion about the political nature of art that is not present in the graphic novel. This addition likely stems from Clowes’s role as a writer and artist in the comic world, where the general perception is that comics are childish and meaningless because they are not avant-garde or political like a tampon in a teacup. The movie portrays this perception as ridiculous, and the overly politicized art that is satirized in the film comes with equally vacuous explanations from the artists – the hippie student and the instructor. Audiences are made to identify with Enid, whose art shows talent and skill, by watching her frustration with her teacher’s inability to accept her art as well as her desperation when she borrows Seymour’s fried chicken advertisement to use as a piece in her art class.

Zwigoff's film version of *Ghost World* also seizes an opportunity to discuss racism. The most obvious example takes the form of the chicken poster Enid uses for her art class. Enid uses the poster to play on her teacher's ideas of political art to great success. When her teacher submits the poster to an art show, however, the poster is found to be incredibly offensive to several people there, and the teacher is forced to fail Enid. Finally, word gets out about the poster hanging in the art gallery, and Seymour loses his job because of it. The movie criticizes both Enid's relative flippancy in her willingness to use a divisive and hurtful issue such as racism for her own ends and the gallery patrons' inability to enter into an open discussion about the implications of racism.

While sex is a theme of the graphic novel, the movie is not focused on it in the same way. Some of the same incidents occur; Enid visits a sex store and makes fun of the merchandise as well as the patrons, and Enid and Becky leave Josh a note saying that "we came here to fuck you, but you were not home. Therefore, you are gay" (Zwigoff). Instead of visiting the sex store with Josh, a boy her own age, however, Enid drags Seymour along with her, who is old enough to be her father. The change in dynamic raises questions about age differences in relationships: can a man and a woman who are far apart in age maintain a platonic relationship? Is it more or less unacceptable for Seymour or Josh to visit the shop with Enid? Additionally, the boundaries between Seymour's roles as father, friend, and lover are challenged; Enid becomes jealous of Dana, Seymour's girlfriend, in the movie, as Enid's feelings change from wanting to fix Seymour to wanting to spend time with Seymour as a friend to wanting physical love with Seymour as affirmation and validation.

The movie *Ghost World*, in typical film fashion, dramatizes the plot. The graphic novel version leaves the characters a little hurt but more than able to heal and move on; there is hope in

Enid's climbing onto the mystery bus on the last page. The movie, however, leaves the characters destroyed, especially Seymour and Enid. Seymour loses his job, moves back home with his mother, and begins to see a therapist; Enid, unlike in the graphic novel, ends the movie not only with no college prospects but also with no high school diploma, since the summer art class she failed was required for her to graduate. While Enid is the focus of the movie and some of the time Enid and Becky spend together in the graphic novel is eliminated in the movie, there's still enough to see exactly how they behave with each other; each girl thinks the other has something special that she lacks, and they both lash out at each other just as much as they lash out at other people, constantly critical. It seems, however, that their relationship is on its way to repair at the end of the movie; Becky and Enid are moving in together. Enid's disappearance to board the mysterious bus in the final scene, then, seems somewhat out of place. With that decision, she "[freezes] her personal narrative at the crisis point of adolescence" (Flanagan 159), whereas the graphic novel's bright and hopeful final panels give a sense of passing into something new. A desire to run away from everything Enid destroys in Zwigoff's film is not unreasonable, but the movie lacks the same goal that Enid expresses in the graphic novel when she says that she would like to leave and come back when she is "a totally different person" (Clowes 74). The recurrence of the Ghost World graffiti throughout the graphic novel is also missing from the ending of the movie, eliminating some of the significance of the title. Seymour's importance in the movie replaces some of Enid's internal motivation to go off on her own.

While *Ghost World* changes a great deal in adaptation, the movie retains much of the core emotional resonance of the graphic novel. Both book and movie examine change and growth in myriad ways. The film, however, seems to exclude the possibility of love between Rebecca and

Enid that is found in the comic (“Maybe we should be lesbos” [Clowes 31]). Much of the relationship that is cut in the film adaptation is of a pseudosexual nature, but as a result of the shift, Enid and Rebecca’s film relationship loses some of its platonic intimacy and potency as well. The extent of this loss is such that Rebecca’s character actually drops out of the film for quite some time while Enid is more concerned with Seymour, and Rebecca only returns when she is needed to both pick up the pieces of Enid remaining after the sexual encounter with Seymour and show Seymour that Enid truly cares for him via Enid’s sketchbook. The natural growing apart that occurs between the girls in the graphic novel is thereby skirted in the film. Additionally, the film adaptation uses its added art focus to juxtapose nostalgic, vernacular art (Enid’s drawing of Don Knotts, for instance, or Seymour’s blues) with avant garde, experimental art like the teacher’s disturbing short film, as well as political art like Enid’s use of the fried chicken advertisement. While the graphic novel does to some extent examine nostalgia in Enid’s childhood toys and records, the film adds depth to the discussion and attempts to find some kind of solution to the problem of nostalgic, experimental, and political art. Clowes and Zwigoff lose some of the Enid-and-Rebecca story in adapting the graphic novel *Ghost World* for a Hollywood film, but gain interesting discussions of issues not featured in the original text.

### *American Splendor*

*American Splendor* is straight “off the streets of Cleveland,” according to the cover of each issue. It is unique in that the stories featured in *American Splendor* are almost entirely autobiographical; author Harvey Pekar recounts his argument with a secretary at work over some donuts, relates a conversation he overheard in the cafeteria, retells a story about choosing a checkout line at the supermarket. Pekar’s stories lack glamor and fantasy, all taking place in his

hometown of Cleveland. Cleveland, as per the cover joke on each comic issue, is not a particularly exciting place -- it is, in fact, just like anywhere else.

This sameness of Cleveland with everywhere else in America is what allows Pekar to tap so effectively into the everyday -- the events of life that take place outside of commercial or constructed space. The everyday comprises those moments people take for granted: conversing with a coworker, arguing with a friend, buying a cup of coffee. The everyday is nigh impossible to fully define, simply because of its nondescript-ness. Ben Highmore says, “the everyday is the accumulation of ‘small things’ that constitute a more expansive but hard to register ‘big thing’” (1). To put it in comic terms, the everyday might be characterized as the gutter between panels, the things not worth drawing. *American Splendor*, however, focuses on these everyday moments as a way to connect people and to relate author and reader. Highmore characterizes the connections found within the everyday more generally: “...even in the midst of the most desperate isolation, the ordinary can take hold of what seems exceptional and connect it with other ‘exceptions.’ The ordinary speaks of commonality without necessarily intoning the ideological set pieces of ‘the silent majority,’ or of universality” (5).

Cleveland is handled almost lovingly in the comic; it provides a consistent backdrop to everything that happens (for the most part) and resides comfortably in the background, an everyday to the everyday. When a movie version was filmed, it was entirely on location in Cleveland, no matter the season (winter scenes look especially bleak). In the film, Joyce Brabner (Hope Davis) says, when Harvey asks her if she is really willing to move to Cleveland for him, that Cleveland “depresses her as much as any American city” (Berman and Pulcini). Its juxtaposition with other places – New York and the Letterman Show, for instance – gives Cleveland an edge, a fighting chance. It is the kind of city that is often discounted, whereas

metropolises are celebrated, but Pekar avoids celebrating the big city. He has little interest in moving out of his familiar surroundings and other locations, like Los Angeles or London, in the comic are almost denigrated in direct opposition to the way many typical comics would venerate them.

Pekar uses *American Splendor* to bring attention to these everyday occurrences, his everyday life, and the ordinary (but also not ordinary) people he encounters. Even so, Pekar's efforts are not to fancify or glamorize the everyday; rather, Pekar attempts to show life as it is and retain the realism in the everyday. The artists Pekar employs to illustrate his comics draw characters as they are, warts and all. In some stories, Pekar himself looks fearsomely gorilla-like and is festooned with stink lines. Robert Crumb, one frequent illustrator for *American Splendor*, characterizes his work as "an uncensored translation of his consciousness" (qtd. in Hight 182). In this way, *American Splendor* conveys the everyday through the eyes of many different people. The different perspectives and perceptions of each artist change the superficial appearance of a room or a character, but a core essence remains. Pekar, Joyce, Toby, Mr. Boats, and others all might look different to different artists, but the thread of Pekar's writing throughout makes them instantly identifiable, regardless of the change in the size of a nose or the definition of a set of cheekbones.

Pekar attempts to rescue characters like Mr. Boats, the janitor at the VA where Pekar works, and Toby Radloff, one of Pekar's coworkers -- in Radloff's words in the movie, "a genuine nerd." The film adaptation of *American Splendor* allows viewers a fuller picture of Toby than the comic can offer; rather than the comic's collection of multiple different images, the movie needs a single character with a set role that is readily recognizable for audiences and can be better developed over the course of the movie. This unified character can be observed



most effectively in Toby's speech patterns. Toby's voice immediately marks him as different and identifies him, for audiences, with other nerds that viewers have encountered who speak strangely. Despite its need for a single character, the film still offers some of the comic's multiplicity in a dichotomy between actor portrayal and appearances by the real Toby Radloff. In one scene, the movie cuts from a dramatization of a conversation between Harvey and Toby about jellybeans and Lent to an area offstage where the actors take a break after the scene and the real Harvey and Toby discuss jellybean flavors. This scene is reminiscent of the comic *American Splendor* in that it shoves the multiplicity of characters and people to the forefront, equating Judah Friedlander's portrayal of Toby to a comic book drawing that recreates Toby as closely as possible. Just as an artist draws Toby the way he perceives Toby, the actor plays Toby in the way he perceives him. The common thread present throughout the various Tobys becomes, then, an essence of Toby.

This same multiplicity occurs in Harvey, as well, but to a greater degree. In the comic, his multiple images are a side effect of Pekar's inability to draw; different artists have different styles, and while Pekar himself remains the same, the various artists perceive him and portray him in slightly different ways based on their styles. Multiplicity of portrayals occurs in other comic franchises, too -- Spiderman is drawn differently in his first appearance versus in comics released last year versus Toby McGuire's Spiderman versus Andrew Garfield's Spiderman. No other comic, though, encompasses such a diversity of image within the space of one or two issues, or within a single film. The film plays with this trademark of *American Splendor* by using not only an actor (Paul Giamatti) portrayal of Pekar, but also the real Harvey Pekar, animated Harveys from various comics, old footage from Pekar's appearances on *The Letterman*

Show, and the badly acted Harvey Pekar character in the stage play adaptation *Harvey and Joyce* watch in Los Angeles.

Toby and the treatment of the trip to see *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) is likely one of the most emblematic scenes in Berman and Pulcini's *American Splendor* film, and the most obvious example of the juxtaposition of the everyday and the commercial. Harvey, Joyce, and Toby drive to see *Revenge of the Nerds* together; previously, Toby had extolled the film's virtues to Harvey to justify his plan to drive all the way from Cleveland to Toledo to see the movie. Upon leaving the theater, Joyce and Toby happily chat about how empowering and enjoyable they found the movie, because it finally gave a win to the nerds rather than the popular kids. Harvey, walking behind Joyce and Toby, wears an expression of disbelief and disgust. Incensed, he begins to raise his voice as he interrupts Toby's and Joyce's joy in the movie. Harvey points out that the movie nerds weren't like Toby -- they came from wealthy backgrounds, would go on to get jobs and "stop being nerds," whereas Toby, Harvey says, is in his thirties and still lives in his grandmother's basement.

Joyce chastises Harvey for his harshness and she and Toby continue to enjoy themselves, but the argument itself provides a crystallized and topical view of the precise issue *American Splendor* wrestles with again and again. Aspects of the everyday, in this particular case a peculiar work colleague, are threatened with misrepresentation in the public sphere -- perhaps even so much as exploitation of that type of subculture and their typical lack of representation. Everyday spaces are encroached upon and *American Splendor* attempts to preserve them in the eventuality -- or in Pekar's typically pessimistic outlook, maybe "inevitability" is a better word -- of their extinction.

*American Splendor* as movie cannot afford to use the same structure as the comic; unlike *Watchmen*, for example, *American Splendor* would make a poor movie as-is, as it lacks a unifying plot thread. Hight classifies the film as a drama-documentary featuring “dramatized versions of actual events” to “reach a wider audience” than typical documentaries, with an aim to convey “an emotional truth less easily portrayed through the representational constraints of documentary” (187). The episodic, tangential structure of the *American Splendor* comic functions in some ways in the movie, but is used in that instance to create a sort of director’s commentary format that is more familiar to viewers. Many DVDs come with commentary footage, allowing viewers to watch a movie with muted or heavily lowered sound while watching along with the directors, actors, or producers, who will commentate various scenes and let the viewer into the world of the making of the film. *American Splendor*’s use of breaking-the-fourth-wall and the real Harvey Pekar as narrator and character gives the movie some of the comic’s feel of Pekar speaking directly to the audience while still keeping the format approachable and commercially viable.

Since a movie requires a clarifying plot line, *American Splendor* prioritizes the family romance arc. Harvey meets Joyce, they get married, and later on raise a child. Against the smooth Hollywood grain, though, there are constant tangents and idiosyncrasies. Joyce suggests she and Harvey get married before they carry out any typical courtship rituals. They fight all the time once married, in direct opposition to an idealized, harmonious married couple. Harvey develops cancer. They argue about children; one of the first things Harvey says to Joyce in person, before she has even visited his home, is that he has had a vasectomy. Joyce gets to know Harvey first through his comic renderings of his life rather than real interactions. Both Harvey

and Joyce have been married before. Eventually they do end up raising a daughter, the child of one of Harvey's artist friends, who is not officially theirs but who they love as their own.

It is perhaps the truth behind the story that makes it relatable, rather than its tried and true Hollywood plot. The everyday lives of viewers take winding paths, go off on tangents (Harvey's musings on the other Harvey Pekar's, for instance), go the road less traveled. Few, if any, families are *Leave it to Beaver* cookie-cutter style, and *American Splendor's* unconventionality in reaching its culmination in the happy routine of the characters' lives and the retirement party for Harvey, featuring all the real people from the comic, is more like real life than is often possible in film.

In the *American Splendor* comic, Joyce Brabner, Pekar's wife, is handled equitably, the same as any other character. Drawings of her are filtered through different artists' perceptions, similar to Pekar and his many forms within the comic, but the essence of her character remains. Brabner's influence changes the comic a great deal; as Pekar's wife, she becomes a main character, and she and Pekar even write a volume of *American Splendor* together: *Our Cancer Year*, a story specifically dealing with Harvey's journey through cancer treatment and Joyce's involvement with a group of teenagers in war-torn countries. *Our Cancer Year* plays a role in the film adaptation as well, culminating in Joyce's idea to write the book and the acquisition of their adoptive daughter from an artist they create the graphic novel with. Despite Brabner's considerable presence in the comic, she is less featured in the film adaptation. Her character, played by Hope Davis, is pivotal, but unlike Harvey Pekar himself, the real Joyce Brabner only appears with a speaking role once. The *Our Movie Year* collection that details the production process and promotion process for the movie does not address this lack of Brabner in the film, so the question remains: did Joyce Brabner simply not wish to appear more than she does in the

film, or does the Hollywood film adaptation prefer the younger, more attractive Joyce Brabner to the real one?

The *American Splendor* comic ran for decades as a serial publication, much of the time published somewhat irregularly and in the underground comics network by Pekar himself. Over that time, characters constantly changed; some would recur and some would appear only once or twice. While personalities are often the same across issues, *American Splendor* accounts for many years of characters' lives, over which time they evolved, matured, and underwent major life events; many facets of a given character can be identified throughout the years of *American Splendor*. The film, however, must take place within a set one and a half to two hour time period, and requires precise characters with laid out roles in order to function for an audience that may or may not be familiar with the *American Splendor* comics. The use of drawn images from the comics and of the real people many characters are based upon within the film adaptation keeps the movie closely connected to the comics, while still keeping characters specific and unified enough that audiences can identify them as one entity and their character arcs can be fulfilled within the time frame of the film. Berman and Pulcini's film adaptation displays a "respect for the comic book as an art form" (Hight 198) that celebrates Pekar's *American Splendor* without sacrificing the possibilities of film. While the film needs a unifying backbone, a beginning, middle, and end, it works to effectively treat both the plot and the characters of *American Splendor* while still satisfying the demands of a commercial Hollywood film.

## **Conclusion**

The growth of the Marvel universe in both graphic novels and film seems to be a sign of things to come for adaptation between the two mediums. Superhero comics have proven to be reliable blockbuster hits as film adaptations, with titles like *Avengers* and *Guardians of the*

*Galaxy* grossing millions. Not only do the films provide opportunity for more profit in the form of merchandising, but they also inform comics; team establishment and dynamics, so popular in the films, will likely take a more forward position in superhero graphic novels as readership expands to include fans drawn in from the movies. In the same way, comics can influence film, pushing for treatment of important social issues on the sidelines of what might otherwise be a simple action-heroes-save-the-world movie. And, in the future, comic characters might be drawn with an actor already in mind, with the assumption that a movie adaptation is inevitable and close at hand.

The feature film, however, is not the only place where superhero narratives are finding their way onto the screen; television has also embraced the comic book drive. The CW's *Smallville* was an early adaptation, and more recently that same network's *Arrow* has begun to adapt DC's Green Arrow character. Marvel has also reached into the television sphere, spinning the serial *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* off of the *Avengers* movie and subsequently publishing comics based on the TV series. Marvel also partnered with Netflix to create *Daredevil*, the first season of which was released all at once on Netflix's streaming platform. Other graphic novels, too, have been adapted for television, perhaps most notably in AMC's *The Walking Dead*. Television can achieve the shorter episodes of many serial comics as well as the longer run time of comics that film lacks, making it an even closer medium for adaptation from the graphic novel.

Hollywood's apparent inability to handle women outside the typical leading lady norm – older women, women with intimate relationships with other women, whether platonic or sexual, women with unconventional body types – may begin to change over time as pushes for body positivity and tolerance of all kinds gain more and more traction. It only makes sense that as the mindsets of Americans change, the representations that are acceptable in popular media will

follow. Whether graphic novels or film will be the first to show widespread acceptance of varying body types for women is uncertain, but given the strong connection between the two mediums in recent years, it is likely that the shifts will occur in close proximity to one another. The specific subgenre of superhero narratives may be less amenable to that kind of change, especially since female characters have historically always been drawn thin, with hourglass figures and tight or otherwise revealing costumes. Body equality in other subgenres, however, might be more easily realized.

Graphic novels outside the superhero seem to pale in comparison to the massive push towards comic hero adaptations in film. However, if the nature of the comic and the graphic novel continues to change over time as it has over the past several decades, shifting from mere child's play to a medium that can be taken seriously and that can communicate serious ideas, more graphic novels may see a version of themselves at the movie theater or on television. The same influence of graphic novels on film can also be observed in the opposite direction, as well. As film becomes more innovative in its use of space and image, adaptations of movies into graphic novels may well become easily created and very popular. The two mediums fit together well, perhaps better than most other pairings of two largely different forms of expression, and that fit lends itself to a continued and rich interaction between film and comics. The interconnectivity observed between and across mediums in Marvel's recent work alone bodes well for the future; film, television, and comics bind together to create a cohesive, multimedia whole that engages audiences more than individual projects alone could hope to do.

Moving forward, the three text sets examined here, *Watchmen*, *Ghost World*, and *American Splendor*, can all be set up as examples for future adaptation ventures. *Watchmen*, an adaptation lacking all support or participation from the graphic novel's author, Alan Moore, is

able to accomplish some elements more effectively by virtue of sound and the moving picture itself, but loses a great deal of complexity in translation. *Ghost World*, an adaptation on which author Daniel Clowes worked closely with the director, Terry Zwigoff, strikes a balance between gaining a cohesive plot and interesting side issues and losing unique interpersonal dynamics and frank treatment of female sexuality. *American Splendor*, an adaptation in which original author Harvey Pekar actually acts, plays with perceptions and portrayals of characters as well as the sometimes mundane, sometimes remarkable minutia of the everyday. Only one of these sets, and perhaps the least successful adaptation, is a superhero narrative; the others provide examples of how comics outside the hero can become successful films in their own right and open the door to new comic-to-film adaptations in the future that bypass the popular draw of the hero.

The remaining problem facing comics to film adaptations, however, is one of audience. As Julie Sanders notes in her *Adaptation and Appropriation*, the “full impact of the film adaptation depends upon the audience’s awareness of an explicit relationship to a source text” (22). Mainstream superhero narratives are more widely read than the underground comics that yielded Zwigoff’s *Ghost World* and Berman and Pulcini’s *American Splendor*, and as a result the impact of the adaptive choices made by film creators is more likely to be lost on audiences viewing adaptations like *Ghost World* or *American Splendor* than they are on audiences watching *Watchmen* and other superhero films. Adaptation studies scholars can look ahead to highlighting greater diversity, or lack thereof, in film adaptations as these become hot button issues in film discourse. Stam’s ideas of translation over fidelity will continue to hold true through recasting of popular characters in various diverse identities. Rather than requiring absolute fidelity from source to adaptation, scholars and audiences alike will need to recognize value in bringing various experiences from varying identities and groups into popular narratives.





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