

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: **AMERICAN SPLENDOR**

USA, 2003. Rated R. 101 min

Cast: Paul Giamatti, Harvey Pekar, Hope Davis, Joyce Brabner; **Music:** Eytan Mirsky, Mark Suozzo; **Cinematographer:** Terry Stacey; **Producer:** Ted Hope; **Director:** Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini

the gloom and doom. There's a big glowing heart beneath Pekar's torn and worn hand-me-down winter coat, held together with staples.

American *Splendor*—the movie and the comic strip—prove that there is an art to portraying reality. Pekar's comics are the story of the working class, the everyman, and the film is careful to maintain that tone. Both follow in the neorealist tradition, plucking the meaning from the mundane and, at the same time, bringing the mundane to the extraordinary. Vittorio de Sica's hallmark Neorealist film *The*

voiceover in the studio, he lazily admits that he hasn't even read the script.

The film's genre-mixing format, ironically, is one of the ways directors Berman and Pulcini manage to maintain this sense of reality. Film by its very nature aggrandizes its subjects, magnifies the smallest details to heroic proportions, and a film about a working-class everyman poses a great risk of undermining its own subject by turning him into a larger-than-life hero. But by mixing documentary footage of the real Pekar with the film's scripted narrative as well as animated sequences—all tied together with Pekar's grating yet endearing sandpaper-voiced voiceover—the film bypasses the inherently reality-inflating nature of film by sending the message that it takes more than one genre, one film, one comic strip, to depict a whole life.

- Written by Cynthia Rockwell



Bicycle Thief is an entire film devoted to the simple story of a working-class man searching for his lost bicycle, but Pekar's story presents a neorealist challenge in that it ventures into more glamorous areas—he did, after all, appear often on the David Letterman show and now has a movie made about his life. But true to form, the film treats these extraordinary developments with a touch of the mundane. Letterman is portrayed as an ego-maniacal tool of corporate America; the film itself is treated as just another development in Pekar's life. In the opening scenes when Pekar is working on the

Right now I'd be glad to trade some growth for happiness," Harvey Pekar says to R. Crumb in *American Splendor*, at a point in Pekar's life when he says he was "feeling really bad." Crumb, a friend and fellow underground comic strip artist, doesn't really respond so much as simply offer a willingness to endure Pekar's moping. And somehow, that seems to be enough.

Throughout the film this scene is echoed several times. Crumb appears in only a handful of scenes, but always as the near-silent presence benignly, if disinterestedly, perhaps bemusedly, enduring Harvey's gripes. Each of these scenes is quietly affecting, an understatedly touching meeting of comic strip minds that have seemingly chosen opposite paths for dealing with life's difficulties. One seems to have bypassed emotional expression; the other seems to feel all too much. "Life is so sweet and so sad and so hard to let go of in the end," Pekar warbles softly in voiceover as Paul Giamatti, the actor who plays Pekar in *Splendor*, walks alone across a highway overpass. He may be anti-glamour and anti-Hollywood, but Pekar is all heart. Unadorned. His life, his comics, and his film all share the same quality of a shabby kind of sentimentality beneath

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