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## Pekaresque Adventures: Aesthetics and Identity in "American Splendor"

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## Pekaresque Adventures: Aesthetics and Identity in "American Splendor"

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"When considering the ontological status of the comic book, it was once natural to think of superheroes battling all-powerful villains, Archie and Jughead battling wits with Principal Weatherbee, or Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig battling Elmer J. Fudd in the forest. In short, the assumption was that comic books were kids' stuff, and not to be taken seriously by world-weary adults. Much has changed in the last 20 or so years, with the rise of the so-called graphic novel, but many of these – including such seminal works as Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, and Ed Kramer and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* – still deal with superheroes, albeit in complex and ethically shaded ways. While it is the case that the comic book field has primarily dwelt in the world of fantasy, there has always been a strong regard for realism as well, detailing the everyday adventures of ordinary individuals. Examples of this can be found in the works of Will Eisner, Milton Caniff, and Frank King. This realistic strain is perhaps best exemplified today by Harvey Pekar's magnum opus, *American Splendor*."



*Dr. Tim Madigan*

## **PEKARESQUE ADVENTURES: AESTHETICS AND IDENTITY IN “AMERICAN SPLENDOR”**

“From Off the Streets of Cleveland: Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor* as a Defense of the Extraordinary Aspects of Ordinary Life”

The late Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor* was a comic book exploration of his life and times. Best known perhaps for its 2002 film adaptation, *American Splendor* was a thirty-year exploration of what Pekar called “finding the extraordinary in the ordinary.” For most of his working life a file clerk at a Veteran’s Hospital in Cleveland, Pekar gave a singular exploration into such topics as leading a working class life in an economically downward economy; matrimonial issues (he was married three times); health scares (he had two bouts with cancer, as well as long-term depression); the benefits and drawbacks of being a minor celebrity (he was a frequent guest for several years on *Late Night with David Letterman* as well as becoming a well-known figure thanks to the popularity of the film version of *American Splendor*); and reflections on personal identity in a media age. In this paper, I will discuss how Pekar’s life work presents a major contribution to sociology, as well as connect it to James Joyce’s concept of “epiphanies.” In addition, I will discuss my own 25-year friendship with this remarkable writer.

“Comics are words and pictures. You can do anything with words and pictures.”  
-Harvey Pekar

When considering the ontological status of the comic book, it was once natural to think of superheroes battling all-powerful villains, Archie and Jughead battling wits with Principal Weatherbee, or Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig battling Elmer J. Fudd in the forest. In short, the assumption was that comic books were kids’ stuff, and not to be taken seriously by world-weary adults. Much has changed in the last 20 or so years, with the rise of the so-called graphic novel, but many of these – including such seminal works as Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen*, and Ed Kramer and Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* – still deal with superheroes, albeit in complex and ethically shaded

ways. While it is the case that the comic book field has primarily dwelt in the world of fantasy, there has always been a strong regard for realism as well, detailing the everyday adventures of ordinary individuals. Examples of this can be found in the works of Will Eisner, Milton Caniff, and Frank King. This realistic strain is perhaps best exemplified today by Harvey Pekar's magnum opus, *American Splendor*.

Harvey Pekar, author of the famed graphic novel *American Splendor*, died on July 12<sup>th</sup>, aged 70.

Best known now for the film version from 2003, *American Splendor* began in 1976 as a self-published yearly comic detailing Pekar's life as a file clerk at a Cleveland, Ohio hospital. It is a chronicle of his life: his boyhood, growing up as a "greaser" in the fifties; his varied relationships with women, and his eventual marriages (he'd been wed three times and each wife puts in an appearance in *Splendor* issues); his reflections on politics, literature, jazz, work, and life in general. Pekar was a down-to-earth guy who tried to record things as they really happened. He was reflective without being preachy. In his story "Rip-Off Chick", for instance, he told of his on-again, off-again relationship with a woman he described as being "basically a worthless person," then adds "Dig me, casting stones."

One could never accuse Pekar of pandering to his audience. He did nothing to spruce up the often grim realities of his day-to-day existence. Many of the stories dealt with his money woes, his anxieties about growing old, his health issues (including several bouts with cancer), and his tendency to say the wrong thing at inopportune moments.

Yet for all their apparent harshness, one had to admire Pekar's attempts to show life as it really is: for the most part unglamorous, often tedious, but nonetheless worth living. His stories remind me time and again of Samuel Beckett's famous words "I can't go on/I'll go on." It is the meaningfulness of simple pleasures which really come across in these tales. In one of them, Harvey – who portrays himself as a diehard cheapskate – comes across a secondhand store which sells good shoes for fifty cents a pair. He's in heaven!

Pekar had a fine ear for dialogue, and some of the best stories in *American Splendor* involve his interactions with members of the working class, a part of society which is all too seldom dealt with in

literature, let alone the specialized area of comic books. It is in this manner that he expanded the comic book field, showing what it is capable of doing, and pointing out new horizons which fellow authors and artists can capitalize upon. The comic book can detail a credible, realistic story without resorting to the hero (and Pekar *is* a hero in these tales) having to attain mystical powers or supernatural strength. Pekar's honesty, his eye for details and his sympathy for the human condition places him in the same category with Mark Twain, Frank Norris, George Ade (a particular favorite of his) and Henry Miller. And the fact that it is by no means ridiculous to place a comic book author in such ranks is due entirely to the quality and integrity of *American Splendor*.

Much praise is also due to the various artists of these works, for these stories are all collaborative efforts. Pekar wrote them, then worked closely with the men and women who depict, through their artwork, his autobiographical texts. Probably the best-known of these artists is Robert Crumb, creator of "Fritz the Cat", "Mr. Natural" and other famed underground comics (and recently the creator of a comic rendition of the Book of Genesis!). The two first met in Cleveland in the 1960s, and it was Crumb's wild versions of a nervous, bug-eyed Pekar that first gave *Splendor* its prominence. It is interesting to compare the different ways in which the various artists portray Pekar and his world: in some of the stories he appears quite handsome, resembling a slightly manic Ben Gazzara; while in others (particularly those drawn by Crumb) his appearance is more akin to a raving lunatic; and in most he is a much like the schlubby Everyman so ably portrayed by Paul Giamatti in the film version. The film version of *American Splendor* nicely demonstrates this when Joyce Brabner (later to become Harvey's third wife) is meeting him for the first time, and wonders which, if any, of the artistic renditions she's seen will most capture the flesh-and-blood version she's soon to meet.

I first met Harvey back in 1985. At the time I was an undergraduate student in philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo. As a child I had been a big comic book fan, but had long since put them aside and felt I had given up such childish things for good. My friend Craig Fischer, then an undergraduate student in English at the same institution, convinced me that comics were worth

reconsidering, and that several important works were expanding the field in ways previously unimaginable. We both marveled, from issue to issue, at the intricacies and unexpected twists of the *Watchmen* series, and the dark and disturbing variations on the Batman story which Frank Miller was coming up with in *The Dark Knight*. But, as mentioned earlier, while I admired these works, they still struck me as being essentially superhero stories. When Craig showed me *American Splendor*, however, I was convinced that the comic book world could indeed develop narratives in a more mundane but equally exciting way. How could someone growing up in Buffalo, New York *not* love a work that dealt with stories about old cars not starting on a winter's day? *That* was something I could truly relate to, and something I'd never before seen in a comic book.

Craig and I took several pilgrimages to Cleveland to meet the master. I well remember the first occasion, where we burst into his apartment, crammed wall-to-wall with record albums and books, holding up a six pack of beer and offering to take him out to get an order of chicken wings. We were shocked when he told us he neither drank alcohol nor ate meat. Thus were our preconceptions shattered. He also told us at the time that he had been invited to appear on "Late Night With David Letterman." This seemed to us a great opportunity to alert the world to his work, but Pekar astutely said that the only reason he'd been asked to come on was to make fun of him, and that instead he was going to come out and aggressively attack Letterman. It seemed to me that this was exactly the wrong thing to do, and I can well remember watching, with fear and trembling, the first appearance of Pekar on the Letterman show. His strategy, it turned out, was spot on – it was so unexpected, and so entertaining, that he appeared several more times, which itself became grist for the *American Splendor* mill, and led to some memorable television experiences.

What I have most learned through both reading *American Splendor* and getting to know its author is that life is far more complicated than one can imagine, and that the simplest events can have unexpected profundities – something which James Joyce referred to as "epiphanies". As the comic strip and the movie based upon it ably show, Pekar's life was unpredictable, but then so are all our lives. One

of the constant themes of the work is personal identity: who is “Harvey Pekar”? One facet of the man I came to know is one seldom dealt with in the stories: he was an intense reader with an interest in such avant-garde novelists as Edouard Dujardin, Andrei Bely, Flann O’Brien, and Dubravka Ugrešić. This deep intellectual side is one that might be more difficult to depict graphically than the cantankerous guy impatiently caught behind an old lady at a supermarket or the obsessive collector of jazz albums or the angry author dealing with his various editors, but it is one more piece of the total person.

There are many levels to Pekar’s personality which go far beyond that captured by his work – as he himself was quite conscious of, and as is witnessed in the story (well depicted in the film *American Splendor*) called “The Harvey Pekar Name Story.” In it, Pekar reflects on the fact that for many years there was *another* Harvey Pekar listed in the Cleveland phone book, one he was not related to or connected with in any way. Soon a third with the same name, the son of the other Harvey Pekar, appeared. For years he wondered who they were and what they did, but never followed up on this. Then, within six months times, both of the other Harvey Pekars died. “Although I’d met neither man, I was filled with sadness. ‘What were they like,’ I thought. It seemed that our lives had been linked in some indefinable way.” He is nonplused to see, a few years later, yet another Harvey Pekar listed in the directory. “What kind of people are these? Where do they come from, what do they do? What’s in a name?” he reflects. And then he asked the ultimate philosophical question: “Who *is* Harvey Pekar?” followed by a panel – masterfully drawn by Crumb – of our Harvey Pekar reflecting wordlessly upon this.

Shortly before his death, I asked him to reflect upon his life and work. He told me: “I read comics as a kid, from around the age of six to eleven, but by eleven I found I could predict the plot. I stopped reading them then. In 1962 Robert Crumb moved to Cleveland. I saw his stuff and was blown away. The underground movement that Crumb was involved with was important, but it left too much out. There never was a realistic movement in comics. There was this huge gaping hole that to me were obvious. I thought ‘shit man I should do this before someone else does it.’ I’ll at least be a footnote in history.” Impetus enough for starting a comic book with his own life at the center.

I stayed in touch with Harvey, on and off, over the years. We mostly talked on the phone about avant-garde literature and jazz (he *hated* Ken Burns' PBS series on the latter). I kept encouraging him to put together an anthology of his jazz criticism, but he grumbled that it would be too much work and not lucrative enough to be worth the bother. I also closely followed what seemed to be the quixotic efforts of getting *American Splendor* made into a film. One memorable event occurred at a Toronto restaurant in the early 1990s, where I drove up to meet him and a potential producer. While standing around with a group of Pekar acolytes, Harvey burst into a profane diatribe about how the producer never showed up, and that it was all futile anyway, since nothing ever came of such meetings, and the guy was probably nothing but a lying jerk. Suddenly one of the people standing by said in a quiet voice "I *am* here." It was none other than the potential producer. The rest of us fell into stunned silence, and Harvey, awkwardly, put out his hand and said "Hey man, good to meet you." I recall staggering out into the Toronto night, nonplused and yet happy to have witnessed a genuine Pekar moment.

A few years later, while flipping through *Entertainment Weekly*, I saw a still for an upcoming movie. "That looks like Harvey," I thought, and then learned that it was actually Paul Giamatti, portraying *Our Man*. So a film was indeed made, and it very nicely captured the complexities of the Pekar world. When I called him up to congratulate him, Harvey said "Well, we'll see how it does." After the film won several awards, and made Pekar the center of media attention, he told me "We'll see how much I'll be talked about a year from now." And, as usual, he grumbled about how everyone thought the movie had made him a lot of money, which was NOT the case.

I last met up with Harvey about a year ago, when I stopped by his – surprise, surprise – cluttered home to catch up on things. We wandered over to a hamburger joint and even though I offered to pay he insisted on picking up the check. "I'm doing alright, man," he said. Most of all he seemed if not happy then at least immersed in work, which was probably the best thing for him.

I last spoke to him in April. I had arranged to bring him to give a talk at my school, St. John Fisher College, and he called a month or so before to say "Hey, man, I completely forgot, I'm gonna be in

San Francisco then." With anyone else I'd have been upset, but Harvey being Harvey I shrugged it off and was planning to bring him to town in the fall semester of 2010. Now all I have are the memories of my meetings with him, my Harvey Pekar bobblehead, and my dog-eared copies of *American Splendor*. It's still difficult to think of him in the past tense, for he was a vital part of my life for 25 years. I wish he could have seen all the tributes to him, for I suspect he relished the recognition he did receive for making his life his life's work.

*American Splendor* allowed us all to follow the slings and arrows of Harvey's existence, and thereby come to better appreciate the turns in our own lives. It is difficult not to feel empathetic with such a "tell-it-like-it-is" kind of guy. Harvey Pekar – file clerk, jazz critic, urban dweller, movie star, and author – was an authentic working class hero, even if he couldn't leap buildings in a single bound. Thanks to *American Splendor*, we can all better appreciate our own Pekaresque moments. He was a genuine inspiration to me and to countless others who continue to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.