

Film Review

Terry Zwigoff: *Ghost World* (USA 2000)

Michael Oppermann

Ghost World is based upon the comic strip of the same name. Daniel Clowes (its creator) co-wrote the film script with director Terry Zwigoff who has demonstrated his interest in the world of comics before. His 1994 documentary on Robert Crumb, for example (simply called *Crumb*), has been showing at a number of American and European festivals. The link to *Crumb* is also obvious in this movie because Crumb's daughter Sophie has provided some drawings for the film (which, according to the plot, have been created by the film's central character called Enid).

Cinema adaptations of comic strips have a long history of varying artistic and commercial success. It ranges from *Dick Tracy* to the *Batman* series, from *Superman* to *The Mask*.^[1] Judging from an artistic perspective, the extremely dark and gloomy images of Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* seem to be most striking. No adaptation of a comic strip matches the superior quality of *Ghost World*, though, a film that manages to combine a cartoon-like charm with psychological insight. The film tells the story of two teenagers. One is Enid (English actress Thora Birch) who loves to dress up in rapidly changing ways. She likes to put intense colors on her lips, dyes her hair in rather extravagant ways and apparently enjoys wearing the ugliest types of glasses available. Her language is, most of the time, despicable. Actually, she has such a filthy mouth that her friend Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson) distances herself from her gradually to follow a more normal path in life (she decides to move in with her boyfriend). Initially, though, both girls seem to favor a cynical attitude that does not reveal any emotional ties with their surroundings. The opening scenes from the high school graduation, for example, show them misbehaving in every possible way. They terrorize the "teenage idol", a guy called Josh, laugh at the wrong moments and make all kinds of derogatory remarks, thus trying to distance themselves from the event. On other days they hang around uninspiring diners all afternoon long to observe their environment and mock virtually everything. They also enjoy browsing through contact magazines and replying to ads that sound stupid enough to guarantee some fun.

Behind the witty surface of the dialogue, though, the film reveals existential teenage dilemmas. Enid loses her job at a fast-food diner after a few days (because of insulting the customers), and rather than engaging in a relationship with anybody, she prefers to act as a matchmaker for others. Although she hangs around with Seymour (Steve Buscemi) who is a fanatic collector of ancient 78s and thus a total miscast like her, she prefers to find dates for him rather than confronting her own emotions. What follows is the typical "Emma Woodhouse" dilemma (to refer to Jane Austen's famous character). After having found a match for Seymour, Enid realizes that she actually wants him for herself so that she tries to

separate him from his girlfriend. Enid pays a price for trying to remain cool all the time. Her inscrutable face with its intricate layers of make-up has put a wall between her and reality and entangled her in a “Ghost World” that reflects a typical teenage problem. Enid expects everybody to love her while, simultaneously, she walks through the world as a cynical observer. Life is complicated, in other words. It remains complicated after Enid has won Seymour for herself. She withdraws from the relationship and finds refuge again in the role of the cool observer. As a result, we see Seymour searching for her through his apparently lonely nights. Enid is a teenager in turmoil who is trying to establish a relationship with the world. She finds shelter in a “Ghost World” of her own before and after the moment of initiation. She is a complex and highly contradictory character beyond the realms of the comic strip. In fact, the film presents us with an eclectic vision of the world. It is dominated by ghosts of the past; Enid’s hair-styles and dresses, for example, are totally postmodern. They present a ride through America’s fashion history in capsule form, making Enid look like a punkette or a Kim Novak carbon copy, just the way she wants. In this manner, the film’s reality resembles a striking amalgam of styles that defies classification or labeling. Indeed, many elements in *Ghost World* convey a feeling of timelessness. In the first scene of the film, for example, we see Enid dancing to the video of a Hindi film hit called *Jan Pahechan Ho* which is showing on telly; we also hear her humming the same tune at the end of the movie. Seymour, on the other hand, listens to obscure 78s from the 1930s (to “Devil got my Woman” by Skip James or to calypso tunes by Lionel Belasco) and displays an interest in the logos of a long-defunct chain of restaurants called “Coon Chicken Inn”. The end of the film is fairly striking. A man waits at a bus stop at the same time every day. Although the stop has not been served for years, Enid joins him on his bench and they wait together. The two look like characters from an Edward Hopper painting. After a while, to our great surprise, a bus comes; we presume that it will carry Enid to another “Ghost World”. Most of the colors of the film have been digitally remastered on the computer. The result is a predominance of brown and neon green tones that enhance the feeling of timelessness. In this manner the movie can also be considered as a visually effective ride into the world of a teenager. Superb actors and a subtle sense of direction take us directly into the psychological landscape of a girl waiting for a period of transition.

^[1] *Dick Tracy* was directed by Warren Beatty (USA 1990); *Batman* and its sequel *Batman Returns* were made by Tim Burton in 1989 and 1992; *Superman* was directed by Richard Donner (England 1978) while the Jim Carey vehicle *The Mask* was made by Charles Russell (USA 1994).

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Michael Mann : *Insider* (USA 2000)

Michael Oppermann

After the superb *Heat* (1995), a ferocious action movie, former *Miami Vice* director Michael Mann presents us with a fairly subdued portrayal of two male characters who undergo a process of isolation. Al Pacino is Lowell Bergman, a devoted reporter for a CBS news program called 60 minutes. He convinces Dr. Jeffrey Wigand (Russel Crowe), who has been fired by his employer (tobacco company Brown & Williamson) to become the key witness in a law suit. As an “insider”; who has been directly involved with his company’s research Lowell knows that his former employer has added specific addictive drugs to its cigarettes. Brown & Williamson, however, swear that their products are not harmful. Wigand’s decision to use his “inside knowledge” against his former bosses turns out to be of a highly existential nature. He gets exposed to increasing psychological terror until he is finally threatened with murder. Since Wigand never made his family part of his decision, his wife (Diane Venova) leaves him, taking their two children with her. The moment the family disintegrates equals a classical anagnorisis; Wigand realizes that he has become totally isolated. But neither the loss of his family nor of his house can change his mind. Wigand interprets his struggle as a question of integrity. Lowell Bergman undergoes a similar development by turning into a fearless fighter for truth and justice. Already the first minutes of the film show that he is a very serious and dedicated journalist; even a mighty Hizbullah leader and his guards have to succumb to Lowell’s conditions for an interview. In the course of the film Lowell isolates himself more and more from his colleagues: His insistence on making the Wigand case a constant part of 60 minutes leads to growing pressure from the tobacco industry so that finally CBS, being afraid of a lawsuit, refuse to broadcast Wigand’s testimony in court. The more Lowell insists on the case, the more his colleagues turn away from him. In this manner he becomes a fairly belated personification of a “New Hollywood”^[1] ideal from the 70s. He turns into a kind of “Last Man Standing”^[2] in the field of investigative journalism, thus following in the footsteps of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman.^[3]

Both Lowell and Wigand represent the struggle of the honest individual against a corrupt system.^[4] But, as the film shows very clearly, in the 90s the struggle of David against Goliath is no longer successful; the good old “Mr. Smith” days are over. But whereas Wigand gets more and more shattered in the course of the film, Lowell remains strangely untouched. He deliberately decides to follow in the footsteps of an American archetype, the “loner”; or “solitary man”.^[5] In this manner, Al Pacino’s character walks on a highly mythological road.^[6] The impression of loneliness and isolation is increased by the fact that Wigand and Crowe are two characters with very few common characteristics; as a result, they only meet in

a few scenes. Most of their conversation takes place via telephone or email. The film's superb deep-focus photography adds a stunning visual dimension to the portrait of two men who, due to an existential decision, become "outsiders". Also the movements of the camera contribute to the impact of the film; very often the camera shifts from the faces of the characters to isolated objects in the interior where it remains while the dialogue continues so that the general feeling of growing loneliness gets more intense. *Insider* is a film that contains no action sequences. Apart from a few traditional suspense elements, it focuses on dialogue and a careful development of its central characters. In this manner, director Michael Mann has confirmed his reputation of being one of the finest Hollywood directors.

^[1] The term refers to directors such as Robert Altman, Alan J. Pakula, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese or Robert Benton (to name just a few) who helped to enlarge the canon of Hollywood aesthetics by incorporating elements of the European "auteur" tradition into their films.

^[2] *Last Man Standing* was directed by Walter Hill in 1996.

^[3] In Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976) Redford and Hoffman play the parts of the two *Washington Post* reporters who uncovered the Watergate scandal.

^[4] This struggle has a long history in American films. Frank Capra's famous *Mr. Smith goes to Washington* (USA 1939) can be considered as a kind of blueprint for many other movies. The film tells the story of a young senator who, almost entirely on his own, wins against a corrupt political system.

^[5] "Solitary Man" is the title of a recent song by Johnny Cash which, for me, sums up the entire tradition of the "lonely hero" in American popular culture.

^[6] I do not agree with German critic Jan Distelmayer who, in a review of the film, maintains that Al Pacino is in danger of turning into a cinema legend that gets entrapped in his own myth ("Gemeinsam einsam." *Die Zeit* 18, 27.4.2000, 45). Pacino's portrayal of the devil in Taylor Hackford's *The Devil's Advocate* (USA 1997) or his part as corrupt New York mayor in Harold Becker's superb moral ambiguity film *City Hall* (USA 1996) have shown that the actor has always managed to find new and interesting roles for himself that do not comply with any kind of stereotype.