

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*American Splendor*]

The Marginal Celebrity

By Steve Sailer

STUDIOS PREFER MOVIES like "Bad Boys II" that require few words to describe ("Things go Boom!"), while we critics favor films like "American Splendor" that need lots of words to explain, especially when one of those words is "postmodern." The irony is that "American Splendor" is a much more enjoyable film to watch than to read about.

So, what is "American Splendor"? It's not, as I had feared, the sequel to "American Beauty." Instead, it's an interwoven combination of documentary, biopic, and animation about a prickly, semi-employable Cleveland hipster named Harvey Pekar.

Born in 1939, Pekar bounced from crummy job to crummy job while writing jazz reviews in his spare time. Finally, he got himself a lifetime civil-service sinecure as a file clerk at a Veterans Administration hospital. He decided in 1976 that his daily life deserved to be immortalized in a series of underground comic books he called "American Splendor."

That Pekar can't draw anything besides stick figures didn't slow him down. He simply got his old pal R. Crumb, the "Keep on Truckin'" cartoonist, to illustrate what Crumb accurately calls Pekar's "staggeringly mundane" life. A marginal celebrityhood ensued, capped by a numerous appearances on the Letterman Show and now this film.

In the movie, the real Pekar is shown commenting on Paul Giamatti's fine performance as Pekar as he writes his comic books commenting on his life. And now I'm commenting on all that commentary. Whee! Ain't we postmodern?

Actually, this contemporary tendency toward commentaries piled upon commentaries seems more like a medieval throwback. Thirteenth-century Churchmen and Talmudic scholars would have understood the 21st century filmmakers' urge to say rather than show.

Over the last few years, voiceovers and other techniques borrowed from documentaries have become ever more common in feature films, such as the grating pseudo-Ken Burns interludes in "Seabiscuit." Fortunately, the husband-wife team of documentarists behind "American Splendor," Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, know how to use their bag of nonfiction tricks to keep this film lively without distracting the audience with their cleverness.

Giamatti, the dumpy-looking character actor whom you'll undoubtedly rec-

After admiring the film, I bought Pekar's own 1985 anthology of his comic books, figuring those would be even better. I was wrong.

It turns out that Berman and Pulcini are far more gifted than their subject. They've extracted the few moments of interest from Pekar's life and made them vivid.

As subject matter for dozens of comic books, however, Pekar's life story lacks only one element: incident. As a writer, he lacks only wit, insight, concision, and timing. His stories are like a phone call from a self-absorbed acquaintance who insists on methodically telling you every single thing he did today.

They're comic books, but there's none of the usual humor or heroism, just a grumpy fellow riding the bus and having banal "How was your weekend?" conversations with the folks at work, often winding up with some little life lesson like "As long as you got your health, things can't be all bad."

The joke is that there are no jokes. That wasn't a bad little joke back in 1976, but it got old in about 1977.

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ognize from his many supporting roles, isn't particularly well-cast as Pekar—he's too hangdog Italian to capture fully Pekar's left-wing Jewish intellectual's edginess—but he gives Berman and Pulcini exactly what they want.

Interestingly, in real life Giamatti isn't at all the blue-collar schlub he usually portrays. A graduate of Choate and Yale, he's a prince of the new American meritocracy. His father, the Renaissance literature scholar A. Bartlett Giamatti, was president of Yale and the Commissioner of Baseball who banned Pete Rose.

The filmmakers shied away from showing what's most striking about Pekar—his bulletproof fascination with himself—in favor of a mildly bogus populist portrayal of him as a working-class hero.

"In the future, everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes," said Andy Warhol, who has been famous for saying that for 35 years now. In reality, we live in an age of laboriously created brand names, which can then be exploited for decades. Pekar, for example, has been slaving for 27 years to make himself famous.

In his introduction to Pekar's book, Crumb wrote, "Yeah, Harvey is an egomaniac, a classic case ... But how else could he have gotten all those comics published? ... Only an egomaniac would persist in the face of such odds. Believe me, I know from whence I speak, having been nagged and bullied plenty by him to get the work in."

The truly interesting thing about Pekar is that he's representative of so many talentless avant-gardists who somehow convince themselves that they have something upon which lots of other people ought to spend their precious time. ■

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BOOKS

[*The Dust of Empire: The Race for Mastery in the Asian Heartland*, Karl E. Meyer, *Public Affairs*, 252 pages]

Ignorant Imperialists

By David Gordon

KARL MEYER'S EXCELLENT book can be read on two levels. Central Asia for many people is a place of both mystery and attraction. Meyer aptly quotes James Elroy Flecker's lines, "For lust of knowing what should not be known, / We take the Golden Road to Samarkand," which epitomize this attitude. (Flecker's play *Hassan*, from which this comes, is largely forgotten today, but the great Shakespeare critic G. Wilson Knight thought highly of it.)

To those entranced by Central Asia, Meyer offers an abundance of material. Drawing from his thorough familiarity with the history of Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and the Caucasus, he is ever alert for the significant anecdote. One example must here suffice. In 1853, Hadji

Murad, the principal lieutenant of Imam Shamil's guerilla war in the Caucasus against Tsarist Russia, surrendered to the Russian governor, Prince Vorontsov. He offered to change sides and lead a force against his former allies. The Russians left him in suspense; when he realized that they had no intention of accepting his offer, he bolted. He was soon tracked down and killed. Meyer notes that Tolstoy wrote a short story about the incident, but "tactfully unmentioned was the epilogue: Hadji Murad's corpse was decapitated and his head embalmed, exhibited in a Tbilisi galley by Vorontsov and sent along as a *memento mori* to the tsar."

Meyer has given us much more than a collection of gripping stories. He writes to warn America against the dangerous path she appears to be following. Our unprecedented military and economic power allows us to "throw our weight around" in the classic fashion of the great 19th-century empires. Too often we have succumbed to the temptation to do so. Meyer wrote before the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, in defiance of the wishes of nearly every nation in the world, but this exercise of the arrogance of power is a perfect example of what he has in mind.

Our author is among those optimists who think that we can learn from history. By study of imperialist ventures in Central Asia, he hopes, America can escape falling into a fatal error. "In a real sense, America now sits where Britain did in the 1890s, only the old empire is squared.

ples would happily change places with them. Hence the special shock of September 11."

The confident assertions of Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol *et hoc genus omne* that the United States can cram American-style democracy down the throats of various foreign regimes exactly parallel remarks of British statesmen that now strike us as more than a little ridiculous. Lord Curzon called the British Empire "under Providence, the greatest instrument for good the world has seen." Lord Rosebury, a Liberal Prime Minister could not contain himself. Speaking of the Empire, he asked, "Do we not hail in this less the energy and fortune of a race than the supreme direction of the Almighty?"

Meyer has wisely drawn much of his material on this topic from the great work of the Harvard historian William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1890-1902*. When the book first appeared in 1935, Langer was a leading light among the revisionist historians who questioned America's participation in World War I. He wished to expose the follies of European power politics and imperialism.

Boasting of the sort to which Meyer has called attention, whether by British or American statesmen, may be foolish; but is it also a crime? Meyer argues that the assumption of superiority leads to action based on ignorance. Those who think themselves above all others are unlikely to pay attention to the essential facts needed to deal with other countries.

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... The thesis of this book is that the moral and diplomatic dilemmas confronting Washington today differ in degree but not in kind from those that confronted Britain before World War I. In truth, Americans are if anything even more certain that their institutions are the envy and exemplar of less fortunate breeds, and that most of the world's peo-

Meyer has a definite view about the nature of these essential facts. He thinks that, in Central Asia at any rate, long-established local traditions rigidly constrain action by the great powers. A policy that ignores local history courts disaster. "Strip away the ideological verbiage and *au fond* one can detect a striking kinship between Lenin's heirs and