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The Ghost Worlds of Modern Adolescence

by PAMELA THURSCHELL



Inner absorption and reverie is one marked characteristic of this age of transition. Who has not had spells of mental involution and absent-mindedness, when thoughts went "wool-gathering" and the soul was haunted by automatic presentations that take the reins from the will and lead us far away in a rapt state, now reminiscent, now anticipatory, into a world of dreams or ghosts?

— G. Stanley Hall¹

G. Stanley Hall, whose massive two-volume work *Adolescence* (1904) has been seen by many as the founding text of our modern *Sturm und Drang* sense of adolescence, suggests here that the "age of transition" has a natural affinity with ghosts and prophetic dreams. Adolescence, it seems, is caught between the past of childhood

¹ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (2 volumes) (D. Appleton, 1925). Volume I, pp. 311-312. I would like to thank Dave Tolchinsky and Dana Luciano for early discussions that helped me think through the many connections between ghosts and adolescents, and Ken Parille for his fantastic and substantial editorial input.

and the future of adulthood — a strange and uncanny temporal state that partakes of both backward-looking haunting and forward-looking desire. Hall's rhetoric universalizes this inwardness; his question "who has not had spells of mental involution?" reminds us that all adults have experienced adolescence, that we all might have found ourselves immersed in that in-between "rapt state, now reminiscent, now anticipatory." As the title of Joyce Carol Oates's famous short story about the dangers of being a teenage girl in the early 1960s "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" suggests, the key questions addressed to the adolescent are both temporal and spatial.²

As Hall's work indicates, the modern adolescent is created by holding together two opposing temporal schemes. On the one hand, there is adolescence as passing phase, a few brief moments in time on the trajectory from childhood to adulthood. On the other hand, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the "adolescent" is also being redefined as a "case," a locus for concerns about the potential criminality, waywardness, or deviance that accompanies the insecure cultural space between childhood and adulthood (before the child takes that apparently logical next step into economic productivity and sexual reproduction). While the twentieth century progresses, that space will be filled by indicators of shared identity — sub-cultural styles, music, clothing, etc. — that mark someone as a member of a group called "young" (although in the beginning of the twentieth century it might be easier to chart that particular identity as it is assigned by others).³ But the tension among adolescence as a phase, identity, and emerging social problem remains. To put it another way, adolescence may eventually be left behind by everybody, but in the meantime what do we do about all those boys hanging out on street corners?⁴ (Or all those girls menstruating earlier than they used to?) What if they, for economic or other reasons, never move "forward," never take their place in an adult labor economy or procreative reproduction within the expected-to-be stabilizing bonds of heterosexual marriage?

In this essay I suggest that Hall's evocative quotation about the adolescent "world of dreams and ghosts" offers a good place to begin to analyze the representation of the late twentieth-century adolescent girls who wander the streets of Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World*, occupying haunted spaces and unsettling temporalities. However, I also ask whether contemporary adolescence is marked not only by an anticipatory relation to the future and haunted relationship to the past, but by something even less assimilable to teleological notions of time and progress. What if Clowes's ghostly adolescents point not simply toward the continued presence

2 Joyce Carol Oates. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Ed. Elaine Showalter (Rutgers University Press, 1994).

3 See for instance, Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Methuen, 1979); Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth, 1875-1945* (Chatto and Windus, 2007).

4 See Geoff Gilbert's "Boys: Manufacturing Inefficiency" in *Before Modernism Was* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) for a compelling argument about the creation of the juvenile delinquent at the turn of the century and the boy on the street corner and his resonance with Modernism.

5 These are two of Hall's most pressing concerns.

of those future and past times, haunting those caught in the “age of transition,” but also toward the fear or desire that those times will never come or have never been?

In *Ghost World*, it is not clear whether adolescents have the attributes of ghosts (inhuman, insubstantial, or deathly; moving between different times while unanchored by place), or whether conventional society itself is spectral and unreal — a ghost world of adulthood.⁶ Ghosts, like adolescents, are defined by their liminality, caught between time frames. If ghosts exist uneasily between the worlds of the living and the dead, then adolescents exist uneasily between childhood and maturity. For both adolescents and ghosts, we might argue, “time is out of joint.” Growing up, of course, always means growing up toward death.

However, not only is time layered and complicated for ghosts and adolescents, but space is also awkwardly arranged, for where do ghosts and adolescents “properly” belong? In contemporary ghost films such as *Ghost* (1990), *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1991), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and *The Others* (2001), ghosts encroach upon and crowd the live people who perceive them; kicked out of the world of the living, they refuse to settle into a grave or afterlife, instead occupying space where they should not properly be.⁷ Adolescents also uncomfortably unsettle location, dismantling the difference between public and private space. They “hang out” or “hang around.” Propelled out of the family, they are not yet a full part of the adult labor economy in the “outside” world. From Hall onwards, adolescents have been represented as out of place in the house, but dangerous out on the street.⁸

These connections between the liminal status of ghosts and adolescents in terms of their “out of joint” temporalities and locations are made clearer by turning to *Ghost World* and the ways in which its teenage girls uneasily occupy their late-twentieth-century milieu. To consider the fractured time and space of the adolescent, I look at ways in which Clowes’s comic imagines adolescence as haunted and haunting. The wasted modern landscape of *Ghost World* suggests why both the adolescent and the ghost might have no particular place to go. I then turn to how these ghostly, adolescent dislocations of time and space help us to reflect upon Fredric Jameson’s influential discussion of time and space in postmodernism. Is the eerie twilight landscape of *Ghost World* completely subsumable to Jameson’s and Baudrillard’s understanding of the simulacrum, the loss or lack of an authentic relation to oneself or to one’s historical moment in a late-capitalist world in which everything appears

⁶ For a fascinating discussion that insists the title refers to the inauthentic, postmodern, and duplicated world of the film, and not in any way to Enid as ghost, see the Internet Movie Data Base discussion, particularly the analysis of *metheemc* (12/8/2008) found at www.imdb.com/title/tt0162346.

⁷ For a related argument, see my article “Refusing to Give up the Ghost: Some Thoughts on the Afterlife From Spirit Photography to Phantom Films” in *The Disembodied Spirit*, ed. Alison Ferris (Bowdoin College Museum of Art Catalogue, 2003), pp. 20–31.

⁸ If the concerns about boys revolve around their appearance in the public sphere, loitering without motive or intent, perhaps one problem for adolescent girls from the late nineteenth century onwards may be their inability to occupy homes comfortably, as is the case in Henry James’s *The Awkward Age* (1899) and in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Death of the Heart* (1938).

to be a copy or replication"? If so, is there no way out, no way to imagine a livable future for the adolescents of *Ghost World*?



Clowes's graphic novel is a brilliantly bleak portrayal of the long dark suburbia of the soul of two teenage girls, Enid and Rebecca, recently graduated from high school and staring into the abyss. Facing a future that seems to contain nothing but dead-end service jobs and deteriorating eyesight, Enid and Rebecca hang out in one diner after another, observing and collecting society's outcasts. The graphic novel focuses on the gradually unraveling relationship between the two girls and represents the eviscerated post-high school landscape of the late adolescent as a space that may be impossible to occupy, except as a kind of ghost.

Ghost World's representation of time and space alternates between an arguably postmodern, ironic distancing — an awareness that everything including the stuff of memory and self can be bought or sold — and a painful recognition of loss, transmitted through objects. Although *flâneur*-like (and sometimes cruelly detached) in her collecting of people, places, and objects, Enid also manifests an intense investment in a personal and historical nostalgia at odds with her image. Enid's relationship with Becky is troubled in part because Becky reluctantly takes her place in the limited future. In the final chapter, she has a depressing service job at a bagel chain and a relationship developing haltingly with their mutual friend and love interest, Josh. Enid, by contrast, refuses or is denied any kind of progressive (hetero-normative, productive, or reproductive) future whatsoever. When she fails a college entrance exam, her escape plan is thwarted. *Ghost World* asks: "Is there any other way out?"

Enid's ambivalent relationship to postmodern commodity culture is shown in the "Garage Sale" chapter. Although Enid ostensibly wants to sell the reminders of her childhood, it becomes clear that this desire to divest herself of herself, through divesting herself of her things, won't actually work. The sale will not produce any exchanges; she refuses to sell "Goofie Gus," an odd doll from her childhood, to a passing customer she calls "some jerk with a trendy haircut" (53.4). For Enid, selling her past may be one way to avoid the more obvious option for becoming economically independent: entering the workforce. Instead of capitulating to the bleak 1990s postmodern McWorld of adult capital — the sprawling wasteland of coffee chains, malls, computer stores, and the soul-destroying service jobs that define them — Enid appears to make a half-hearted attempt to further "ghost" herself by liquidating her past, selling off what is uniquely hers and her (even if those signifiers of her past are inevitably also commodities). Trapped between a

9 According to Baudrillard, postmodernism simulation is the "substitution of signs of the real for the real." The simulacrum questions the possibility of authenticity of any "real" behind the multiplication of representations, advertisements, and signs that constitute (post)modern experience. "A common definition of the simulacrum," Brian Massumi notes, "is a copy of a copy whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no longer properly be said to be a copy." "Realer Than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari," *Copyright* 1, 1987.

desire to abandon her past and a desperate need to cling to it, Enid deserts the yard sale with Becky to hunt for the Satanists she saw the day before. As they leave, Becky says, “what about your stuff?” and Enid replies, “Fuck it — leave it there! I don’t want any of that shit!” (54.7). Enid and Becky abandon the yard sale for other public spaces: a diner and then a supermarket. Later that evening, when Becky asks, “How much did you make at your garage sale?” Enid remembers that she has left her stuff sitting out unprotected (58.4). Enid then runs off through nighttime panels back to her yard, finding her table ransacked but the frowning Goofie Gus doll still there. In the chapter’s final panel, a tiny Enid cradles Goofie Gus under moonlight, whispering “Thank God!” (58.8). She appears to be floating in space — the physical world represented in the preceding panels has disappeared. She looks both like a small child and a disembodied spirit, with nothing but Goofie Gus to anchor her to a self.¹⁰



Enid’s desire to divest herself of the past and its detritus contrasts with her nostalgic yearning for an imagined-to-be uncomplicated, pre-lapsarian childhood. This is represented most potently by her wish to recover an old record, “A Smile and a Ribbon,” recorded by a child singing act of the 1950s, Patience and Prudence. Enid’s father finds the single for her, and in the penultimate chapter, she listens to it repeatedly while sobbing in her bedroom. This moment comes after Enid has had a fight with Becky and a failed sexual encounter with their friend Josh. The 45, the (very personal) commodity connecting Enid to her past, functions as a substitute for the connections she fails to make with others in the present.

Stuck in its final grooves, the old single, which goes “FTT-FTT-FTT” throughout the scene, ties the poignancy of the moment into a specific anxiety about modern, or postmodern, archiving and obsolescence. The repeated noise becomes the soundtrack for Enid’s paralyzing nostalgia, her feeling that she is stuck in a past she can’t escape. What would become of Enid’s past and sense of self if the ability to

¹⁰ Thanks to Ken Parille for pointing me to this panel.

play that record disappeared, if, for instance, as is likely in the early '90s, she no longer had a record player capable of playing singles? Are records still records if what they record is unsalvageable? In *Ghost World*, the ghosts of childhood and history are precariously lodged in this haunting, nearly obsolete recording technology.¹¹ For Enid, the emotional “real” of the personal past lives in old records that display their authenticity via their near-obsolence. If Enid resembles a ghost, it may be partly because she, like her record player, is “out of time.” She prefers earlier historical moments to the empty homogenous present.

Enid continually desires other such times and places. Jason Sperb argues in relation to the *Ghost World* film: “as a teenager in America simulation constitutes [Enid’s] only point of reference for history or authenticity; however she simultaneously acknowledges the possibility of some true reality, somewhere, something not commodified” (210). She thrives off of, but also repudiates, the simulated, pop culture-soaked landscape she is born into. As Sperb notes, *Ghost World*’s representation of time and space supports Fredric Jameson’s contention that late capitalism suffers from a crisis in historicity and an excess of the simulacrum:

[t]he new spatial logic of the simulacrum can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to be historical time. The past is thereby itself modified: what once was...the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project...has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum.¹²

Jameson suggests that under postmodernism, history and culture are uncoupled from a sense of the past. Where once we might have lived through history, we now go somewhere — to the store, or cinema, or online — and purchase a simulacrum of it. The surreal semi-urban streets that Enid and Becky traverse conform neatly to Jameson’s ideas in many ways. They feed a sense of the postmodern uncanny, replicating the same chain stores on every street corner in every town. As the girls drive off on an excursion toward the end of the comic, they pass nothing but strip malls; a Taco Bell sign is followed swiftly by a “Paco’s,” an even crummier copy of a crummy (non-)original. “This is so depressing,” says Enid, “Just how everything is all the same no matter where you go” (112.3-4).

But the girls’ reaction to the profusion of duplicates and conglomerate capital — the postmodern ghost world adults have built — is not simply the detachment of the *flâneur* or the misery of the postmodern discontent. Enid and Becky both revel

11 In Terry Zwigoff’s *Ghost World* film, the additional character Seymour (played by Steve Buscemi) collects original 78s of obscure blues recordings. The 78 comes to represent a (racialized) version of lost authenticity as unrecoverable and as out-of-place in the modern urban landscape as the delta blues itself. In one scene, a distraught Seymour watches an aging delta blues musician perform (virtually ignored by the audience) as the opening act for an all-white, frat-boy band called Blues Hammer, which massacres Seymour’s beloved blues. *Ghost World* relies on a shared scathing aesthetic and critical sensibility, the belief that Enid (or Seymour) can sort out the wheat from the chaff, the authentic reproduction (the crackling 45 or 78) from the inauthentic reproduction (the terrible blues cover band).

12 Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991). p. 18.

in and disdain the in-authenticity of Hubba Hubba, “the Original 50s Diner.”¹³ The diner is so terrible as a copy, such a failure as a pastiche, it almost becomes an original again.¹⁴ When Josh says, “aren’t there hundreds of places like this?” Enid replies “Not hardly. This is the Mona Lisa of the bad fake diners!” (81.8). What would it mean to have an auratic “original” Mona Lisa of bad fake diners? Can there be an affective content — other than the pleasures of cynicism or irony or feeling superior to one’s surroundings — attached to this kind of setting? Why might the adolescent haunt these kinds of postmodern spaces?

If this description fits Jameson’s assessment of a postmodern culture affected by a “well-nigh libidinal historicism” — a reduction of history to commodity that allows one to create, sell, and buy the past as ordered — then perhaps the adolescent, whose youth prevents him or her from having much access to even recent history, is the perfect customer for this relation to the past.¹⁵ “Libidinal historicism” describes Enid’s reaction to the ghost world she’s been given. Her desire to incorporate the stuff of the past indicates a desire for a more authentic way of being, some endpoint other than the eviscerated ones adulthood offers. Or perhaps it indicates a way that history might have gone so as not to lead to the present landscape. Inevitably, Enid’s desire for an authentic past takes place at the level of styles, commodities, and images. Modern adolescence may be inseparable from the movement neatly summed up by the title of George Melly’s memoir, *Revolt into Style*; embracing a philosophy or an attitude such as punk’s “No Future” may begin as revolt, but inevitably leads to the buying of T-shirts.



If one thing “ghosts” promise in the comic is an affective relationship to a meaningful lost world, then it is interesting that the one explicit mention of haunting

¹³ Sperb comments on this incident in the film; see *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 21 (2004). p. 211.

¹⁴ This campy flip-flopping of bad and good is one of the defining traits of postmodern irony. At the graduation dance in the film, Becky says “this is so bad it’s good,” and Enid replies, “This is so bad it’s gone past good and back to bad again.”

¹⁵ Jameson. p. 18.

comes at the end and displays a characteristic ambivalence toward the possibility of a non-commodified relation to the past. After Enid learns that she failed the entrance exam and will be unable to leave by going to college, she walks on a beach and encounters Bob Skeetes, whom she had seen earlier at the diner and her garage sale.¹⁶ Skeetes, an economic outcast, is trawling for money on the beach. When he proceeds to do a promised astrological reading, Enid asks the comic's central question: "So what's my future?" (116.4). He replies that he sees a woman from the past: "It's the 1930's I believe . . . twenties. or thirties . . . I get the sense that she's an artist of some kind, or a scholar . . . a woman of intellect and leisure . . . a sexual libertine . . . She has a haunted quality as though she wants to tell you something" (116.5-6). But his generalized description dwindles off before anything is revealed, and he explains that in order to get any real data he'd have to do a full astrological rundown — presumably for a fee. In the modern world, even ghosts can be commodified; you must pay to get complete access to them.¹⁷ But it is significant that when Enid asks for a future, she receives an image of a woman from an attractive, bohemian past. If it is impossible for Enid to imagine a future for the contemporary moment, perhaps it can only reveal itself to her as a ghost of an historical era that appeared to contain more possibilities.

Ghosts, of course, are anachronistic by definition. They are always out of time, and throughout the comic, Enid pursues anachronism. Adolescents often choose a deliberately anachronistic style to express their rebellion against current historical conditions and choices (or lack of choices). A Mod revival might reveal a longing for an earlier historical moment when different kinds of adolescent resistance were imagined as possible, such as different forms of identifications involving class, gender, or sexuality. When Enid dyes her hair green and dresses up as a punk, she is distressed that no one "gets" her statement. As she tells Becky, "It's not like I was 'going punk' or something . . . Anybody with half a fucking brain could see that I wasn't dressed like some *modern* hardcore asshole . . . It was like an old 1977 punk look."

Enid is anxious to maintain a clear identification with an impossibly past mo-



16 Seymour in the movie seems in some ways like a stand-in for Clowes. In the graphic novel Clowes makes a brief disappointing (to Enid) appearance at a signing, which Enid later describes to Becky: "There was nobody there and he was like this old perv" (67-68). Skeetes's and Clowes's unappetizing appearances, and Josh's colorless one, mark a dearth of sexual or affective masculine possibilities for adolescent girls as cool (and disaffected) as Enid and Becky. The repeated, then disavowed, refrain "Maybe we should be lesbos" suggests both that *Ghost World's* only possible love story is between the two girls, but that this love story is another future destined not to happen (69.5).

17 This is hardly a postmodern phenomenon, of course. See T. S. Eliot's portrayal of the dodgy spirit medium Madame Sosostris in "The Waste Land" for a Modernist version of the commercial nature of spiritual enlightenment.

ment. To be perceived as adopting contemporary styles — “going punk” — is repellent to her, whereas an immersion in the retro (even if it is only a knowing representation of the ghost of punk) is good.

Is this a clear choice between a sincere immersion in, or a knowing and ironized adoption of, a style? I do not think so. The choice for Enid is not simply to ape past styles, either as parody or pastiche. Rather, she wants to reject the present by immersing herself in the past, even if she also perceives that the context of the present (Jameson’s “libidinal historicism”) makes total immersion impossible. After the punk rock conversation, Enid says to Becky:

I wish I could just come up with one perfect look and stick with it . . . Like what if I bought some entire matching 1930's wardrobe and wore that every day . . . The trouble with that is you look really stupid and pretentious if you go to a mall or a Taco Bell or something . . . And you have to act a certain way and drive an old car and everything and it's a real pain in the ass! (63.6-7)

Making oneself into a ghost of a past style as a protest will inevitably emerge as ironized because of the contrast between a 1930s outfit (or even, perhaps, a Johnny Rotten look) and a Taco Bell. The context of multinational capitalism renders every style possible, but simultaneously flattens style into just another consumer choice. Is there any way an adolescent, disgusted by a present that offers no satisfactory exits, can partake of a past set of social circumstances without falling into pastiche?

In “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” Elizabeth Freeman argues that not every contemporary adoption of past style can be subsumed into the postmodern marketplace, that there may be “crossing[s] of time” that are not “postmodern pastiche,” but rather “stubborn identification[s] with a set of social coordinates” that exceed the historical moment of the identifier.¹⁸ She calls these stubborn identifications “temporal drag,” with “all the associations that ‘drag’ has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present.”¹⁹ For Freeman, temporal drag contrasts with and supplements Judith Butler’s influential theory of drag as a performative copy that deconstructs the possibility of the original.²⁰ Freeman’s temporal drag is always anchored in past ideas, styles, and politics which may come to seem embarrassing, essentialist, backwards-looking (as Freeman says, a drag, or as Enid might put it, a pain in the ass), but which highlight “the interesting threat the genuine past-ness of the past sometimes makes to the political present”²¹. Temporal drag may be another way into *Ghost World*’s anachronisms that could bracket questions of postmodern irony or cynicism and recognize the genuine need of the adolescent for a new relationship (even if only through a fantasized temporal

18 Elizabeth Freeman. “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations” *New Literary History*, 31.4, 2000. pp. 727-744. For more on temporal drag, see Freeman’s excellent *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010).

19 Freeman. p. 728.

20 See Butler’s *Gender Trouble*.

21 Freeman. p. 728.

disjunction) to an unsatisfactory present she had no part in building. There may be nothing quite as ghostly as the temporal dragster, stubbornly anchoring herself in an outmoded style and time.

But is this desire for an impossibly different world simply a capitulation to the impossibility of a politics? In a critique that could be applied to the comic, Henry Giroux has argued that the *Ghost World* film lacks an escape route for Enid or other adolescents; it is missing configurations of community and political action that aren't foreclosed by the postmodern wasteland. And as refreshing as the film is, given the treatment youth have received in popular representations over the last twenty years, it resonates too intimately with a major aim of neoliberalism: to "make politics disappear by . . . producing cynicism in the population." Cynicism does more than confirm irony as the last resort of the defeated; it substitutes resignation and angst for any viable notion of political resistance and transformation. It is precisely on these terms that *Ghost World* both indicts and reflects the society it attempts to portray through the eyes of alienated teenage girls.²²

This question of "viable notions of resistance" haunts *Ghost World* (the comic and the film) and makes haunting one of its central questions. Who are the dead — the adolescents who wander the streets, between times, between homes — and who are those who uphold the viable, but eviscerated, world? Is there a politics that could bridge this gap? The irritating parody of a politically correct, post-high school go-getter, Melorra, who's been working for Greenpeace, reveals to Enid and Becky that she's just made a commercial for a right-wing political candidate because she is eager for the "exposure" (55.6). In Melorra, Enid recognizes that conventional politics seem bankrupt, subject as they are to market forces; but does this imply that every version of politics or of an imagined future must also be foreclosed? What can the future look like in a world of ghosts?

Toward the comic's end, when Enid is studying for the entrance exam that would allow her to move away and attend college, she buys a second-hand hearse to drive east in. She and Becky use it to return to a deserted amusement park (Cavetown USA) they had visited as children. As they drive, Enid says, "We're hurtling back in time to a *savage era* where *dinosaurs rule the earth*" (110.1). The deserted Cavetown (in which all the dinosaurs look smaller than the girls remember) and the hearse seem to bookend the adolescent dilemma, caught between a desire for a deep, almost evolutionary regression to childhood, and the fear that the only way of hurtling out of their ghost world is in a hearse. After Enid discovers she failed the entrance exam, the panels contain fewer and fewer words. Though she has spent most of the story talking over the quieter Becky, Enid seems to be fading out into a ghostly silence. In a series of panels, Enid sits on a beach:

22 Henry A. Giroux. "Teen Girls' Resistance and the Disappearing Social in *Ghost World*" in *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* Vol. 24, pp. 283-304. For another way of reading the politics of irony and cool as "politics conducted on a new terrain," see Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film" in *Screen* 43.3, pp. 349-369.



Her cursing seems like both a warning and mourning — the adolescent’s rage at the continued existence of childhood. In the final scene, Enid boards a bus on a route previously out of service. Earlier readers had seen an old man waiting for that bus, apparently futilely. Enid dubs the man “Norman,” because the name repeatedly appears in the pavement near where he waits. When Enid asks, “Don’t you just love the idea of some little kid doing that? It’s so *retarded* and *egomaniacal!*” Becky replies, “It seems like something you would do!” (85.6). “Norman” signifies both ends of the age spectrum: the imagined child marking the landscape and the old man exiting it.

Carved into the sidewalk, “Norman” recalls the repeated graffitied logo “Ghost World,” which refers to the comic and its diagnosis of postmodern society’s spectral condition. If “Norman” is an “egomaniacal” kid asserting his identity, then the anonymous graffiti artist, who has painted “Ghost World” on everything in the town over a series of years, is the mirror opposite — one who disappears into anonymity rather than asserting his tag line. As Susan Stewart argues, graffiti can be a way of cutting through the depersonalized urban landscape to declare an artistic vision or personal identity: “graffiti writers or artists address the relation that those cut off from consumption bear to consumerism, and they address the ways the consumer culture absorbs and reinscribes all other forms of cultural production.”²³ Graffiti allows the economically and socially dispossessed to put their mark on a world determined to shut them out; they rewrite the landscape of late Capitalism with a sign that they, too, were there. The graffiti artist whose work marks some of the chapter headings of *Ghost World* might be seen as Enid and Becky’s ghost writer, present from their childhood and inscribing the ghostly trap that appears to contain them. Perhaps the two Normans — the unknown “egomaniacal” child who confidently writes his name on the sidewalk and the stubborn old man who

²³ Susan Stewart. *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford University Press, 1991). p. 209.

leaves — promise exit strategies for the adolescent.

At the end of the “Norman” chapter, after the girls realize that the Satanists, who seemed so well-suited to each other, have broken up, they return to the bench, huddling together for comfort, perhaps musing on the fragility of relationships — the Satanists’ or their own. They then realize that the aged Norman has disappeared. The bus stop has been re-activated, and they watch the bus head off into the night with Norman’s head visible in the back seat. In the film, when Enid sees Norman at the bus stop, she says, “I know you’ll always be here,” and he replies aggressively, “That’s what you think. I’m leaving town.” Enid watches him board a bus that will take him out of the film altogether. Is the bus a version of the hearse — an exit that leads to death? Or are there alternatives to a postmodern landscape that appears to stretch endlessly and repetitively in every direction?

Enid does finally leave, not in the hearse as she’d planned, but on that unreal, ghostly bus. The tragedy of the story, encapsulated by a poignant non-encounter on the last page, is that she leaves Becky behind to face, with fading eyesight, a ghostly future. (On the last page, Enid watches a depressed-looking Becky, now in glasses, through the diner window, and murmurs a typical and false older-person-to-young-girl comment, “You’ve grown into a very beautiful young woman” (118.4). As the bus pulls away in the final panel, we see the deserted silent town bathed in the melancholy blue light that has suffused the comic’s pages. In an interview, Clowes noted that this color reflects a “haunting” scene from his own adolescence:

My initial thought was — I remember when I was a teenager, Enid’s age, I remember walking around and being struck by — I was living in the city of Chicago, if you walked around at six in the evening, you notice everybody came home from work and turned on their television. And there’d be this kind of dark gloom with no color at all outside, and inside there was this blue light. Often people still had black and white televisions back then. It just had this very specific kind of blue tone that was very haunting to me. Somehow that’s a striking image of my teenage years. . . . So I wanted to capture that, I wanted the whole thing to feel like it was bathed in that light.²⁴



Buried among other definitions of “ghost” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “**Television**: A displaced repeated image on a television screen caused by a duplicate signal travelling by a longer path. . . .When marked fading occurred, the normally clear [television] reproduction was accompanied by ‘ghosts’ or additional images which faded in and out.” *Ghost World* is a brilliant exploration of the multiple flickering ghosts of modern life and memory, with its technologically reproduced images, commodities, sprawl, and affect-filled, yet anonymous, sites (diners, malls), which ground the haunted time and existence of the postmodern teenage

²⁴ Interview by Xavier Guilbert. du9.org, 1/29/2009.

girl — who desires what appears impossible: a past and a future that differs from the ones adulthood offers. If the comic finally does not choose to answer political and historical questions about the future of adolescence in light of the false promises of late Capitalism, it leaves me that much more convinced of the importance of these questions and the necessity for building an “elsewhere” to *Ghost World’s* nowhere and everywhere, a bus stop at which Enid might alight and live in a better present.

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Close Reading Clowes’s Dialogue:

“You’ve grown into a very beautiful young woman.”

by KEN PARILLE



Reviewers of *Ghost World* have likened the characters’ dialogue to overheard conversations, imagining Clowes in a restaurant, pen and notebook in hand, furiously transcribing the banter of nearby teenagers. While the dialogue reads like off-the-cuff speech, it’s also careful and complex: one seemingly simple line can suggest numerous meanings and connect to several important themes. The comic’s final line, in which Enid says of Rebecca, “You’ve grown into a very beautiful young woman,” is a perfect example of such textured writing.

We can interpret Enid’s line in concert with her facial expression and the panel’s environment. While the end of a friendship would likely elicit visible emotion in most teenagers, Enid’s expression is hard to read; it’s strangely blank, unlike her standard sneers, smiles, and smirks. Does her apparent lack of emotion undermine the compliment she pays to Rebecca, whom she may never see again? It certainly