

# Ghost World

Screenplay by Daniel Clowes;  
dir Terry Zwigoff, 2001

When *Ghost World* was first released in 2001, its two female leads were not stars. While Thora Birch and Scarlett Johansson had each appeared in several films before, neither had become celeb-mag fodder or red-carpet regulars. For one of them, that was all about to change. But which one? With my usual instinct for backing the wrong horse, my money was on Birch. Thora Birch: smart, sexy, wise beyond her years, talented and funny. What could go wrong? A few years later, Johansson has worked with such visionaries as the Coens, Brian De Palma, Woody Allen and Calvin Klein. Thora Birch on the other hand has a post-*Ghost World* filmography that looks like a bad joke. Or a bad dream: *Shadow Realm*, *Night Visions*, *Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story*. For all I know, each of these is a masterpiece, but I doubt it.

*Ghost World*, on the other hand, actually is a masterpiece.

Based on a comic by Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* tells the story of Enid (played by Birch) and Rebecca (Johansson). They have just graduated from high school (brought to you by Tropicana fruit juice). They appear to hate everything and everyone, apart from each other.

In the original comic they do various things, they are rude to various people, they fall out, they drift apart from each other, and that's about it. Which is not to say that the comic is of no interest. In fact, it's both heartbreaking and very, very funny. But if it was ever going to make a successful film then someone was going to have to dig up a plot from somewhere.

Luckily, they did. Clowes collaborated with director Terry Zwigoff and developed the character of Seymour (played here by Steve Buscemi). Seymour appears briefly in the comic, where he is hurt (rather badly) by our heroines, and then disappears. In the film he is treated just as badly ... but then we, along with Enid and Rebecca, get to know him a little better.

It is Seymour – collector of blues records, loner – who drives the entire plot. Enid begins to hang out with him, much to his surprise, and to Rebecca's dismay. And, as that long hot summer drags on, it will be Seymour who drives the girls apart. Not that he does this intentionally, of course. It just kind of ... happens.

Seymour is a challenge to Enid: so uncool, he's almost cool. She is determined to fix him up with a girlfriend: 'We need,' she says, 'to find [...] women who share your interests.'

'Maybe I don't want to meet someone who shares my interests,' he retorts. 'I hate my interests.'

*I hate my interests*. What a strange, bitter, hilarious thing to say. The inference is that these are not interests at all, but obsessions, things that you can't do anything about, things that you wish you didn't have, because all they do is make you a weirdo, a freak, someone who isn't normal.

But Enid and Rebecca never wanted to be *normal*. Still, they've left school now and are faced with one or two harsh realities: getting a job, getting a place to live, the sort of things you can't put off forever. Enid would like to. Eventually, though, she gets a job in a cinema. Grimacing in disgust at the popcorn she's supposed to be selling, she regales the customers with her honest opinions of the films on offer. Doesn't she know she's not supposed to do that? How on earth does she expect to get on in life?

How, indeed? Seymour seems to be the only one who really understands her: Rebecca is busy working in some Starbucks-esque hell hole and enthusing over ironing-boards; Enid's dad wants to get back together with

the dreaded Maxine. The promise of a scholarship to art college hangs in the air. Could this be Enid's big chance?

Or will she blow it?

*Ghost World*. The title is never explained. We can make of it what we will. Throughout the film (and the comic) we see alienation, displacement, bitter humour, and quiet despair at lives going nowhere, slowly. The guy who waits for the bus is waiting at a spot where buses have not stopped for a long time. He, at least, will always be there.

No one else will: even Seymour has moved on. The woman Enid and Rebecca introduced him to (in a plot strand that could have come straight out of a romantic comedy, but which actually appeared in the comic first) has turned out to rather like him, and they are getting on rather well. Too well. There's no room for Enid in Seymour's life any more.

Then, one night, Enid and Seymour have somehow got it together after all, but it's too late. Everything has already gone wrong. She watches the guy who waits for the bus that will never come.

And the bus comes. He gets on, and disappears. So now there really is no one left.

Enid must finally face her responsibilities.

She's lost Seymour his job. His relationship has floundered. She won't be going to art college, after all. She gets on the bus, and disappears.

And, unless you are a really dedicated fan (the kind of fan who seeks out *Shadow Realm*, *Night Visions*, and *Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story*) you may never see her again. I like to think there is some parallel universe (some *Ghost World*) where Birch is as big a star as Johansson. Every time she gets on that bus I wonder, where is she going? Is that the last we'll ever see of her? The weird trajectory of Thora Birch's career (she was in *American Beauty*, too) gives me hope that one day she'll be back. Maybe in some quirky left-field indie hit that somehow finds favour with the multiplex audience. She deserves it.

Meanwhile, we can find solace in *Ghost World*, as Enid and Rebecca wander those malls and streets forever, with an unknown future ahead of them where anything could happen.

*Peter Higgins*