

Quintín on Gerald Peary's film *Archie's Betty*

The Buenos Aires Festival of Independent Cinema-April 16, 2015

Gerald Peary's first film was *For the Love of Movies: The Story of American Film Criticis*, which he completed in 2009 after struggling to make it for more than eight years. Gerry's second film, the one we saw today, *Archie's Betty*—a formidable work that took him a mere three-and-a-half years—is based on the famous American comic strip. Betty, the virtuous mild-mannered blonde, is in love with Archie, the eponymous hero, and Archie, in turn, has a crush on Veronica, the spoiled dark-haired charmer who has dazzled the entire male student body at Riverdale High. I had to puzzle this out in the course of the film since, although a few copies of *Archie* had passed through my hands as a child in Argentina, they seemed way too girlish to me at the time; I preferred *Superman*. Actually, as it turns out, lots of boys were reading *Archie*—published all over the world except for—curiously—France and England. One of its most devoted readers was Gerry himself, who, at the beginning of the film, tells about being taken by his father to the neighborhood barbershop where he would ask the barber to take his time with the clients ahead of him so he could finish reading the latest number. I remember perfectly having the same experience, but the magazine that had me looking forward to my haircuts was *El Gráfico*.

Carefully scripted, meticulously edited, *Betty's Archie* delves into the identities of the real people who inspired the comic strip characters—arriving finally at the discovery of the actual “Betty,” a young girlfriend of Bob Montana, the original artist and creator behind the *Archie* series. Actually, Gerry's involvement with the dramatis personae of *Archie* dates back to 1988, when he published a long article which showed how Riverdale was inspired by Haverhill, a factory town in Massachusetts. These historical precedents were long obscure until Gerry's hypotheses and the new evidence he uncovered were brought to light. Up until that time, Montana's corporate bosses had taken credit for the creation of Archie and the other characters, effectively eclipsing Montana, who had actually spent his high school years in Haverhill.

But the history of the comic strip's identities and their revelation serves only as the starting point for the film, which has two major themes. The homage paid to *Archie* is part of the director's autobiography, especially the story of his childhood and how he became the all-American adolescent that the comic strip, with its accounts of high school life and first loves, embodied. Gerry's father was a Russian Jew, fleeing from the Nazis, who wound up

a small, isolated town in the mountains of West Virginia—a place that had never before so much as seen a Jew—where he found employment teaching in a Christian college. *Archie* would provide a model for the understanding of dating and of the teenaged rebelliousness that would shape the young Gerry. But this universal adolescent identity transcends its North American origins. When the screening of *Archie's Betty* was over, a young man in the audience asked for permission to speak. He said that he was Colombian and that his father had been an avid reader of *Archie*. When he was born—with red hair—he was heralded as nothing less than an incarnation of Archie. Thus, the comic book also turns out to be symbolic for the recognition of redheads as an ethnic minority.

But there is something more in *Archie's Betty* than simply the obsession with tracking down the “real” references. Besides investigating the possible models for Archie, Betty, Jughead, and the others, the film also weighs in on the dispute about who deserves credit for the comic strip, and bears witness to the devotedness of people like Gerry and other comic book enthusiasts. But, on another level, the film is a testament to the universal need to leave a mark in history, even if only for having been a distant source of inspiration for a popular cultural hero. American culture, wherein everything is forgotten and then rediscovered—whether through history, journalism, or the movies—is based upon the need to leave something behind in this world—something besides children—a compulsion that *Archie's Betty* illustrates so clearly.