



[Howl](#) - on general release

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) March 2011

Starring: James Franco, David Strathairn, Jon Hamm, Jeff Daniels and Treat Williams. **Director(s) and Writers**

: Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman.

Animation

: Eric Drooker.

Mary Murphy; "What are you rebelling against ?

Johnny: "Waddiya got?"

[*The Wild One* László Benedek 1954]

Art doesn't change society it can only reflect it. If Whitman gave voice to the American Dream in *Leaves of Grass*, then Ginsberg's *Howl!* announced the nightmare.

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" is the most famous opening line of any 20th Century poem. It was delivered by Allen Ginsberg, during a now-legendary group reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on Oct. 7, 1955, to an audience of around fifty people.

The film is a mixed media affair; - presented in black and white and colour - using documentary, period drama and animation. And it is this that makes it a rather unique experience for some and a puzzling one for others. Critical opinion is divided; I think it works great. There is no set anchor: the film has Franco reading out the poem; we then see him being interviewed and then there is the courtroom scene.

The opening credits help capture the background to the times: war in Korea; the post McCarthy era and the potential nuclear threat that found many Americans questioning their future (and if they had one). It should also be remembered that this was a period when the USA was leaving behind its Isolationist policy, that had dominated since the American Revolution, and in the post-World War II/Cold War period had taken on the role as 'World Policeman'.

Whereas counter-cultures of the past held to some sort of optimistic vision, the post war American youth seemed steeped in nihilism. Ginsberg disowned the tag 'Beat Generation' by saying it was just "a bunch of guys trying to get published".

Opening the film, we find ourselves in a claustrophobic setting: smoky and seedy. Ginsberg (Franco) shuffles a sheaf of papers nervously adjusting his spectacles (everyone seems to be wearing thick-rimmed spectacles in the room), then reads out the first four lines. The slightly-out-of-focus camerawork captures the smallness of setting, beautifully, and throughout the film we are taken back to this setting.

The film cuts to another closed environment of Ginsberg in a room speaking into a reel-to-reel (we hear the interviewer, now and again, but never see him). Franco parrots Ginsberg's drawl perfectly - the script of the interview being a transcript of the original.

Eric Drooker's animation has the feel of Japanese anime (in fact the idea for his first graphic novel, *FLOOD!*, seems to have been inspired by manga) and he uses the images of Ginsberg's poem to inform his own work in this film. Some critics have questioned the wisdom of having animation. To me, it added a greater depth to understanding the ethereal aspect of much of the imagery in *Howl*, particularly when Drooker calls on William Blake's paintings as inspiration. Blake, after all, was one of Ginsberg's heroes and himself a questioner of industrialisation in the same manner that the Beats questioned Modernism. And during the second part of *Howl* Drooker draws, directly from Fritz Lang's own Moloch/capitalist image from *Metropolis*. But Drooker also uses colour to give vent to bursts of heartfelt humanity in the same way as the Ghibli animator, Hayao Miyazaki, does in his films.

