

Unpleasantness in *Pleasantville*: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

In the film *Pleasantville* (Ross 1998), David (Tobey Maguire) and Jennifer Wagner (Reese Witherspoon) play twin teenage brother and sister who are miraculously transported from their 1990s suburban home into the fictitious black and white 1950s *Father Knows Best*¹⁾ (Russell & Tewksbury 1954-1960) family sitcom,²⁾ 'Pleasantville.' However, while they may indeed be twins, David and Jennifer lead dramatically different lives, particularly when it comes to their social status in high school. David is terribly shy and almost invisible, spending most of his free time watching 'Pleasantville' reruns. Jennifer, on the other hand, is overly promiscuous. The impetus for their 'time travel' is an argument they have over a newly acquired TV remote control that was mysteriously delivered by a TV repairman (Don Knotts) after the original remote was broken. David, an expert on every episode of 'Pleasantville,' wants to watch the 'Pleasantville Marathon,' with the chance to win \$1,000 answering trivia questions. Jennifer, however, wants to watch MTV with Mark (Justin Nimmo), her date. In their fight over the remote 'with a little more oomph,' they suddenly find themselves in the Parker's black-and-white living room as Bud and Mary Sue, the obedient son and daughter of Betty (Joan Allen) and George (William H. Macy).

Forced to 'play' their respective roles as Bud and Mary Sue until they can convince the TV repairman to let them return to their real life in 1998, they begin to interact with the characters of 'Pleasantville,' who begin to experience strong emotions—the strongest being sexual desire—and things begin to drastically change as the entire town starts to deviate from the standard norm: soda shop owner Mr. Johnson (Jeff Daniels) begins to paint (in color); Betty discovers that she no longer wants to be the attentive housewife, and succumbs to Mr. Johnson's passion for her; the high school basketball team—which has never missed a shot, let alone lost a game—discovers the mysteries of love and sex up at Lover's Lane; and even married couples—who have always slept in separate beds—start purchasing newly available double beds. And as characters begin to experience strong emotions and desire, they suddenly change from black and white to color, until eventually the entire town explodes in a rainbow of colors. But this transformation is not an easy one. The town fathers, led by Mayor 'Big Bob' (J. T. Walsh), see these changes as a threat to the moral fabric of their town, and they resolve to do something about their newly disobedient wives and children by enacting a

'Code of Conduct'—a list of rules that prohibit, among other things, the reading of books (which now have printed pages), playing loud music, and using any paint colors other than black, white or gray.³⁾

After Mr. Johnson paints a nude portrait of Betty—which he proudly displays in his shop window (See Figure 7)—and paints a cubist mural with Bud (See Figure 9), a riot ensues in which books are burned and anyone of 'color' is harassed. In his role as Bud, David transforms himself from a 'wimp' to a 'winner' who not only wins the love of Margaret (Marley Shelton), but who also becomes a leader in the 'colored' resistance against the Code of Conduct. He is brought to trial with Mr. Johnson where he is able to not only empower his father to win back Betty's love, he invokes so much rage in the mayor that Big Bob turns color as well. In the end, all of the inhabitants of Pleasantville have become emotionally—and for many sexually—empowered, colored beings. Bud returns a hero to his real life as David, while Mary Sue/Jennifer chooses to stay so that she can go to college.

This analysis will first look at *Pleasantville* as a postmodern text by focusing on the significance of suburbia in American life, as well as its use of nostalgia. Second, it will examine the symbolic nature of color in *Pleasantville*—how it is used to ideologically 'color' the past as well as our 'memory' of the past, and how the lack of color in the film makes it a somewhat racist text in the fact that the film is devoid of any black characters whatsoever, although black music serves as a powerful influence in the film. And because of the imaginary 'time travel' to the 1950s, it is a fantasy text as well. However, Cargal (2007) claims that the words, 'Once Upon a Time,' that appear in the opening of the film 'establishes the genre as that of a fairy tale, signaling the need for the suspension of disbelief necessary for the magic about to happen and the expectation of some moral to the story at its end.' Willard (2007: 141), on the other hand, bluntly asserts: 'This film is a fantasy. The opening frame of the film contains the written line, "Once upon a time." No claim to realism for its primary subject or content is made. The claim to truth (which it certainly *does* make) emerges at a higher level of "content." But the events recorded, around which the story line develops, are to a great extent not the *kind* of events which occur in real life.' The author contends that this film, clearly qualifies as a *fantasy* text based on Todorov's (1973) criteria.

Suburban bliss or postmodern nostalgia?

Pleasantville presents viewers with a sharply contradictory vision of suburban life. The opening images of the fictional 1950s show, 'Pleasantville,' project all that seems good about life in the American Eisenhower-era suburbs⁴⁾: the ideal nuclear family living the ideal life in the ideal house, crisply portrayed in black and white. Suddenly, viewers are jolted into 1990s America, still in the suburbs, but now all the houses—although in color—look boringly the same, as if someone has cloned the same beige, stucco home over and over again (Figure 1). Here, viewers find apathetic, disengaged students listening to their teachers drone on about all that is bad with the contemporary world: unemployment, global warming, famine, and AIDS. By thrusting David and Jennifer from the contemporary suburbs into the seemingly simplistic 1950s, the film's storyline challenges and



(Figure 1): The 'cloned' suburbs of 1990s America
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questions popularly conceived constructs of suburban bliss.

Life in the suburbs has long been viewed as a social norm in the United States—it is where many Americans choose to live in search of the 'good life.'⁵ Indeed, the suburbs, 'in all their variety and in their shifting visual, cultural, political, and economic forms, are now central to everyday American life' (Dickinson 2006: Online). And, according to Hayden (2003: 3), more Americans live in the suburbs today than in urbanized areas. In fact, they 'are the site of promises, dreams, and fantasies,' serving as 'a landscape of the imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and social uplift.' Furthermore, the suburbs represent collective reactions to collective uncertainties and fears in a postmodern world. However, living in the suburbs presents a paradox—that is, the 'dilemma of how to protect ourselves and our children from danger, crime, and unknown others while still perpetuating open, friendly, neighborhoods and comfortable, safe homes' (Low 2003: 11). In short, it is in the suburbs that one could attempt to escape the postmodern anxieties in creating a safe home and community.

This issue of safety ties directly into postmodern nostalgia because one often longs for the past, which is typically viewed as a lost—better, more simplistic—time in which to live, even if this cherished and seemingly familiar place never really existed.⁶ This perception is supported by Wilson (2005), who states: 'Nostalgia is an emotion of longing for the past—admittedly, the longing may be for a past that did not necessarily exist' (36). Or consider Davis (1979) who wrote that contemporary nostalgia is a response to the 'deep cultural and spatial disruption of contemporary society [which] has begun to dislodge man's deep psychological attachment to a specific house in a specific locality, in a specific region, which over the centuries had been fostered by the more settled and protracted arrangement of a primarily agricultural and small-town society' (6). In this respect, *Pleasantville* presents viewers with the 'good' aspects of suburban life while at the same time drawing their attention to its contradictory possibilities and impossibilities.

Suburbia may be seen as 'bland' and 'conformist,' a place devoid of emotions and passion, but it also offers a sense of security and acceptance. By appealing to individual and collective nostalgic memories, *Pleasantville* attempts to negotiate these contradictions. As Cargal (2007: 117-118) rightly claims: 'Our longing for a previous time when things were different, when things were "as they should be," is precisely what the film *Pleasantville* is about. The movie makes it clear that it is pointless to long for such a paradise lost, not only because change is inevitable but, even more importantly, because there never was such a paradise in reality that might subsequently have become lost.' Indeed, *Pleasantville* seems to choose security and safety by offering viewers 'images of white heterosexuality leavened with just a bit of danger and risk' in the form of 'aberrant sexuality and the authenticity of "other" racial and ethnic identities' (Dickinson 2006: Online). In other words, it defines the limits of the suburban good life by showing viewers both what it looks like (its aesthetic effect) and what actions need to be taken in order to actually *live* this good life (its ethical effect). By contrasting life in contemporary suburbia with the TV-induced nostalgic memories of the 1950s suburbs, *Pleasantville* asks audiences to consider which one is truly better. And while many see the film as being critical of suburban life, it by no means rejects it. Instead, it tries to offer viewers a 'revised' vision of suburban life, one that offers both safety and homogeneity 'spiced up,' so to speak, with a taste of racial and sexual 'danger.'

The town of Pleasantville is certainly aesthetically pleasing—even in black and white the images are sharp and appealing—with well-maintained streets on which cars move slowly, well-kept houses with perfectly manicured lawns surrounded by white picket fences over which friendly neighbors chat with one another in suburban bliss (Figure 2). In fact, the single-family detached house is a fundamental symbol of the American dream and life in suburbia. And nearly as important as the houses defining suburbia are the automobiles,⁷ for as Girling and Helphand (1994) rightly argue, the automobile is crucial to the suburban landscape: 'To the traditional interplay of city and country, dwelling and nature, has been added mobility and the street. The dialectic of culture-nature is now a triad of culture-nature-mobility' (34). Indeed, one is quickly drawn to basketball team captain



(Figure 2): 1950's suburban bliss in the town of Pleasantville.
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(Figure 3): Suburban mobility: Skip Martin's convertible.
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Skip's (Paul Walker) pristine 1950s convertible (Figure 3).

An even more important symbol of suburbia are the well-kept lawns, and in the film viewers see Bud's Pleasantville neighbors happily mowing and watering theirs, an image audiences see in another suburban film, *The Truman Show* (Weir 1998), as Truman (Jim Carrey) works in his front yard in plaid shorts. For Hayden (2003: 17, 26-35), one's yard is a measure of one's moral and civic worth. Girling and Helphand (1994) go so far as to suggest: 'Even in the seemingly prosaic suburban yard/garden, Edenic⁸ characteristics are present: peacefulness, innocence, and idealized nature, a place where the world is both useful and good to look at' (23). They even reinforce American gender norms, because it is traditionally the male who does the yard work.⁹ In fact, these yards, while symbolizing American gender and class norms, also project images of suburban stability and safety. Thus, even if *Pleasantville* is used to critique American suburban life, the visual appeal of the suburban landscape remains unchallenged.

Pleasantville claims that contemporary suburbia is fraught with danger which surprisingly, according to Grossberg (1992), leads to both angst and boredom. And Low (2003) further argues that the suburbs, formed as a reaction to the anxiety produced by globalization, both foster and relieve this anxiety—again, an intriguing paradox.¹⁰ But it is within this contradiction that our nostalgic vision of a 'better' past makes sense in the film. Consider the beginning of the film, where the images of the 'Pleasantville' TV show contrast sharply with David's life in the 1990s. Viewers first see the 'Pleasantville Marathon' advertisements on TV, and in the very next scene, they are taken into David and Jennifer's high school where teachers monotonously lecture about the grim future:

Counselor: For those of you going on to college next year, the chance of finding a good job will actually decrease by the time you graduate. The available number of entry-level jobs will drop thirty-one percent over the next four years. The median income for those jobs

will go down as well. Obviously, my friends, it's a competitive world and good grades are your only ticket through. In fact, by the year 2000...

Teacher: The chance of contracting HIV from a non-monogamous lifestyle will climb to one in one hundred and fifty. The odds of dying in an auto accident are only one in twenty-five hundred. Now this marks a drastic increase...

Teacher: ...from just four years ago when ozone depletion was at ten-percent of its current level. By the time you are twenty years-old, average global temperatures will have risen two-and-a-half degrees, causing such catastrophic consequences as typhoons, floods, widespread drought and famine. Okay, who can tell me what "famine" is?

Contrast these dystopic visions with the TV show 'Pleasantville,' as George comes home from work and is greeted by his loving, cheerful, homemaking wife, Betty (Figure 4):



(Figure 4): The 1950s loving wife greets her husband with a martini.
©1998 New Line Cinema

George: Honey, I'm home.

Betty: Hello, Darling. How was your day?

George: Oh, swell. You know, Mr. Connell says if things keep going the way they are, I might be seeing that promotion sooner than I thought.

Betty: Oh Darling, that's wonderful! I always knew you could do it.

George: Hey, Pumpkin! What's that smell? Is that your meat loaf?

David: "It might be."

Betty: It might be.

George: Oh Pumpkin! You sure know the way to this man's heart.

All the while, David is trying to ignore the argument his mother (Jane Kaczmarek) is having with his father, her ex-husband, about who is going to watch the kids over the weekend:

Mother: No. No. That was not the deal. No. You have custody the first weekend of every month. This is the first weekend. No, I'm not going to bale you out. I'm going out of town this weekend. La Costa. Barry, if I want to have a mud bath with my new boyfriend, that's really my business, isn't it? Excuse me?

Through this dialectic, the contrast is crystal clear: life in the past, i.e. 'Pleasantville,' is safe, loving, and nurturing; life in the present is extremely unsafe and frightening. However, the message of the film is not as simple as this dialectic suggests, for even though life in the suburban past of the 1950s seems 'safer,' it is merely an avenue of escape found in a television show—it cannot in any way, shape or form, be a substitute for 'real' life. That is, because 'Pleasantville' is only a TV show, albeit a powerfully tranquil escape from the ills of modern society, this 'imagined' safety, 'when taken alone, is just as stultifying to the spirit as is the fragmentation and fear of the present' (Dickinson 2006: Online).

Interestingly, some critics have suggested that *Pleasantville* argues against nostalgia.¹¹ However, one can see how the film argues *for* nostalgia, especially in acknowledging the represented risks and dangers involved in becoming full, emotionally-realized human beings. Consider, for example, when Margaret, David/Bud's 'Pleasantville' girlfriend, realizes that life exists outside of Pleasantville:

Margaret: So what's it like?

David/Bud: What?

Margaret: Out there.

David/Bud: Well it's, uh louder. And scarier, I guess. And it's a lot more dangerous.

Margaret: Sounds fantastic.

This dialectic between 'a lot more dangerous' and 'sounds fantastic' is key to understanding the movie. While *Pleasantville* does indeed examine and critique the sometimes numbing safety of the suburbs, the 'danger' only 'sounds fantastic' as long as its accompanying fear remains safely objectified and 'contained' in the filmic experience.

Coloring the past

Color makes an unexpected appearance in the black-and-white world of *Pleasantville*. The town of Pleasantville is one of order, regularity and stability. In short, nothing ever changes here: people are friendly and polite, and everyone lives in complete harmony in row after row of suburban bliss. In fact, so squeaky clean is the world of Pleasantville that the characters don't even go to the bathroom, hence the absence of toilets. Ironically, the townspeople gorge themselves on copious amounts of food,



(Figure 5): 1950s simple-minded abundance?
©1998 New Line Cinema

such as the mammoth breakfast David/Bud and Jennifer/Mary Sue are served by their mother Betty after first arriving in Pleasantville (Figure 5): ‘You’re going to start your day with a nice big breakfast. Here you go. Here’s some pancakes, and eggs, sausage, and some good crisp bacon. And of course, a ham steak. You eat up and it’s right off to school. Hurry. Hurry.’

The somewhat grotesque artery-clogging excess of this breakfast makes it perfectly clear that viewers are no longer in the 1990s, with its dire predictions of hopelessness. Instead, they have been transported to—as Gabbard (2004: 91) so cleverly puts it—the ‘simple-minded abundance in the Middle America of the 1950s.’ Furthermore, Lyons and Drew (2006: 52) point out that *Pleasantville* both ‘recognizes and pokes fun at our collective notions of 1950s life in suburban America; the initial depictions of David and Jennifer’s TV mother, Betty—with coiffed hair, high heels, and full makeup, serving her weight in pork products and carbohydrates each morning for breakfast—are both fun and funny.’ In addition, ‘Jennifer’s comment that her 1950s bra, which lifts, pads, and points her breasts in an alarming manner, could “hurt somebody” indicates to audiences that this film will not be merely a stroll down memory lane: the 1950s have been improved upon, Ross hastens to reassure us.’ Indeed, the sights and sounds of this morning breakfast scene—despite its obviously exaggerated portions—is quite comforting to many Americans; in fact, many breakfast food items—such as scrambled eggs—are considered ‘comfort’ food.

The arrival of David and Jennifer, two jaded and cynical modern teens from the future, brings

with it the emergence, little by little, of color. And while color usually has positive connotations, for the people of Pleasantville it disrupts their innocent, bucolic lifestyle, bringing confusion, chaos, and namely, promiscuity and sex. As things begin to change, life in Pleasantville is disrupted and orderliness begins to collapse. For example, Jennifer/Mary Sue begins dating the basketball team captain Skip and introduces him to sex. Yet so deep is Skip's innocence and purity, he has never even experienced an erection:

Skip: I think I better go home now, Mary Sue.
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: Why?
Skip: I think I might be ill. Something's happening to me.
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: That's supposed to happen, Skip.
Skip: It is?
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: Yeah. Trust me.

Unable to keep this newfound discovery to himself, he tells his teammates and the urge to copulate subsequently spreads like wildfire among the Pleasantville teens, who finally learn what 'Lover's Lane' really means. Jennifer/Mary Sue even teaches her mother about sex:

Betty: Mary Sue?
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: Yeah?
Betty: What goes on up at Lover's Lane?
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: What do you mean?
Betty: Well, you hear these things lately. Kids spending so much time up there. Is it holding hands? That kind of thing?
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: Yeah. That, and...
Betty: What?
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: It doesn't matter.
Betty: No. I want to know.
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: Well, sex.
Betty: Ah...what's sex?

Jennifer/

Mary Sue: You sure you want to know this?

Betty: Yes.

Jennifer/

Mary Sue: Okay. Well, you see Mom, when two people like each other very, very much and they want to share that love with each other...

When Betty realizes that her husband George would never condone a sexual relationship with his wife, Jennifer/Mary Sue tells Betty about masturbation:

Jennifer/

Mary Sue: Are you okay?

Betty: Uh, yes. It's just that...your father would never do anything like that.

Jennifer/

Mary Sue: Oh. Hmm....Well, you know, Mom...there are other ways to enjoy yourself without Dad.

This culminates in Betty experiencing her first orgasm, an event so powerful it ignites the tree in the front yard, heralding the arrival of more danger—fire—to the town (Figures 6a & 6b). Prior to this event, the only thing the fire department ever did was rescue cats out of trees.



(Figure 6a): The sexual awakening of Betty.
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(Figure 6b): Betty's orgasm-induced fire.
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According to Batchelor (2000): 'Pleasantville is not exactly what Bakhtin had in mind when he characterized the hermetically sealed and lifeless classicism of Stalinist art, but it is in its way a parallel McCarthyite universe' (68). And interestingly, the film reflects Barthes' take on sex and color: 'Current opinion holds sexuality to be aggressive. Hence the notion of a happy, gentle, sensual, jubilant sexuality is never to be found in any text. Where are we to read it then? In painting, or better still, in color?' (ibid. 68). Indeed, it is color that revolutionizes life in Pleasantville, bringing

with its sexual awakening, freedom, and, in some respects, more equality for women. The people of Pleasantville, who once knew their place in their sheltered world, have now discovered desire—and the more new things they experience, such as books and rock n’ roll music, the more they desire.¹²⁾

Consider the local hamburger joint owner/artist Bill Johnson. After discovering color in an art book given to him by David/Bud:

- Bill: It’s beautiful, Bud....
- David/Bud: What’s wrong?
- Bill: I’ll never be able to do that.
- David/Bud: Oh. Well, you’ve just started. I mean, you can’t do it now.
- Bill: No, that’s not it. Where am I going to see colors like that? Must be awfully lucky to see colors like that. I bet they don’t even know how lucky they are.

Bill begins to paint in color. The discovery of color also renews his romantic interest in Betty, Bud’s mother, who not only finds the gumption to leave her husband, but allows Bill to paint her in the nude (Figure 7). And when Bill displays this in his shop window, it sparks a riot among the townspeople, who not only destroy Bill’s shop, but also begin burning the once-blank books whose pages are now filled with stories, pictures and colors.



(Figure 7): Mr. Johnson’s nude portrait of Betty.
©1998 New Line Cinema

As each person experiences new emotions and desires, they suddenly become colored, and change becomes the norm instead of the exception: the furniture store starts to sell double beds instead of single beds, constant sunshine and good weather gives way to clouds and rain, and women start to challenge the authority of their husbands. Nowhere can these changes be seen more than in George’s relationship with Betty. Whereas before he would announce, ‘Honey, I’m home!’ and be greeted at the front door with a martini, he comes home one night, during a rainstorm no less, to

find that his wife is not at home and, horror of all horrors, dinner is not ready. Panic-stricken, George runs to the only refuge he knows, the bowling alley:

Bob: George? What happened? Are you all right? What is it?
George: Rain.
Mayor: Real rain? Oh, my God.
George: I came home like I always do. And I went in the front door. And I took off my coat. And I put down my briefcase. And I said, 'Honey, I'm home.' Only, no one was there. No wife. No lights. No dinner.
Men: No dinner?
George: I went to the oven. You know, I thought maybe she had made me one of those TV dinners. But she hadn't. She was gone. I looked and looked and looked. She was gone.
Mayor: It's gonna be fine, George. You're with us now.
Gus: What are we gonna do, Bob?
Mayor: Well, we're safe for now. Thank goodness we're in a bowling alley. But if George here doesn't get his dinner, any one of us could be next. It could be you, Gus, or you, Roy, or even you, Ralph. That's real rain out there, gentlemen. This isn't some little virus that'll clear up on its own. Something's happening to our town, and I think we can all see where it's coming from. Roy, why don't you show them what you showed me before?
Roy: Bob?
Mayor: It's okay, Roy. Come on up here. I know, Roy. Thanks. He asked her what she was doing and she said, 'Nothing.' She was just thinking. My friends, this isn't about George's dinner. It's not about Roy's shirt. It's a question of values. It's a question of whether or not we want to hold on to those values that made this place great. So, a time has come to make a decision. Are we in this thing alone, or are we in it together?
Men: Together! Together! Together!

So alarmed by the changes taking place in Pleasantville—especially George not getting his dinner and Roy's wife scorching his shirt with the iron (Figure 8)—the town fathers and mayor issue a 'Code of Conduct' that is to be delivered at a town meeting.

Still shocked by his wife's absence, George demands that Betty return to her black-and-white self and obedient ways:



(Figure 8): The 'horror' of change taking place in Pleasantville.
©1998 New Line Cinema

George: Now, you listen to me. You're coming to this meeting. You're going to put on some make up. You're going to come home at six o'clock, every night, and you're going to have dinner ready on this table.

Betty: No, I'm not, Sweetie. I made you a meatloaf. You just put it in the oven and turn this little knob up to three-fifty. If you put the pie in forty minutes later, it'll be hot in time for dessert. I made a couple of lunches for you for tomorrow, and put them in brown paper bags. I'm going to go now.

Betty has done the unthinkable in Pleasantville: she has not only disobeyed but left her husband, realizing that she is unable to go back to her black-and-white, subservient ways.

Indeed, the 'Code of Conduct' announced by the mayor is quite severe:

Mayor: 'One: All public disruption and acts of vandalism are to cease immediately. Two: All citizens of Pleasantville are to treat each other in a courteous and pleasant manner.'

Meanwhile, David/Bud is hiding in Bill's burger shop, which has been destroyed in the riot:

David/Bud: 'Three: The area commonly known as "Lover's Lane," as well as the Pleasantville Public Library, shall be closed until further notice. Four: The only permissible recorded music shall be the following: Johnny Mathis, Perry Como, Jack Jones, the marches of John Phillips Souza or the Star Spangled Banner. In no event shall any music be tolerated that is not of a temperate or pleasant na-

ture. Five: There shall be no public sale of umbrellas or preparation for inclement weather of any kind. Six: No bed frame or mattress may be sold measuring more than 38 inches wide. Seven: The only permissible paint colors shall be black, white or gray, despite the recent availability of certain alternatives. Eight: All elementary and high school curriculums shall teach the “non-changist” view of history, emphasizing continuity over alteration.’



(Figure 9): David/Bud's and Mr. Johnson's controversial mural painting.
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In an act of further disobedience, David/Bud and Bill paint a mural outside of the destroyed hamburger shop that depicts all of the changes and social unrest that has been occurring in Pleasantville (Figure 9).

And so desperate is Bill to retain his newfound identity as an artist who has discovered color, he offers to compromise with the mayor, who believes that life in Pleasantville should remain black and white:

Bill: I didn't mean to hurt anybody. Maybe if I painted something different. Or maybe I could use less colors or something. Or, you know...certain colors. Or maybe I could...you could pick out the colors beforehand, and then they wouldn't bother anybody.

However Bud, who has realized that the changes that have occurred in Pleasantville are good for both its citizens as well as his newfound sense of self, tells the mayor:

David/Bud: It can't stop at once! Because it's in you! And you can't stop something that's inside you. Everyone is turning colors! Kids are making out in the street! No one is getting their dinner! Hell, you could

have a flood any minute! Pretty soon, the women could be going off to work while the men stayed home and cooked!

These most recent passages are a good example of Fairclough's (1995) notion of individuals negotiating their social identity in a situation of contestation and confrontation. In fact, there is an interesting struggle between the 1990s' social identities of David and sister Jennifer with those of their 1950s' personifications of Bud and Mary Sue. This is particularly evident in Jennifer/Mary Sue who is transformed from being a promiscuous teenager with little interest in school to someone who actually chooses to remain in Pleasantville so that she can attend college (Figures 10a & 10b):



(Figure 10a): The 1990s' version of Jennifer.
©1998 New Line Cinema



(Figure 10b): The intellectual transformation of Jennifer/Mary Sue.
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- David/Bud: Are you sure you don't want to come home?
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: Yeah, I think I'm gonna do this for a little while. Besides, you think I even have a chance of getting into college back there?
David/Bud: Honestly? Do you have your admissions letter?
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: Yeah, it's right here.
David/Bud: And you're sure about this?
Jennifer/
Mary Sue: I did the slut thing, David. It got kinda old.

David, on the other hand, is transformed from being a socially inept 'nerd,' whose life used to revolve around watching old episodes of 'Pleasantville' on TV, into a young man who has not only won the heart of Margaret, but also someone who has become much wiser and more mature—so much so that he is able to give his neurotic, 'real life' mother, salient advice about her life:

David: What's wrong?

Mother: Oh, I don't know. Everything's fucked up. I got halfway down there and I thought, what am I doing? He's nine years younger than I am. Doesn't make me feel younger. It makes me feel older. When your father was here, I used to think, this was it. This was the way it was always going to be. I had the right house. I had the right car. I had the life.

David: There is no 'right house.' There is no 'right car.'

Mother: I'm forty years-old. It's not supposed to be like this.

David: It's not supposed to be anything.¹³⁾

The message here is clear: 'there is no objective standard of value, all values are arbitrary and subjective, and this is what makes life worth living' (Lakits 1998: Online).

From a feminist point of view, however, Jennifer's decision to stay in the make believe world of Pleasantville and attend college is more than unsatisfactory—it is down right sexist. Newman (2002: 143), for example, takes issue with the fact that while for David, 'a sensitive boy of the 1990s now worldly-wise about the emotional needs of his single-mom parent. Going back to the future represents progress for him.' However, for Jennifer, her decision to 'stay put' and 'become somewhat of a nerd herself by going to college' forces her to 'turn away from the body to regain her color in an act of intellection rather than intercourse.' Why can't Jennifer's decision to 'stay in the past' be as empowering as David's decision to 'return to the future'? Newman claims:

A simplistic gender-bending scenario and swap might have had Mary Sue become "manly" as she sets off on her studies, matching Bud's taking on of the nurturing role with a parallel virilization. The film thwarts this...by involving Mary Sue in a moment of decidedly heterosexual intellectual courtship...All body in the '90s, she can be "embodied" (albeit in a conventional way) and engage in a life of the mind in the past. Going back thus represents going forward for Jennifer/Mary Sue.

In particular, Newman wants to know what book Jennifer/Mary Sue is reading in her last scene in the film (Figure 11).

In other words, what exactly is Jennifer/Mary Sue going to study 'after she has so paradoxically been introduced to the "pleasures of the text"'? Is she reading yet another white, male author such as D.H. Lawrence, or has she chosen to read de Beauvoir's (1949) *Le deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*)—which was translated into English and available in 1953—a book that would prepare her for the feminist movement of the 1960s? Ross, however, leaves these questions unanswered; and by do-



(Figure 11): What is Jennifer/Mary Sue reading?
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ing so, makes *Pleasantville*'s redemption of 'Nerdsville' ironic 'by relying on one of the chronologies that postmodern feminists in particular have associated so intimately with repressive ideologies of Enlightenment humanism by choreographing the relationship between present and past in a disappointingly monodirectional and predictably progressivist way' (ibid. 143). Indeed, viewers are left to wonder if Ross was aware of ideological shortcomings of Jennifer/Mary Sue's decision, or did he simply 'forget'? Or, perhaps, this aspect of the film never even crossed his mind. Could it be that Ross, like the men in *Pleasantville* 'who—labouring under a 1950s American "sit-com" ideology of traditional "family values"—[is] blissfully ignorant of [his] own sexism?' (Hoberman 1999: 14-16).¹⁴

Pleasantville, like *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis 1985) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Coppola 1986), offers a satirical take on American nostalgic yearnings for the 1950s and early 1960s, a world that always *seems* less troubled than the contemporary one. However, Batchelor (2000) claims that 'If such a world had ever existed, it would have been a kind of purgatory...Color is uncertainty, doubt and change, but without it there is only the Law and Home' (69). Still, as portrayed in many Hollywood films, the past *does* seem better than the present. In fact, it most always does.

Coloring memory

According to Grainge (2003), *Pleasantville* 'creates a narrative based on the cultural hypothesis, "not everything is as simple as black and white"' (203). It does this through its use of digital coloring techniques 'to affect a political allegory about the legacy and significance of the 1960s' (ibid. 203). Grainge is interested in how nostalgic films such as *Pleasantville*—using postmodern technology, namely digital and computer imaging—affect the way individual and collective cultural memory chooses to remember America's postwar past. Grainge argues that discursively, 'the film intervenes in political debates about the status of the 1960s, reclaiming the decade as a positive metaphor against the (supposedly) more reactionary "memories"' as portrayed in films such as *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis 1994). He sees *Pleasantville* as inscribing a competing vision 'of the past through an economy of representational retro' (ibid. 203). In short, this film evokes the past

through a stylized attempt to 'textually refigure, the form and locution of memory politics in the semiotic terrain of contemporary culture' (ibid. 203). Fredrick Jameson has been critical of such fantasy films and the way in which he believes they distort history and produce a kind of postmodern amnesia. Like Huyssen, Sobchack and Collins,¹⁵⁾ he is interested in how postmodern representation affects memory practice.

Pleasantville is a film that exists between the time travel of *Back to the Future* and the media voyeurism of *The Truman Show*. By revisiting the 1950s, the film explores and then breaks down common notions of nostalgic fantasy about domesticity, sexuality, gender, family values, and community service. In the beginning of the film, Jennifer and David are bombarded with a smorgasbord of world blight from which there seems to be no escape. Jennifer reacts by being the high school slut, while David escapes to the past through television reruns of 'Pleasantville.' Here, viewers find a kinder, gentler world that is ruled by sense of decency, morality, and family values. David watches 'Pleasantville' reruns so much that he is an expert on its characters and plots and can retell the dialog verbatim. He is, in essence, what Spigel (1995) describes as 'the young television-literate generation' (16). David is part of a growing number of young people who are not so much nostalgic for the past (since they were not even alive in the 1950s and 1960s), but instead a romanticized vision of 'the good old days' mixed with what they believe to be more enlightened, progressive attitudes about the present. Still, David clearly uses 'Pleasantville' reruns to escape his troubled life. But when he finds himself trapped in the show with his sister Jennifer, his ambivalent longing for the past is replaced by an extreme desire—much like Marty (Michael J. Fox) in *Back to the Future*—to get back home.

Indeed, color is a crucial element of *Pleasantville's* narrative strategy. Aichele (2002: 103-104), for example, claims that the 'invasion of realism is represented in the discourse of the movie through the gradual penetration of color images into the black-and-white TV show world.' But unlike *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming 1939), in which color appears abruptly, color appears as a representation of 'realism' that 'gradually invades Pleasantville.' As Aichele rightly points out:

...the use of both color and monochromic images is not only essential to the discourse of *Pleasantville*, but it plays an important part in the story as well. Expression form itself becomes expression content, and transformations of content change the form. Eventually, Pleasantville is entirely colored, so that when David returns to his home at the movie's end, the reality shift involves no media shift at all. The fantasy world has become the real one (ibid).

In addition, 1950s' morality is represented by black and white in *Pleasantville*, creating a sexless, sterile, monochrome world. It is only when the present is introduced that color begins to appear. And the way color is used in the film is significant. It is not simply a tool used to demarcate the past and present in the film; here, the colors are extremely intense and spectacular, creating a shift

in the film's registers of reality, fantasy and spectacle. Ideologically, *Pleasantville* 'evokes a nascent conservatism against which to pit and champion themes of social justice and cultural and political regeneration' (Grainge 2003: 206). For Grainge, David and Jennifer are able to transform the people of Pleasantville by utilizing their 'values and savvy derived from a world of nineties-cum-sixties libertarianism. In each case, a liberal-lite Clintonism seems to be the organizing political vision' (ibid. 206). And, while at first glance the film seems to be about a return to innocence, *Pleasantville* evoked strong criticism. For example, Hoberman (1999: 16) attacked the film for its 'exasperating mix of technological wonder and ideological idiocy.' And O'Hehir (1999: 50) accused it of being a 'muddled liberal fairytale about freedom and tolerance in the Frank Capra tradition.' Still, few films conceivably have captured more clearly the contradictory visions of life in America's suburbs as has *Pleasantville*.

Furthermore, many critics liked *Pleasantville* for its cumulative visual effect. After all, the digital techniques employed to gradually color the black-and-white world are breathtaking. However, the film also received much criticism for its heavy-handed cultural referencing to artistic Modernism, the sexual revolution, the subversive nature of rock n' roll and jazz music, feminism, and even civil rights, all of which are used to attack and eventually defeat right-wing conservatism as represented in the fascist book burnings and the McCarthy-like courtroom battles. Hoberman, in particular, focused on the ideological aspects of *Pleasantville* and how it reflects the battle between the Clinton-climate of liberalism and tolerance and right-wing Christian fundamentalism. 'By playing excessively in what [Hoberman] calls a "media hall of mirrors"—a film style dependent on the dizzying mix and self-devouring quotation of historical, mythic and media references—*Pleasantville* left itself open to criticism of narrative confusion and, more seriously, of demonstrating a lack of political and/or historical depth' (Grainge 2003: 207).

In addition, these complaints seem to echo Jameson's criticism about the indiscriminate use of pastiche in contemporary nostalgia films. *Pleasantville* does, in fact, concentrate less on the past than on deconstructing stereotypes of 'pastness.' However, for Collins (1993: 242-257), *Pleasantville* is less a reflection of Jameson's 'nostalgia mode' than it is 'eclectic irony.' In other words, it utilizes 'the sophistication of media culture (its icons, images, sounds, scenarios, conventions and genres), greeting new forms of textuality by reworking traces of the "semiotic array" in hybrid and ironic combinations' (Grainge 2003: 207). This is accomplished by placing both David and Jennifer, as well as the audience, *inside* the show.

On the other hand, Collins (1993: 255) claims that films such as *Back to the Future* and *Pleasantville* belong to a genre he calls 'new sincerity' because of the way in which they manipulate contemporary images and texts, which, in turn, affects cultural memory. For Collins, it is not a matter of remembering or even recovering the past, but of 'the reconfiguration of cultural references and textual traces within the semiotic array.' In other words, he is concerned less with Jameson's contention about the deliberate manipulation of historicity than on 'the individual negotiations of the array that form the delicate process of not just maintaining but constantly rearticulating cultural

memories.' However, *Pleasantville* does attempt to recreate the past through its use of 'recycled' media memories of the 1950s. It does this by creating a 'hyperreal' past that is defined through the medium of the television sitcom. In doing so, it takes a satirical approach to what seem like old-fashioned family values. For example, viewers find the 'fulfilled' housewife in Betty, content to be a homemaker who eagerly awaits the return of her loving children from school each afternoon and her patriarchal husband from work at night. As long as she has a husband who knows what is best for the family, obedient children who do well in school, the latest appliances and a clean home, she's happy. What else could she possibly want in life? But is life in Pleasantville *really* as grand as it seems?

In step David and Jennifer, who are placed 'squarely within a hermetic textual universe rhetorically drawn from that past' (Grainge 2003: 209). Instead of merely revisiting the 1950s, as Marty did in *Back to the Future*, David and Jennifer challenge an *idealized* version of the 1950s, and they proceed throughout the film to 'deconstruct its ideological assumptions' (ibid. 209). In many ways, *Pleasantville* reflects the postmodern historicism that Hutcheon (1988) identifies 'when textual traces of the past come into ideological and cultural mediation with the present' (89). That is, *Pleasantville* seems less concerned with changing the past—which was a matter of survival for Marty—than with creating a reflective engagement with the past. Instead of rooting for David and Jennifer to change the people of Pleasantville, as audiences might do for Marty in *Back to the Future*, viewers are left pondering if these changes are really for the better.

But like *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville* examines traditional American family values—a theme evident in the popularity of 'Nick at Nite'¹⁶ reruns of 1950s and 60s sitcoms such as *The Donna Reed Show* (Bellamy 1958-1966) and *Leave it to Beaver* (Connelly 1957-1963)¹⁷ in the 1990s. Politically, the 1990s marked a time in U.S. history when President Clinton was impeached and nearly convicted for lying about his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky, a charge he initially denied and later admitted amid a flurry of rhetorical dance. Clearly, Clinton's promiscuity was in stark contrast to the family values portrayed in the sitcoms of the 1950s and 60s, and perhaps this longing for a more 'innocent' past fueled the nostalgia boom in American movies.

Opperman (1998: 93-97) goes so far as to claim that *Pleasantville* is 'a kind of implicit commentary on the Clinton-Lewinsky case.' That is:

It comes out that the moral values that have brought Clinton to trial do not come from the Bible, as many representatives of America's Moral Right want us to believe. On the contrary, the film makes it clear that these values are associated with American TV. The Moral Right defends a puritan and purified vision of the world, which is raised on the concept of American family series. The film reveals that this vision of America hides a highly repressive outlook on life.

Pleasantville, in essence, is less concerned with changing America's memory of the past, as was the

case in *Back to the Future*. Instead, it presents viewers with a vision of a more liberal, tolerant, enlightened, unified—and particularly telling, *colored*—community that is in stark contrast to the black-and-white conservatism of the 1950s.^{18) 19)} It attempts to dramatize the social conflicts of the seemingly ‘good old days’ by exposing its ugly underbelly. Willard (2007: 152-153), for example, claims that:

not very long ago people still generally assumed that traditional moral rules and order were a good thing: that the Pleasantville type of life—where people did not routinely do what they felt like doing but did what they were supposed to do—was the moral ideal. That the shift of moral mood has been relatively recent is indicated by the fact that some fifty years ago the Pleasantville type of sitcoms were taken to be realistic portrayals of life in suburbia, which itself was thought to be a good place to be and life there a good way to live. Exposing the presumably dirty underside of such an “ideal” suburban existence as a major and constantly reiterated theme is only quite recent in filmmaking. It almost seems that we today are compelled to defend ourselves against a past we can no longer sustain and to which we are now morally superior.’

The social conflicts *Pleasantville* addresses involve art, literature, music, morality, sexuality, family, and difference.²⁰⁾ This is particularly evident during the riot in which the conservative townspeople go on a rampage through town, breaking storefront windows, burning censored books, and sneering at the new ‘colored’ folk of Pleasantville. Consider the scene in which two still black-and-white high school boys harass the now ‘colored’ Betty:

Whitey: Hey! Where are you going in such a hurry? Well, that’s not real friendly.

Boy: Got to see if she looks like her picture.

Whitey: Yeah. I’ll bet she looks real pretty.

Boy: Yeah, you want to be friendly, don’t you? Yeah, come on. Why don’t you show us what’s under that nice blue dress?

In the black-and-white world of Pleasantville, such sexual harassment would have been unheard of—in fact, impossible. But as the townspeople become colored, one-by-one they become the ‘other’ that is to be feared and detested.

Through the use of digital colorization, *Pleasantville* is a film that cleverly rearticulates the past and the present, creating an ironic ‘suburban pastoral.’²¹⁾ That is, it reveals an idealized version of small town life found in *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Capra 1946). In doing so, it recasts conservative nostalgia for small-town family values, attempting to ‘recuperate the significance and memory of the

1960s (Grainge 2003: 216). Or as Gitlin (1993: xiv) puts it: 'the genies that the Sixties loosed are still abroad in the land, inspiring and unsettling and offending, making trouble.' Indeed, Jennifer and David embody

these 1990s-cum-1960s genies. With their sexual savvy, political sophistication, and demystified notions of identity, gender and family, they question, interrogate and problematise the forms and values of the media past caricatured in *Pleasantville*. Using the infusion of color to dramatise this process, *Pleasantville* is a pregnant, even indicative, memory text of the late 1990s: it articulates a discourse of cultural remembrance in a moment where the textuality of memory has, itself, become increasingly hyperconscious (Grainge 2003: 217).

However, as Aichele (2002: 104-106) points out:

...what the 1990s audience finds funny is not necessarily what the 1950s audience found funny. Characters and situations seem unrealistic to present-day viewers in ways that they did not to the original viewers of actual shows in the 1950s. Certain behaviors and ways of speaking seem old-fashioned. Clothing and hairstyles from the 1950s tend to appear strange or ugly now, while the automobiles and popular music have acquired respectability and "classic" status.

But there is a darker side to the use of color in *Pleasantville* that is not so readily apparent, one that reflects Fairclough's (1992) third dimension of CDA—'discourse-as-social practice'—and that is one of Hollywood racism, which will be addressed in the next section.

Is *Pleasantville* a racist text?

Danger and risk in Hollywood films are often codified in issues of race and sex, and 'racial' difference—'whites' versus 'coloreds'—is a key element of *Pleasantville*. However, the film projects this difference within the 'safety' of white suburbia. Indeed, experiencing sexual passion is one of the keys to becoming 'colored' in the film, but the true cause is experiencing any kind of strong emotion, including anger, as evidenced by the transformation of the mayor during the trial near the end of the movie. But is *Pleasantville* a racist text? As the residents of Pleasantville become 'colored,' the town becomes increasingly racialized as the conservative black and whites try to control and even oppress the coloreds. For example, they post signs that read, 'No coloreds,' and impose rules banning any kind of 'colored' behavior, including listening to rock 'n roll music. In this respect, the film echoes the emerging civil rights movement in the 1950s and the struggle for racial equality that would climax near the end of the 1960s. Ironically, however, the town of Pleasantville is completely void of *any* black citizens.

Despite this absence of African Americans, becoming colored in the film is also marked by a shift from listening to 'white' to 'black' music. For example, when Jennifer seduces Skip at Lover's Lane, viewers hear Pat Boone singing 'Mr. Blue' (Blackwell 1959). But as the sexual passion spreads like wildfire among the Pleasantville teens, the music becomes Gene Vincent's (1956) rhythm and blues tune, 'Be-Bop-a-Lula.' And when a Pleasantville teen drops a coin into the jukebox at Mr. Johnson's soda shop, audiences hear, 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy' (Price 1952), a song written and performed by black men with the 'racy' lyrics: 'You like to ball in the morning, don't come back until the night.' And even more telling is the scene in which David/Bud, who has recently been honored as a hero for not only knowing about fire but also how to put a fire out, arrives at the soda shop where he is confronted by teens eager to find out what is outside of Pleasantville:

Boy: How'd you know about the fire?
 David/Bud: What?
 Boy: How'd you know how to put it out and all?
 David/Bud: Oh, well...where I used to live, that's just what firemen did.
 Boy: And where's that?
 David/Bud: Um...outside of Pleasantville.
 Boy: What's outside of Pleasantville?
 David/Bud: It doesn't matter. It's not important.
 Girl: What's outside of Pleasantville?
 David/Bud: There are some places that the road doesn't go in a circle. There
 are some places where the road keeps going.
 Girl: Keeps going?
 David/Bud: Yeah. It just keeps going. It all keeps going. Roads and rivers...
 Boy: Like the Mighty Mississippi?

During David/ Bud's explanation, David Brubeck playing 'Take Five' (Desmond 1959) is heard in the background. This song is significant for as Gabbard (2004) points out, Brubeck's music was instrumental in introducing bebop music to 1950s white audiences. And as David/Bud tells the story of Huck and Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1884), audiences hear Miles Davis playing 'So What' (Davis 1959). For Gabbard, this song is a

signifier of profound transformation...As black music, the Miles Davis recording carries with it an aura of the forbidden and the transgressive that Pleasantville needs as it moves the narratives of the civil rights movement to the small town devoid of African American faces (98).

Indeed, this shift from 'white' to 'colored' music reflects the newfound identities of the Pleasant-

ville colored residents, as they become what could possibly be categorized as ‘urbanized.’

It is interesting to note that while David/Bud is explaining the story of Huckleberry Finn, he completely avoids its racial/discriminatory overtones. For example, this includes the use of the word ‘nigger’—offensive to many American blacks in the past as well as the present—or how Huck’s willingness to help Jim escape slavery in the South to freedom in the North reflects his rejection of white racism while embracing the true friendship and humanity he has found in Jim. Instead, David/Bud emphasizes that freedom comes from within—it is a personal decision—completely avoiding the history of slavery or the deep-rooted racism that started boiling in 1950s America. More importantly, all of the characters in the film who are discovering their newfound sense of freedom are depicted as ‘coloreds,’ even though they are *all* white. It’s as if the film is trying to say: ‘Look, even white people can suffer from racial discrimination.’ Consider also the crucial courtroom scene, which clearly resembles *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee 1960), in which David/Bud declares: ‘It’s in you and you can’t stop something that’s inside you.’ What he really means is that *everyone* is ‘colored’ inside, which, in turn, makes everyone all the same on the outside. But try telling that to an inner-city Black American teen, who is struggling to survive in the 1950s, with no white Huck to take him ‘down the river’ to racial equality and freedom.



(Figure 12): *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve* (Masaccio 1426-1427)

Just as important as the shift in music is the role that art plays in *Pleasantville* in symbolizing the growing emotional awakening among the townspeople. When David/Bud opens the art book that he’s brought to show Mr. Johnson, the first painting we see is Masaccio’s ‘The Expulsion of Adam and Eve’ (Figure 12). The parallel between Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden and David and Jennifer is obvious: ‘David and Jennifer entered the paradise of Pleasantville

and have broken its rules causing guilt and conflict' (Winegarden 1999: Online).

Deacy (2003: 203-204), for example, explains the Biblical aspect of *Pleasantville* as follows:

It is for this reason that *Pleasantville* may be read as a cinematic analogy of the Fall. Indeed, according to Thomas Hegel, although in the Genesis story, human-kind lost its state of innocence and bliss by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the Fall narrative nevertheless has a message and a prediction of reconciliation and redemption. It is of a kind, moreover, that the characters in *Pleasantville* may be seen to emulate. Hegel considered paradise to be no more than a "dreaming innocence," which is lacking in the knowledge of good and evil, lacking in self-consciousness and lacking in an ability to choose.

Furthermore, Aichele (2003) makes an interesting comparison between David and Adam, claiming that they are both 'ordinary human being[s], and like the serpent...David...brings forbidden knowledge—supernatural knowledge—to Pleasantville.' Furthermore, Margaret plays the role of Eve in offering David/Bud the apple. However, this is 'only after (and because) David as the serpent has already tempted her.' Aichele goes on to explain that:

Insofar as David is the one to whom Margaret offers the apple, he is placed in a peculiar position. He is simultaneously the supernatural tempter and the human being. David here corresponds to Tzvetan Todorov's [1973] understanding of the fantastic as narrative undecidability between the marvelous and the uncanny.¹⁾ This accounts for the encounter between David and the TV repairman described above, in which David refuses to allow the restoration of paradise. God splits in two and this tears Eden apart, but it also opens a space for a nonutopian, uncertain, human world. The old sitcoms go their way, and a new, more colorful day arrives. By the movie's end, a sadder-but-wiser deity drives off in his repair van' (117).

And Mr. Johnson's subsequent nude portrait of Betty (See Figure 7) represents a physical manifestation of the social disruption occurring in Pleasantville, which also causes the first major reaction by the 'white majority.' Finally, the provocative mural painted on the side of Mr. Johnson's soda shop (See Figure 9) makes a social statement, much like the graffiti found in inner cities, in that it visually represents both honesty and authenticity. That is, it serves as a bold rejection of the 'Code of Conduct' and the 'old' social order. In this sense, it is symbolic of the black uprisings of the late 1950s and the entire 1960s.

Conclusion

Pleasantville asks viewers to consider the boundaries between the urban and suburban, black and white, and good and evil, all within the safety, comfort and normalcy of white, heterosexual suburbia. Moreover, it questions and examines the 'dangers' of succumbing to one's true feelings and emotions while contrasting the 1950s' nostalgic past with contemporary life. By 'crossing over into this dangerous territory,' the film seeks to 'create the human subject in the suburb through the imagining of the sublimity (and thus the unsayability) of...cross-racial, cross-generational...sex' (ibid. Online). In short, it allows the comparison of the blandness of suburban life with 'otherness.' By 'accepting' the narrative of this film, audiences can safely 'risk' experiencing 'authentic' emotions. Interestingly, while the film allows viewers to temporarily 'escape' the doldrums of suburban life, it returns them to the same suburbs and the same relationships, just as at the end of the film David (surprising to some critics²²), decides to return to his home in the 1990s suburbs. However, he is now able to cope much better with this more 'dangerous' world because of the lessons he has learned in 1950s Pleasantville. In other words, the past has become instructive—there seems to be much we can learn by looking back. But in the end, many Americans tend to, like David, return to the safety of their home and family—and more often than not, this home is in the predominant white suburbs.

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Notes

- 1) *Father Knows Best* was a popular American radio and television sitcom of the 1950s and 1960s, portraying an idealized vision of middle-class American family life.
- 2) Marc (1989: 81) points out that in these sitcoms, 'all the "normal" families moved to the suburbs during the 1950s. Popular culture turned such suburban families into capitalism's answer to the Communist threat.' Indeed, in 'his famous "kitchen debate" with Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, Richard Nixon asserted that the superiority of capitalism over communism was embodied not in ideology or military might but in the comforts of the suburban home, "designed to make things easier for our women"' (Coontz 1992: 28).
- 3) See Marchant (2007: 323): 'The preservationists' reactions to the changes in their reality are full of parables, mirroring back to us, as viewers, allegories about developments that have often been resisted in our own world. Our own culture's reluctance to embrace various social movements of the past half century is less than subtly reflected once the backlash campaign begins. Women's rights, for example, are contested in mild-mannered but indignant tirades by husbands complaining about their wives not having dinner ready when they get home from work. Similarly, racial equality symbolically comes under attack when reactionary shopkeepers clinging to the disappearing black-and-white way of life blatantly post hostile "no coloreds" warnings on their storefronts. But, as is often the case when a genie is let loose from its bottle, the chances of returning it there grow progressively slimmer with each passing moment, just as they do in *Pleasantville*.'
- 4) According to Coontz (1992), 'In retrospect, the 1950s also seem a time of innocence and consensus: Gang warfare among youths did not lead to drive-by shootings; the crack epidemic had not yet hit; discipline problems in the schools were minor; no "secular humanist" movement opposed the 1954 addition of the words *under God* to the Pledge of Allegiance; and 90 percent of all school levies were approved by voters. Introduction of the polio vaccine in 1954 was the most dramatic of many medical advances that improved the quality of life for children' (24).
- 5) Coontz (1992) cites historian Clifford Clark [1986] who claimed the "good life" in the 1950s...made the family "the focus of fun and recreation"...There was an unprecedented "glorification of self-indulgence" in family life. Formality was discarded in favor of "livability," "comfort," and "convenience." A contradiction in terms of earlier periods, "the sexually charged, child-centered family took its place at the center of the postwar American dream" (28).
- 6) See Coontz (1992: 29) who points out that '1950s family strategies and values offer no solution to the discontents that underlie contemporary romanticization of the "good old days." The reality of these families was far more painful and complex than the situation-comedy reruns or the expurgated memories of the nostalgic would suggest. Contrary to popular opinion, "Leave It to Beaver" was not a documentary.'
- 7) Coontz (1992: 25) cites Marc (1989) who 'argues that prewar fantasies of sophisticated urban "elegance," epitomized by the high-rise penthouse apartment, gave way in the 1950s to a more modest vision of utopia: a single-family house and a car.'
- 8) See Cargal (2007) who cites Reinhartz (2003: 164-165) and Aichele (2002: 115-119) who 'stress the deconstructive unveiling of the dystopia beneath the utopian surface of *Pleasantville* in their readings

of the film alongside Scripture—she by focusing on the “new heavens and new earth” of Revelation, and he by returning to Eden.’

- 9) See Jenkins (1994: 118-121) who believes that women are generally portrayed as only being concerned with the beauty of their lawn and/or garden, while men maintain overall control.
- 10) Consider Aichele (2002: 118-119), who asks: ‘ Might the so-called “primary world” of everyday life as we know it be itself just another “level of reality,” another fictional, ideological construct? [See Baudrillard (2004), *Simulacra*. This possibly infinite regress appears even more explicitly in other recent movies, such as *The Matrix* (Wachowski, A. & L.: 1999), *The 13th Floor* (Rusnak: 1999), and *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg: 1999) (118)]. Or is our supposedly non-fictional world impermeable to fictional beings? The gnosis offered by David and Jennifer to the Pleasantville inhabitants is also offered to the film’s audience—and the simulation and fictionality that are inherent in any story, and that are raised to a higher degree by the mechanically reproduced electronic media of film and television, are likewise imputed to the audience’s primary world. “The process will...put...models of simulation in place and...give them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of lived experience, to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our life” [See ‘Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 124 (119)].’
- 11) See Muzzio & Halper 2002: 549-550).
- 12) See Courrier (2005: 239) who suggests that ‘Greil Marcus (1999) may well have seized upon the most interesting aspect of Pleasantville in a review he wrote for *Esquire*. “The film means to prove that America always contains a secret country, a zombie second self-and that zombie America can be overthrown, in this case with sex and art...It’s a fairy tale, but it’s not as if it isn’t a fairy tale that has already been lived.’
- 13) See Reitan (2005: 217) who asserts: ‘With these words, David is clearly rejecting the idea of a cosmic purpose, of some script for how life should be lived. And yet it also seems clear that David is not, in the same breath, denying the possibility of a meaningful life. What David has learned from his sojourn in Pleasantville is that meaning is found in something other than blindly following a scripted role.’
- 14) In Porter (2007:411).
- 15) See Huyssen (1995), Sobchack (1995), and Collins (1995).
- 16) ‘Nick at Nite’ is a Nickelodeon television network that broadcasts classic television shows from the 1950s through the 1980s.
- 17) *The Donna Reed Show* and *Leave it to Beaver* were both popular sitcoms on American television in the late 1950s and early 1960s, focusing on wholesome family values.
- 18) There is a difference, however, in the larger-scale emphasis between *Pleasantville* and *Back to the Future*. The Clinton impeachment crisis was really a manifestation of the cultural wars, which sits precisely in *Pleasantville*. Indeed, the political dialogue and discourse during the Clinton scandal persistently returned to the theme of the cultural wars between a liberal president and a conservative congress. *Pleasantville* was released on October 23, 1998, less than a month before the election of 1998. The campaign leading up to this election had been one in which culture wars were prominent.
- 19) Joseph (1999) claims that the ‘same dynamic can sometimes be seen in our mainstream political discourse. It comes as no surprise that clashes of cultural values which seek to identify the good American from “the other” have occupied a significant, some might even say preeminent, place in American politics of late. Some have labeled recent political differences as “culture wars.” What is striking is the anger expressed and the personal demonization of one’s political opponents. Whether the issue is abortion or affirmative action or free trade, there seems to be a tendency to identify one’s opponents

as evil, as alien, as “the other.” The two sides present sharply contrasting visions of America’s past and its present. Each vision seeks to define the “true” American community and each, in the process, seeks to define the other as “out of the mainstream,” as “the other.” The “liberal” or “Democratic” vision suggests that the United States, for all its excellent aspirations and economic strength is still, to an extent, captive to its history, leaving it as a partially fulfilled dream that is deeply flawed. Racism, sexism, poverty, religious bigotry, homophobia, and class conflict serve to marginalize many segments of the American community while centralizing power in the hands of a few’ (624-625).

20) See Jensen’s (1998) online article, ‘The Culture Wars, 1965-1995: A Historian’s Map,’ for an in-depth analysis of the cultural wars.

21) See Adair (1999).

22) See Simon (1998).