

## *Pleasantville* and the Political Temptations of Nostalgia

On a casual viewing, the 1998 film *Pleasantville* presents a biting if humorous take on conservative nostalgia for the 1950s, or at least the 1950s represented by television shows such as ‘Leave it to Beaver’, ‘Father Knows Best’, ‘The Donna Reed Show’ and the like.<sup>1</sup> Magically transporting two contemporary teenaged twins played by Reese Witherspoon and Tobey McGuire into a fictional version of such family comedies, which is called “Pleasantville”, the film playfully shows the transformations the two bring to the straight-laced fictional town the show is named for. Originally shown in black and white, by the end of the film Pleasantville has become a much more liberalized, enlightened, and free spirited town, and is now displayed in full vivid color. Growing sexual awareness is the initial force of this liberation, and the film plays heavily on the contrast between the sexually repressed Pleasantville and the sexually free climate of contemporary America. Contrasting scenes of enlightened free thought and intellectual repression are also featured prominently.

There would seem to be little doubt where the film maker’s sympathies lie when the political undertones of the film come to the fore in the second half of the film. Liberal viewers already know the villains. A reactionary contingent of town elders (led by the Chamber of Commerce) and some holdout youths is consistently shown to be censorious, sexist, intolerant, and prone to violence as they resists Pleasantville’s liberalization. Meeting in the all male sanctuaries of barbershops and bowling allies, the group moves from puzzlement to rage as the

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<sup>1</sup> *Pleasantville*, directed by Gary Ross, perf. Tobey McGuire, Reese Witherspoon, 1998.

comfortable world they rule begins to dissolve. Still in black and white, they take a stand against the increasing number of transfigured youths with signs and placards bearing slogans such as ‘no coloreds allowed’ and they impose, briefly, a draconian regime that shutters the library and proscribes provocative art and music. The film’s deliberate evocation of the segregated pre Civil Rights movement South continues in a climatic courtroom scene filmed in a set reminiscent of that seen in “To Kill a Mockingbird.” In this scene Toby Maguire’s character triumphantly drives the last remaining black and white bigot out of town by taunting him with the image of men staying home while the women go out to work.

At first glance, then, “Pleasantville” presents a parable of the sixties rebellions— a youth movement overcomes racial prejudice, male chauvinism, and sexual repression, leaving in its wake a freer, more enlightened society. Most critics, friendly and otherwise, took it for granted that the movie was meant to be a liberal cautionary tale for a time of conservative resurgence and the use of nostalgia in the service of a political agenda that would, many believed, roll back the achievements of the civil rights movement and modern feminism.

There are, however, considerable problems with this reading. On closer consideration, the ways in which the changes of the sixties are invoked in *Pleasantville* prove to be no less idealized and nostalgic than the conservative appeals to the 1950s family sitcoms being satirized. Indeed, one thing that is immediately obvious is how much of the real social upheavals unleashed in the 1960s is missing from the liberation of Pleasantville. There are no drugs, no

violent protests or dabbling in radical politics, and despite its several references to the civil rights movement and reliance on a colored vs. non-colored visual scheme, there are no black characters to speak of in the film. Quite arguably, reading the film as a simple morality tale leaves it open to the charge that it simply represents a liberal counterpart to the conservative nostalgia it satirizes. I'd like to offer an alternative reading that allows "Pleasantville" to be a more subtle and illuminating meditation on the political temptations of nostalgia.

#### *David and Jennifer's World*

The opening scenes of "Pleasantville" establish the characters of David (Toby Maguire) and his twin sister Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon), and situate them thoroughly in the contemporary world of white, suburban American teenagers. The siblings are introduced as easily recognized types. David is a geek, the kind of brainy kid who substitutes an obsession for a TV show from a long lost era for girlfriends or a real social life. Though attracted to a pretty girl at school, he can only watch her from afar and imagine what he would say if he had the nerve to approach her. As the film opens David is enthusiastically anticipating a twenty four hour marathon of 'Pleasantville' reruns, complete with an ongoing trivia contest he feels sure he will win.

Jennifer is quite different. She is a social butterfly with a promiscuous sex life that is the envy of her friends and seemingly quite comfortable with herself and her world and contemptuous of her straight laced and socially reserved brother. Brazen, forward, and a poor student, she successfully pursues the school hunk who is as vacuous and inarticulate as she is. She is heard

recounting on the phone a conversation the two had enjoyed that consisted mostly of an exchange of “hey”, earning the admiration of her less daring girl friend, who approvingly comments on her “slutty” appearance. Setting up a collision with David and his plans to watch the “Pleasantville” marathon that weekend, Jennifer is planning watch a televised concert with the newly found object of her plainly carnal desires that night.

With this introduction, our sympathies are initially pulled in the direction of backwards gazing David—he seems more genuine and friendly despite his nerdy ways, while his sister comes off as abrasive, self-possessed, and shallow. The contemporary world is also presented in a generally unattractive way. The opening scene is somewhat chaotic, and the soundtrack features aggressive, harsh music that is importantly undistinguished as we are taken to David and Jennifer’s high school for a quick glimpse of their gritty, worldly life. References to the AIDS epidemic, Global Warming, economic uncertainty, and world poverty come in rapid fire succession in a run of brief school room scenes. When we learn a bit more about David and Jennifer’s family life, the sense that all is not well in their world is confirmed. Like so many of their generation, David and Jennifer come from a broken family and live with a single mom who as the film opens is about to leave for a weekend trip with the latest in what is clearly a string of unsatisfactory boyfriends. The difficulties of divorced life and single parenthood are well in evidence as we hear her arguing with her ex-husband over the phone about child care arrangements. His failure to pick up the kids as

he is supposed to leads to their staying home alone, setting the stage for their magical and eventful journey into a TV past.

### *David Gets His Wish*

Against this background, David's fondness for the orderly family life shown on his favorite TV show is perfectly understandable, and much is made in the opening scenes of the contrast between the happy family scenes he sees on "Pleasantville" and the bitter argument he overhears between his estranged parents. For a movie that is ostensibly a critique of this kind of nostalgia and idealization of the past, the opening sequences are curiously indulgent of its sources, presenting in effect a litany of conservative complaints about the effects of the rebellions of the 1960s while affirming their validity. Sexual promiscuity, worldly children, broken families, neglectful parenting, a vapid popular culture—all are on display and their effects on the young openly acknowledged.

Into this troubled world enters a very curious agent of disruption. A TV repairman, played by Don Knotts in his last film role before his death in 2006, appears when the twins, squabbling over what to watch on television, break their remote. Not knowing how to turn on the TV without it, both David and Jennifer find their plans for the evening threatened until this repairman shows up with a remedy. Delighted to find another "Pleasantville" fan in Peter, he quizzing the boy on his knowledge of the show. Satisfied that David knows his stuff, the repairman gives him a new remote, one with "a little more oomph." When the twins use it to turn on the set they suddenly find themselves in the middle of a black-and-white "Pleasantville" rerun, playing the roles of the son and daughter of

Betty and George Parker, the famous doting parents of the show. Suddenly in a colorless world, called to an absurdly bountiful all American breakfast by overly sweet and solicitous parents, the twins panic and look immediately for an escape. Knotts' character, speaking as a talking head on the 1950s era television set, is hurt to find both kids mortified--he thought he was fulfilling Peter's dream. Ignoring their pleas to be returned home he leaves the two to take up their new roles while he goes to collect himself.

### *Jennifer Becomes Mary Sue*

It is at this point the film begins to reveal the moral complexities that come with comparing our own times with those of the past, real or imagined, and the most interesting element here is the gradual transformation of Jennifer. David does his best to fit into his new role as "Bud Parker", a role he knows well on account of his extensive familiarity with reruns. He immediately realizes which episode the two have landed in, and as bewildered as he is he resolves to be the Bud he's always envied and let events unfold as they are meant to. Jennifer by contrast is immediately aware of how deeply out of place she is. In Pleasantville Jennifer must play the role of "Mary Sue Parker", a prim, proper, and popular girl who exemplifies the innocence and purity of this imaginary world. Unlike her brother, Jennifer is appalled by the banality of Pleasantville, and she immediately bristles at its constraints and superficiality, mocking everything from the sweater set she forced to wear to the sanitized language of 'gosh' and 'gee whiz'. Her sexual awareness in particular is an anomaly in Pleasantville, and her

restlessness and unwillingness to act chaste and naïve when she is in fact sexually confident and self-aware turns her into an aggressive agent of change.

To her brother's horror, Jennifer is soon challenging the bland perfection of Pleasantville at every turn: asking impertinent questions in class, teaching modern slang to her TV world friends, and worst of all, refusing to dampen her sexual forwardness in the slightest. Events very quickly go off script. Seducing the innocent but handsome high school star athlete Skip, Mary Sue sets in motion the cascading sexual enlightenment of her newfound classmates whose experiences are mirrored in changes to the Pleasantville environment. In the first of several scenes that show a child giving council to a parent or adult, Mary Sue also leads her Pleasantville mother Betty Parker (played by Joan Allen) to her own first sexual experience.<sup>2</sup> The cumulative effects are a simultaneous enrichment and loss of perfection: the basketball team discovers sex but starts losing games, firemen are forced to do more than rescue cats as a real fire breaks out when Betty has her first orgasm, and town experiences real rain for the first time as the youths of Pleasantville head to Lover's Lane in groves. With the forces unleashed by Mary Sue's sexual boldness comes the loss of a pleasant but bland paradise. In its place comes a world that is messy and noisy--scarier but richer and much more exciting.

But something peculiar happens to Mary Sue as she plays this role of vanguard for sexual revolution and social transformation. The driving and

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, rarely in the film does an adult show the slightest bit of wisdom, either in the present or in Pleasantville. The children lead throughout. Betty is the only exception, as her sexual wakening leads to a gradual increase in wisdom and self-confidence as she takes up with and helps in turn to liberate the hapless if genial soda jerk Bob, played by Jeff Daniel. Encouraged by both Betty and later Bud/Peter, Bob gradually learns to embrace his long denied desire to be a painter.

stunning visual motif of the film is the progressive addition of color to the black and white world of Pleasantville. Initially characters become colored, as do bits and pieces of their world, one at a time, as they become sexually experienced. Mary Sue represents the first exception to this. Despite her more extensive sexual past, she remains black and white while the kids around her are transformed. As she complains to Bud , “I’ve had ten times more sex than the rest of these girls and I still look like this. They spend a half hour in the back of a car and suddenly they’re in Technicolor?” Bud answers, less than helpfully, that “maybe it’s not just the sex.”

Just what it is that actually leads to a person’s becoming colored is only gradually revealed. The answer begins to emerge when the Pleasantville youths begin to discover literature in addition to sex. Initially Pleasantville is as intellectually sterile as it sexually repressed. Jennifer wanders into the school library by accident and discovers that all the books are blank. This complements the complete emptiness of the education offered at Pleasantville High School, where geography classes apparently rotate lectures on Pleasantville’s two downtown streets (Main, and, of course, Elm) and history lessons follow the ‘non-changist’ school of thought. However, as the students begin to discover their sexuality, they also begin to discover their minds. Turning to Mary and Bud, who as Peter was a good student, the kids of Pleasantville ply the twins from the outside to tell them the stories missing from their blank tomes. Overcoming his initial loyalty to Pleasantville as it was, Bud outlines the story of *Huckleberry Finn*, and the text and illustrations of Twain’s masterpiece magically fill in the pages.

He then turns his attention to *Catcher in the Rye*. Soon the town library is as popular with the kids as Lovers' Lane.

The introduction of intellectual growth as a force of liberation represents a turning point for Mary Sue. It also represents a change from the film's previous tendency to align Pleasantville's liberation with its increasing resemblance to the modern (real) world. In Mary Sue's case, she becomes freer the more she leaves her own world and becomes a true denizen of the transformed Pleasantville. A poor student in the world she came from, Mary Sue begins to forgo her penchant for shallow sexual encounters while immersing herself into the newly discovered world of books. Courtesy of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*--"it seems sexy" she tell a confused Bud when he finds her reading a book--Mary Sue beings to realize the deeper meanings that sex can have in our lives, and the price she's paid in a lack of integrity and feigned superficiality while playing the "slut." In a pivotal scene that is both stirring and problematic, she embraces the chaste ways of Pleasantville by donning a pair of classic 50s owl rimmed glasses and the kind of sweater set she'd earlier ridiculed. She then rebuffs Skip as he tries to lure her into another go around at Lovers' Lane, saying she has to study. She cozies up instead with Lawrence and by the morning she is at last in color.

#### *Whose Liberation? Which Sexual Revolution?*

In Mary Sue's case, then, it is this intellectual, as opposed to merely physical, sexual awakening that leads her to becoming colored. This transformation began subtly, when she gives the 'birds and bees' talk to Betty.

Cementing the role reversal the scene's humor depends on, Mary Sue begins with the familiar line "when two people love each other..." There's an irony here, as the emotional connection Mary Sue would have Betty believe is the proper locus of sexual behavior is exactly the kind of thing that has been absent from her own sexual encounters, and it's this gap between her feelings and her actions that Mary Sue is coming to reject. But this awakening also coincides with a growing distance between her and the world she came from, and most startling of all with a lessening of her rebellious leanings. From here on out Mary Sue is replaced by her brother as a leader of the Pleasantville youth movement, and by the time of the critical courtroom scene that marks this movement's triumph, she is a spectator in the gallery. The thoroughness of her transformation is confirmed at the film's end, when she opts to remain in Pleasantville, rather than return to the present with David. Only in the transformed Pleasantville, she points out, will she have a chance at college. This is coupled with both her fuller appreciation for her brother, who she used to consider a loser, and her explicit rejection of her promiscuous past –"I did the slutty thing David, it got old."

What should we make of this? Jennifer/Mary Sue illustrates most strikingly the gap between the triumphs of the fictionalized 60s rebellion of "Pleasantville" and the film's more ambivalent representation of the actual social transformations of the last several decades as portrayed in the film. The character also reinforces the film's unhistorical telling of that story that has prevailed throughout in less obvious ways. I mentioned earlier the lack of any acknowledgment of some of the darker elements of the 60s liberation

movements, or any substantive engagement with the complicated realities of racial politics. We can add to that the curious nature of the literary works explicitly cited in the film. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: it's hard not to be struck by the eclecticism of the titles, and the anachronism of these choices. What's lacking is any reference to any of the truly iconic texts of the youth rebellion that date from 1950s, books like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* or Allan Ginsburg's *Howl* or Ken Keasey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Or consider the choice of Lawrence as the vehicle for Mary Sue's intellectual awakening. Why not *The Feminist Mystique*? Or *The Second Sex*? The film's curious avoidance of so many obvious period cultural references carries over to the musical selections. While there are expected nods to early rock and roll—we hear at various points Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly and Elvis—the soundtrack is also eclectic and anachronistic, if always highly effective. Dave Brubeck's "Take Five", Miles Davis' "So What?" from "Kind of Blue" and Etta James' "At Last" are all featured more prominently and used to greater effect than the instantly recognizable rock and roll classics we might have expected.

#### *Against Liberal Nostalgia*

It is clear, then, that we should not be too quick to equate the liberation of Pleasantville with the actual social changes wrought by the 1960s, which makes it all the harder to reconcile Jennifer's transformation into Mary Sue with the standard reading of the film as a straightforward liberal polemic. It is more plausible to argue that the film suggests the liberationist pretensions of the youth

movement as it *actually* occurred failed girls like Jennifer, at least in certain ways. Jennifer/Mary Sue is better off, not in the present, not in the idealized 1950s of the black and white Pleasantville, not in the actual 1950s, but in an idealized version of what the rebellions of the 1960s *might have*, but in fact failed, to bring about, in the transformed but still fictional colorized Pleasantville. The sexual liberation Mary Sue brings to Betty frees her from the sterile and subservient (if pleasant) relationship she's had with George, but does not result in the kind of pointless couplings that have characterized Jennifer's (or perhaps her real mother's post divorce) encounters do date. Rather Betty's sexual growth marks genuine self development, while it is clear that Jennifer has come to age in a sexual environment that is no more conducive to genuine self-expression than the one Betty has escaped. Mary Sue's feminism is closer that of Danielle Crittenden's *Things Are Mothers Never Told Us* than one that uncritically celebrates the achievements of the women's liberation movement. While not mourning the passing of the restricting and artificial veneer used to cover the reality of female sexuality in early times, Mary Sue's newfound chastity suggests Crittenden's cautious suspicion of the overt and aggressive sexuality of some younger women that still allows the needs and desires of men to define sexual roles. For some women who grew up in the wake of the sexual revolution, neither attitude allows for honest, healthy female sexuality, or productive and satisfying relationships between men and women. Jennifer/Mary Sue's decision not to return to the world that had offered so to an intelligent and strong young

woman is perhaps the film's most powerful refusal to embrace uncritically the social changes of recent decades.

### *Bud Becomes Peter*

If Jennifer's experiences in Pleasantville lead her away from her life in the present, her brother's experiences propel him on an opposite trajectory. While he initially struggles to preserve Pleasantville as it always has been, he gradually emerges as the leading force of change. In the process he gradually acquires the self-confidence and strength to do the sorts of things he was unable to do in his life in the present world, such as talking to girls and standing up for himself. Originally enamored with the saccharine perfection of the fictionalized past, he gradually comes to terms with the more complex and difficult realities of the present and is able to embrace his real world wholeheartedly upon his return. Appropriately enough, his first act after returning from Pleasantville is to turn off the television. He then turns to offer advice to his mother, who has returned early after deciding against spending the weekend with her boyfriend. The resulting scene is revealing, and shows David's new understanding of his world to be almost as naïve as his former one.

David finds his mother in the kitchen distraught at where she finds herself in early middle age. The comfortable middle class life style she had aspired to and temporarily achieved has vanished with her divorce, and suddenly feeling too old for the care free sexual adventures she had been clinging to compensation, she is suddenly at a loss. Tearfully, she turns to her son and says "it wasn't supposed to be like this." David answers with the lesson he has

apparently drawn from his adventures in Pleasantville: “it’s not supposed to be anything.” This attempt at comforting reflects the underlying ethical picture that the film ultimately falls back on, a kind of simple romanticism that would valorize any impulse we act on so long as it is sincere and authentic. As Bud had said earlier, “if it’s inside you it can’t be stopped”, and neither, apparently, can the social changes these forces bring once unleashed. David is now able to accommodate the morally ambiguous complexities of his “noisier and scarier” world he came from because he now sees those complexities as the inevitable, and so acceptable, result of the choices of free people.

The problem is that it just isn’t true that “it’s not supposed to be anything”, at least not if we want to take seriously the idea that the world represented by Pleasantville needed changing, or the idea that our current world remains in desperate need of reform, as suggested by the film’s opening sequence. It must be supposed to be like *something* if we’re to have any reason to want to change the world. The problem with the kind of individualistic, subjectivist moral picture embraced by David is that it is unable to say just what was wrong with Pleasantville other than that people weren’t as free as they might want to be. What is lost is any sense that the choices we make should be governed by adequate values and genuine wisdom, rather the caprice or blind appetite. As it stands, David’s new found romanticism is unable to distinguish the kind of self-aware sexual freedom achieved by Betty and Mary Sue in the new Pleasantville from the disappointing and insincere sexual opportunities available to Jennifer and her real world mother in the actual present. That social problems are the

result of specific social organizations, that the real failures of the past and present are *injustices* that should be the ultimate focus of political reform, is invisible to this kind of ethical picture.

This same blind spot is at work in what is an otherwise touching moment at the film's end, when David picks up a tissue to dry his mother's eyes and clean up her smeared make up. The scene deliberately echoes an earlier one, where Bud comforted Betty Parker and applied gray scale makeup to her in order to disguise the fact that she'd become colored. In both scenes David/Bud works—with the best of intentions to be sure—to accommodate an older woman to a world in which she is not and should not be comfortable. In eventually coming to see why Pleasantville had to change and reducing that change to a nostrum of individual freedom, David loses his ability to see the failings of his own world. The biggest failing of the moralistic reading of the film is that it invites viewers to do the same thing by substituting a nostalgia for a social transformation that never was for the conservative nostalgia for a golden age of the family that never was.

The political dangers of nostalgia are clear—it tends us towards simplistic thinking, particularly in moral terms, inviting us to see history as driven by clearly identifiable forces of good and evil. A more insidious danger is that it blinds us to legitimate targets of self criticism, and I think this is the true lesson of "Pleasantville." Just as nostalgia for a golden age of the middle class family blinds us to the shortcomings of that age and the actual problems of the time, a nostalgic retelling of the protests and social movements that reduces a complex

and difficult time to a simple triumph of individual freedom over oppression can blind us to the problems created by increased divorced rates and a more sexually indulgent culture, for example. The moral ambiguities the film acknowledges are the important insights it offers.