

Pleasantville (1998)

“There are some places where the road keeps going.”

Major Credits:

Direction and Screeplay: Gary Ross
Cinematography: John Lindley
Original Music: Randy Newman
Visual Effects: Cinesite Digital Imaging
Cast: Tobey Maguire (David/Bud), Reese Witherspoon (Jennifer/Mary Sue), William H. Macy (George Parker), Joan Allen (Betty Parker), (Jeff Daniels (Bill Parker), Don Knotts (TV Repairman)

Background:

For all its visual dazzle (a contemporary example of the 19th century’s “cinema of attractions”) and technical virtuosity, *Pleasantville* has a long lineage. The contrasting worlds of color and black-and-white were first successfully depicted in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), then updated brilliantly in Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), in which Jeff Daniels stars as a film actor who leaves the b&w screen world to pursue real life adventure in color with a devoted movie fan. *The Truman Show* (1998), which is also about a man (Jim Carrey) trapped in a television show about suburbia, was released just a few weeks before *Pleasantville*. These films and others like Todd Solondz’s *Happiness* (also 1998) and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) and Neil LaBute’s *Your Friends and Neighbors* (also 1998) seems to follow a trend that began a decade earlier in reaction to Ronald Reagan’s nostalgic projection of a homogeneous America and whose seminal text is David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986).

Less remarked upon is *Pleasantville*’s indebtedness to American director Frank Capra, whose great movies of the 1930s and 1940s (*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, 1936; *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1939; *Meet John Does*, 1941; *It’s A Wonderful Life*, 1946) depicted liberal morality tales and populist themes. For all its obvious critique, *Pleasantville* seems destined to become a popular classic, itself memorialized and replayed on cable television.

Cinematic Qualities:

Pleasantville draws the digital technology that employed throughout the 1980’s to “colorize” classic movies that had been filmed in black-and-white to make them accessible to television viewers accustomed to color. The film was originally shot in color and incorporates nearly 1700 shots that are digitally altered using the new computer software. Perhaps surprisingly in light of the failure of the colorization process in the previous decade, these special effects achieve a convincing, poignant result.

The film’s “high concept” and visual design may unfortunately detract from its interesting sound track, which integrates pop songs of the era with original music by Randy Newman.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the prerequisite for people and objects to appear in color?
2. At what precise moment does the film seem to mutate from comedy to social drama? What political, cultural, and psychological values does it affirm?
3. How does the film evoke particular historical eras and political issues beyond the nostalgia of Fifties television sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*?
4. Does the film ever transcend its own cleverness? In other words, does it ever present a moment that, upon reflection, seems beautiful or profound?