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Politics and Visual Rhetoric in Film: The Apologetics of Pleasantville

Introduction

Moving images – whether in film, television or videogames – are primary modes through which most in industrialized regions encounter the world. In this sense, they are virtually reality for many. They can also be virtual in the sense of being artificial and simulated. The movie *Pleasantville* (1998) is a case in point, but in a very specific way, namely, that it does not offer an imitation of historical events as much as an imitation of ready-made narratives circulating in mass media and culture, which it converts into visual rhetoric.

In *Pleasantville*, a brother and sister are mysteriously transported into a virtual world of a 1950s television program called “Pleasantville”, and there forced to live as characters. The town represents conservative America, and the movie a rejection of its values. Or so we are meant to think. In fact, “think” is too strong a word, for the movie employs cultural iconography or what Roland Barthes called mythic imagery that forestalls critical thought, and veils the fact that it conserves mainstream American values behind a symbolic cloak of progressivism. In addition to the naïve, conformist 1950s sitcom, *Pleasantville* invokes images of racial segregation, fascism and pluralism, with the former three associated with antagonists and the latter with protagonists. This masks what concretely occurs, namely, that characters consistently move towards mainstream values when imagery has audiences and indeed the writer-director Gary Ross believing the reverse. The film accordingly exemplifies how background cultural stories based in historic events and what laypeople accept as veridical – for example, equality and its rightness as a moral reality – can be co-opted to instantiate the contrary with few noticing. Consequently the film also demonstrates how visual rhetoric can subtly mislead, and because such rhetoric profoundly shapes worldviews, educating people to sort through it is of pressing importance today.

One Thing in the Guise of Another

While ostensibly mocking conservative ideology, *Pleasantville* overwhelmingly portrays those deviating too far from it as misdirected and immature. Yet iconography obscures

this. The character Jen, for example, is initially brainless and promiscuous, and she introduces sex to the heretofore celibate Pleasantville world, typified by the squeaky-clean oeuvre of the sitcom *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963). With time, however, a love of literature supplants carnal appetite, and when one night Jen denies her Pleasantville boyfriend sex, opting to stay home reading, she transitions from black and white to colour. As in *Leave it to Beaver* and other programs from that era, the Pleasantville world is initially colourless, and such transitions signify self-actualization – a breaking into a richer existence, further from the naïve, closed, conformist world of 1950s and 60s television, which forms a symbolic antagonist in the film. By the end, Jen has “grown up”. She has had enough of what she calls “the slut thing”. When last we see her, she sits outside a college building, dressed in a chaste outfit, reading to a studious young man gazing attentively at her face, who, to all appearances, likes her for the “right” reasons. Jen does not rebel, but finally conforms to a safe conception of what a young woman should be, whether in America or elsewhere, the 1950s or today, however laudable her changes may be. The transition to colour and other mechanisms to be discussed, however, suggest otherwise, and indeed imply she is entering a more dangerous world.

This pattern repeats. The movie concludes with David and Jen’s mother outside the Pleasantville world abandoning a weekend with her boyfriend. “He’s nine years younger... doesn’t make me feel younger, makes me feel older”, she sobs. By relinquishing him, she too aligns with conventional mores – specifically, those decrying older women taking up with younger men. Likewise with her son. He begins as an archetypal geek. He has probably never had a date. By the end, he has proclaimed his heterosexuality by becoming romantically involved with a girl, and asserted his male prowess by attacking a hooligan to protect Betty, his stereotypically helpless mother in the Pleasantville world; and at just this moment he morphs into colour, again indicating self-actualization, and a conventional one, however healthy, since it hardly goes against the status quo for young men to date and physically defend women. At times, *Pleasantville* is flagrantly repressive. Throughout, men control the appearance of women. After becoming coloured, Betty passively allows David to apply pasty grey makeup to conceal the change. When Mr. Johnston urges that she should not hide the beautiful colour, Betty lets him remove the makeup with a damp napkin. At the conclusion, David dabs tear-streaked makeup from his mother in the contemporary world. However, the repressive side of all this is obscured, among other reasons, because the stereotypically conservative 1950s sitcom and those advancing its agenda are established as primary antagonistic forces, so that those acting against this outlook are taken as proponents for a more liberated worldview.

A seeming exception to the rule of non-deviance is the implied affair between Betty and Mr. Johnson, who runs Pleasantville's soda shop. However, "seeming" is the operative word, for activities occur within normalizing boundaries.¹ Violence, for example, is normalized and celebrated in hockey rinks, and adultery popular entertainment, even among conservatives, when portrayed within prescribed codes of daytime television. A contrary example is David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996): a movie in which partners openly enjoy and encourage one another's infidelities, and, finding automobile accidents erotically stimulating, have sex at crash sights, and sometimes cause them as foreplay. The film was deemed depraved by many.² The unease, however, is not from adultery, crashes or violence *per se* since all are staples of mainstream entertainment. Rather, it is the fact that these activities are not confined to their "proper" place and occur in combination. Betty, by contrast, commits adultery within prevailing boundaries. She lies to her husband about her first encounter with Mr. Johnson, and consequently keeps her relationship deceitfully and hence "properly" behind closed doors – a form of conduct perplexingly less threatening than open relationships. Moreover, she remains sexually monogamous since Betty and her husband, despite having kids, have never had sex, a point emphasized when Jen teaches her what it is, which also emphasizes Betty as "a woman in need". Taken together, this makes her affair tamer than those portrayed daily on television, more so since next to nothing is shown.

Pleasantville thus does what many advertisers do: it offers one reality on the face of it, while tacitly marketing another, and this, in large measure, by means of visual rhetoric. An example from the advertising world is a Yahoo! commercial from some years ago. The ad has a tattooed woman, dressed in Bohemian garb. In the top right corner, a caption reads: "Your own personal everything."³ Combined with the tattoos and outfit – symbols of rebellion in Western culture – this creates an appearance of individuality. Only the appearance is false because the woman's individuality is assaulted: she is branded with tattoos that include logos for Yahoo! and Facebook; and, moreover, these companies make money not by facilitating individual expression, but by exploiting profiles and searches to identify what one person shares with many, so that users can be sold to marketers. Here what is taken as a social "truth" in contemporary Western culture – that individuality is desirable – is co-opted to advance something largely at odds with the ideal. Although the strategy is obvious in this case, there are instances more difficult to parse. *Pleasantville* is a case in point, which, for reasons to be

¹ The idea of normalizing boundaries is loosely inspired by Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, transl. by Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, esp. p. 141.

² For example, see Kathryn Bromwich, "Films Banned in their Homeland", *The Guardian*, 21 September, 2014.

³ For the advertisement, see <https://coldclips.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/yahoo-tattoo.jpg?w=656>.

discussed, has even the writer-director confused about what he is promoting.

Mythic Imagery

That *Pleasantville* overwhelmingly fails to subvert conventional social boundaries is obscured by what Barthes called “mythic imagery”. By “mythic imagery”, which in principle can be auditory as well, he meant images loaded by history with meaning so that they communicate rapidly and form a sign language. Once loaded, they function very much like words.⁴ Photographs of Hitler or Gandhi are examples, and they immediately evoke connotations of oppression or liberty, almost as readily as the words “evil” and “justice”. Like concepts, moreover, such images are overwhelmingly abstractions, removed from what most have directly experienced. I will return to this point at the end.

One obvious mythic image is the 1950s television program, reinforced by the fact that Don Knotts – himself an icon of family values television – plays the repairman responsible for sucking David and Jen into the Pleasantville world. By poking fun at this mythic image of naïve idealism, *Pleasantville* offers an invitation to unthinkingly assume it questions traditional values without critically examining the content of the movie.

Another way the film cloaks the fact that it conserves mainstream American values is through symbolic iconography of authoritarianism, social oppression and patriarchy. David and Jen’s arrival in Pleasantville disrupts the town. The formerly grey world begins blossoming into colour, a boy brashly quits his job, the high school basketball team suffers its first loss and double beds appear in furniture shops, something absent in 1950s and 60s shows such as *Leave it to Beaver*. These happenings worry the town’s leaders, branding them as foolish. This precipitates an authoritarian reaction. A typifying scene occurs in the local bowling alley. George – David and Jen’s father in the Pleasantville world – staggers in, drenched. Men help him to a chair, as if injured. Shocked, he mumbles “rain” – an inconvenience heretofore unknown. Worse still, he returned home to discover “no wife, no lights... no dinner”. Another man, Roy, removes his jacket to reveal that his wife singed his shirt with an iron when lost in thought. Roy weeps. The men wince, as if Roy is burned. The mayor asks: “Are we in this thing alone or ... together?” One by one the men say, “together”. Then in unison they chant: “together, together, together!”

As a milkman makes his rounds the next morning, we see a sign posted on a tree:

Town Meeting

Tonight

All True Citizens

—of—

Pleasantville

Town Hall

8 o'clock

David skips the meeting, opting to stroll with Margaret, his love interest. David is still black and white, but Margaret is coloured. Headlights momentarily blind the couple when a car driven by a boy named Whitey rolls up. Whitey, whose name emphasizes white supremacist iconography, asks why David is not at the meeting, sneering it might be because he is entertaining his “coloured” girlfriend. At the meeting, a riled crowd of non-coloureds packs the town hall. Low angle shots reminiscent of *Citizen Kane* (1941) evoke fascism, as does the décor, which unmistakably resembles that of Hitler’s January 1939 Reichstag speech. The mayor stands before a colossal banner bearing the Chamber of Commerce symbol, and all its members wear pins recalling those worn by Nazis.

The morning after, a sign reading “No Coloureds” adorns the barbershop. A crowd gathers around the soda shop where Mr. Johnson has painted a Matisse-like nude of Betty on the window. A throng led by Whitey clamor around Betty, exhorting her to show “what’s under her blue dress”. When surrounded, David intervenes, punching Whitey. Crimson trickles down Whitey’s otherwise uncoloured face, and the boys, shocked, flee. Growing nastier, vandals hurl projectiles, shattering the window, and then wreck the shop. In a later scene reminiscent of Nazi book burnings, masses heap contents of a library onto a bonfire. The authorities enact ordinances that, among other things, dictate that “the only permissible paint colours shall be black white or gray”. Mr. Johnson laments, “I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t paint anymore”, to which David replies, “maybe I have an idea”. Early next morning, the pair slump half-asleep against the exterior of the town hall. Behind them is a colourful mural. An agitated mob of non-coloureds gathers. Music swells.

David and Mr. Johnson are arraigned for unlawful use of paint. Spectators in the hall are segregated, with coloureds confined to the balcony. Near the climax of the proceeding, David points to the balcony, and says: “You see those faces up there? They’re no different than you are. They just happen to see something inside themselves.” Motioning to Betty, who is now coloured, David urges: “Look at her, dad. Doesn’t she

⁴ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, transl. by Annette Lavers, London: Jonathan Cape, 1972, pp. 107–109.

look pretty like that? Do you really want her back the way she was?" Tears wet George's face. He becomes coloured, as do many spectators. The mayor exclaims: "This behavior must stop!" David laughs, "That's just the point. It can't stop ... because ... you can't stop something that's inside you." The mayor imperiously retorts, "It is not inside me". David taunts further, enraging the mayor, who then turns to colour. Triumphant music builds. A youth bursts in and cries, "Hey, look at this!" Out stream the people to discover their formerly colourless world has blossomed. Margaret and David kiss. Jen teases. Betty beams. David giggles at a display of colour televisions in a shop showing scenes from around the world.

Colour commonly symbolizes pluralism, and the victory of David and his followers is undoubtedly meant to represent an ascendancy of diversity and freeing from convention. Yet, as discussed, most transitions are towards the mainstream. Furthermore, David's triumph brings a concrete reduction of diversity. Before his victory, there was both colour and black and white. Now all is colour. There was also discord in opinions. With David's victory, disagreement ceases. The message concretely instantiated – a message David explicitly expresses when he says "they're no different than you are" and "you can't stop something that's inside you" – is that we are all essentially the same, especially on the inside. Thus while deploying an anti-totalitarian sign language, the movie brands the totality with a single identity, therewith affirming what it pretends to reject. In this regard, the movie manifests a longstanding tendency, namely, emphasizing shared identity and interests. The mechanisms and reasons for this, elaborated especially well by Frankfurt theorists, are too complex to detail here, but the effect is that insofar as people believe they are the same and share common interests, opposition and hence social change decreases.⁵ This is not to suggest problems generating opposition within society go totally unrecognized in *Pleasantville*. For example, socioeconomic disparity is acknowledged when, answering some trivia early in the film, David says, "Nobody's homeless in Pleasantville because that's just not what it's like". Thereby the film ostensibly highlights the harshness of the "real world", while inviting the viewer to chuckle at the ingenuousness of 1950s television. Yet the movie exclusively displays safe, middleclass life, which would not be so problematic if not for the "in touch" pretense.

The iconographic portrayal of pluralism, fascism and segregation reinforce the idea that those clashing with David and his followers are repressive and conformist. The tendency

⁵ See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964; Matthew Crippen, "The Totalitarianism of Therapeutic Philosophy: Reading Wittgenstein Through Critical Theory", *Essays in Philosophy* 8 (2007), pp. 1–28.

is to conclude that David opposes oppression and that his victory marks the ascendance of pluralism. What is missed is that two warring factions need not represent opposed ideologies; groups holding nearly identical values may still tussle for power. That the mayor and his allies affirm the status quo does not mean David and his followers subvert it. However, this is hidden by symbols that create a semblance of opposing ideologies. The film rallies moviegoers to the cause of protagonists by playing on what most audience members already accept as morally true – that fascism, segregation and patriarchy are bad, and pluralism good. Thus without looking at what is concretely occurring, most will side with those who seem to fight these outlooks, and against those appearing to defend them.

Marketing the Mainstream

Pleasantville encourages moviegoers to laugh at the idealized security and cleanliness of 1950s television programs, joking there are no toilets, the weather is always nice and nothing is flammable – firefighters only rescue cats from trees. Then David and Jen arrive. A little violence, thunderstorm and small fire ensue. The message, explains writer-director Gary Ross, is that “[y]ou can drain the life and nuances and complexity out of things by homogenizing them to make everything harmoniously dull, flat, conflict-free, strife-free”. “The tougher thing is to give yourself that kick to be alive and to be fully engaged.” “I guess if the movie has a message”, he sums up, “it’s that it’s worth that price, as difficult or strife-ridden as it may be.”⁶ The problem is that Ross never addresses the price. In *Pleasantville*, nobody gets seriously hurt, starves, suffers depression, cancer, war, hazardous work conditions or even severe obesity or bad skin. Despite some violence, nothing worse than a split lip results, the thunderstorm is a novelty, not a natural disaster, and the fire causes no injuries or significant damage.

Speaking of “myth from the right”, which might be expanded to include myth that conserves the world as it is, be it conventionally conservative or liberal, Barthes suggested we fear the Other, and consequently attempt to reduce it to sameness.⁷ The movie manifests this at the end when all things and people become coloured. Barthes reasoned that when this strategy fails, the Other may be reduced to a clown,⁸ as with communism in the United States, so that it no longer threatens the status quo. This also occurs in the movie, for example, with conventionally liberal values envisioning a hungerless or unpolluted world or conventionally conservative ones discouraging pre-marital sex all symbolically associated with naivety. This encourages thoughtless rejec-

⁶ Jamie Allen, “Interview: Gary Ross breathes his life into ‘Pleasantville’ ”, *CNN Interactive*, 12 October 1998.

⁷ Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

tion of a variety of outlooks. Interestingly, moreover, it is repressive not only in the sense of promoting current, mainstream American ideology, but because it thwarts debate by suggesting that to consider traditionally conservative views is to be an idiot.

Barthes maintained that one can immunize “the contents of the collective imagination by a small inoculation of acknowledged evil”, and hence protect “it against the risk of generalized subversion”,⁹ and the movie does this to some extent too. It creates a binary opposition between a flat, homogenous existence with no evils and a colourful world with trivial ones. It thereby adds the impression that mindless fascism is the price for a world without hunger, pollution and so forth. While completely ridding the world of such evils is unlikely, this does not make the end any less valid, nor mean we are powerless to move closer; and there is no reason to suppose that doing so inevitably leads to totalitarian forms of administration.

An additional way the movie obscures realities it pretends to address is by symbolically communicating in historical terms that most have never directly experienced. While racism and fascism still exist, Jim Crow style segregation and Nazism are these days known mostly through media portrayals. In line with this, segregation scenes in *Pleasantville* seem based more on *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962) and suchlike than historical occurrences themselves. The fascist imagery likewise appears borrowed from movies such as *All the King's Men* (1942) and *Citizen Kane* (1942). The symbols accordingly are imitations of imitations, analogous to shadows in Plato's cave. However, they and other media portrayals are virtual realities for us – again, like shadows in Plato's cave – because they comprise the bulk of our experience about current and past affairs. In *Pleasantville*, symbols specifically bestow progressive appearances on regressive messages, partly, it seems, because they mimic earlier movies that had genuinely progressive thrusts.

The take home message of *Pleasantville* is: “Shut up, don't complain, accept things as they are.” Because the visual rhetoric – especially that involving fascism, segregation and pluralism – is so strong, most are likely to miss this and that the movie is a smug affirmation of mainstream Western values. For just these reasons, the movie is a valuable cultural text that can be used to exemplify how social and moral ideals that we unthinkingly accept are used to sell the reverse of what they celebrate.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.