

“Pleasantville” Revisited: What The Film Can Teach The Specialist

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Doug Hodgson, my undergraduate political theory professor in 1974, was fond of ridiculing my young, naïve belief that a world that devoid of pain, suffering and conflict was both desirable and achievable. “Humans need conflict,” he warned the class, “Conflict produces growth and growth is a central aspect of human nature. The opposite of conflict is death.” Ten years later, I remember talking in Boston with a research psychiatrist who was working on a “wonder drug” that he claimed would not only cure depression, but be the first of an entire class of new medications designed to target specific neurotransmitters. They would eventually end mental illness. I remember wondering, as did Peter Kramer (1993, 1997), if these drugs might be capable of altering not only personality but the “soul.” That drug—fluoxetine (Prozac)—and its offspring (the other SSRIs, SNRIs, atypical antipsychotics, etc.) would not live up to the psychiatrist’s medically-informed but naïve expectations. The search continues for quick and preferably pharmacological ways to end not only psychopathology but problems of living.

I recently rewatched the 1998 film “Pleasantville,” with its all-star cast that includes Reese Witherspoon, Tobey Maguire, Jeff Daniels, William Macy and Joan Allen. It also boasts a screenplay and direction by Gary Ross (who also wrote “Seabiscuit” and cowrote the wonderful parable “Big” that arguable launched Tom Hanks’ career as a serious actor) and original music by Randy Newman (best known for his sardonic song about prejudice, “Short People”). If you have not seen this movie since its release 11 years ago, it is worth a serious re-examination. If you have never seen it, please give yourself a treat and view it. Either way, keep in mind what many perceive as the goals of psychiatry and medical psychology: the alleviation of pain, suffering and conflict.

Briefly, Pleasantville (the film) tells the story of teenager David (Maguire) whose wish for a kinder, gentler, conflict-free life is epitomized in “Pleasantville,” a fictitious 1950s series that is a cross between “Father Knows Best,” “The Andy Griffiths Show” (Don Knotts even has a role in this film) and almost any other Eisenhower-era black and white family TV series. In real life, David and his sister Jennifer (Witherspoon) are contrasting characters. David is the quintessential nerd; well-read but unassertive and anxious, he escapes each day into the TV-land utopia of the Pleasantville series. Jennifer is vacuous, narcissistic, pleasure-centered and motivated only by her need to be popular and attractive. She is proudly promiscuous. Both are unaware that their identities are only partially-developed.



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Each perceives the source of their discontent to be rooted in the “outside” world. In a sense, each believes in an external solution; if only a pill could give them what they believe they want. David’s “pill” arrives, in the form of a TV repairman (Knotts) who magically transports the siblings into the TV series “Pleasantville” in which everyone is attractive, the basketball team is undefeated (players never miss a hoop), and a hot date between teen couples involves holding hands in Lover’s Lane. Everything is “perfect” and gloriously routine. There is no rain and no color, no fire, no anger and no pain (physical or emotional). There is also no “outside” world beyond the two or three streets of this small, perfect American town. The streets all circle back. Married couples sleep in separate beds. Breakfasts are gigantic and include every manner of carb, fat and sugar imaginable. There is no history, no world affairs. The school library has books, but they are blank on the inside.

In Pleasantville, Maguire and Witherspoon are transformed into TV-land counterparts Bud and Mary-Sue Parker. Bud is initially thrilled. He has every episode of “Pleasantville” memorized and knows all the townspeople. He fits right in. Mary-Sue is shocked and revolted. With no sex, drugs, or teen popularity contests to win, she is lost. However, over time the siblings transform Pleasantville and they are in turn transformed. By the end of the movie, Pleasantville is no longer a charming American illusion, it is a real town with real people who love and hate, hug and hit. Gradually the town and its people become colorized.

This is a movie with multiple levels of interpretation. On one level, it is an allegory about being cast out from paradise. At one point, Maguire is even offered an apple by a girl who is attracted to him, a very literal allusion to Eden and the Fall. (In fact, religious imagery abounds in this film, with Knotts as a wry, cunning God while Bud and Mary-Sue are arguably cast in the role of Lucifer, the “bringer of light.”) But clearly this movie views the Fall from the perspective of Erich Fromm (1941) rather than the Hebrew patriarchs. Eating the apple from the Tree of Knowledge brings awareness and freedom—of both good and evil. On the “good” side, the people of Pleasantville learn about jazz and rock music, art books depict nudes and abstract expressionism, and formerly blank books begin fill with the works of Twain, Lawrence and Salinger. Bill Johnson, an amateur painter who operates the local soda fountain, is initially portrayed as a mindless dreamer until Bud brings him a book that surveys great art. His usual Christmas window mural becomes transformed into a Picasso-like abstract. Color abounds. On the “bad” side, not everyone is appreciative of this new-found diversity. Soon, stores sport “No coloreds allowed” signs. Bill Johnson scrapes off his abstract Christmas mural and instead paints a lusty but exquisite reclining nude of Betty and the town is scandalized. In a wonderful scene, Bud defends his TV-mother’s honor when local boys begin mocking Betty and hinting at rape. He belts one of them, and the boy bleeds red. Bud, who has until now been puzzled over the fact that he has remained black and white, now becomes colorized. Aggression--the feelings and behaviors that terrified him in the real world and were part of his shadow self--is what brings him his color.

Specialists influenced by psychoanalytic theory will also be impressed with this film’s depiction of sexuality. Sexuality is what initially liberates the townspeople, beginning with basketball star and school heartthrob Skip. He is introduced to sex by Jennifer/Mary-Sue, and when he tells his teammates about what he has discovered, their basketball skills are destroyed and they lose their first game. As in real life, sex has the power to both bring out and disrupt the best of our humanity. Later, Mary-Sue explains sex to her mother, Betty (played by Joan Allen), including the joys of masturbation. When Betty experiments alone in her bathtub, the results are literally inflammatory: as she climaxes, the tree in the Parker’s front yard bursts into flame, which completely baffles the town fire department since there has never before been a fire.

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fully treated with VRGET, leading to clinically measurable habituation of their physiological responses and reductions in PTSD symptoms.

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However, Pleasantville does not descend into silly fascination with superficial lust. Sexuality is an aspect of libido, which according to Freud (1920, 1975) is in turn a manifestation of eros, the creative and connecting life-force. Libido/eros is what becomes sparked by the Parker siblings; the energy they conduct winds up inspiring art, poetry, music, curiosity and learning as well as the usual physical connecting among the town folk. And it is the reaction against this process of liberation, this bringing of pain and suffering and joy and wonder, that leads the "good" people of Pleasantville to rampage one evening. In a scene that clearly ties religious fanaticism to fascism, the town engages in a book burning. The mayor decries this display of street anarchy, invoking the need for law and order. So he issues an edict on "civilized behavior" that could have been written by the Moral Majority.

"Pleasantville" clearly argues on behalf of integrating opposing aspects of the psyche. Mary-Sue becomes colorized when she begins reading and studying. She decides to stay in TV-land and we last see her sitting on the library steps of a university engaged in a conversation about her studies. She is no longer vacuous. Bud finally gains color when he stands up for his mother, who is being taunted by a group of boys. He punches one of the offenders, there-

by "owning" the aggressive and risk-taking aspects of his personality. Specialists who incorporate an understanding of social/cultural contexts into their work will also be provoked by the film's broader, more societal discussion. At what point do cultural agitators violate the rights of others? At what point does cultural upheaval become cultural violence? Where do the rights of expression end? These questions, raised by critics of medical psychopathology from Szasz to Laing, remain relevant.

For those of us who specialize in "non-medical" psychologies (e.g., counseling, family, group, psychoanalysis)—this film clearly reminds us of the value of pain, struggle and conflict and how these forces shape social/cultural as well as individual identity. The protagonists are not cast as having pathologies; theirs are existential issues, problems of the soul. Their "treatment" does not fit into evidence-based practice or a manual.

However, Pleasantville is a blatant product of the late 1990s, a time when the "culture wars" were raging, and it takes a very clear position in this conflict. The conclusion is, sadly, overly optimistic. Still, it is a truly inspired movie with excellent writing and acting by an ensemble cast that later went on to even greater fame. As a parable, it gently prods at our fantasies of the predictable and "perfect" world. The last bit of dialogue sums it up nicely. Betty Parker sits at a bus stop with her husband George. It is unclear

if she is about to leave Pleasantville. "So what's going to happen now?" asks George. "I don't know. You know what's going to happen now?" she replies. George laughs. "No, I don't." Bill Johnson appears in the scene, staring ahead, and adds: "I guess I don't either." Uncertainty is the only thing that is certain now. If you believe, as I do, that human psychology dictates there can be no light without the dark, nor love and connection without its counterpart, disconnection and destruction, then you and your students will feel inspired by the message of this film.

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