

# A pale reflection

*Pleasantville*, written and directed by Gary Ross

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This is not subtle stuff. In Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* twins David and Jennifer are contemporary teenagers attending high school. In an opening montage teachers tell their students about seriously diminished job possibilities, the HIV virus, depletion of the ozone. The twins' parents are divorced and squabbling. The world is a difficult place. A person might long for something simpler. But what if he got what he longed for?

David (Tobey Maguire) is a loner obsessed with a 1950s situation comedy, *Pleasantville*. Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) is pretty and apparently sleeps around. Through the intervention of a somewhat sinister television repairman, the pair are transported into the black-and-white world of David's favorite program. They become television characters Bud and Mary Sue Parker, the children of George and Betty Parker. They are stuck in Pleasantville.

Life is perfect there: no poverty, no rain, no illness, no bodily functions; there are no roads out of town because there is nothing outside of town; the pages of all the library books are blank; firefighters rescue cats from trees, they've never seen a real fire.

Jennifer and David prove disruptive elements. She introduces sexuality into the town; she even explains the facts of life to her mother. He introduces literature (the printed words appear as he explains the story) and modern art. Bits of coloring begin to appear: on a rose, a girl's lips, a shiny car and, eventually, Betty's face. A thunderstorm lashes the normally sunny town. Color comes to the flesh and clothes of the townspeople, one by one.

The old guard reacts, vigilante-style, against the changes. Store windows are smashed, books are burned. The 'colored' are jeered at and harassed. A town meeting passes a code of conduct: no one is to go to Lover's Lane; no one is to use the library; only Perry

Como, Johnny Mathis and such will be tolerated on juke-boxes; no umbrellas may be sold; double beds are outlawed; only black, white and grey paint may be used.

In an act of revolt David and an accomplice paint a colorful mural, for which they're placed on trial. David argues for emotion and the inner life. In the end, the entire town bursts into Technicolor. Jennifer, now a bookworm on her way to college, decides to stay in Pleasantville. David returns to his former existence, to help his real-life mother.

*Pleasantville* has a few things to recommend it. Joan Allen is appealing and moving as Betty, a repressed and lonely housewife. Reese Witherspoon is effective as the bad girl who discovers literature. There is also something moving about the sight of timid teenagers suddenly coming to life, kissing, reading books, tapping their toes to music. There are sequences that remind one of François Truffaut's underrated *Fahrenheit 451*.

And, of course, the film is a technical tour de force: the combining of black-and-white and colored characters and objects within a single frame. *Pleasantville* required 1,700 special effects and months of post-production work. The film was shot on color film stock and then the coloration removed from scenes and parts of individual frames one by one. The effect is sometimes quite startling.

But *Pleasantville* as a whole? It doesn't add up to much. Ross, in his first feature film, paints with far too broad a brush. His film is too nebulous, too tame in its criticisms. Life's rough edges are rounded off. A work that argues for spontaneity and change is fatally ordered and tidy. The ending, which ties everything up in a neat package, is inexcusable, sentimental, banal. A film about nonconformism with a thoroughly conformist

conclusion! If the spectator were to leave 15 minutes before the end he would retain a considerably higher opinion of *Pleasantville* and of Ross. As it is ...

The filmmaker (who wrote *Big* and *Dave*) is opposed to right-wing religious and political forces operating in the US. He is against repression and authoritarianism. He says things like this: color in his film came to represent 'being lifeless versus coming alive, hiding who you are versus letting who you are come out.' The idea for the film, he told one reporter, came to him 'the day after Newt Gingrich was swept into power.' Ross is the son of blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter Arthur Ross and a former speechwriter for Michael Dukakis and Bill Clinton. He was a delegate for Ted Kennedy at the 1980 Democratic Convention.

While the Democratic Party has abandoned social reform, Ross--and there are numerous others like him in Hollywood--remains a sincere and socially-concerned liberal. Nonetheless, the fact that this liberalism receives virtually no support or nourishment from the official public arena does make itself felt, in an intellectual and artistic laxness. *Pleasantville* is weak in part because like the town in the television program it is something of an aesthetic Potemkin village: a fantasy in which the forces of reaction collapse without a fight. How much will that help anyone?



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