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Reality TV from the 90s to the 50s:

Authenticity, Gender, and Patriarchy in *Pleasantville*

Pleasantville attempts to expose the repressed desires of humans, using the 1950s sitcom to represent an idealized reality. The Zizekian theory of reality versus the real drives the main characters' transformations from living a repressed reality to realizing their real desires. The female protagonists allow their true colors to show as they acknowledge their desire to be more than just a body in a patriarchal society. However, *Pleasantville* is problematic in its attempt to show the progress of gender and patriarchy. Changing from black-and-white to Technicolor, *Pleasantville* fails to break out of the stereotypes that bind the 1950s sitcom.

Keywords: Zizek, Mock, embodiment, desire, repression

As soon as we take into account that it is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire, the whole accent radically shifts: our common everyday reality, the reality of the social universe in which we assume our usual roles of kind-hearted, decent people, turns out to be an illusion that rests on a certain 'repression,' on overlooking the real of our desire. (Zizek 343)

Pleasantville attempts to expose the repressed desires of humans, using the 1950s sitcom to represent an idealized reality. The main characters, David and Jen, are transported from 1998 into the town of Pleasantville, a *Leave It to Beaver*-esque black-and-white world of the 1950s, where they take on the identities of Bud and Mary Sue, siblings of parents, George and Betty. Posing as Bud and Mary Sue, David and Jen trigger a domino effect of changes within the town that begin to expose the repressed "real" of the town that hides underneath the perceived "reality," seemingly turning the citizens of Pleasantville's world upside-down. The film suggests that there is a space for change and progress toward authenticity by bringing out the *real* desires of Pleasantville's citizens, represented by their characters turning Technicolor. In the case of the female characters, Betty and Jen/Mary Sue, their real desire is revealed as a longing to be more than just a body. In the case of the male characters, George and David/Bud, their real desire is revealed in the definition of their masculinity.

The question of authenticity is actually a Zizekian question of finding the real of our desire (332). However, I will argue that no real change has occurred in Pleasantville, no progress made. By the end of the film, the new and supposedly

enlightened town of Pleasantville is still shrouded in greyness (or whiteness), true authentic desires still hidden behind fear, replacing the old Pleasantville with just another, more colorful, costume. Furthermore, I will argue that in order to reach the mass audience of white, middle-class consumers, Hollywood tells the story of progress through the lens of white, middle-class heterosexuals who become enlightened. This representation feeds the heteronormative culture of Hollywood and mass consumerism, and it represses the authentic issues and real desires of our culture. Our society's colorful diversity is misrepresented as a white-washed, homogenized façade of reality.

Erin Lee Mock writes of the 1950s sitcom,

Many critics and viewers actually blame these shows for masking the very conflicts that they repeatedly broached. However, if the domestic sitcom of the 1950s clearly did present an idealized American family, it also dramatized, with disturbing regularity, the limits of that ideal. For postwar Americans, the 'ideal' family was one in which the husband-father's dangerous impulses were usually reined in, fears remained mostly unrealized, and the worst outcomes were apodictic off-screen. (30)

The 1950s sitcom repressed and muted real issues and desires in order to represent respectability and "family values" that kept women in the home and patriarchy at the heart of cultural hegemony. The lack of tension or strife and the desire to maintain family "normalcy" over these issues throughout the 1950s and beyond are

in direct contrast to the 1990s desire to put controversy or real issues in the fore shot. Through film, *Pleasantville* attempts to do the same.

Pleasantville addresses pressing issues of our society head on, discussing both gender inequality and racism. The problem lies in its delivery. The film reveals a society in need of change but does so without creating any real change by movie's end. In order to show how *Pleasantville* has failed to create an authentic, or real, society, I will look at two characters within the film through the lens of gender. Betty (the mother) and Mary Sue (the daughter who is also known as Jen) are the two primary female characters that go through transformations throughout the film. Betty Parker is a traditional stay-at-home mom who makes breakfast, packs lunches, and plays cards with her female friends, her identity reduced to mother and homemaker. Throughout the film, Betty's transformation marks a major shift from a faithful, dutiful housewife to a sexual being with wants and desires outside of the home. A key scene that reveals this repressed desire occurs when the soda jerk, Bill Johnson, is standing at Betty's front door, and there is a moment between Betty and Bill of familiarity, curiosity, and potential intimacy. This scene is important to note because it speaks to the repressed tensions that Mock spoke of that are hidden, yet suggested, in the sitcoms of the 1950s. On the surface, there is an innocent exchange between two people, but underneath the pleasant façade is a clear yearning and desire connecting two people who are not supposed to be together.

Betty's transformation begins when she asks her daughter, Mary Sue, what goes on at Lover's Lane. As the scene fades out, Jen begins to give her mother the sex talk. As the scene fades back in, Betty indicates that Mary Sue's "father would never

do anything like that.” So Jen proceeds to tell her mother about other ways she can pleasure herself. This role reversal signals the limited roles that Betty embodies. Later that night, Betty takes a bath, masturbates in the tub, and as she climaxes, a tree outside bursts into flames, creating a real fire, which had previously never existed in Pleasantville. This climax marks a significant change in Betty that moves her into a trajectory of exploration about other possibilities for her life outside of the home. As Betty’s desires are gradually realized, her world begins to change. The first physical change is noticed when Betty’s playing cards are bright red rather than black-and-white, a symbol of Betty’s changing perception of the world. The next change occurs on Betty’s face, which turns to color. This physical change indicates Betty’s altered perception of her self and her own reality. However, Betty resists the changes. At a critical point in the movie, rather than embrace her authenticity and show her true colors, Betty reacts in fear and covers up her colored face with grey makeup, creating the illusion that nothing has changed. Betty’s fear controls her reality and, much like the actual 1950s sitcom, continues to repress the real.

Betty’s repressed desires are revealed in many scenes throughout *Pleasantville*. But there is one key scene that stands out in Bill’s soda shop. Betty walks in and sees Bill painting. He shows her the book of art that was given to him earlier that day. As they look at one of the paintings together, an abstract image of a woman, Bill remarks,

Bill: “Isn’t it great how she’s resting like that?”

Betty: “She’s crying.”

Bill: [looking confused] “No, she’s not.”

Betty: "Yes she is." [softly and knowingly; a tear running down her face]

Betty wipes the tears away from her face, revealing her colored skin underneath her grey makeup. As she realizes what she has exposed, she turns quickly to go and Bill stops her. Bill tells her it is beautiful and that she shouldn't cover it up. He begins to wipe the makeup off her face, symbolic of shedding her mask as just a dutiful housewife with no layers of desire beyond it. This scene is critical because Betty, on the one hand, makes a choice to leave her situation in search of her real desires. But what she finds instead is another man who still limits her to her body and, only through his permission, does she allow him to expose her true colors. Her desires are purely sexual, and she is still seen as a sex object rather than someone who could contribute to society on her own. Betty's place in society as sex object is solidified when she leaves George and is seen with her suitcases at Bill's doorstep. The following morning reveals a painting in the soda shop window of her naked body lying across a counter top, which insinuates that Betty has committed adultery by experiencing the true desires of her heart, sex with the man that she truly loves. Although Betty's physical and motivational transformation is significant and important, she reacts to her newly found liberation in a disturbing way by running into the arms of another man.

It is important to note that while Betty is breaking the rules, she doesn't want people to know she is breaking the rules. She is trying to hide her authentic self rather than trying to break down the boundaries of a mother's role in the family and a woman's role in society. Betty is not really challenging those roles at all, and her

authentic or real self, although we see sneak peaks of it, is still repressed in a reality that remains steeped in patriarchy. Even in the scene where Betty is taunted by a gang of high school boys, it is her son who comes to her rescue because she cannot seem to rescue herself.

Jen (Mary Sue), the other primary female character in *Pleasantville*, makes a very different but equally important transition than her mother. At the beginning of the film, Jen represents a woman's worth as reduced to her body in her 1990s world where her primary goal is to win the affection of Mark Davis. Rather than relying on her brains, Jen is determined to use her body to win over Mark's affection. Once inside the world of Pleasantville, Jen is still trying to use sex and her body to connect with Skip Martin, captain of the basketball team. Although Mary Sue had already won his affection through her intelligence as shown in the soda shop scene when Skip commented on her "Our Town Hall" report, Jen is having trouble relating to Skip without any sex or physical intimacy being involved. After Jen deflowers Skip at Lover's Lane, we see the first change to Technicolor, a single red rose that Skip notices while driving home. For Skip, discovering his repressed desire for sex has changed his perspective much like Betty's was changed after her conversation with Jen about sex and masturbation.

Although many in Pleasantville are responding to Jen's sexual influence, David is resistant to change. As Jen is single-handedly encouraging and transforming the girls and boys of Pleasantville into "colored," real beings, David is upset that Jen is messing with their universe and throwing things out of whack.

David: "You have no right to do this to them."

Jen: "David, listen to me for just a minute. People don't want to be geeks. They want to be attractive. They have a lot of potential; they just don't know any better."

David: "Well, they don't have that kind of potential."

Jen: "Oh yeah? Look at that." [turning David around to show him a girl enticingly blowing a pink bubble of chewing gum in front of a guy who is mesmerized by it.]

Jen is pointing out that people don't want to be a "geek," or smart; they want to be "attractive," bringing their worth back to the body again. What is interesting about Jen's character is that she serves as the instigator of change in order to bring out repressed desires of the citizens of Pleasantville, but she is actually still very resistant to change within herself. We don't see a transformation in Jen until much later in the movie when she discovers that, by beginning to explain the contents of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to someone, the pages begin to fill in. Once this happens, Jen discovers a book by D.H. Lawrence. The significance of D.H. Lawrence is interesting because, not only is he known as a misogynist in the literary world, but he also despised the cinema (Williams 2). Linda Ruth Williams writes, "Philosophically suspicious of looking, [Lawrence] also spent most of his time professionally engaged in artistic acts of looking, for his fiction is animated in visual scenes, dramas in which the gaze is focused and exchanged" (4). Using Lawrence as Jen's author of interest as she breaks free of her own body leads the viewer to believe that Jen has not lost her sexual virtues but has transformed them and created herself to be more complex and more than just a body. The fact that Jen is

slowly, and somewhat unconsciously, trying to break the barriers of embodiment as identity while reading him serves to point out the dual role that Jen's character plays in the movie. She is sexual enlightenment to others but turning against sex in order to define her own authentic identity (Williams 1).

Jen's actual transformation begins when she reveals her own repressed desire. While reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Jen puts on her sweater, the same sweater set she condemned earlier in the movie. Putting on clothes rather than taking them off is symbolic of her denying her body as her true identity. Immediately after putting on her sweater, Jen reaches for a pair of eyeglasses. As she puts them on and begins reading again, the camera pans to a black-and-white picture of her on the table looking studious in her glasses, further signifying Jen's transformation into her real self. The fact that Jen is embracing the "geek" in her and ignoring her "attractiveness" tells the audience that Jen is no longer relying on her body to find her place in the world. The final act of defiance to embodiment is when Skip comes to Jen's window so they can run off to have sex. The new Jen looks annoyed and sends Skip away, saying that she can't go because she is studying. Shutting the window on Skip seals Jen's fate and signifies her final transformation. The next morning, when Jen wakes up, she is in color. At the end of the movie, Jen chooses to stay in Pleasantville where she has a chance to go to college, her "real" desire being realized.

Betty's fate at the end of the film is not quite as clear. Betty is shown sitting to the left of George on a bench, contemplating what will happen next in her life.

George laughingly comments that he doesn't know and then the screen pans back to

Betty who looks to her right again where now Bill is sitting next to her who also doesn't know what happens next. The cinematography of this scene depicts Betty's choices as a woman, a life with George or a life with Bill. But Betty could have other options such as choosing to be on her own or going to school to learn her own passions outside of a relationship where a man is still calling the shots. However, it seems that, symbolically, the cinematography of the movie suggests that picking one man or the other are Betty's only two options.

George and David/Bud, in much the same way as Betty and Jen/Mary Sue, are utilized as opposing examples of the reality of masculinity. George represents the traditional 1950s provider and man of the house who is also emotionally closed off and detached from his wife and family. David (Bud), on the other hand, is more emotionally mature than his father but stereotypically un-masculine, even by 1990s standards. By juxtaposing the two primary representatives of masculinity, we see a dichotomy of issues going on in both the 1950s and the 1990s.

George, for most of the first half of the film, really only appears as a backdrop to what is going on with the women from a feminine perspective. That is a strategic move on the part of the story because, referring back to Mock's comments of repression, men were often clueless to the woman's plight. George, being a member of the white, male-dominant men's club, is representative of what masculinity was supposed to look like in the 1950s. It is no accident that the men holding all the power in the film, those who were part of the mayor's Chamber of Commerce, were the slowest to transform and change color. George, for most of the film, served as comedic relief in his portrayal of the stereotypical patriarch coming home from

work to his dinner and newspaper while his wife took care of everything at home. George doesn't notice the changes going on around him until he comes home one day to no dinner and no wife. His complete disorientation as he stumbles into the bowling alley, though funny, is a not-so-subtle comment on the normalized state of patriarchy.

George doesn't acknowledge the real of his desires until the end of the movie when his son pushes him to see the beauty of his wife and the emotional connection he is lacking with her. His repressed desire for true, authentic connection with Betty as opposed to playing the masculine role of emotionally disconnected provider is revealed through his "un-masculine" shedding of tears and his change to Technicolor.

David (Bud)'s transformation also comes very late in the movie. Before entering Pleasantville, David is a shy, non-confrontational boy hiding from manhood behind the façade of the TV sitcom, *Pleasantville*. David's reality is shrouded in the repressed desire to be assertive and confident. We get a sense of that repression in the opening scene when David is seemingly trying to woo a girl, but as the scene closes, the camera pans out to show that David is actually observing the girl from a distance and only fantasizing about wooing her. David lives out his desires through his obsession with *Pleasantville*, demonstrated by his vastly detailed knowledge of the sitcom. Being the main character of the film, David's transformation is gradual. Much like Jen, he serves as a catalyst for change within Pleasantville, due to his 90s sensibilities. However, despite his ability to bring out the color in others, he doesn't change color himself until his own desire is realized. Only when David (Bud)

displays real aggression by defending his mother from an imminent attack and punching Whitey, do we see David's desires realized. By breaking out of his fantasy and dealing with his issues head on, David embraces his assertiveness. That assertiveness and aggression is also symbolic of David becoming a man and demonstrating his true masculinity. Whereas George embraced his emotional side, David asserted his aggressive side. The dichotomy of these two representations of masculinity and male repressed desire shows how issues of masculinity function within reality.

The suggestion of change within *Pleasantville* without actually seeing change is common within Hollywood. Cultural manipulation is controlled by those in power. Nancy J. Holland presents the ideas of Herbert Marcuse in her article, "Looking Backwards: A Feminist Revisits Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*." Marcuse rereads Freud from a Marxist perspective in which Holland quotes,

domination is exercised by a particular group of individuals in order [for them] to sustain and enhance [themselves] in a privileged position. Such domination does not exclude technical, material, and intellectual progress, but only as an unavoidable by-product while preserving irrational scarcity, want, and constraint. (70)

Holland is using this reading to show that repression is often used to sustain dominance and power. Many films in Hollywood portray the real of our repressed desires, but they do so on their own terms, casting those desires in a light of heteronormativity and whiteness, therefore maintaining tight control over their dominance. Tammie Kennedy writes on this issue, "Gaining acceptance and

membership into the heteronormative society often depends on diluting any kind of queer sensibility that might challenge the centrality of neoliberal, middle-class values that also squelch racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender diversity” (4). *Pleasantville* does just that. The serious issues of gender and race equality are played out in a world that is palatable to the white middle-class, and it keeps the dominance of white male patriarchy in control.

Jackie Byers addresses the progress of Hollywood film as it relates to feminist criticism in her book, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*. “If we are to avoid reproducing the very forms of power we seek to challenge, feminist theorists and critics cannot uncritically adopt the categories and modes of thought so directly responsible for women’s (and therefore men’s) oppression. We must realize that criticism is always a social and political activity” (4). Byars looks specifically at film in the 1950s because that was the period of time when the “social fabric of America had begun to weaken” (8) due to women moving out into the workplace, changing the dynamics of the family structure. Byars makes the point that even if women have come a long way within certain areas of social life, in film they still have a long way to go to be seen as equal to the masculine dominance of the plots and discourses.

Patriarchy is a major barrier to progress within *Pleasantville* as well. One of the most compelling scenes in the movie is when the men, all members of the Chamber of Commerce and all very resistant to the changes occurring, are at the bowling alley and George comes stumbling in and out of the rain. He looks confused and disoriented. After coming home to an empty house and no dinner, he no longer

knows what to do with himself. The mayor, the primary symbol of patriarchy within the town, feels the need to “rally his troops” and fight the changes that are happening, clearly enacting the forces of patriarchy to maintain the white male dominance within the town. From his perceived pulpit, thanks to camera angles facing upward and signifying his rank on a pedestal of power, the mayor gives his speech.

Mayor: “Well, we’re safe for now. Thank goodness we’re in a bowling alley. But if George here doesn’t get his dinner, any one of us could be next. It could be you, Gus; or you, Roy; or even you, Ralph. That is real rain out there, gentlemen. This isn’t some little virus that’ll clear up on its own. Something is happening to our town, and I think we can all see where it’s coming from. Roy, why don’t you show them what you showed me before.”

Roy: “Bob.” [looking worried]

Mayor: “It’s okay, Roy. Come on up here.”

[Roy comes up to the front and shows his shirt burned with an iron print. There are gasps of shock.]

Mayor: “He asked her what she was doing. She said nothing. She was just *thinking*. My friends, this isn’t just about George’s dinner; it’s not about Roy’s shirt. It’s a question of values. It’s a question of whether or not we want to hold onto those values that make this place great. So, a time has come to make a decision. Are we in this thing alone or are we in it together? “

[The men gradually join in a communal chant, "Together!"]

The "family values" the mayor speaks of bring us back to Mock's quote about the 1950s, and the desire to keep those family values firmly in place, with a nuclear home and traditional family structure. These are still issues being faced in the 1990s as well as today. It reminds us that there has been progress but not enough.

Traditional families are still considered to be the definition of success in the reality of society today. Single-parent homes and families with same-sex partners as parents are still not considered traditional nor are they being accepted as normal.

The "family values" of non-traditional family systems are being challenged on a regular basis by the conservative Christian right as well as society in general. In the case of same-sex parent families, the real of their situations are being hidden or repressed and, in many states, even denied.

A key scene in the movie signifies the ultimate change of Pleasantville. The mayor is holding a trial against Bud and Bill for painting a mural on the soda shop building's wall, going against the rules of the town. The mayor's dominance is very clear with him set high up on his bench, camera angle looking up at him in the same way it was when giving his earlier speech in the bowling alley about holding onto their values. The mayor finally shows his "true colors" by being provoked into anger and actually changing from black-and-white to color. As the father figure of the community, releasing his repressed emotions and showing his *real* self triggers the entire town and population to finally turn color. Symbolically, this is an important detail because the town is not given permission to turn completely Technicolor without the consent of the patriarch, whether voluntary or not. Once the mayor is

transformed, the entire community transforms, revealing a completely changed society. The power of the change still lies with the man.

Heavily referenced in gender critiques of film, Tania Modleski writes about the importance of feminist criticism coming from women rather than men. In the majority of cases in the 1990s, feminist criticism and theory still needed a stamp of approval from men. This was especially true in Hollywood and among film producers. The film industry is still a male-dominated operation. Modleski writes,

For feminism has emphasized from the beginning the *oppressiveness* of the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality and the institution it supports – that of the nuclear family. The family is the structural unit keeping women economically and physically dependent on men; separating women from other women; and, in extreme (but by no means uncommon) cases, providing the space in which men may abuse women with impunity. (13)

Modleski's criticism of the nuclear family as a structural impediment to new ways of looking at feminism makes a statement to how far feminism still needs to go in order to change the mindset of American family values. *Pleasantville* does not go far enough to promote the feminist cause nor does it break with the traditional nuclear family structure.

Pleasantville does begin to expose *some* of the repressed issues going on during the 1950s. By taking two kids with a 90s sensibility and dropping them into the 1950s world, they were meant to invoke havoc, creating change that would push the reality of Pleasantville into an enlightened and real society. The promise at the

end of the movie is a utopia where everyone reveals their true emotions and thoughts and progress allows for all citizens to follow their passions and desires. However, there are still many problems in this film that keep real, authentic issues of culture in the repressed state.

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