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"A Kindler, Gentler Time": How Pleasantville and The Truman Show "Fix" the 1950s Suburban Ideal

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A person living in the 1990s finds herself walking around inside a television show. The cars, the haircuts, and the rows of single-family houses with immaculate lawns all tell her that she's taken a trip to 1950s suburbia. She could be any actress hired to play a role on *The Truman Show*; or she could be one of the teenagers trapped in the sitcom *Pleasantville*. The two movies, both released in 1998, have premises that are almost mirror images of one another. In *The Truman Show,* Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) unwittingly stars in the world's most popular reality TV show. His daily routine is filmed with secret cameras and broadcast to viewers' homes, and everyone he interacts with is actually an actor. On their breaks they live normal lives in the 1990s, but at work they pretend to live in the only world Truman has ever known: a constructed, town-sized set with a 1950s aesthetic. In *Pleasantville*, the premise is almost inverted. High school-age twins Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) and David (Tobey Maguire) are sucked out of their lives in the 1990s and trapped in the reruns of a family sitcom from the 1950s. In a reversal from *The Truman Show,* the main characters who are trapped in the show are actually the only ones who know that the picture of 1950s suburbia they inhabit is not real.

Both the films reflect 1990s nostalgia for the 1950s by placing their characters in a television show that is either set in or aesthetically inspired by the 1950s. In *Pleasantville,* David and Jen are trapped in the reruns of a sitcom that diegetically, or in the world of the film, aired in

the 1950s. Though David is a huge fan of the show while Jen is more interested in boys and clothes, they must figure out how to work together to navigate the black-and-white world of the picture-perfect 1950s neighborhood they find themselves stuck in. As they introduce change and begin knocking the town's routines off kilter, characters in the show start to experience real emotions for the first time; and slowly but surely, the world of *Pleasantville* starts to turn from grayscale to technicolor. Once the town gains color (1:47:47), its rows of pastel cars and brick buildings start to look like the town in *The Truman Show*, Seahaven. In Seahaven, Truman grew up surrounded by aesthetic markers of suburban postwar America: like the white picket fences and the cheery colors. Truman starts out the film content in his constructed small town, and unaware that he is a television show character. His unflaggingly chipper personality aligns with a nostalgic image of a sunny, wholesome 1950s.

Pleasantville and *The Truman Show* are not the only media from their era to reflect a nostalgia for some idyllic image of suburban America associated with the 1950s. In the *Friends* episode "The One Where Chandler Gets Caught," for example, Monica and Chandler struggle to tell the rest of the group that they're moving to the suburbs to start a family. Monica earnestly explains, "we want a lawn, and a swing set." Chandler adds, "and a street where our kids can ride their bikes, and maybe an ice cream truck can go by." Ross delivers the sarcastic punchline: "so you want to buy a house in the 1950s?" Though that episode aired in the early 2000s, the joke draws on an anxiety about family values and a nostalgia for clean, suburban innocence that animated the 1990s. Conservatives of the decade decried the rising divorce rate and the increase in nontraditional families, fearing that children of divorced parents (Coontz 221), working mothers (215), and same sex couples (21) would be somehow damaged or disadvantaged. The concerned often compared what they saw as the decade's fractured families with an image of the

stable, suburban family unit of the 1950s. This mythologized family, with a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and a couple of happy, well-adjusted children, was cast as a wholesome contrast to the crumbling home lives of the 1990s.

That contrast between the 1990s and the 1950s was grounded in images from television. The 1950s saw the development of the family sitcom, a show that typically depicted a close-knit, white, middle class suburban household successfully navigating the relatively low-stakes problems of domestic life (Halliwell 158-61). A typical episode would involve the working father and housewife mother guiding their children gently, patiently, and with a loving sense of humor through some childhood predicament. By the end of the episode, the kids would have learned a moral lesson. Shows like *Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best,* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* cemented the picture of the ideal family in the American imagination. The image that Monica and Chandler invoke, of kids on bikes pedaling past welcoming green lawns on safe suburban streets, comes right out of shows like *Leave it to Beaver.* That episode of *Friends* even references the classic 1950s sitcom: when Monica describes the beautiful maple trees in their new suburban neighborhood, Phoebe replies, "again with the nature! What are you, beavers?" Early seasons of *Leave it to Beaver* took place on Mapleton Drive, so the mention of maples and beavers calls to mind the show's happy family with their tidy house, manicured lawn, and white picket fence.

The Truman Show and *Pleasantville* draw on this genre too. *Pleasantville* invents its own family sitcom modeled directly after shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*; the fictional TV show *Pleasantville* is meant to be another example of the popular genre. *The Truman Show* creates a sort of hybrid. It is a reality show, but the town's strong 1950s aesthetic combined with elements like Truman's highly regular routines, his wholesome and simple life,

and his repeated catchphrases, strongly evoke those family sitcoms. These sitcoms' representations of 1950s suburbia are comforting, safe, and a contrast to conservative fears about the 1990s. The television show *Pleasantville's* reruns are even advertised: "flash back to kinder, gentler times" (1:48), a reference to George H. W. Bush's 1988 speech in which he called for a return to a "kinder, gentler nation" (American Presidency Project). This allusion associates the show explicitly with American nostalgia for the 1950s.

To audiences of the 1990s who watched *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* in theaters, 1950s suburbia represents something more than a fun retro setting. It is what Greg Dickinson calls "the decentered center of US life," a symbol of safe, wholesome, traditional American familial life. In having characters travel to representations of this symbolic center of America, *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* relocates and revises what Lauren Berlant has named the pilgrimage to Washington narrative. In this narrative, an innocent or naive American (who Berlant terms the "infantile citizen") visits the nation's capital, expecting it to be "practically utopian" (29). However, when he arrives in the capital, this naive character is forced to encounter the reality of the nation. He is exposed to some aspect of the national character that complicates his patriotic idealism, like political corruption or racism. Though temporarily crushed by the violation of the values that he believes represent true America, he is ultimately able to mobilize his outrage to repair the problem and restore justice. He then returns home less naively idealistic, but with a renewed faith in the nation that is ultimately stronger for being more mature and realistic.

The Truman Show and *Pleasantville* are both pilgrimage narratives, similar to Lauren Berlant's pilgrimage to Washington, DC. Instead of locating America in the nation's capital, though, these films locate America in the idealized suburbs of the 1950s. I propose that this

pilgrimage differs from the one Berlant outlines in one crucial way: the capital can be visited at any time, but if America is really located in 1950s suburbia, then citizens of the 1990s have missed the boat on encountering the nation. The anxiety that "real" America may be a relic of the past may help explain why both these movies' versions of the 1950s have to be manufactured and mediated by television. These films associate the 1950s with the camera of the television show, which they depict as manipulable and unreliable. In contrast, they associate the perspective of the 1990s with the seemingly objective camera of the film itself. The television shows in both movies construct a version of the 1950s that is "fixed" by 1990s values, erasing or repairing the racism and sexism associated with the decade. At the same time, though, in refusing to allow women to partake or succeed in pilgrimages, and in excluding people of color from meaningful roles in the narrative, both films ultimately advance the argument that the only people equipped to successfully encounter the nation and return wiser to the 1990s are white men.

Fixing the Look and Feel of Suburbia

Both *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* ground their aesthetic in the image of the 1950s suburb. In some ways they rely on this image to establish an idyllic, all-American environment, and in others they critique and attempt to repair problems associated with 1950s suburbia. The original modern American suburb was Levittown, NY. The first of several Levittowns built by the Levitt family, the Long Island community opened in 1947. It was intentionally designed to feel entirely different from cramped, grid-like urban environments. Cookie-cutter homes, spaced sixty feet apart from the neighbors to create room for sprawling lawns, were placed on wide, curving roads. The space was intended to feel picturesque, and the town's creators took care to

keep it that way. When signing a lease, residents agreed to cut their lawns and remove weeds at least once a week, and to refrain from hanging laundry outside (Kushner 42). The Levitts' idea of what a picturesque community looked like was also informed by racism: residents agreed not to allow their homes to be "used or occupied" by anyone who was not white (43). Even after this language in the lease was ruled unconstitutional, the policy remained unofficially in place, and the suburb remained entirely white for over a decade. Levittown, NY was massively popular, quickly spawning the creation of more Levittowns in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and eventually all across the country.[1] With affordable homes, and federal funding available to help white veterans make down payments, the Levitts filled their neighborhoods and became "icons of optimism...on par with Walt Disney and Henry Ford" (Kushner 46). America's Levittowns, and the other planned suburbs that followed in its footsteps, became symbols of the American dream and its implicit whiteness.

Levittown would look familiar to anyone who has watched *The Truman Show* or *Pleasantville,* and that is because the community built by the Levitts helped shape an enduring picture of what suburbia looks like in the American imagination. This image has carried through the sitcoms of the 1950s with their suburban settings (one recent Newsday article compared Levittown with an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*) to *Friends'* 21st century nostalgia for postwar suburban life. Greg Dickinson identifies four key components of what he calls the "visual vocabulary of the suburbs," which could come straight out of Levittown's original lease agreement: the "single-family detached house," the automobile, the "well-kept lawns," and "the presence of whiteness and the nearly complete absence of nonwhite faces and non-Anglo

[1] In the 1990s, David watches a TV marathon of *Pleasantville* that advertises "a free trip to the Pleasantville of your choice," showing a United States map with a dozen towns called Pleasantville all across the country.

American cultures." Both *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* alternately draw on and complicate this vocabulary to establish an idealized image of suburbia.

The two films both tell us that we're in this idealized world from the moment characters step outside their homes. As soon as we see their neighborhoods, the films' use of Dickinson's visual vocabulary locates us in 1950s suburbia. When David and Jen (or Bud and Mary Sue, as they're known in the world of the TV show) leave their home, they walk past rows of houses, each with their own convertible and well-maintained front lawn. Each neighbor they pass by is white, and no people of color ever appear in the town of Pleasantville. *The Truman Show* also establishes a vision of the idyllic suburban environment when Truman first leaves his home. The rows of pastel-colored houses, each with a cared-for lawn and a shiny car parked in the driveway, align with the first three components of "filmic visions of the suburbs." It looks like Levittown, and we are perhaps encouraged to make this association by the fact that Levittown and other early American suburbs first opened during Harry S. Truman's presidency.

But even as the movie establishes this vision of idealized postwar suburbia, it adjusts it to better align with 1990s sensibilities. As Truman surveys his neighborhood, he is greeted by the black family that lives across the street from him. This moment tells us that even though Truman's environment borrows the aesthetic of 1950s suburbia, he is not living in an authentic version of the 1950s; the segregation that was built into the suburbs would have prevented Truman and this family from being next door neighbors. Truman's multicultural neighborhood is an example of what Michael Dwyer calls "fixing the fifties." Dwyer writes about time travel narratives that center on the 1950s, especially *Back to the Future*. Though *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* are not exactly time travel narratives, his framework is useful because both films involve a trip to the 50s from a later decade. Dwyer argues that films like *Back to the Future*

"fix" the 1950s in two senses: they depict the decade itself as fixed (as in static and unchanging), and they depict the decade's problems being fixed (as in repaired.)[2]

The television shows in *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* serve to do both types of fixing. In *Pleasantville*, the 1950s are fixed as in static because the plotlines of each episode never change. David watches endless reruns of *Pleasantville* at home, and part of the comfort in that is that the routines and stories remain fixed. *The Truman Show* fixes the 1950s in a similar way, by keeping the TV show's aesthetics rooted in the 1950s. In flashbacks, we can tell that styles have not changed between Truman's college years and his thirties (19:19-25:12). Seahaven's aesthetic is not a temporary trend but a lifelong constant. Even as the world around the television show changes, the show's "look" remains fixed in a vision of 1950s suburbia.

Both films also use their diegetic TV shows to fix the 1950s as in repair it. This process involves adjusting the earlier decade to make it align with values or norms of the 1990s. Showrunners living in the 1990s create a fun, retro, nostalgic 1950s vibe for the set of *The Truman Show.* But this 1950s-inspired set has "fixed" elements of the decade that consumers of the 1990s would likely find uncomfortable or shameful. It has done away with segregation and created a multicultural suburban paradise for Truman, drawing on the style of the past but the politics of the present. Additionally, *The Truman Show* partially fixes the narrow roles for women in popular memory of the 1950s. Though many women in the 1950s worked, sitcoms set in suburbia mostly depicted women as housewives. Truman's wife has an independent career as a nurse in Seahaven (40:55), suggesting that women are free to do more than cook, clean and

[2] *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* arguably "fix the fifties" in a third sense as well. Both television shows are also fixed as in rigged. *Pleasantville* is entirely scripted, and the outcomes of each episode are fixed from the beginning. *The Truman Show* is also rigged. Their extensive surveillance and their use of earpieces that let the actors respond to instructions in real time allow the producers to control all outcomes on the show.

maintain the household in this version of the 1950s. In *Pleasantville*, David and Jen "fix" the TV show's representation of the 1950s by drawing characters out of their rigid, scripted routines, and teaching them to be unafraid of independent thinking and sexual desire.[3]

Framing Unreal Suburbia with the Unreliable Camera

Both *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* treat the camera of the television show as subjective and the camera of the film as objective. This juxtaposition suggests that the idealized environment portrayed in these television shows is ultimately false. Camera angles are far from the only technique used to remind us that this 1950s suburbia is somehow unreal. Multiple details in both films tell us that there is something false about the vision of the 1950s we are looking at. Though the world of *The Truman Show* is predominantly white, the presence of some people of color signals to the audience that his home community of Seahaven is a less than perfectly faithful recreation of the decade. *Pleasantville*, too, shows us that we are in a constructed version of 1950s suburbia, not the real thing. The world is in black and white, ensuring the viewer can't forget that their gaze is being mediated by a camera incapable of capturing the full spectrum of reality. Other aspects of the town remind the film's viewers that they're looking at a set of the 1950s, not the real thing; the books in the library have blank pages (25:46), the bathroom stalls have no toilets (30:48), and there is no map of the world beyond

[3] This fixing of the decade's supposed rigidity and suppression is associated with the sounds of black musicians. Even though there are no people of color in the world of *Pleasantville*, the presence of songs by Etta James, Miles Davis, and Billy Ward and the Dominoes reflect the same kind of mentality on display in *The Truman Show*. In both films, 1990s multicultural values fix the racism of the 1950s by inserting blackness into the background of suburbia. Black extras and unnamed minor characters populate the background of *The Truman Show*, and the sounds of black musicians provide the background music in *Pleasantville*.

Pleasantville (22:23). If something won't need to appear on camera, like the insides of a book or a bathroom stall, it doesn't exist in Pleasantville.

However, the camera is one of the most significant tools that each film uses to remind the viewer that they are looking at a constructed or unreal version of 1950s suburbia. Since both movies center a television show, both movies set up an opposition between the manipulable cameras of the show and the supposedly more objective cameras of the film itself. Towards the beginning of *The Truman Show,* we watch Truman walk from his front door to his car in a series of twelve shots that come from seven different angles. Simone Knox argues that each shot we see can be explained by a hidden camera of the television show that Truman unwittingly stars in. She maps out that there must be two pointing at different angles in the trees to the left of his front door, one in the house directly across the street, one on his next door neighbor's trash can, one each in the bushes and the pillar near his car, and one on his lapel (Knox 4). Toggling between the seven cameras, the show's producers swivel and zoom to show Truman's progress as he greets his neighbors, steps across the lawn, and pets a dog on his way to his car. As we watch the film *The Truman Show*, we understand that we are also watching the diegetic television show *The Truman Show;* we are seeing exactly what the show's fans are seeing broadcast to their TVs.

We begin to see outside the narrative planned and produced by the showrunners when we are allowed to see through the lens of the film camera rather than the television camera. When Truman sees a lantern suddenly falling out of the sky, the shots of his surprised and curious reaction follow the same patterns as the shots of his walk from the front door to the car. They can all be attributed to one of the cameras that Knox identifies. However, she points out that in between the shots of Truman walking to his car and the ones of him examining the lantern, there are a series of shots that cannot come from a hidden camera of the movie's televised reality

show. Within the first four minutes of the film, we watch the lantern fall out of the sky from an angle far too high up for its camera to be attached to any structure (3:11). We then watch it hit the ground and shatter in an extreme close up (3:16). Since the showrunners did not predict where the lantern would fall, or even that it would fall at all, it seems unlikely that they would have a hidden camera aimed at that particular, small patch of empty road. Those shots, Knox argues, do not come from the reality TV show *The Truman Show;* they come from the movie *The Truman Show.* In moments of "diegetic disruption" (Knox 8), where unpredictable "real life" intrudes into the planned television show, the film camera shows us a reality that the TV cameras were not set up to capture.

In *Pleasantville,* a similar relationship between the TV cameras and the film cameras exists. When 1990s twins David and Jennifer first find themselves sucked into the 1950s family sitcom, the shots of them sitting stunned in a black-and-white living room (13:31-13:44) are filmed in the style of a multi-camera sitcom. The style, which was made famous by *I Love Lucy,* defined the family sitcoms of the 1950s and '60s that *Pleasantville* is based on. In a multi-camera sitcom the set includes three walls of a room; where the fourth wall would be, instead there are three or four cameras pointed at the inside of the set. The two outer cameras shoot cross shots of the characters, capturing them at an angle as they move or speak, typically in close-up. The one or two inner cameras capture wide shots that show the entire room and all the characters in it, and often zoom in to medium shots as well. When David and Jennifer first enter the show *Pleasantville,* they are inserted directly into a medium shot of Bud and Mary Sue Parker taken by one of the central cameras. As they look around, baffled (13:31), we can see that they have replaced the teenage children of *Pleasantville's* Parker family in the exact same shot that was playing on their television moments earlier. They are in a *Pleasantville* rerun. As their

conversation becomes increasingly frantic, the film cuts between shots that could all be attributed to a sitcom's outer or central cameras (13:39-56). They are being filmed as if they are on the set of a multi-camera sitcom, where cameras and a live audience replace the room's unseen fourth wall.

Something changes, though, when David and Jen hear someone say "psst, over here!" (13:56). In a close up of David shot by an outer camera, we see him and Jen look towards where the fourth wall should be: where on a sitcom like *Pleasantville,* the cameras and the live studio audience sit. The sound is coming from that wall. The next shot is one that cannot exist in a multi-camera sitcom. It is an eyeline shot, showing the perspective of David and Jen as they look down at the television leaning against the room's previously-unseen fourth wall: a wall that could not exist if this were a set. This shot establishes for certain that David and Jen have not been sent to the set of the sitcom *Pleasantville.* They are not trapped in the show as a production, they are trapped in the show made real. The man who walked through the room a moment earlier is not an actor playing George Parker to the cameras, he is the real George Parker walking within the four walls of his real black-and-white home.

Later in the movie, we will learn that David and Jen's actions are affecting the plotlines in the TV show's reruns; so alongside the "real" Pleasantville of the film that David and Jen are immersed in, there is also a TV show *Pleasantville* being broadcast with the conventional appearance of the multi-camera sitcom, only with changed storylines and with David and Jen in the roles of Bud and Mary Sue. These coexisting *Pleasantvilles* mean two sets of cameras. When David and Jen first arrived in *Pleasantville,* we saw their confusion through the TV show cameras. But when they started to interact with the television screen, we experienced the same phenomenon that appeared in the lantern scene in *The Truman Show.* We saw something that the

TV cameras could not possibly show us, and so we knew that we were looking through the cameras of the film instead of the cameras of the diegetic television show.

In both movies these types of transitions serve to associate film with the real, and television with the planned, manipulated or constructed. In *The Truman Show*, most shots can be attributed to the television show. Truman lives entirely in the constructed world of the television show, and we experience his world through that lens (literally!). It is the exceptional moment that switches us to the perspective of the film. But in *Pleasantville,* once this first scene transitions from the cameras of the television show to the cameras of the film, we mostly stay in that mode. The TV show has turned into a full, real world, and we experience it that way along with David and Jen. In *Pleasantville,* the exceptional moment is when we return to the multi-camera mode of a sitcom. But in both movies, the television cameras are associated with the pre-planned, constructed, repetitive routines of family sitcoms. In a later scene in *Pleasantville,* when Betty Parker (Joan Allen) spends an evening with the local diner's owner (Jeff Daniels), we see George (William H. Macy) return home after work and search the empty house for his wife and the meal he's sure she has prepared for him. As he wanders the empty rooms, repeating the lines, "honey, I'm home," and "where's my dinner?" he is consistently shot like a character on a sitcom set. He seems to be clinging to the predictable routine of the television show *Pleasantville,* and so the cameras trained on him reflect that. But the simple script he is repeating is not suited to the "real," complex world of the film *Pleasantville* that he now lives in.

Knox characterizes these transitions in *The Truman Show* (which I argue also occur in *Pleasantville),* as setting up an "opposition between the manipulated and manipulable 'television' camera and the more truthful 'film' camera" (9). The movies ask us to see the cameras shooting the reality show that Truman lives in or the sitcom that the Parkers inhabit as

representing a scripted, inauthentic version of human life. In contrast, the cameras of the film show more than the sitcom cameras can, give us a fuller and more accurate picture, and therefore seem more objective or "real." The TV show cameras are visible and noticeable, because the audience can see how they manipulate the shot or limit the audience's view. But the film cameras go unseen and unnoticed, almost as if they aren't also mediating the audience's experience right alongside the TV show cameras. These films are self-consciously characterizing film as unmanipulated and real, and television as manipulated or fake.

Both *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* present an idealized image of a suburban American paradise that is linked to the planned suburbs and popular sitcoms of the 1950s. In doing so, they place their characters in an environment that symbolizes the height of safety, wholesomeness, and traditional family values in the American imagination: an environment that many feared was decaying or already lost by the 1990s. This "decentered center of US life" (Dickinson), a representation of all that is good and hopeful about America, is not only tied to a specific type of community but to a specific decade too. Perhaps because of this fear that "real" or "good" America is long gone, the films also take care to tell the audience that the perfect suburban paradise they create is somehow false. The towns of Pleasantville and Seahaven are both televisions sets. They are manipulated, mediated and unreal representations of the 1950s ideal. The towns represent an America that sees itself as a "haven" or "pleasant," but the "ville" in Pleasantville is a constructed set, and the "sea" in Seahaven is a man-made body of water. Both are built to separate the suburbs entirely from the America they are supposed to embody.

Repairing and Reinforcing Bigotry in *Pleasantville's* Pilgrimage

So what does it mean to make a pilgrimage to an embodiment of America that no longer exists, that is cut off from the reality of the nation? In Berlant's framework, the nation is in theory accessible to every citizen. You encounter the nation by taking a trip to its capital. In the type of mediated pilgrimage that occurs in *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville,* though, the nation is largely inaccessible. Anyone can watch it on TV, but some form of manipulation needs to occur for citizens to encounter America themselves. Though *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* have similar premises, the pilgrimage narrative operates differently in each. *Pleasantville* lines up most directly with Berlant's version of the narrative, in which the main character or characters travel to encounter the nation themselves.

Berlant's pilgrimage narrative framework can be broken down into six basic steps: naive idealism, an encounter with the nation, disillusionment, repairing the nation, a renewal of faith in the nation, and a triumphant return home. This means the characters that the film sets up for a pilgrimage narrative will start out naively idealistic, travel to encounter the symbolic center of the nation, and then become somehow disillusioned. In *Pleasantville,* both David and Jen are trapped inside the sitcom. However, only David is set up to undertake a pilgrimage.

In his life in the 1990s, David adores the television show *Pleasantville.* He watches its reruns religiously and has memorized an impressive amount of the show's trivia. He considers the stars of the show, the Parkers, to be a simpler and happier mirror of his own family life. Like his family, they live in the suburbs with a teenage son and daughter. However, the Parkers parents have a loving marriage and show interest and pride in their children. As David watches *Pleasantville's* Bud (Kevin Connors) present an award for his science fair project to his parents and sister, he can hear his own mom (Jane Kaczmarek) on the phone angrily trying to persuade

his absent father to follow through on a promise to see David and Jen. On the television, Mrs. Parker patiently and lovingly corrects Bud's excited rambling: "darling, that's wonderful, except there's no such word as 'swellest'" (5:28). The camera cuts to a closeup to show her fondly placing her hand on her son's shoulder. At the same instant, David's mother frustratedly snaps, "no, that's not the point. The point is you're supposed to see them. Fine, fine, fine, see them another time" (5:37). As she speaks, the camera zooms into a closeup on David, just like the one *Pleasantville* gave us of Bud. This closeup, though, highlights how alone David is in comparison. His mom has her back to him (5:45) and is paying no attention to him as he sits alone on the couch. When he murmurs, "what's a mother to do?" (5:46), he is both predicting the catchphrase that Mrs. Parker will momentarily recite with an affectionate shrug (5:47), and reacting to his own mother's frustration and distance. *Pleasantville* symbolizes the close, uncomplicated family he longs for: those family values that might be decaying in the 1990s, that were supposedly strong and stable in the 1950s.

When he initially enters the television show world of *Pleasantville,* David is shocked and upset. But once he leaves the house and steps outside, surrounded by the visual vocabulary of the suburbs, he starts to feel a sort of excitement. As he passes by the wide lawns and adorable homes, an incredulous smile appears and grows (18:30-48). He seems surprised and delighted by how well he fits in. He can address his neighbor by name (Mr. Simpson), can accurately respond to his friendly question about Mr. Parker's new car ("oh yeah, a Buick!"), and easily slips into the right slang ("it's swell!") (18:31-38). Though he wants to get home, he also seems to enjoy going about Bud's daily routine; his biggest worry appears to be making sure Jen doesn't throw the town of Pleasantville off its wholesome rhythm. Because his love of *Pleasantville* is so strong, it takes a while for him to become disillusioned. He brushes aside the details that disturb

Jen, like the fact that the books in the library have no text, or that his boss is entirely at a loss as to how to open up the shop if his scripted routine is even slightly disrupted.

At first David tries to prevent the town from changing, but even when he starts to accept and even enjoy the change he doesn't seem particularly disillusioned with the status quo in Pleasantville. He merely seems to believe it can be improved. David's disillusionment comes in the final third of the movie, when the kind and friendly people of *Pleasantville* begin showing violent prejudice against the people of their town who have become technicolor. It becomes clear that in helping the town discover sexual desire and the ability to think independently, David and Jen have also introduced sexual harassment and the ability to discriminate. The town's residents start reacting with aggression and bigotry to their technicolor neighbors, at one point forcing David to defend Mrs. Parker from a grayscale crowd of teenage boys threatening to "see what's under that nice blue dress" (1:28:38-29:30). Physically fighting them off turns him to technicolor, signaling his loss of black-and-white faith in *Pleasantville*.[4] From then on, he becomes the ringleader of the technicolor people's attempt to repair their hometown. As their stores are smashed, their books are burned, and they are forced to hide from angry mobs (1:30:00-31:55), David urges calm and organizes acts of protest. He encourages the people to listen to banned music (1:36:04-30), and paint public murals with banned colors (1:37:35-38:14).

Ultimately, David fixes the bigotry of *Pleasantville* in a dramatic court scene. He and Mrs. Parker's artist love interest are on trial for creating a massive, multicolored piece of protest art in the center of town (1:42:11). As the entire population watches, he turns Mr. Parker from grayscale to technicolor by forcing him to grapple with his complicated feelings about his wife, bringing him to tears for the first time (1:44:37-46:11). Much of the grayscale audience is so

[4] And suggesting that "being a man" and using violence to defend a woman's honor is ultimately what makes him into a full human being.

moved by this display that they, too, turn to color (1:46:23-26). David is quickly able to tease out color-inducing emotional responses from every single town member, including its last hold out, the dictatorial mayor (J.T. Walsh) (1:47:00). When even the mayor is in full color, the town exits the courtroom into a completely technicolor world. For the first time, there is not a shade of gray to be seen from the blooming flowers to the blue sky (1:47:47). We soon see that other changes have taken place, too. Pleasantville is no longer disconnected from the rest of America; its busses now connect it to other cities (1:49:10), and its televisions show images of the pyramids and the Eiffel Tower (1:48:55). With its colors filled in and its borders opened, Pleasantville has joined the real world in all of its complexity. Having fixed this symbolic center of America, David can return home with a renewed faith and a more mature wisdom. We see him use this maturity and faith when he arrives back in the 1990s and must comfort his mother, who is sobbing over a date gone wrong. She feels like her life isn't the way it's "supposed to be," but David patiently explains, "there is no right car, there is no right life...it's not supposed to be anything" (1:54:37-55:10). "How'd you get so smart all of a sudden?" his mother asks in response (1:55:19).

As successful as David's pilgrimage is, there is someone who noticeably doesn't get a similar narrative: Jen.[5] Though she also travels from the 1990s to the 1950s, she doesn't start out particularly idealistic, doesn't help lead the charge in fixing the 1950s, and most strikingly, she doesn't return home at the end of the narrative. Jen's journey follows a different trajectory. She can't become disillusioned with *Pleasantville* because she never bought into the illusion in the first place. As David is beginning to enjoy blending into the friendly neighborhood where nothing goes wrong, she is still complaining, "we're, like, stuck in Nerdville!" (19:55).[6] Though

[5] The film's sidelining of Jen is reflected by the fact that Jane Kaczmarek, who plays David and Jen's 1990s mother, is credited simply as "David's Mom" (1:58:48).

[6] Every time Jen contributes something important to the narrative, *Pleasantville* seems to undermine her contribution with a joke at the expense of her intelligence or values. For example, when she first reveals

she starts out dismissive of *Pleasantville*, she grows to enjoy a life free from the distractions and demands that the 1990s imposes on young women. Ultimately, she declines to return. When her brother asks, "are you sure you don't want to come home?" she tells him, "I did the slut thing, David. It got kinda old" (1:49:38). Her (kind of jaw-dropping) reply assumes that being a woman living in the 1990s is "[doing] the slut thing." There is something about the 1990s, or at least about Jen's particular life in the 1990s, that makes being a "slut" inescapable. And there is something about the 1950s that allows her to be happier, more fulfilled and more virtuous. In having Jen make such a strong statement, the film implies that women may be better off in this fixed version of 1950s suburbia than they are in the 1990s.

Even though the film disabuses us of the notion that the 1950s were a "kinder, gentler time" (1:48) by putting violence, bigotry and sexism on display, Jen's decision to remain suggests that maybe there actually *is* something simpler and more wholesome about life in 1950s suburbia that makes it easier for women to thrive. That wholesomeness seems linked to the decade's expectations and norms for women; it's hard not to connect Jen's criticism of the 1990s with the conservative sweater and floor-length skirt she's wearing as she declares that she's done with "the slut thing." The idea that women have an easier time navigating the world within the benign constraints of the 1950s is only reinforced by David's return home. His mother is sobbing

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to David and the audience that something is off in Pleasantville by pointing out that the books in the library are blank, he suspiciously asks, "what were you doing in the library?" She replies, "I got lost!" (25:50). These moments, all played for laughs, originally seem to mock her superficial, anti-intellectual attitude. However, even when she drops that attitude and starts skipping dates with cute boys in order to read classic literature, the movie continues with the same digs at her intelligence. In one instance, when she tries to fight the book-burning mob, the screenplay inserts some comedy into the intense moment as she snaps, "this is, like, the only book I've ever read in my whole life, and you're *not* going to put it on that fire!" (1:30:38). And at the very end of the movie, when she explains to David why she's not returning to the 1990s, the serious conversation gets a moment of levity when she says, "besides, you think I even have a chance of getting into college back there?" (1:49:22). The movie insists on undercutting every one of Jen's thoughtful or helpful comments with a reminder that she isn't actually that smart.

in the kitchen precisely because she is overwhelmed by trying to navigate the "fucked up" 1990s. "I'm forty years old, it's not supposed to be like this!" she tells him (1:55:07). David seems more equipped to navigate the complexities of the 1990s than she is. He capably reassures her, wipes away her tears, and teaches her a life lesson in an almost paternal tone of voice. It is as if women can't complete the pilgrimage narrative because the 1990s is inherently hostile to women: so hostile that they cannot return home wiser and prepared to navigate the decade.

There is another way in which *Pleasantville's* fixing of the 1950s sends an odd message. When people begin turning to color, the story becomes a metaphor for the racial segregation of the Jim Crow era. The greyscale people contemptuously call their technicolor neighbors "colored" (1:25:07), using the same language directed against black people in the 1950s.[7] Signs start appearing in businesses' windows that say "no coloreds" (1:26:54), and when David is put on trial, the courtroom has separate sections for the grayscale and technicolor crowds (1:42:11). When David fixes Pleasantville, he fixes this bigotry and segregation. However, he does so by turning the entire town to color. By the time he is finished they are all the same again, and they are all white. In challenging and ending this one kind of segregation, the film fails to question or even mention the actual segregation it references. That unnamed, real segregation shapes the world of the film; it is the reason that Pleasantville is an entirely white community. There is a contradiction in the way the 1950s are repaired in the film's resolution. The ending where the town finally accepts how large and complex the world is happens in a setting that is made comfortably homogenous. The entire town is white and middle-class, and unspokenly but assuredly also Christian and heterosexual.[8] The film suggests that with the introduction of

[7] Notably, the first character to use the slur is named Whitey (1:24:53).

[8] One interesting moment creates a suggestion of non-straight sexuality. After painting their protest mural, David and Bill fall asleep on one another's shoulders. The intimate moment, where they appear to be cuddling, is immediately followed by shots of the two men on trial. They are told, "this unnatural

technicolor they are finally able to grapple with a full and nuanced picture of the world, which is what makes Pleasantville truly idyllic even despite those messy realities and emotions. But that progressive message is undermined by the implication that there exists a full and nuanced picture of the world that entirely excludes anyone who wouldn't be able to buy a house in Levittown.

These contradictions within the film don't negate its plea for tolerance or its interest in exploring the flaws overlooked by our nostalgia-tinged view of the past. However, they do call into question the way *Pleasantville* positions the cameras of the television show as creating a false vision of the 1950s, while the cameras of the film represent an impartial critique from the objective perspective of the 1990s. The film's storyline suggests that the creators of *Pleasantville* the TV sitcom have an agenda. They misrepresent the reality of the 1950s, painting it as picture-perfect while ignoring the ugly parts of history. In contrast, the objective film camera of the 1990s can see the fuller picture and reveal the distortions of television. But in actuality, the film's cameras are just as subjective as the television's. Both the diegetic television show and the film that depicts it have an agenda, and both the 1950s and the 1990s see themselves and the past subjectively. The 90's is not in a position to interrogate the flaws of the 1950s entirely objectively, just as film is not in a position to interrogate the flaws of television entirely objectively.

Co-opting the Pilgrimage in *The Truman Show*

In *The Truman Show*, Berlant's framework is complicated by the fact that our main character is the only one not to take a pilgrimage. I would propose that midway through the

depiction occurred in full public view where it was accessible to and in plain sight of minor children" (1:42:56). This language, following a shot of the two men sleeping on one another's shoulders, calls to mind 1950s era prosecutions of gay men, and the fears that Coontz names of children being exposed to homosexuality. However, this remains subtext at most. Both men are paired with a female love interest.

movie, Truman actually co-opts the pilgrimage narrative that Seahaven's actors start out on. At first, the pilgrimages in the film appear to be undertaken by those who knowingly step onto the massive television set that is the town of Seahaven. The town is less of a utopia than Pleasantville. Truman lost his father in a (staged) drowning incident (1:04:19), and his job as an insurance salesman lets us know that bad things can happen here: he delivers lines like, "if he's in a coma he's probably uninsurable" (5:48). However, like Pleasantville, the town is still depicted as an idealized vision of small-town America, full of friendly neighbors and safe enough for its inhabitants to live carefree lives. It is somehow better than most of America, as one actress suggests when she tells Truman that they should get rid of the homeless "before we become just like the rest of the country" (16:25). The show's creator, Christof (Ed Harris), describes it by saying, "Seahaven's the way the world should be" (1:07:35).

We know that this vision of "the way the world should be" is the site of pilgrimages, as an interview with Christof gives us a short history of "attempts to infiltrate the show" (1:03:08). One example shows a man bursting out of his hiding place in a young Truman's living room and lunging for the camera, shouting, "Yes! Yes! I did it! I'm on *The Truman Show!"* (1:03:22-27). Though many of these intruders are apparently motivated by a desire to be on live television, or a moral imperative to reveal the truth to Truman, the show's history of "close calls" (1:03:16) establishes the set as a site of pilgrimage that people are willing to sneak or fight their way past security to reach.[9] The film opens with interviews of the television show's actors, and their statements make it clear that they are taking a pilgrimage onto the set of Seahaven too: their

[9] Dickinson notes that another symbolic center of America is Mount Rushmore. Like Washington, DC or 1950s suburbia, Mount Rushmore is seen as embodying something fundamental about the nation. Interestingly, as a child Truman's family made a pilgrimage to visit the monument. However, he was brought to a set, not the real mountain. When looking back at photos of the trip, he comments, "it looks so small" (37:30). Meryl then quickly closes the book, as if to prevent a moment of disillusionment or suspicion.

naive idealism shines through in every word. Smiling brilliantly, one actress tells the camera, "*The Truman Show* is a lifestyle, it's a noble life. It is a truly blessed life" (1:28-37). Her conviction is apparent, as is the conviction of the actor who plays Truman's best friend. He insists, "it's all true. It's all real. Nothing here is fake, nothing you see on this show is fake. It's merely controlled" (1:58-2:05). The two feel that when they step onto the set, they are encountering something noble and authentic. They are helping to create a true, real representation of the world as it should be.

Though the actors may start out naively idealistic, each becomes disillusioned with the world of the show. The three main characters in Truman's life, each played by an actor from the 1990s, are his college crush Lauren (Natascha McElhone), his wife Meryl (Laura Linney), and his best friend Marlon (Noah Emmerich). Meryl and Marlon continue idealizing the show for far longer than Lauren; their actors are the two who give glowing interviews about their roles on the show. They become disillusioned as well, though, when Truman starts to suspect that he is being lied to. When Truman first comes to Marlon with his suspicions, the actor seems confident and fluent in his ability to redirect Truman with placating words and praise for Seahaven. When Truman asks about leaving the island, Marlon easily replies, "[I've] went all over. Never found a place like this, though. Look at that sunset Truman. It's perfect. That's the big guy. Quite a paintbrush he's got" (36:27-41). When Truman responds that he's "going away for a while," Marlon's reply, "really?" sounds utterly calm and unalarmed (36:47-55). His casual, relaxed tone and body language reflect a naive confidence in the "big guy:" the show's creator, who constructed that perfect sunset and ideal small town.[10] All the shots in the scene can be attributed

[10] In calling Christof "the big guy," Marlon creates another small similarity between the two films; the controlling figure in *Pleasantville*, the mayor, is called Big Bob (1:59:00).

to a hidden television camera, reinforcing to the viewer the validity of Marlon's confidence in the showrunners' absolute control.

As Truman grows increasingly erratic, though, Marlon's faith starts to appear shaken. When rescuing a sobbing Meryl from a threatening, knife-wielding Truman, it's hard to say to what degree Marlon is genuinely disturbed versus acting. His surprise at the violent scene before him is certainly performed, since we can safely assume that the producers sent him to restore order with full knowledge of what he would be walking into (54:55-55:20). It seems likely, though, that at least some of the disturbed expression on his face is real. He is watching Truman, the unfailingly cheerful symbol of the "true" or ideal American man, threaten his wife with a weapon. In the following scene, he attempts to reassure Truman as the two sit on the pier staring out onto the water, much as he did earlier when Truman asked about leaving the island. This time, though, there is something odd about the camera angle. The long shot prominently includes a crane that appears to be sitting in the water (55:24). It is likely a floating dock crane meant for unloading shipping containers. However, it also resembles a camera crane, used to maneuver the camera on a set. Regardless of how the audience interprets the machine, the shot creates the impression of peering at Truman and Marlon from behind the scenes, the view partially obstructed by the metal poles of a clunky piece of equipment that isn't meant to be seen by the audience in the final product. In theory, the showrunners could obtain a cleaner and more aesthetically appealing shot of the pier from nearly the same angle by mounting a hidden camera on the crane rather than partially behind it. The odd choice of camera placement makes it unclear whether this is a shot from the television show *The Truman Show* being aired to audiences around the world, or a shot from the movie *The Truman Show* indicating that the perfect image

of idyllic Seahaven is breaking down for both Truman and Marlon. As they become increasingly disillusioned, the world around them looks less polished and more constructed.

Ultimately, Marlon's disillusionment is complete when he discovers that Truman has escaped by digging a hole from his basement to his lawn. Ignoring the showrunners' instructions not to look into the camera and to salvage the situations by saying something in character, Marlon gives a panicked shrug, looks directly into the lens and whispers, "he's gone" (1:17:20-25). Marlon's choice shatters the illusion so dramatically that the producers make the decision to cut transmission for the first time in the show's history. At this point, the pilgrimage narrative requires the actors to repair the problem in this symbolic center of the nation, gaining a newfound maturity and wisdom in the process, which they will carry with them when they leave Seahaven. But the actors' attempts to repair the situation fail. In fact, their attempts to fix the world of the show only further collapse it. Christof triggers sunrise in the middle of the night to give the search party more light (1:20:10), stripping back the illusion of authenticity. When that fails to help the cast locate him, they have the actors stand frozen in position waiting for his return. The camera's slow, eerie pan across a town full of people standing perfectly still highlights the constructed nature of the show (1:20:54-59). In the end, the actors are unable to fix this representation of the 1950s. The illusion has been too completely crushed. It is not the actors who leave Seahaven and enter the 1990s wiser, but Truman. In a way, he takes over the pilgrimage narrative. Though he doesn't gain any renewed faith in America and he certainly doesn't repair the world of the show, he is the one who gets to leave the 1950s wiser and more mature. He even experiences a kind of return; he may have been born in Seahaven, but the film takes care to show us that in entering the world of the 1990s, he will return to his true love Lauren, or Sylvia, as she is known in the real world. When she is removed from the show she

urgently tells him, “get out of here. Come and find me” (27:21), and when he finally escapes we see a shot of her running to meet him (1:35:16).

Though all of the actors’ pilgrimages fail, the women of *The Truman Show’s* pilgrimages notably collapse in by far the most spectacular fashion. Of the three main actors, the male character Marlon is able to stay on the show, organizing the effort to repair the world and find Truman, unsuccessful though it may be. His moment of disillusionment involves looking out onto Truman’s lawn and shrugging into a camera. In contrast, the female characters Lauren and Meryl’s moments of disillusionment are intense, crushing, and traumatic, and they both require the actresses to be removed from the show. Lauren is violently forced into a car while screaming, “please, oh no! No, don’t listen to him, Truman! Truman! Truman!” (26:50-27:19). Meryl’s disillusionment is perhaps even more violent. In her first moment of panic, Truman prevents her from leaving the car by locking her in (47:40), scares her by driving dangerously to the point that she is near throwing up (48:36), and ignores her demands to be let out of the car (49:49). The manipulative Meryl is not a particularly sympathetic character. Especially hard to swallow is her condescending sympathy when Truman’s trauma around water, which was intentionally instilled by the showrunners, stops him in his tracks (49:58). However, it is also hard to ignore the fact that if we didn’t feel that Truman is so justified in his rage, we would likely consider his behavior abusive in this scene.

That abusive dynamic becomes even more apparent in their next interaction, which completes her disillusionment with the show. She becomes increasingly anxious as he steps threateningly towards her and shouts at her, eventually grabbing a sharp peeler and holding it between them (54:05-15). He violently grabs her and pulls her against him, and though his goal seems to be to wrestle the peeler away from her, in the process he pins his arm against her neck

and holds the sharp edge to her throat (54:30). In this moment she marks her final, utter disillusionment by looking into the camera and speaking directly to the producers, just like Marlon did. She yells for them to "do something!" (54:35). Again, while it's hard not to sympathize with Truman's genuine and justified panic as his world collapses around him, there is something disturbing about the way he chases her through the house and pushes her against the wall as she begs him to let her go (54:40-48). She ends up sobbing in Marlon's arms and demanding to leave Seahaven (54:48). It's hard to call this a mere disillusionment with *The Truman Show*; it is a violent and traumatic total shattering of not only her idealization of Seahaven, but of any sense of safety and security she felt in this symbol of America.

The way Marlon loses his idealism suggests that this image of perfect 1950s suburbia is false. The intense and violent way that Lauren and Meryl lose their idealism suggests not only that the idealized image is false, but that it is actually unsafe for or inhospitable to women. Neither get to even attempt the next step of the pilgrimage narrative, repairing Seahaven. Their disillusionments are so severe that they have to be removed from the show without the chance to try fixing the 1950s. Their stories present a kind of mirror to Jen's story in *Pleasantville.* Jen's lack of a successful pilgrimage narrative forces her to stay in the television show. While that film suggests that men can gain wisdom and maturity by stepping outside of and repairing the rigidity of the 1950s, it simultaneously suggests that women can only develop or maintain wisdom and maturity by staying within those rigid constraints. The 1950s are a stepping stool for helping David learn to navigate the more complex 1990s, but the 1950s are also a stabler, simpler, better place for Jen to live a good life. *The Truman Show* argues the exact opposite: for women, the 1950s are unstable and unsafe, and a good life there is unsustainable.

Critiquing 1950s Television from the Perspective of 1990s Film

The many similarities between *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* are striking. Both center characters from the 1990s who are trapped in a television show with a 1950s aesthetic. In both, the name of that television show is the same as the name of the film. Both involve characters grappling with a growing understanding of the world's complexities outside of TV's simplicity, and in both films the key to that understanding is associated with a body of water.[11] The color red is important in both films.[12] Interestingly, both also give their male protagonist a blonde, ponytailed love interest who wears a red sweater with a white collar (*The Truman Show* 24:11, *Pleasantville* 1:48:18).

One of the most significant similarities between the two films is the way they use the pilgrimage narrative structure and the idea of repairing the 1950s to posit the 1990s as an objective critic of the earlier decade's faults. In a typical pilgrimage narrative, a person idealizes the symbolic center of the nation, but becomes disillusioned when they visit that symbolic center and realize its imperfections. In *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*, people idealize 1950s suburbia as the symbolic center of the nation, but they can't visit it because by the 1990s it no longer exists. Instead, they must visit a constructed version of it: reruns of a 1950s television show, or a set that mimics the postwar suburban aesthetic. These versions of 1950s suburbia are built to lack imperfections. In theory, no one who visits them should become disillusioned with

[11] In *Pleasantville*, the first changes happen at the lake at Lovers Lane. Teenagers begin travelling there to have sex, bringing color to themselves and the objects around them. The lake and its surroundings are the first place that we see fully in color (1:06:45). In *The Truman Show*, the sea is a way to keep Truman in the confines of his town, and the staircase out of the set is in the sea (1:31:35).

[12] Red keeps appearing in symbolic moments in *Pleasantville*, in a way that other colors don't. For example, the first thing to turn to color is a red flower (36:40), and David starts to accept the changes in the town with a bite of a bright red apple offered by his crush (1:12:26-34). In *The Truman Show*, the color red consistently appears everywhere, from the red brick streets, to the props, cars and buildings, to the coordinated outfits of the ensemble. It is rare to see a scene without multiple characters wearing red. Some examples include 22:05, 35:24-32, and 1:20:12-19.

America, because Pleasantville and Seahaven are the nation as it should be. However, in both films, a disillusionment occurs anyway. The cameras of the film show us that the cameras of the television show depict a false, hollow version of a 1950s suburban paradise: one that an observer with a 1990s perspective might want to fix.

The films seem to state that although 1950s suburbia may be idealized as a site of real America, the 1990s (and the objective film camera aligned with the perspective of the 1990s) can see through that false image. The manipulative television camera, associated with the perspective of the 1950s, depicts a vision of the 1950s as they never really were. The vision of a "kinder, gentler time" is a lie. Despite the best efforts of the two television show's creators, Seahaven and Pleasantville do have problems, and they do disillusion those from the 1990s who undertake a pilgrimage. In *The Truman Show*, the 1990s impulse to fix this vision of the 1950s is a foolish and unattainable goal, while in *Pleasantville* it works so well that Jen decides to stay. But whether the would-be fixers are successful or not, in both films, the impulse to construct a better version of the 1950s involves criticizing some of the decade's norms and values. Both films try to fix the 1950s by repairing its racism and sexism, but both films may also inadvertently reinforce some of the ideas that they criticize. Just as the film camera is actually not so different from the television camera, the 1990s may actually not be so different from the 1950s.

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