

### **A Breakdown of a Nostalgic Utopia in Gary Ross's "*Pleasantville*"**

Nowadays many people's quality of life improved thanks to the progress of education, technology, and perhaps government's policy. But would a better life build a bridge to a Utopia in the future? Or will it just make people recall a peaceful time without modern complexity in the past? Even if people reached a place like Utopia, they still might not be satisfied with what they have possessed: immortality, harmony, simplicity, and so on. The reason is that most people want to live in a changeable world. Gary Ross is an American writer and director, who is best known for the movie "*Pleasantville*"<sup>1</sup> released in 1998. In the movie, he compares a 1950s sitcom "*Pleasantville*" to a Utopia, where residents have no ideas about knowledge, sex, and colors—everything and everyone there is in black and white—so that people would not live in a state of chaos. However, once the residents face the invasion of outsiders, they have to think about their future and even choose to break the Utopia down.

In America, the 1950s is widely considered as an ideal era when people live in a simple but not poor life. Ross describes this era in one interview: "There was no strife; it was a kinder, gentler time. And all these bromides always evoked how America used to be so happy and well-adjusted and mighty and potent, and all those things"

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<sup>1</sup> All references of the script given within the paper refer to Gary Ross. *Pleasantville*. 7 October. 1996 <<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Pleasantville.html>>.

(<http://www.avclub.com/articles/gary-ross,13563/>). This is shown in the '50s sitcom "Pleasantville," where for a long time, the main male character, David, has desired to live. Living in the highly developed 1990s, David is always implanted with ideas about competition, unemployment, AIDS, climate change, etc, problems which are common in civilization. But in Pleasantville, people do not need to worry about those problems. On the scene in David's bedroom, he talked to his friend on the phone: "Because nobody's is homeless in Pleasantville." For David, it is a world nothing bad would happen, and he could throw away unhappiness and forget about his parents' divorce there.

What exactly does the Pleasantville look like? In Pleasantville, the temperature is always 72 degrees Fahrenheit. It never rains; basketball players shoot with unflinching accuracy; the mission of firefighters is to rescue cats from trees; all the books are blank; there are only two colors: black and white; and most surprisingly, people have no ideas about sex. It is like a Utopia. "Life in *Utopia* was comfortable and worthy enough, so long as no one resented its lack of diversity, lack of colour, indeed lack of anything dynamic" (Elton 199). Residents living in a Utopia would be satisfied with their present life if they are never told that variety and color are the spices of life. They are ignorant of what is happening outside their world, not to mention having doubts about their monotonous life. So, there are no problems like AIDS happening in

Pleasantville, and nothing will go wrong. But here is a question: does “pleasant” always mean “happy” or “good”? Just as Ross admits: “I thought that was a lie, so I wanted to satirize that sort of perfection” (<http://www.avclub.com/articles/gary-ross,13563/>). On the surface, residents living in the so-called pleasant place are happy under the control. However, their curiosity and desire are enticed away from their suppression after facing the challenge of change.

This challenge is brought about by David and Jennifer when they are transited into the sitcom “Pleasantville” by accident. Jennifer is a typically modern girl who seeks interesting life and lust all the time. In the first place, she is unwilling to follow David’s instruction, leading a Pleasantville-like life; instead, she stirs the peace there and opens Pandora’s box of the residents. In geography class, the teacher and the class are surprised by her unexpected question: “What’s outside of Pleasantville?” The teacher gives her a condescending look and replies: “The end of Main Street is just the beginning again.” Residents of Pleasantville live in their small world marginalized by themselves without knowing the outside colorful world. Also, in Pleasantville, all books are blank, so the residents’ horizons are limited without doubt. Like people in the 1950s, they just enjoyed their simple life, and few of them could imagine how the high-tech would make a great progress and how much discoveries are made today.

However, after Jennifer has sex with a guy, everything gets changed. People

learn about sex, fire, and knowledge; basketball players never shoot without misses; more strikingly, there are colors appearing in Pleasantville. Colors start from a rose, a car, building, and so on, and then people who have changed are colored, including David and Jennifer's mother in Pleasantville, who are taught about sex by her daughter. Ironically, she has to put on makeup to make her face become black and white again because she is afraid of being seen in colors.

On the other hand, David and Jennifer do not change into colors until they find out the true self. About this point, Ross said: "As each character experiences what makes them unique, they become 'colored'" (<<http://edition.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9810/12/austin.ross/index.html>>). David punches a guy for his colored mother and forsakes his fantasy of 1950s, so he changes; Jennifer opens her mind for books and knowledge and abandons her decayed life in the past, so she changes. In fact, most of people are afraid of change because it may bring people to an uncertain future after going through struggles. But what if people's belief collapsed and the world changed one day?

Elton says: "This is, as no one has ever doubted, a very restrictive commonwealth, subduing the individual to the common purpose and setting each man's life in predetermined, unalterable grooves" (Elton 199). Of course, there are some conservatives keeping this faith and strongly opposing any change. One of them

is the mayor, and he asserts: “We have to have ‘Code of Conduct’ we can all agree to live by.” The conservatives break into a colorful shop filled with art works and fight with colored “aliens” under the banner of justice. They resist changing because they are stuck in the so-called Utopian rules and orders, which restrict their free will and potential. Once they free themselves out from the restriction, they would find that their ugliness, envy, desire, and fear... those precious human natures are elicited as other colored people do. The mayor and those conservatives are compelled to look into their inside in the courtroom. Beyond their expectations, that results in a prevailing colorization in Pleasantville. No one is in black and white anymore.

There is another satire: the colored people in Pleasantville also refer to the colored people except whites in the real life. The 1950s witnessed the “African-American Civil Rights Movement,” which aimed at outlawing racial discrimination against black people in the United States. This situation is similar to the petition submitted by colored people in Pleasantville. On the scene of courtroom, colored people and people in black and white are separated. After all residents in Pleasantville get colored, they must learn to mingle with each other without discrimination. In the real life, neither can we change skin colors, nor can we go back to the era only full of black and white. After all, it is the different color peoples that make the world so beautiful. Times are changing, and people are changing. Nostalgia

will not bring people back to the superficially perfect era.

#### Works Cited

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