

## Where Epistemology and Metaphysics Touch in Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and Gary Ross's *Pleasantville*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Lowry's novel, *The Giver*, falls short of a consistent philosophical premise regarding the establishment of Sameness in the novel because it vacillates between a metaphysical and an epistemological understanding of Sameness. On the other hand, Ross's film, *Pleasantville*, navigates the same high concept with more philosophical consistency. Further, the film illustrates the white establishment's fears of female sexuality and the racialized Other with more concreteness than the abstract liberation experienced by community members in *The Giver*.

**Keywords:** *The Giver*, *Pleasantville*, metaphysics, epistemology, sexism, racism, sameness, difference

## Donde la epistemología y la metafísica se tocan en *The Giver* de Lois Lowry y *Pleasantville* de Gary Ross

### RESUMEN

Este artículo argumenta que la novela de Lowry, *The Giver*, no alcanza una premisa filosófica consistente con respecto al establecimiento de la Igualdad en la novela porque oscila entre una comprensión metafísica y epistemológica de la Igualdad. Por otro lado, la película de Ross, *Pleasantville*, navega por el mismo concepto elevado con más consistencia filosó-

fica. Además, la película ilustra los miedos del establishment blanco a la sexualidad femenina y al Otro racializado con más concreción que la liberación abstracta que experimentan los miembros de la comunidad en *The Giver*.

**Palabras clave:** *The Giver*, *Pleasantville*, metafísica, epistemología, sexismo, racismo, igualdad, diferencia

标题: 洛伊丝·劳里的《记忆传授人》和 盖瑞·罗斯的《欢乐谷》中的认识论与形而上学

### 摘要

本文论证认为, 劳里的小说《记忆传授人》未能就同一性 (Sameness) 建立一致的哲学前提, 因为其对同一性的理解徘徊在形而上学与认识论之间。另一方面, 罗斯的电影《欢乐谷》以哲学一致性更高的角度解读了这一概念。此外, 与《记忆传授人》中社区成员所经历的抽象自由相比, 《欢乐谷》更具体地诠释了白人当局对女性的性 (female sexuality) 的恐惧以及被种族化的他者。

关键词: 《记忆传授人》, 《欢乐谷》, 形而上学, 认识论, 性别主义, 种族主义, 同一性, 差异性

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The veil of perception—the idea that there is a gap between appearance and reality—is a persistent theme in epistemology. Randall Auxier analogized the veil of perception as a river of doubt, with one bank representing the world of appearances and human epistemic fallibility and the other bank signifying the in-itself—the really real (Aux-

ier and Davies 115). We can build a bridge of experience across it with the tools of perception, or we can dig a tunnel of existence under it by means of ontological reasoning. The former tactic is empirical; the latter is rationalist or transcendental. The empiricists claim that our access to that reality is had through our experiences, including sense experience, so they claim that we can build a bridge of experience across the river of doubt, although empiricists vary regarding how reliable the bridge is, given the degree of each empiricist's fallibilism. Because our perceptions are fallible, some rationalist philosophers attempt to dig a tunnel of existence under the river. For instance, Plato depreciated the value of perception in reaching reality, relegating it to the realm of mere opinion on his Divided Line in *The Republic*. Only objects of the intellect, such as mathematical objects, known but not seen, constituted knowledge for Plato. Similarly, René Descartes began his *Meditations* with the premise that sense perception was the easiest faculty to doubt, and thus could not be relied upon to establish a firm foundation for scientific knowledge. Instead, he needed a necessary truth, *cogito ergo sum*, upon which to build his edifice of knowledge.

The appearance/reality gap is largely a product of early modern European philosophy in the Cartesian tradition. American pragmatist and Continental phenomenological philosophical traditions understand the problem as the product of a misguided mind/body dualism. However, when popular cultural artifacts, such as a novel or a film, deploy the veil of ignorance as a premise in their plot structure, an analysis of the ways they navigate the problem is in order. Their options include those traditions that emerged in response to Cartesian philosophy. Rationalists look for *a priori* knowledge, necessarily true propositions, and transcendentalists search for the *a priori* necessary conditions that make possible the

experiences we do in fact have. The rationalists and transcendentalists, then, dig a tunnel of existence under the river of doubt, a strategy involving metaphysics and ontological reasoning. Such are the options for crossing the river of doubt and overcoming the veil of perception. If either is successful, epistemology and metaphysics *touch*.

In Lois Lowry's dystopian young adult novel, *The Giver*, the veil of perception is woven into the community intentionally as a policy measure in the establishment of Sameness—the effort to insure a world without conflict, inequality, difference, pain, or freedom of choice. Similarly, in Gary Ross's film, *Pleasantville*, the veil of perception drives the high concept of the film. Members of a fictional television show community, "Pleasantville," do not know they are in a fictional program and are limited in their access to reality.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, they lack *pathos* in terms of neutered emotionality, *eros* in terms of sanitized or nonexistent libido, and *aesthesis* in terms of an inability to perceive color and an inability to experience affectively love, pain, loss, grief, and sensuous, artistic beauty.

Returning to *The Giver*, a question lingers in the premise of the novel's community. Has the bridge of experience been sabotaged to render perception spurious, or has the tunnel of existence been blocked to alter reality itself? Put otherwise, has the Committee of Elders in charge of maintaining Sameness in *The Giver*, changed the ability of its community members to *perceive* an unchanged reality, or has the Committee altered reality itself? The evidence in the novel offers inconsistent answers to this question, structuring much of its high concept around the epistemology/perception thesis but un-

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1 For purposes of clarity, *Pleasantville* refers to the film, "Pleasantville" refers to the television show in the film, and Pleasantville refers to the town depicted in the television show.

necessarily giving credence to the metaphysics/reality thesis. Their points of overlap do not hang well together. While memory is where epistemology and metaphysics try to touch in the premise of *The Giver*, Lowry falls short of a consistent philosophical premise upon which to base the story.

On the other hand, Ross's film, *Pleasantville*, navigates the river of doubt with more philosophical consistency than Lowry's novel. Changes from sameness to difference in television's "Pleasantville" emerge as latent potentialities whose epistemic access involves the new forms of perception, *pathos*, *eros*, and *aesthesis*. These epistemic paths, bridges of experience, transform the constructed appearances of the community into a metaphysical reality with all its flux, uncertainty, and possibility. Further, the film illustrates the white establishment's fears of female sexuality and the racialized Other with more concreteness than the abstract liberation experienced by community members in *The Giver*. Thus, I argue both that *Pleasantville* offers a more philosophically consistent premise than *The Giver* and that the liberation depicted in *Pleasantville* is more concrete, explicitly denotative, and socially relevant than the freedom that memories proffer to community members in the *The Giver*.

### THE GIVER

As a proxy to understanding *The Giver*, think Plato's *Republic* or Orwell's *1984*. The community in *The Giver* has in common with Plato's work a highly planned society where members' aptitudes are studied by Elders who dictate their vocations, the communal raising of infants, and the high value placed on Platonic, rather than erotic, relationships. It shares with Orwell's work the presence of a Speaker giving the community orders and the presence of a slow-moving bureaucra-

cy of committees who study the possibility of changing the rules, but rarely do so. It shares with Ross's film, *Pleasantville*, discussed herein, the lack of both color and eroticism. At puberty, members of the community take pills to suppress "The Stirrings." Members of the community cannot see color. The community no longer experiences snow, hills, or seasonal changes because of the institution of Climate Control. Love is entirely absent in the community. As Susan Louise Stewart writes, "Jonas lives in a community set in the future, where science has finally reached its logical—and on one level, peaceful and perfect—conclusion . . . [But] people have no choice as to whom they will marry, their vocations, and as readers discover, how many children will constitute their families. Members of the community know in advance when they will receive certain clothing and when they begin to ride a bicycle. They do not even have a choice as to what they remember" (Stewart 23). Here, Stewart ends with memory, the attempted touching point between epistemology and metaphysics in the novel. Epistemology and metaphysics touch when the means of acquiring knowledge about the "really real" are successful. Thus, in the world of *The Giver*, Lowry posits memory as the epistemic access to *unaltered* reality.

#### **THE BRIDGE OF EXPERIENCE: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL/PERCEPTION THESIS**

Ample evidence in *The Giver* points to the thesis that Sameness has been achieved by changing people's ability to perceive. Several characters, including the protagonist, Jonas, the Giver himself, and Gabriel, the one-year-old Jonas ends up saving from a eugenic death, have pale eyes. The pale eyes represent a special ability to see what others cannot, specifically color. Jonas notices the ephemeral color red in an apple and in his love interest, Fiona's, hair. The red apple

corresponds both with the redness in Fiona's hair and with the emergent redness in Pleasantville, as the fruit points to a Biblical understanding of a special kind of knowledge—likely forbidden, sexual knowledge. All of these instances of the novelty of red announce the emergence of eroticism in the otherwise unadorned and “pure” communities. Because of his pale eyes, Jonas has the ability “to see beyond” (Lowry 116). This raises the question: have others' subjective perceptions been altered, or has objective reality itself been changed? The pale eyes and ability to see beyond demonstrate that perception in others has been manipulated, as does the suppression of sexual desire; that is, the bridge of experience has been intentionally damaged so that the river of doubt cannot be crossed, and epistemology and metaphysics fail to touch.

The five senses are not the only modes of perception. Emotion and habits of feeling are experiential modalities, sensuous perceptions. When Jonas is given memories by the Giver, he *feels* love, pain, and joy, and he learns something about the possibility of reality through these feelings. His erotic love for Fiona gives him insight into the possibility of real objects otherwise absent in the community. Post-pubescent members of the community must take pills to suppress their libido. This means that aesthetic experience, as such, is suppressed in the community. Erotic and familial love as well as physical and emotional pain constitute aesthetic experience as much as seeing the color red. But the absence of these affective experiences in the community is not the product of ontological engineering but of perceptual manipulation. This explicit management of feeling supports the perception thesis.

### **THE TUNNEL OF EXISTENCE: THE METAPHYSICAL/REALITY THESIS**

Other evidence in the novel suggests a different understanding of the establishment of Sameness in the community. Climate Control was the means by which the community eliminated difficulties including hills, snow, and unpredictable weather (Lowry 106). The Giver also tells Jonas, “Today flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones. Probably when you saw the faces take on color it wasn’t as deep or vibrant as the apple, or your friend’s hair” (Lowry 119). That flesh is all the same color suggests the intentional manipulation of reality as such, an ontological change. But the Giver continues, “We’ve never completely mastered Sameness. I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Fiona’s must drive them crazy” (Lowry 120). “We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences,” the Giver continues. “We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others,” including the beauty of rainbows (Lowry 120–1).

Here we see that the ontology of the community has been altered genetically and atmospherically, and the tunnel of *existence*, rather than *experience*, has been blocked to impede its ability to traverse the river of doubt. But if Fiona’s hair is a tricky problem for the scientists such that her hair persists in being red, (as does the apple), why can other members of the community, those without the pale eyes, not see it? Here is the inconsistency in the premise concerning the establishment of Sameness.

### **WHERE EPISTEMOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS TOUCH IN *THE GIVER***

The capacity for memory is where epistemology and metaphysics touch in the premise of *The Giver*. It is the primary



means to cross the river of doubt and see beyond the veil of perception. Jonas is charged at age 12 to be The Receiver of memories. This honor means that he receives memories from the Giver, who consults the Elders based on the wisdom of memories. The plan for Jonas is that he become the new Giver. The memories Jonas is given include pleasant ones of rainbows, of familial love, of the exhilaration of sledding down a snowy hill, and eventually of music. He also receives painful memories, of a broken leg after crashing his sled and of a soldier injured on the battlefield. Carter Hanson argues that memory, especially cultural memory, serves as the primary lever for liberation from the dystopia of the community in the novel. He writes of the role of memory in the novel: “The Giver is a striking object lesson in the human and political costs of relinquishing historical memory. Without directly satirizing contemporary American culture, Lowry critiques the anesthetizing effects of cultural amnesia—the ability to forget” (Hanson 58).

Interestingly, Hanson points out that Lowry’s treatment of memory is decidedly unscientific. Its ability to serve as a philosophically consistent touchpoint between metaphysics and epistemology is lacking. Jonas comments on the ontology of the color red: “It had that same thing: the color red. But it didn’t change. It just *was*” (Lowry 120). The Giver explains that it’s because it’s a memory of a time when red existed. Memory gives Jonas the access to a past where existence was different; but Jonas has the ability to perceive difference amid the altered reality of Sameness. These two features of the premise of the story do not hang well together. It would be more consistent if the pale eyes were what drove the scientists crazy, rather than the reality of Fiona’s red hair. That is, the scientists would be concerned with the challenges involved in altering perception, rather than those in manipulating reality.

Randall Auxier penned the analogy of the bridge of experience and the tunnel of existence, which is applied here. He applies the analogy to Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Charles Hartshorne, arguing that Brightman digs “a metaphysical tunnel of his own under the river of doubt; but he digs only at night, while wearing a blindfold, and does not remember doing so in the light of day” (Auxier and Davies 117). Mapped onto the world of *The Giver*, the difficulties experienced by the genetic scientists represent a tunnel of existence between appearance and reality, the pale eyes build the perceptual bridge, and memories provide more immediate epistemic access to the reality by draining the river of doubt. The analogy speaks to our real-world fallibility and our indirect access to reality in-itself. Then, in *The Giver*, the community’s establishment of Sameness amounts to the attempt to hinder the construction of the bridge *and* the digging of the tunnel, such that the river of doubt cannot be traversed, and epistemology and metaphysics fail to touch. While the genetic scientists work on blocking the tunnel, the Elders work on hindering the bridge’s construction, but they have failed to work together in making the river entirely impossible to navigate. Lowry has failed to establish a consistent philosophical premise, such that the metaphysics and epistemology of *The Giver* end in a vicious circle, even while the immediacy of memory, as an epistemic tool, attempts to do the work intended by roles of the Giver and Receiver of Memories in the community.

### **PLEASANTVILLE**

After a brief summary of the film’s plot, I will present a concise review of some of the representative literature on *Pleasantville* in order to create new space to discuss the film philosophically. With the exception of Erin Kealey’s philosophical

analysis that supports my thesis, the historicist, social psychological, and political interpretations of the film summarized herein do not address the philosophical premise undergirding its high concept. Therefore, I will present an alternative reading of the emergence of color in the community. Last, by contrasting the film with Lowry's *The Giver*, I will illustrate its superior philosophical consistency and more substantive and relevant social commentary.

The film opens in the 1990s depicting fighting siblings, David and Jennifer, in a somewhat broken home (with divorced parents). David longs for the comfort of the images of stability presented in the program "Pleasantville." He has even memorized its plot lines as a hobby, and his expertise is what prompts the TV repairman (Don Knotts) to deliver the magic remote control to David. David's sister, Jen, thinks this obsession silly and is solely focused on the potential lust of her ensuing date. Their fight over control of the television ends in a destroyed remote control and allows for the plot to unfold with the arrival of the magic remote control. Then, thirteen minutes into the film, David and Jen are transported into the television show's community by way of the magic remote control. They are immediately outfitted in conservative, suburban 1950s clothing and living in the home of the teenage main characters on the show, Bud and Mary Sue Parker, into whom they have themselves been transformed.

The town is entirely antiseptic. Nothing will burn, and nothing is written in any of the books in the library. The homes are all single-family houses surrounded by white picket fences. As Greg Dickinson writes:

[*Pleasantville* mark[s] the contours of the good life within suburbia, pointing to the (im)possibilities that "border" ideal subur-

ban living as the film struggle[s] with seeming contradictions within (white) suburbia. In the film, suburbia is imagined as a bland landscape, devoid of deeply felt emotions or passionately committed relationships. Yet suburbia, in part because of this blandness, is also imagined as a place of safety, a home that offers security and acceptance. The struggle becomes one of offering passionate commitments and emotionally engaging relationships while maintaining the safety of familiarity and the security of a risk-free environment. (Dickinson 217)

The town is also sexless. In the show, Muffy takes her father to the ball, dressed as Prince Charming, when her date comes down with the measles. After Bud convinces Mary Sue to go out with Skip (Paul Walker), she is afraid she could “kill a guy with these” (her breasts). However, Bud assures her that he won’t notice anyway, because “they just don’t notice that kind of thing around here.” On their first date, Mary Sue tells Skip that talking is overrated. He does not understand the sexual undertones of her comment. The restaurant also has no toilets. Handholding is the raciest thing that occurs between high school sweethearts.

The siblings are trapped in the town, but they eventually unsettle its reality. In class, during a lesson on the different geographies of Elm Street and Main Street, Mary Sue asks, “What’s outside of Pleasantville?” The teacher does not understand the question. David, as Bud, learns that he cannot miss a basket at his first basketball practice, nor can any of his teammates; that is, until Bud lets his teammate Skip know of his skepticism about Skip asking out his sister. Skip’s frustra-

tion, an infusion of *pathos* into the community, results in a rare missed shot, shocking the coach and the rest of the team.

Mary Sue disrupts the town's stability when she plays on the (equivocal to her, univocal to Skip) meanings of "pin." She proposes: "Skip, you can pin me anytime you want to. Or maybe I should just pin you!" The town's sexless reality illustrates a rare moment of inconsistency when Bud's dad assures him that Mary Sue is a fine young woman who would never do anything for Bud or her father to be concerned about. That is, if the town is devoid of lust, what could her dad be concerned about? At Lovers' Lane, Mary Sue initiates sexual activity with Skip, who is mystified and transformed by the encounter. His sexual awakening manifests in his ability to see a red rose, the first appearance of color in the town. Skip's epistemic access to the redness of the rose is opened via his erotic discovery. When Skip regales his basketball team of his discovery, they all miss their next shots. Later in the film, Margaret (Mary Shelton), a teenage inhabitant of Pleasantville, gives Bud an apple, an allusion to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, insight into one's sexuality, and potential awareness of one's nakedness and concomitant shame.

Jen sees herself as unleashing the potential in the community, but David thinks she is disrupting their universe for the worse. But the initial changes quickly multiply, and soon color starts emerging throughout the town: pink chewing gum and tongues, red taillights and lollipops, teal cars, and colored lights on a jukebox. In a way similar to *The Giver*, Bill Johnson (Jeff Daniels), Bud's co-worker at the soda shop, is excited about the novel differences and succumbs to despair about the sameness he has been living in. Betty (Joan Allen), the mother of Mary Sue, sees her playing cards turn red at the mention of Bill, who is not her husband and with whom

she is secretly in love. Her erotic curiosity is unearthed when Mary Sue gives her a daughter-mother, rather than mother-daughter, birds and the bees talk, including an apparent masturbation tutorial. Betty's first orgasm produces her vision of pink flowers as well as the town's first fire. The tree outside her house explodes into flames.

Sex and color emerge, for the most part, coincidentally and coextensively. The town authorities are threatened by both. And each speaks to the racism of white America. The myth of white purity, the myth of the "black man as rapist," "the image of the black woman as chronically promiscuous," and the racist and sexist fear of both female sexuality and the presence of "Coloreds" in town go hand in hand (Davis 2008, 133). Suppression of the Civil Rights (of Coloreds) and of women's rights to control their own erotic desires work in lockstep in both the history of our country and in the transformation of the town. Further, it is telling that the words of *Huckleberry Finn*, no racially neutral book, materialize on its formerly blank pages alongside the emergence of erotic freedom in the town. Etta James plays on the car radio as pink flowers blossom when Bud drives to Lovers' Lane. The Coloreds in town (played by all white actors depicting people with "white" flesh), represent the eroticism and sexuality of Black Americans, viewed as dangerous and threatening to the purity of whiteness when viewed through the racist lens of the white establishment in Pleasantville and in the United States.

*Aesthesis*, or sensuous perception, soon emerges alongside *pathos* and *eros*. Bill Johnson's artistic instincts are unleashed by his perusal of new books of art. His artwork, full of color, passion, and nudity disarms the community authorities. Eventually a gang of conservative men, dressed in white, vandalize his mural. The community outlaws rock and roll. Rock

and roll, (once Black slang for sex), was the soundtrack of the sexual revolution, and a significant impetus for fears concerning integration and miscegenation in the late 1950s. In fact, at early rock concerts, the feverish dancing responses to the music actually caused the rope dividing white and black audience members to fall down. Rock literally integrated the crowds. As I put it in *The Rolling Stones and Philosophy*:

Rock music helped initiate and propel a revolutionary social transformation. Often live music concerts in the South would separate the audience into white and black sides of the room using only a rope. But when the music and dancing began, the ranks would begin mixing. Rock music helped integrate the south, and this was dangerous. Rock [...] was breaking Jim Crow. Footage from the BBC/PBS documentary “Rock and Roll” shows a Citizens’ Council chairman [(reminiscent of Big Bob (J.T. Walsh) in *Pleasantville*)] [...] who tells us: “We set up a twenty-man committee to do away with the vulgar, animalistic nigger rock and roll bop.” And a member of the Alabama White Citizens Council said: “The obscenity and vulgarity of the rock and roll music is obviously a means by which the white man and his children can be driven to the level with the nigger. It is obviously nigger music.” (Vannatta, 2011, 190)

The community of Pleasantville’s suppression of *aesthesis* mirrors the actual history of such suppression in our nation’s history.

### RECENT INTERPRETATIONS OF *PLEASANTVILLE*

A concise exposition of the historicist, social psychological, and political readings of *Pleasantville*, indicate a space for a philosophical analysis of the text. M. Carmen Gómez Galisteo argues that *Pleasantville* exposes tensions “lying behind [the] seemingly peaceful, long-established surface, deconstructing the image of the fifties as a golden age” (Galisteo, 2009, 64.). The film is important in that it challenges and subverts this stereotypical golden age image. The stereotype offered by traditional domestic sitcoms depicts stable communities and families amid a prosperous and increasingly consumerist American society (Galisteo 2009, 64). Men were bread-winning careerists, women were dutiful housewives, and contemporary conflicts regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, and class were absent (Galisteo 2009, 65). David seeks refuge in this depiction as it contrasts with his all-too flawed actual home with his divorced parents, absentee father, and troubled mother. But despite the idyllic image of the show David loves, “the secrets that the fifties hid were plenty: [...] housewives’ dissatisfaction with their lifestyle, repressed artistic aspirations, censorship and authoritative Big-Brother-like government disguised as a benevolent, paternalistic regime ... and could destroy society as it was understood in the fifties” (Galisteo 2009, 66).

Galisteo states that Jennifer and David represent the spark that unveils these hidden tensions (Galisteo 2009, 69). Jennifer unleashes libido on the community. When her mother has her own sexual awakening, she is first ashamed and covers up its revelation (in color) with greyscale make-up but eventually frees herself of the shame that can only exist in a “monochrome world which symbolizes the repression of self-actualization” (Galisteo 2009, 69). The film inverts the norms of the fifties insofar as “going beyond moral propriety



(i.e., Betty Parker committing adultery) results in a positive outcome (sexual satisfaction)” (Galisteo 2009, 70). While for most characters, color and sexual awakening emerge co-extensively; Jennifer, as Mary Sue, only becomes colored as a result of finding her own individuality and identity. Her previous experiences with sex were a function of social expectations and role-playing. But when she reads *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, she becomes self-actualized, and her color represents this actualization.

Galisteo concludes that personal repression leads to social and political oppression, and that self-actualization, even in terms of the return of the repressed, leads to social liberation, even if liberty involves chaotic possibilities. He cites director, screenwriter, and producer Gary Ross: “This movie is about the fact that personal repression gives rise to larger political oppression. [...] That when we’re afraid of certain things in ourselves or we’re afraid of change, we project those fears on to other things, and a lot of very ugly social situations can develop.”<sup>2</sup> And Galisteo concludes by citing Taylor: “With this, Ross wants the smooth unruffled surface of ‘50s sitcoms to stand for America’s fantasy image of itself during that decade, a place that had banished even the admission that real life contained dirt and messy complications.”<sup>3</sup> Galisteo concludes that “Pleasantville pre-dates and advances changes about to come in the American society in the sixties and seventies—the sexual revolution, women’s emancipation...” (Galisteo 2009, 75).

In a later article, Galisteo focuses his analysis on the promi-

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2 Galisteo cites Johnson-Ott, Edward. “Review of Pleasantville.” 1998. 30 April 2009.

3 Galisteo cites Taylor, Charles. “Exile in Pleasantville.” Salon 23. October 1998.

ment place suburbia holds in both the American lifestyle by the 1950s and in the American cinematic imagination (Galisteo 2014, 71). Ross uses the imperfection of the present in David's school and family life to highlight the romance and ideality of the past. While most critical commentary focuses on the role of sex in inducing visible changes in the Pleasantville, Galisteo argues that the role of education is equally important: "Jennifer [...] discovers the power of the written word and her passion for literature up to the point that she decides to stay behind in Pleasantville to pursue a university degree" (Galisteo 2014, 75). Upon my reading, the emergence of color is a function of that which has been repressed or ignored. For most Pleasantville residents, this is *eros* and *libido*; for David, *pathos*; for Bill and I would argue for Jennifer, *aesthesis*. Her passion for literary art, once ignored, suppressed, or repressed, flowers, and she becomes colored as a result.

Galisteo writes: "Pleasantville ultimately becomes not just a critique of misconceptions about the Fifties, but also a warning against contemporary political ideologies which 'satirises the fallacious nostalgia of the New Right, attached as it was (and remains) to a prelapsarian order of patriarchal norms and family idealism'" (Galisteo 2014, 77).<sup>4</sup> Galisteo sees *Pleasantville* as offering a political warning against right wing attacks on the sex and violence of Hollywood (and by extension the cultural left).<sup>5</sup> His conclusion with regard to the relationship between the repression of *aesthesis*, *eros*, and *pathos* and the resulting political oppression is both accurate and

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4 Galisteo cites Grainge 2003: 212.

5 Laura Crossley argues against the notion of *Pleasantville* being a token of a "nostalgia films" invoking a past, and rather it does not "promulgate a yearning for the past, but evoke[s] the characters and tropes of a romanticized past in order to comment upon both that past and the present" (Crossley 2017). In my reading, this much is clear.

bolsters my conclusion regarding the more concrete freedoms experienced by Pleasantville community members.

Erin Kealey presents an existential approach to popular culture based on Martin Heidegger's existential concept of de-severance in order to advance a more immediate contemporary involvement with past eras than those available through the mediated lenses of nostalgia. Slavoj Žižek's analysis of nostalgia and Susan Sontag's writing on camp sensibility (Kealey 251). Kealey argues that "engagement with objects and beliefs of the cultural past can be nostalgic or campy; however, through de-severance we can overcome spatiotemporal distance with an existential intimacy that contributes to a more meaningful way to understand our culture, our shared history, and our future possibilities (Kealey 251). De-severance involves a personal, but not subjective, engagement with temporally distant objects (Kealey 252). Kealey sees David's relationship with Pleasantville and "Pleasantville" as nostalgic, combining fascination and ironic distance with a past, mythic, and ideal object.<sup>6</sup> She also interprets Jennifer's interpretation of Pleasantville as exemplifying camp, which involves a comic and detached relationship with an object exemplifying exaggeration and excess (Kealey 258). However, Kealey applies Heidegger's notion of one of the existential structures of *Dasein*, concern, as allowing the viewer to engage in an intimate way with *Pleasantville*. Our concern for it as an object makes it temporally near for us.

Kealey's use of Heidegger's concept of de-severance is relevant to the perception thesis in *Pleasantville*. At the town meeting at the end of the film, one woman shouts, "Roy

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6 Kealey cites Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

Campbell's got a blue front door!" Roy yells back, "It's always been blue!" Kealey interprets this to mean that

it is not as if colors did not exist before David and Jennifer were transported to the diegetic world; [...] The colorization of Pleasantville introduces "real" colors because a more personal orientation toward involvement opens new ways to experience objects and people. When colors begin to emerge within Pleasantville's familiar black-and-white appearance, people notice the objects that have been overlooked and see them as more than everyday fixed representations. "Real" color emerges when objects and characters are discovered to have possibilities that are hidden from inauthentic conventional perception by the forgetfulness of the past and the preconceived expectations of the future. (Kealey 263–4)

This accords with my reading of *Pleasantville*. Modes of perception have changed. *Aesthesis*, *eros*, and *pathos* allow the perception of color and the knowledge it represents.

Ted Gournelos argues that *Pleasantville* presents a representation of the trauma of loss, alienation, and shock. He thinks the answers to the traumas experienced are inconsistent and wanting. Gournelos summarizes the changes in the Pleasantville as the product of exposure to new things, "primarily sex, literature, and art" (Gournelos 2009, 534). *Eros*, *aesthesis*, and *pathos* are a part of each of these novelties. The colors that emerge as a result of these modes of perception bring the backlashes of racism and fascism, but in the end, no one is immune to the new perceptual modalities, especially the

*pathos* involved in fearing change and the risks involved in sexual awakenings. Gournelos argues that the film transparently communicates that in the end “the real world with its perception of freedom of emotion and sexuality becomes preferable to the fantasy world” (Gournelos 2009, 515). But consider Gournelos’s summary and interpretation of the causes of changes to color in the film:

Jennifer changes color after she reads what we are to believe is her first novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*; her mother Betty changes color after having extra-marital sex; and the protagonist, David/Bud, changes color only after he saves Betty from being attacked and possibly raped by a group of boys from his school. The mayor changes color at the end of the film out of anger and the whole town changes with him. So what is the impetus behind this change? Progressive politics? Emotion? Sexuality? Art appreciation or creativity? That the film is completely inconsistent is important mostly because it points towards a dissonance within the film’s conceptual framework: the film does not understand its own worlds or their politics and therefore it visually reflects an uncertainty about social change. (Gournelos 2009, 515–6)

Rather, I argue that a particular mode of perception has been repressed in each of these changes to color. In Betty, *eros* emerges; in David/Bud and Big Bob, *pathos* returns from its repression; and in Jennifer and Bill, *aesthesis*, in its visual and literary forms emerges.

### THE BRIDGE OF EXPERIENCE IN PLEASANTVILLE

*Pleasantville* is much more consistent than *The Giver* in its building of a bridge of experience between appearance and reality. Passion, sex, and art are latent potentialities in the community, whose reality changes based on these new modes of perception. The tunnel of existence plays no real role in the metaphysical fabric of the town. The town, after all, is a fictional construction, depicting “Happy Days” before the sexual revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, and an emerging artistic freedom. Diversity is unleashed on the community of Pleasantville much as it emerged as a new reality alongside these revolutions in our country. The authorities in the town attempt to suppress difference because it is unknown, potentially dangerous, and chaotic. Betty is liberated, but George, Betty’s husband (William H. Macy), doesn’t get his dinner because of it. The town authorities are outraged at Bud’s hypothesis that soon women could leave home and work while men stay home and cook.

However, possibilities are multiplied in the new reality, and the message of Ross’s film is that these possibilities and potentialities are more beneficial than the chaos and danger they may bring. As Linda Mercandante writes, “they find the risks preferable to a world where we have only stasis and the illusion of freedom” (Mercandante 17). And Bud shows that passion, if not libido, inheres in all of the community members, even those who long for the sameness of the good ol’ days. George’s and Big Bob’s (J.T. Walsh) faces turn red in sadness and anger respectively at the town hall meeting organized to discuss and combat the new chaos in Pleasantville. And Bud’s color emerges in his passionate defense of his mother, who is harassed by a gang of uncolored youths. Her blue dress was a mark of her potential promiscuity, and the gang was sexually aggressive toward her because of it.

### CONCLUSION: THE GIVER AND PLEASANTVILLE

The novel and the film share several themes. Sexual discovery and liberation, both concomitant with redness and pinkness, and difference disrupting sameness occur both. Each is a high concept work of art. However, Lowry fails to be as consistent in the way the veil of perception is navigated. The Elders attempt to hinder the construction of an empirical bridge of experience by medicating the inhabitants to suppress their libidos, but they also attempt to hinder the tunnel of ontological existence by atmospheric and genetic alteration of reality. Unfortunately, Lowry fails to clarify which could succeed in reaching the other side of the river of doubt.

Ross's film is clearer. *Pathos*, *eros*, and *aesthesis*, new forms of perception build an experiential bridge over the river of doubt. The metaphysics of "Pleasantville," the show, were constructed, and they represent the supposed pleasantness of post-war America. But these new forms of perception unleash the latent potentialities of our nature. The flux of difference triumphs over constructed sameness in both films. As Bud states, "there are so many things that are better [than pleasant], like silly, or sexy, or dangerous, or brief." Nevertheless, *Pleasantville* navigates the river of doubt with its bridge of experience with more philosophical consistency.

Further, while both films represent dystopian visions where sameness is valued at the expense of difference, *Pleasantville* fearlessly draws analogies between the supposed pleasantness of Pleasantville and of pre-Civil rights era White suburban America, while *The Giver* analogizes a more abstract danger of sameness and equality at the expense of diversity and liberty. Further, *Pleasantville* successfully illustrates the symbiotic fears of sexuality and the racialized Other. The film brings into clearer view the myths of white purity, especially

white female sexual purity, and of the black man as rapist. It highlights the role of visual and sonic art in liberating the perceptual modes of *pathos, eros, and aesthesis*, depicts the white establishment's fear of these, and conveys the benefits of such liberation with more concreteness than the liberation experienced by the community in Lowry's *The Giver*.

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