

Revisiting the 'Pleasantville' of My Childhood

I was recently reminded of the film "Pleasantville," which was released in 1998 and, according to Netflix, became [one of year's most popular movies](#). Although "Pleasantville" features lustrous Hollywood stars Tobey Maguire, Reese Witherspoon, Jeff Daniels, and William Macy, it would be inaccurate to characterize this film as something meant simply to entertain. Instead, the following plot reveals a hidden bias:

David, a solitary high school student, enjoys watching Pleasantville – a 1950's black and white sitcom, where everything is shown as blandly pleasant. When David and his boy-crazy sister, Jennifer, are given a strange remote control by a TV repair man, the pair land in Pleasantville as Bud and Mary-Sue Parker, living in black and white, with new dull parents who are equally colorless. David wants to escape this situation, but unlike Jennifer, he helplessly blends into the new environment. Through her independent spirit, Jennifer helps her brother move beyond this black and white stultifying milieu and ultimately helps the entire community move into a world of color and progressive views.

For the careful reader, the above plot [provides a social statement](#) about differences that the producers wished to emphasize between the supposedly liberated late 1990s and the "black and white" 1950s.

Post-World War II America as depicted in Pleasantville looks bleak indeed. Gender roles are rigidly fixed, and everyone acts according to prescribed social rules. No one in Pleasantville is pleasant, but rather mechanical and repressed. David's sexually-liberated sister is hurled into

the same black and white milieu, but unlike her brother, she rebels and brings the entire town into the glorious and colorful present.

As someone who grew up in the black and white decade that Pleasantville mocks, allow me to make a few observations about this film. Living in that scorned decade was hardly the stifling experience depicted in the movie. From the perspective of a later time, people seemed quite normal. Almost everyone lived in two-parent families, took biblical morality seriously, and enjoyed simple entertainments like family gatherings and local school sports.

I also don't recall people looking noticeably repressed. Traditional standards of decorum were observed, and all of us avoided the use of obscenity, particularly around "ladies."

Debate was far less inhibited than it is today. For example, in high school and college we debated questions such as, "Was it a good idea to give women the vote?" No one in higher education or the media today would be able to rationally discuss such a topic without risking their careers.

I was too young to now recall much about the supposedly horrible McCarthy era, but history shows that it did not lead to the plague of academic intolerance that is now raging in Western societies. At the height of McCarthy's crusade against Communists, the Yale University faculty remained almost uniformly composed of liberal Democrats. The [only member of the Yale faculty](#) who supported McCarthy, Willmoore Kendall, was abused and [harassed so mercilessly by his colleagues that he left](#) for the University of Dallas. Despite this, hardly anything in the 1950s was as repressive as the political correctness that has now descended on this country and is enforced by public administration, educators, and media.

I would also observe that the picture of communal life in "Pleasantville" contrasts strikingly with the world of [Andy](#)

[Hardy movies](#) that came out of the 1930s and 1940s. These movies, the last of which was released in 1958, present a truly pleasant, well-scrubbed American family. Believe it or not, I did grow up knowing people like Andy Hardy and his family.

Yet today the Andy Hardy series is seen as dishonestly idolizing small-town life; the role of the main character, an adolescent played by Mickey Rooney and the son of a wise judge, has been made to stand for the parochial, small-minded America of the evil past. Andy was apparently not aware of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other grievous sins that entire generations of Americans have now been raised to lament. Indeed, one can't stop lamenting these sins in certain circles without being attacked as a fascist or even worse.

Even more disturbing for the makers of "Pleasantville" should be the fact that the liberated Jennifer gave way to nagging shrews and ranting virtue-signalers. What liberation? In many ways, Americans are more confined than they ever were in the mid-20th century. It is merely that the methodology of our repression has changed, with many Americans embracing their ideological overseers.

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Image Credit:

YouTube-Warner Bros. "Pleasantville – Original Theatrical Trailer"