Colouring the past: *Pleasantville* and the textuality of media memory

Paul Grainge

When Ted Turner purchased MGM Entertainment in 1986, and then financed a plan to digitally colourise a series of black and white movies from the studio's back catalogue, a beachhead of Hollywood directors, actors, film critics and cinematic guilds vociferously attacked the idea in practice and principle. The crux of complaint focused on the fact that, as a technical process, colourisation did not simply enhance the visual quality and resolution of old monochrome movies, but artfully doctored their entire chromatic character. Believing that colourised films would eventually replace the memory of their black and white progenitors, digital alteration was denounced by the anti-colourisation lobby as a venal process. In transforming a monochrome movie into a digitally re-made spectacle, colourisation was said to mutilate and destroy the visual pastness that could embed original black and white films within the tissues of cultural and aesthetic memory. While specific issues of copyright law and artistic rights were fought over, assumptions of historicist blockage and memory crisis came to infuse the anti-colourisation campaign. Privileging the creative originality and historical temporality of monochrome depth, set against the textual amnesia of colourised surface, the anti-colourisation lobby battled to save an 'authentic', textually untampered, film past. The villain of the conflict was not simply Turner, and his attempt to maximise the profit potential of the MGM catalogue, but the very mutability of postmodern simulacra.¹

In this chapter, I want to consider a cultural and theoretical development in the discussion of memory crisis, especially as it bears upon the notional 'amnesia' that has been associated with digital technology in, and as part of, the culture of postmodernism. In doing so, I want to examine *Pleasantville* (1998), a film that reframes the relationship between colourisation and cultural remembrance in a period

where 'digital cinema' had become, by the late 1990s, a sophisticated media genre. Dramatising the incursions of a colour present into a black and white past, *Pleasantville* creates a narrative based on the cultural apotheosis, 'not everything is as simple as black and white'. Tapping into the spectacular growth of nostalgia networks on cable television during the 1990s, the film uses digital techniques of colour conversion to affect a political allegory about the legacy and significance of the 1960s. I am interested in two related issues. At one level, I want to consider how the film operates in the contested field of meaning that, in the 1990s, came to debate the memory of America's postwar past. This leads to a different, but overlapping, concern: namely, to what effect postmodern technologies and forms of representation impact upon the way that cultural memory is textually figured and articulated. I am interested in questions not only of what, but also of how, cultures (in this case, American culture in the late 1990s) remember.

Addressing the 'what' of media memory requires an engagement with a process that Douglas Kellner has called cultural transcoding.² As a type of ideological critique, this describes the way that media cultures articulate a competing array of social discourses within popular representation. In the case of *Pleasantville*, this transcoding centres upon a liberal discourse focused on the rejuvenation of the 1960s. Discursively, the film intervenes in political debates about the status of the 1960s, reclaiming the decade as a positive metaphor against the (supposedly) more reactionary 'memories' of the period advanced in films like *Forrest Gump* (1994). Rather than evacuate history through techniques of digital manipulation and stylistic pastiche – something that Fredric Jameson argues in relation to the postmodern 'nostalgia film'³ – both *Forrest Gump* and *Pleasantville* inscribe competing visions of the past through an economy of representational retro. As such, my discussion will initially consider *Pleasantville* in relation to that of *Forrest Gump*. Each film demonstrates how a stylised evocation of pastness does not negate, but may textually refigure, the form and location of memory politics in the semiotic terrain of contemporary culture.

In addressing the 'how' of media memory, it is necessary to consider theoretical revisions that are beginning to negotiate, and rethink, propositions of postmodern amnesia. Whereas theorists of postmodernism such as Jameson have diagnosed a profound waning of historicity in cultural life, linked to what he calls the 'spatial logic

of the simulacrum', critics such as Andreas Huyssen, Vivian Sobchack and Jim Collins have begun to look more closely at the bearing of postmodern representation on contemporary memory practice.⁴ All three critics explore, in one form or another, the impact of media technologies on structures of temporality and how the quickening pace, and sheer magnitude, of electronic communication has transformed, rather than dissolved, the experience of memory. Huyssen considers the dialectic of memory and forgetting in a rapacious information culture where media technologies – television, film, VCR, cable, computers – have helped create both an evisceration of, and an obsession with, the historical past; Sobchack explores the impact that new representational technologies have had in creating more active and reflective historical subjects; and Collins examines the positive reconstitution of the archive in a culture of accelerated technological innovation and semiotic excess. If Jameson's theory of historicist crisis was commensurate with the fear of amnesia expressed by the anti-colourisation lobby in the late 1980s – both decrying the crass simulation of history within cultural, and especially cinematic, practice – the cartography that Collins gives to 'the information age' perhaps offers a more befitting framework for the colourised memory work of *Pleasantville* at the end of the 1990s.

The politics of pastness: *Pleasantville* and *Forrest Gump*

Pleasantville is based around the transportation of two 1990s teenagers into the world of an eponymous black and white 1950s sitcom. Existing somewhere between the historical time-travelling of *Back to the Future* (1985) and the media voyeurism of *The Truman Show* (1998), *Pleasantville* revisits the 1950s through the auspices of its televisual media, exploring and, ultimately, undoing the constrictive limits of its projected cultural fantasies about domesticity, sexuality, gender and community. *Pleasantville* begins by screen-rushing a catalogue of contemporary afflictions and apocalyptic scenarios: colour news clips and classroom statistics about unemployment, AIDS and ecological disaster. The imaginary world of Pleasantville is the negation of this malaise, a 'kinder, gentler' world where family values and common decency prevail. As a devotee of cable reruns, David (Tobey Maguire) is an arch consumer of 1990s nostalgic camp. His relationship with Pleasantville is not based on longing (at least not in any simple way), but on his command of its plot lines and

characters. David is part of what Lynn Spigel describes as the 'young television-literate generation' that nostalgia networks frequently solicit by recontextualising old programmes in new 'reception contexts'.⁵ According to Spigel, this process generates a particular ambivalence about the past whereby a romanticised nostalgia for the good old days is mixed with a progressive faith in the enlightened values and attitudes of the present. A combination of longing and ridicule attaches itself to the televisual 1950s, brought out by David and Jennifer, who are never straightforwardly wistful or woeful about the past in any complete sense. Preparing himself for a *Pleasantville* marathon, and a cable quiz based on the sitcom, David adopts a reflexive nostalgia that is suddenly forced in upon itself. Beamed through a magic television remote, David's television literacy is mysteriously transposed and tested in the world of Pleasantville itself. Together with his street-wise and sexually assertive sister (Reese Witherspoon), David and Jennifer are inexplicably confronted with, and literally drawn inside, the monochrome world of sitcom 'gee-whizzery'.

Colour is central to *Pleasantville*'s narrative strategy. Black and white is a visual index of the cultural media *and* the caricatured morality of the 1950s. Monochrome is associated with conventions of sexless, sanitised, nicety; Pleasantville is a place without double beds, working toilets or domestic arguments. However, when present values intrude upon the past, colour begins to appear. As soon as David and Jennifer introduce non-marital sex, rock 'n' roll, modernist art and rebellious literature, colour progressively tints the ersatz monochrome universe of Pleasantville. Beginning with a single red rose, the town and its populace are slowly infused with colour, a chromatic transition that defines a growing youth and community awakening. *Pleasantville*'s chromatic significations are central to the film's shifting registers of reality, fantasy and spectacle. While colour is first associated with realism in the framing scenes that locate the family life of David and Jennifer in the 1990s, it takes on spectacular meaning in Pleasantville. The colour is rich, luxurious and far more intense. The use of colour and black and white is not simply a means of demarcating past and present in the film. Instead, colour is used as a form of spectacular excess in a black and white past that is itself fantastical.

While the spectacle of colour is born of changes brought about by, and that will ultimately effect, the lives of David and Jennifer, this

does not happen without protest. Townspeople mobilise against the 'coloureds' in their midst, remonstrating against the irrevocable changes happening to norms of domesticity, fidelity, propriety and pleasantness. Seeing atrophy in colour, the all-male Chamber of Commerce represents a community cabal intent on policing the terms of cultural consensus, of 'separating the pleasant from the unpleasant' through a heady assertion of patriarchal norms and the music of Perry Como. *Pleasantville* revisits themes developed in previous screenplays by the film's director, and one-time Democrat speechwriter, Gary Ross. Like his screenplay for *Dave* (1993), *Pleasantville* evokes a nascent conservatism against which to pit and champion themes of social justice and cultural and political regeneration. While in *Dave*, an honest everyman is displaced into the corrupt world of Presidential politics, changing it with can-do compassion, Daniel and Jennifer are displaced into the regulated myth-world of Pleasantville, transforming it with values and savvy derived from a world of nineties-cum-sixties libertarianism. In each case, a liberal-lite Clintonism seems to be the organising political vision.

In his review in *Sight and Sound*, J. Hoberman criticised *Pleasantville* for its 'exasperating mix of technological wonder and ideological idiocy'.⁶ In a more forgiving article, Andrew O'Hehir still called it a 'muddled liberal fairytale about freedom and tolerance in the Frank Capra tradition'.⁷ While the visual technique of *Pleasantville* was central to many favourable reviews, the type and degree of the film's quotational referencing became a theme of critical concern, if not explicit complaint. The film invokes a gathering of cultural moments and movements under the aegis of a growing expressive creativity in Pleasantville: artistic Modernism, the sexual revolution, the subcultural radicalism of rock 'n' roll and jazz, the burgeoning impact of feminism and civil rights protest. These libertarian, or maverick, symbols are then set against a rag-bag of right-wing invocations, also played out as part of the community's unfolding civic drama. These range from Kristallnacht and fascist book burning to McCarthyite courtroom battles. Hoberman is fully aware of the ideological stakes of *Pleasantville* in the partisan climate of the late 1990s. He lucidly draws out the film's liberal vision of an inclusive and tolerant society in a period beset by the reactionary moral platform of Christian fundamentalism and the inflammatory jeremiads about aesthetic and educational crises emanating from the cultural right. Complaints about *Pleasantville*'s 'muddle'

and 'ideological idiocy' were not levelled at the film's political cloudiness, per se, but rather its narrative style. This refers mainly to the film's over-stimulated quotational practice. There was an underlying assumption in many reviews that the hyperconsciousness of *Pleasantville* simply over-reached itself. By playing excessively in what J. Hoberman calls a 'media hall of mirrors' – a film style dependent on the dizzying mix and self-devouring quotation of historical, mythic and media references – *Pleasantville* left itself open to criticism of narrative confusion and, more seriously, of demonstrating a lack of political and/or historicist depth.⁸

While not argued from the same neo-Marxian position as Jameson, comments of ideological 'muddle' and 'idiocy' share something in sympathy with Jameson's lament about the indiscriminate pastiche of the contemporary 'nostalgia film'. As Philip Drake outlines in the previous chapter, this denotes a film mode entirely dependent on quotational practice, and of the representation of history as 'fashion-plate image'. For Jameson, the nostalgia film concentrates less on the past than on representations and stereotypes of pastness. By this definition, *Pleasantville*'s indiscriminate blending of historical references would be symptomatic of the particular evacuation of historicist meaning and temporal depth that Jameson equates with postmodern culture more generally. However, this pessimistic view does not give reign to the possibilities of postmodern textual practice as it plays with, and reconstitutes, traces of the historical and media archive. Collins provides a different, and I think more enabling, perspective. He describes a certain type of film genre that actively responds to the expanding volume, access, manipulability and circulation of signs in postmodern cultural life. Seen in the context of his treatment of 1990s genericity, films like *Forrest Gump* and *Pleasantville* exemplify less Jameson's 'nostalgia mode' than what Collins has termed 'eclectic irony'.⁹ Put succinctly, films that belong to the genre of 'eclectic irony' utilise the sophistication of media culture (its icons, images, sounds, scenarios, conventions and genres), greeting new forms of textuality by reworking traces of the 'semiotic array' in hybrid and ironic combinations. Rather than claim some authentic relation with the past, retreating from and beyond the question of textual mediation (something that Collins relates to an adverse genre he calls 'new sincerity'), films such as *Back to the Future*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, *Forrest Gump* and *Pleasantville* are all defined by their use and

manipulation of the multifarious images and texts that circulate in the contemporary cultural terrain. This has implications for the question, and representation, of cultural memory. For Collins, memory is not a question of unmediated recall or recovery, but of the reconfiguration of cultural references and textual traces within the semiotic array. His argument concentrates less on the waning of historicity than on 'the individual negotiations of the array that form the delicate process of not just maintaining but constantly rearticulating cultural memories'.¹⁰

In seeing how this process of articulation can be drawn in different political directions, it is useful to compare *Pleasantville* with *Forrest Gump*. Both films create a period pastness by recycling a diverse range of media memories, digitally inserting their protagonists into an archival and textual evocation of (or that begins with) the 1950s. *Forrest Gump* rearticulates America's postwar past in a largely iconic fashion. It replays history through a host of textual traces that include documentary footage of key national events, archival vignettes where Gump 'meets' historical figures in digitally altered footage, and a soundtrack where period lyrics describe the diegetic events of the film narrative. The film operates through a process of 'zoning', using different film stock, colour diffusions, visual imagery and musical resonance to index what decade or 'zone' the film narrative is referring to and operating within. Unlike the status of 'docu-fable' that *Forrest Gump* claimed for itself, *Pleasantville* does not play with boundaries of fiction and history in the same manner. Instead, *Pleasantville* creates a hyperreal past, entirely defined by, and within, the fictional conventions of television (sitcom) genre. Where *Forrest Gump* is based on the archival and historical referencing of 'real' events and peoples – from George Wallace and the desegregation stand-off to the pelvic gyrations of Elvis – *Pleasantville* creates a satirical iconography of projected cultural values. This turns ruefully on the aggrandisement of the nuclear family, an *Ozzie and Harriet* depiction of the fulfilled wife and mother, the breadwinning father, and 2.4 compliant children. Set within a culture of material plenty, *Pleasantville* lampoons a set of white representational fantasies of the 1950s established *within* the 1950s.¹¹

Despite their differences, the respective protagonists of *Forrest Gump* and *Pleasantville* are woven into an iconic rendering of historical/representational periodicity. While the character of Forrest Gump (played by Tom Hanks) becomes the focal link in the film's

textual and narrative development, played out within America's postwar past, David and Jennifer are located squarely within a hermetic textual universe rhetorically drawn from that past. Discussing the escalation in the public sphere of a reflective attitude towards history, Sobchack suggests that *Forrest Gump* is 'absolutely dependent for its humor and irony upon the historically (self) conscious viewers who have been immersed in questions about the boundaries, meanings, and place of history in their daily lives, as well as their own possible place in history'.¹² Similar questions of historical subjectivity are given an added, more explicitly textualised, dimension in *Pleasantville*. Rather than revisit the 1950s, David and Jennifer are placed in an idealised representation of the 1950s. Here, they proceed to challenge, interrogate and deconstruct its ideological assumptions. In some sense, *Pleasantville* makes literal the process of postmodern historicism that Linda Hutcheon identifies when textual traces of the past come into ideological and cultural mediation with the present. *Pleasantville* is less concerned with the degree to which individuals impact upon historical events and happenings (as in *Forrest Gump*), than with the reflective engagement, intervention and re-constellation of history's semiotised traces. Through David and Jennifer's own textual adventure – an adventure that changes the representational and chromatic life-world of Pleasantville as seen and consumed in the present – *Pleasantville* exemplifies what, in the context of postmodern historicism, Hutcheon has described as the 'critical, dialogical reviewing of the forms, contexts and values of the past'.¹³

This takes on a particular significance in the climate of the 1990s. In political terms, *Pleasantville* revisits the instructive mythologies of 'traditional family values' that have underpinned the sanctity and general lauding of the 1950s in conservative rhetoric. According to Stephanie Coontz, these mythologies were most powerfully derived in the 1990s from the countless reruns of television sitcoms like *The Donna Reed Show* and *Leave it to Beaver*.¹⁴ Of course, the fate of the family, trammelled in culture war debates, informed much larger questions about American cultural morality, history and identity in the 1990s. These turned centrally upon the pivotal significance and legacy of the 1960s. For conservatives, especially the New-Right coalition that formed around Newt Gingrich in the middle of the decade, the 1960s became a key battleground of cultural memory. As a decade, 'the sixties' emblematised the lapsarian moment from

which a diagnosis of contemporary malaise took its form and force. In right-wing rhetoric, symptoms linked to the 1960s could include anything from the breakdown of the family and the rise in violent crime, to the emergence of multicultural separatism and the crisis of university education. The liberal-left response, vociferously argued by the so-tarred 'tenured radicals' of right-wing lore, argued for the crucial importance of the 1960s in rethinking terms of inclusion/exclusion in American life and society. These frictions and battles of value were duly fought out in the cultural terrain. Ever sensitive to marketable moods and public discourse – and a prime site of ideological contestation – this could not help but include Hollywood film.

No film is *intrinsically* 'conservative' or 'liberal' and therefore representative of any pure ideological position. This is especially true when relating films to the nebulous culture war debates of the 1990s. As Douglas Kellner points out, the texts of media culture often incorporate a variety of images, effects and narrative strategies, frequently going both ways, ideologically, to maximise their audience appeal.¹⁵ This flexibility combines with the highly complex and 'structurally ambiguous' way that contemporary films construct meaning and negotiate identity. Jude Davies and Carol Smith suggest that any attempt to carve up Hollywood film in thematic terms, based on what specific texts appear to be 'about', will rarely account for the way that films solicit audience identification on a partial basis, and depend upon overlapping and multidimensional constructions of identity.¹⁶ *Forrest Gump* is a good example of a film that offered itself up for a conservative reading – celebrating family values and the authority of a white, male redemption figure – while also providing a view whereby conventional values and racial/gender prejudices appear to be satirised. Despite the ideological ambiguity resulting from the reach for mainstream appeal, popular films *do* inscribe and transcode ideological positions within particular discursive fields. Such is the case, I would argue, with *Pleasantville* and *Forrest Gump*. Both films combine digital innovation and cultural invocation to allegorise the significance of the 1960s, making alternate claims in the hegemonic battle to control the decade's 'memory' and 'legacy'.

Without wishing to simplify the discursive complexity of either film, I would suggest that *Pleasantville* can be read as a cultural and allegorical response to the residual conservatism of *Forrest Gump*. If, as numerous critics agree, *Forrest Gump* constructs a consensus

view of American history based upon the authority of the white father and the marginalisation of black, female, gay and radical 'others',¹⁷ *Pleasantville* assimilates the terms of culture war debate that informed *Gump*'s vision of family idealism, and that underwrote various elements of conservative rhetoric in the early 1990s. While *Forrest Gump* can be set in relation to the high-point of culture war discourse – a period where the 1960s were seen as the cause and origin of a more general crisis of morality and values – *Pleasantville* is focused on the culture war as a political and rhetorical moment. The film is less concerned with controlling the popular memory of America's recent past than with addressing conservative 'culture war' mythologies themselves. Specifically, *Pleasantville* puts forward a vision of community – tolerant, enlightened, coloured – carried out from within, and set against, the conservative territory of the stolid, monochrome, and resoundingly fetishised, 1950s.

This interpretation might better explain the type and variety of media invocation in *Pleasantville*, troubling to critics who identify the film's particular 'muddle' and 'idiocy'. Basically, I would suggest that *Pleasantville* turns key elements of conservative rhetoric against itself. The film invokes a variety of issues, images and right-wing bugbears in a fable that responds openly to culture war discourse of the early 1990s. The film dramatises a series of recognised conflict sites fought over art, literature, music, morality, sexuality, family and difference. At the same time, the film also figures, and playfully renders, images and echoes drawn from conservative rhetoric. While the spectral presence of Alan Bloom and Hilton Kramer haunts the film – symbolically drawn in the town's enforcement of a 'non-changist view of history, emphasising continuity over alteration', and in its vociferous policing of art and public display¹⁸ – *Pleasantville* weaves into its narrative several incendiary tropes that distinguished media representation of the culture wars in the early 1990s.¹⁹

One moment in the film that has invited a cautionary, if not openly sceptical, response on the part of many reviewers, has been the invocation of fascist book burning. Responding to the cultural threat of literary and artistic flowering in *Pleasantville*, represented both by the town's youth and proprietor-cum-artist, Bill Johnson (Jeff Daniels), a conservative mob rampage through the town, smashing windows, creating bonfires of censored texts and sneering at the deviancy of the 'coloureds'. For some, the echoes of Kristallnacht sit uncomfortably within a fable ostensibly dealing with myths

of 1950s America. However, fascist invocation was endemic to the kind of rhetoric mobilised in the vitriolic ‘political correctness’ debates of the early 1990s. From a conservative standpoint, left-wing ‘feminazis’ and other ‘Visigoths in tweed’ had come to police cultural value and personal behaviour, representing nothing short of an emergent ‘totalitarianism’ or ‘McCarthyism’ of the left. The language of fascism infused the standard bromides emanating from the cultural right. *Pleasantville* replayed these fascist and McCarthyite invocations, but transposed them back onto the black and white burghers of the town, characters who increasingly appear as if within the cartoon grip of New Right moralism.

It should be said that ‘political correctness’, the lightning rod of culture war debate, created significant rafts between factions of the left and right. This makes it difficult to speak confidently or coherently about discreet left/right positions and standards of moral value. On issues ranging from the emergence of academic theory and the strategic import of identity politics, to campus speech codes and anti-pornographic censorship, discursive territories of left and right were subject to frequent clouding and conflation. In media terms, however, that axis of left and right was fairly well maintained. If, as Jim Nielson suggests, the ‘most striking feature of media representation of political correctness was its consistent identification with fascism’,²⁰ *Pleasantville* used culture war metaphors of political extremism, associated with tenured radicals and their ilk, but repositioned these within and against the prescriptive social regulation of (white, male, middle class) conservative moral guardians.

Collins suggests that contemporary film genre must work within, and should be understood in terms of, a cultural terrain that is ‘already sedimented with layers of popular mythologies, some old, some recent, but all co-present and subject to rearticulation according to different ideological agendas’.²¹ Through active appropriation of the media and discursive array, *Pleasantville* satirises the fallacious nostalgia of the New Right, attached as it was (and remains) to a prelapsarian order of patriarchal norms and family idealism and absorbed, at some level, within films like *Forrest Gump*. A concerted narrative reading of *Pleasantville* would have to contend with the film’s own ideological prescriptions. The film’s version of a culturally expressive and socially inclusive community is, in the end, fairly muted. J. Hoberman is surely right to comment that, quite aside from its inclusive pretensions, *Pleasantville* projects a resiliently white,

heterosexual version of the redeemed community. The film offers a fairly mainstream dose of Hollywood liberalism. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that *Pleasantville* traffics in a muddled, random or idiotic narrative to advance this liberal positionality. On the contrary, the film rather cleverly weaves elements of culture war rhetoric in and within a media fiction (i.e. the 1950s sitcom) whose myths of family idealism and harmonious community it contiguously deconstructs. Rather than a paradigm of narrative confusion, ideological idiocy or historicist blockage, *Pleasantville* plays reflexively with culture war discourse and its constituent politics of memory.

Colourised memory

Pleasantville is an interesting memory text on a number of levels. I have so far suggested that, through eclectic quotational referencing, the film transcodes a social discourse about the meaning and memory of the 1960s. Specifically, it plays with (and against) conservative nostalgia for the mythic universe of the 1950s domestic sitcom. The film also invokes different kinds of memory debate, however. In significant ways, *Pleasantville* revisits the question of digital colourisation. To its liberal critics in the late 1980s, the process of colourisation created movies that were hollow simulations. They were a crude and stupefying cultural form symptomatic of an emerging digital age, and enabled by a political climate that licensed the re-privatisation of public culture through the enforcement of property rights (in this case, Ted Turner's). While the political climate altered very little in the 1990s – copyright protection becoming a defining issue in the neo-liberal media marketplace – attitudes towards digital culture *did* change. With regard to Hollywood's own output, Andrew Darley suggests that a new modality of mainstream cinema developed, comprised of films defined by sophisticated techniques of computer imaging.²² Represented in movies such as *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Mask* (1994), *True Lies* (1994), *Starship Troopers* (1997) and *Titanic* (1997), the 1990s witnessed the development of an enlivened 'digital cinema' of which *Pleasantville* can be seen to be a part.

In Darley's definition, 'digital cinema' is a movie style characterised by a new regime of spectacle, centring upon the creation of dazzling and spellbinding imagery. Manifest in various genre forms,

digital cinema deploys, and is often highly dependent on, the formal excitations created by techniques of computer imaging. Darley writes: 'The growth of spectacle, and the fascination with image as image, in the sense of both visual excitation and technological density (artifice), is one indication that attention to *formal* facets – means and pure perceptual play – are finding a place within mass entertainment forms.'²³ *Pleasantville* engages a distinctive mode of colourised spectacle. Indeed, the film's 'perceptual play' became a selling point in promotional and advertising strategy (posters depicted a black and white audience from the 1950s awe-struck by the projection of a colour world). However, *Pleasantville* challenges Darley's critical assertion that spectacle has brought with it a consequent 'waning of narrative'. If the film's quotational practice constructs a highly reflexive narrative based on the relationship between present and past, digital technology is used to draw out and acknowledge this relationship in textual terms.

In form and style, *Pleasantville* was not without precedent. In 1991, Nickelodeon (the cable network owned by Viacom that operates the rerun programme Nick at Nite) produced a situation comedy where a 1950s sitcom family were re-located in a 'real-life' suburb of New Jersey in the 1990s. Entitled *Hi Honey, I'm Home*, the family appeared in vintage black and white. *Pleasantville* used the same conceit but reversed the terms. In each case, the narrative 'hook' was based upon temporal displacements in and between the real and televisual universe of the 1950s and the 1990s. While themes of time-travel and of mystical transportations to alternate worlds are nothing new in American film (going back to *The Wizard of Oz*), digital technology has opened up new creative possibilities in the representation of these spatial and temporal displacements: of transposing the present in the past, the past in the present, and of recreating mythic and historical worlds on a new and visually spectacular scale. In *Pleasantville*, digital capacities of visual manipulation are used to create a myth-world where *chromatic* difference becomes the narrative lynchpin. Unlike *Forrest Gump*, where the central character is harmoniously transposed into a tableau of American cultural history, colour in *Pleasantville* is used to draw out cultural and temporal disjunctions; the infusion of colour is a device that signifies the unmistakable trace of the present as it intervenes with, interprets, and transforms, the semiotised realm of the past.

There is, of course, an important difference between the colourisation of old movies – what for Turner became a commercial attempt to maximise the syndication potential of black and white films he'd paid too much for – and *Pleasantville*'s use of colourisation as a narrative device. Accepting the principle that 'colourisation' does not have the same legal, aesthetic and discursive stakes in each case, I would nevertheless say that *Pleasantville* reflects a changing attitude towards the digital re-presentation of the past. To detractors of the colourisation process, colour conversion tampered with the aura (the artefact) and the era (the tradition) of the 'classic' black and white movie.²⁴ At stake in the colourisation debate, and especially felt by the Hollywood establishment, was the destabilisation of categories of value such as 'authenticity' and 'the archive'; digital technology was seen to challenge the visual and cultural basis upon which these categories have been traditionally grounded and sustained. However, as computer technology has been absorbed within cultural life – most profoundly via the Internet but also within a range of genres in the 1990s including film, advertising and music video – digital imaging/information has become less of a threat and more an intrinsic part of (new) media life.

Describing the forms and features of the contemporary 'information age', Collins links the accelerated rate of technological innovation with a new and particular attitude towards the archive. Not only have digital technologies transformed 'offices and living rooms into instant ad hoc archives where juxtapositions are a matter of perpetually reconfigurable random access',²⁵ Collins suggests that the art of (cinematic) storytelling has changed in the context of this exponential increase in the volume of transmissible images. Pointing to a new textual hyperconsciousness in cultural life, Collins puts a refreshingly positive slant on the negotiation of identity and memory in the information age. Mapping a cultural shift in the 1990s, he argues that early, technophobic, fears of information glut – manifest in hostility towards representational forms and genres enabled by new digital technologies – have been replaced by 'the more contemporary response of mastering the array of information which now forms the fabric of day-to-day life'.²⁶ In terms of the interests of this chapter, one might say that while the colourisation debate of the late 1980s was born, in part, from the shock of technological excess – especially as it was felt to impact on the 'authenticity' of the art work and the basis of artistic heritage – *Pleasantville*

represents the domestication of colouring technique and the marketable manipulation of 'techno-textuality'.

It would be wrong to suggest too neat a transition from the 'shock of excess' to the 'domestication of the semiotic array'. And yet, some kind of cultural and critical transformation has occurred. This is linked fundamentally to the way that, in the words of Stephen Prince, 'digital imaging technologies are rapidly transforming nearly all phases of contemporary film production'.²⁷ With the new creative possibilities of computer-generated imagery, notions of authenticity and indexicality have been seriously problematised. As Prince notes, the result in film theory has been to shift emphasis 'away from naïve notions of indexical realism in favour of an attention to the constructedness of cinematic discourse'.²⁸ Digital technology has raised new questions about the ideology of cinematic representation and referentiality and the status of memory is embroiled in these cultural and critical transformations. In cinematic terms, the transition is usefully brought out by the way that *Pleasantville* revisits and recasts the issue of film colourisation, adopting a highly reflexive attitude towards the discursive intersection of memory and textuality. Unlike the anti-colourisation lobby, which sought to preserve a selection of 'classic' art works under the auspice and designation of a sacral film history, *Pleasantville* makes a point of the means by which texts are refigured, recontextualised and remembered in the contemporary cultural terrain.

It has been my argument that *Pleasantville* uses digital colourisation to illustrate the discursive circulation and rearticulation of the past, in and by the present. Creating its own ironic sense of what Gilbert Adair calls the 'suburban pastoral'²⁹ – an idealised evocation of small-town Americana in the tradition of *It's a Wonderful Life*³⁰ – *Pleasantville* deploys colouring technique to recast conservative nostalgia for family values and the glories of small-town community. In doing so, the film transcodes a social discourse prevalent in the 1990s, attempting to recuperate the significance and memory of the 1960s. Writing in 1993, scion of the New Left, Todd Gitlin, said: 'the genies that the Sixties loosed are still abroad in the land, inspiring and unsettling and offending, making trouble'.³¹ In *Pleasantville*, David and Jennifer become the figurative embodiments of these 1990s-cum-1960s genies. With their sexual savvy, political sophistication, and demystified notions of identity, gender and family, they question, interrogate and problematise the forms and values of the

(media) past caricatured in *Pleasantville*. Using the infusion of colour to dramatise this process, *Pleasantville* is a pregnant, even indicative, memory text of the late 1990s: it articulates a discourse of cultural remembrance in a moment where the textuality of memory has, itself, become increasingly hyperconscious.

Notes

- 1 A full account of these issues can be found in Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2002).
- 2 Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 93–122.
- 3 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 4 See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in A Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Jim Collins, *Architectures of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 5 Lynn Spigel, 'From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women's Memories and Television Re-runs', *Screen* 36: 1 (1995), 16–33. Discussing the popularity of television reruns in the 1990s, Spigel suggests that interest in programmes such as *Nick at Nite* (part of Nickelodeon's evening schedule and a forerunner of rerun programming) has less to do with the endurance of television art than with strategies of recontextualisation. These include programme marathons, theme nights, promotions and ironic guest presenters, all of which help to create a new, essentially playful, 'reception context' for old reruns. See also, Paul Grainge, 'Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes and Media Recycling', *The Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 23: 1 (2000), 27–34.
- 6 J. Hoberman, 'Under the Rainbow', *Sight and Sound* (January 1999), 16.
- 7 Andrew O'Hehir, 'Pleasantville', *Sight and Sound* (March 1999), 50.
- 8 For a discussion of these issues, see Jim Collins, 'Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 242–63. An example of the lament for narrative coherence and historicist depth can be found in Jameson, *Postmodernism*, and Allison Graham, 'Nostalgia and the Criminality of Popular Culture', *Georgia Review* 38: 2 (1984), 348–64.
- 9 Collins, 'Genericity in the Nineties', pp. 242–57.

- 10 Collins, 'Genericity in the Nineties', p. 255.
- 11 See Nina C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
- 12 Vivian Sobchack, 'History Happens', in *The Persistence of History*, p. 3.
- 13 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 89.
- 14 Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), pp. 23–41.
- 15 Kellner, *Media Culture*, p. 93.
- 16 Jude Davies and Carol Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1997), p. 9.
- 17 See, in particular, Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 104–19; Thomas Byers, 'History Re-membered: Forrest Gump, Post-feminist Masculinity, and the Burial of the Counterculture', *Modern Fiction Studies* 42: 2 (1996), 419–44; and Fred Pfeil, *White Guys* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 233–62.
- 18 Allan Bloom and Hilton Kramer were two arch cultural warriors in the conservative attack on educational and artistic standards, represented in Bloom's 1987 jeremiad on American liberal education, *The Closing of The American Mind*, and in Kramer's various media pronouncements on political correctness in the arts.
- 19 Troubled by the so-called 'politicisation of the academy', editorials in *New York*, *The New Republic*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Time* and *Newsweek* spoke throughout 1991 of a new intolerance within universities and in cultural life more generally. The bogey of 'political correctness' became the touch-point for news stories about the tyrannies of the 'loony' left.
- 20 Jim Neilson, 'The Great PC Scare: Tyrannies of the Left, Rhetoric of the Right', in Jeffrey Williams (ed.), *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy* (New York: outledge, 1995), pp. 60–89.
- 21 Collins, *Architectures of Excess*, p. 155.
- 22 Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 109. Of course, Hollywood embraced digital technology long before the 1990s. While experimentation with digital-based technologies can be traced to the 1960s, Darley suggests that Hollywood really embraced computer imaging in the middle of the 1980s, pioneered in films using special effects such as *Alien* (1979), *Tron* (1982) and *The Last Starfighter* (1985). It was the commercial success of *Terminator 2* in 1991, however, that 'convinced Hollywood that digital cinema was both aesthetically feasible and potentially highly lucrative'.
- 23 Darley, *Visual Digital Culture*, p. 114.
- 24 While the colourisation conflict marked a figurative defeat for those wishing to instigate a legal grounding for the protection of artistic

rights, the brouhaha soon expired when it became clear that colourised films were not, in fact, replacing black and white ‘classics’ but were often co-existing with monochrome originals in the programming schedules of rerun cable stations such as American Movie Classics. For a lucid summary of the cultural and legal debates surrounding the colourisation conflict, see Stuart Klawans, ‘Colorization: Rose-Tinted Spectacles’, in Mark Crispin-Miller (ed.), *Seeing Through Movies* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), pp. 150–85; and Craig Wagner, ‘Motion Picture Colorization and the Elusive Moral Right’, *New York University Law Review* 64: 3 (1989), 628–725. For a discussion of the ‘discourse of black and whiteness’ in American visual culture during the 1990s, see Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*.

- 25 Collins, *Architectures of Excess*, p. 3.
- 26 Collins, *Architectures of Excess*, p. 4.
- 27 Stephen Prince, ‘True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images and Film Theory’, *Film Quarterly* 49: 3 (1996), 27.
- 28 Prince, ‘True Lies’, 35.
- 29 Gilbert Adair, ‘It’s a Phantasmagorical Life’, *The Independent on Sunday* (14 March 1999), p. 5.
- 30 An indication of *Pleasantville*’s discreet invocation of the colourisation debate – aside from its obvious use of colouring technology – can arguably be found in the film’s implicit, or at least atmospheric, reference to *It’s a Wonderful Life*. It was Ted Turner’s attempt to produce a colourised version of Capra’s film that mobilised the anti-colourisation lobby in 1987, liberal directors and film guilds rushing to protect the aesthetic integrity and original status of *It’s a Wonderful Life* as an ‘American classic’.
- 31 Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), p. xiv.