

NOT ALL SUPPRESSION IS REPRESSION! NOT ALL EXPRESSION IS GOOD

1 "Special Effects" is the only category in which this film is worthy of consideration toward an Oscar. Switching between B&W (black-&-white) & color has been around for a long time (I've done a bit of it myself). But having B&W/color in the same frame is a computer innovation of which this film, I believe, is the first instance. Especially in the last scene, people instantly change from the gray scale of 1958 (40 years before the film's publication) to color--the instant they convert from Apollonian left-brain constraint to Dionysiac right-brain "getting in touch with their feelings" & "letting it all hang out"--to use two phrases from the '60s....

2& I do mean the '60s, the actual time-period of this unconsciously old-fashioned film purporting to be up to the '90s' speed. Remember the '60s? The kids & their adult disciples were aglow with a full-color palette (to use this film's metaphor), against the B&W gray-scale "uptight" (as it was called) parental culture. I knew the '50s intimately, being throughout the decade the pastor of one church. And I came to know the '60s intimately, the decade my work-base was a national church office (the United Church of Christ's exciting first full decade). The politics. The ethics. The esthetics. The churches' responses to the churnings within (heart & church) & without (in culture & world). Within the limits of my '30s evangelical conversion, I was a full participant in that high-energy decade which, on its narcissistic sexual side, this '60s-type film well represents. At the low-cultural level of that side, Woodstock I. At the high-cultural level, HPM (the human potential movement), its New Jerusalem being the Esalen Institute (where I was briefly in '68). My education, conversation, & a small pile of decades beginning with the '20s provide me with a perspective for viewing "Pleasantville," a **devil's sermon**--the devil disguised as a full-color angel of light--a naive Freudian sermon preached by old hippies who haven't grown up, or by boomers who think they've grown up but haven't.

3 Last night, we probably should have asked for affirmative comments first: "What did you like about the film? What's good about it?" I've already said one good thing: techno-cinematic creativity. Another is that while (as this Thinksheet's subtitle puts it) "not all expression is good," *some* is: some folks do indeed need to loosen up, are over-controlled, under-aware of their feelings & over-fearful of them, over-thoughtful & under-expressive (as Shakespeare put it, action is "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought"). To them, the Esalen slogan is appropriate: "Get out of your head & into your body." But the sermon's style is (1) unappetizingly in-your-face arrogant, not likely to convert any who need the basic message, & (2) inappropriate to the narcissistic consumer masses who've already let too much of it hang out & would experience the film as one more opportunity to drink the poison they're addicted to & laugh at the B&W medicine they need.

4 Wisdom teaches the balancing of esthetics (Gk., "perceiving"--esp. perceiving beauty, esp. in the fine arts) & ethics (behavior--esp., proper conduct). The film is an example of run-away esthetics controlling ethics. Russian poet Brodsky, who suffered Stalinism's ethics' crushing esthetics (Marxist "scientific" inhuman rationalism), went to the other extreme (as the film does, presenting the '50s in America as rationalistic-repressive): "Esthetics is the mother of ethics." (He saw Plato's REPUBLIC in its rational manipulation of the populace as an anticipation of Marxian communism.) While wisdom teaches that esthetics & ethics should be mutually corrective, I go with Brodsky's domestic image: beauty mothers (good/evil) behavior. In that a film is an esthetic product, it has a privileged power to influence behavior. That's what worries me about "Pleasantville": ethically-morally, it's a push more to bad than to good behavior.

5 Converts easily exaggerate, in telling their transition tale, their former condition: mired in sin, sadness, stupidity, (in the metaphor of this film) grayness. The film would be a good fit for the '60s soft (human-potential) rebellion both in its oh-wow feelings-discoveries (e.g., a tree outside the house suddenly explodes in flame as the mother learns, on daughter's advice, to masturbate) and in its arrogant derro-

gation of the parental '50s' intelligence (e.g., our young hero, transported from the '90s, teaches a '50s fireman what a firehose is for). A cautionary tale: Let Christian converts respect God's working (the good) in their pre-conversional lives & life-world: we are called not to arrogance but to humility, not to pride but to gratitude, not to insensitivity but to love.

6 Predictably, the film is entirely without benefit of clergy. God is dead, his voice echoing only as blasphemy (3x "O God!"--once, "Jesus Christ!"). No Ps.121. 1-2 CEV: "Where will I find help? It will come from the LORD, who created the heavens and the earth." That's biblical religion's Q/A. As the film begins, highschool kids are into themselves (as are, necessarily, small children). And in neither school nor home are they getting any nudge toward the Bible's A for their Q. The sexual revolution (that '60s again!) has taught them that the A to their Q as to what it's all about is sexual liberation, so we see them (apparently) copulating in their cars at Lovers' Lane. The sexual-libertine tradition is portrayed by a few of those '50s kids teaching the '90s (first actually the '60s) kids to copulate. It's all so sad I couldn't do what the film wanted me to do: laugh.

7 The film is simple-minded, foolish because unaware (or resentful?) of life's complexity/ambiguity--as is the unreal stupidity of the physician in this cartoon (like a spear, which has only one point & can only penetrate--unlike the single-minded spear-thrower, whose eyes take in the whole battle scene). See the difference in two authors: (1) D.H. Lawrence (in Aldous Huxley's ed. of his letters, 1932): "My great religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect." That imbalance, despite DHL's sophistication, is simple-minded; (2) Edwin Markham's poetry against the exploitation of poor laborers & the exclusion of minorities ("Love drew a circle that took them in"--my favorite among his poems) is single-minded, as indeed is the Christian vision.

WIZARD OF ID

by Brant Parker and Johnny Hart



8 For the individual, water & food are necessary, sex isn't ("sex" as in "I didn't have sex [sexual intercourse] with that woman"--a fact Monica says at least three times on Linda's tapes, so how come some folks laughed at Bill for stating the fact?). Without water & food we can't cope, & the sex drive is tough for everybody to cope with. The film suggests we cope with it the way a teen-age boy copes with his first car: let'er roar! Roar is not just the engine but what the teenager does with his genitals in the car: two engines under insufficient control. Please note again this Thinksheet's title. (An excellent book: Ken I. Pargament, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION AND COPING [Guilford Press/97].) Dorothy Parker was right: "You can't teach an old dogma new tricks." You can't teach libertinism to restrain itself, so you must condemn it (as this Thinksheet condemns this film). And Aristotle was right: "What a society honors will be cultivated." Since the '60s, America has been honoring free-open sex & all "sexual preferences" except bestiality & pederasty--so no one should be surprised that the media continue to cultivate it (even to phallic specificity: three erections visible in a film to be released next month).

9 In photography, do you prefer B&W (black-&-white) or color? The film, having this as its control metaphor expects to you answer, without having to think about it, "Color!" B&W has become so rare, in amateur photography, that it costs much more to have a B&W film processed than a color film (i.e., cassette film, in both cases--not a movie "film," as elsewhere in this Thinksheet)....From 1929 till 1942, all my photo-processing (in 1929, glass plates!) was B&W; so when in '42 I began color processing, oh how much better it seemed! In this movie, how much better color seems than the '50s--representing B&W uptight sexual lifestyle! But now, photography has matured. No connoisseur would say that Ansel Adams' landscapes of the West would be better in color. Now some great photogs work exclusively with B&W, suppressing (we might say) color in order to express what color cannot. These experts (one might say) practice abstinence from color, as sensible humans practice sexual abstinence before marriage--believing that color (in the movie's metaphor, sexual "freedom") leads to sadness, romanceless sex, divorce.