

Control and Resistance in the Heterotopic Spatiality of *Pleasantville*

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Abstract

Pleasantville presents the experience of the teenage twins David and Jennifer who are transported to the 1950s TV soap opera named Pleasantville via the TV remote control. The twins introduce free sex, arts, literature, rock and roll, and jazz to this perfected town in which residents live in order. This clash of cultures results in social unrest as the residents become aware that the order is an outcome of submission and challenge the roles attributed to them. The transformation from control to resistance is the dominant motif of the film. Using Foucault's theory of heterotopia, this study scrutinizes how the heterotopian principles in the spatial presentations provide a good lens to negotiate forms of control and resistance.

Keywords: Foucault, heterotopia, *Pleasantville*, control, resistance



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In *Pleasantville* (written and directed by Gary Ross in 1998) the teenage twins David and Jennifer are transported from their society in 1990s to 1950s TV soap opera named “Pleasantville.” This change is a travel back in time but it is also a movement in space, from a space where problems such as unemployment, diseases, plagues, ecological catastrophes are evident to a space in which everything is “swell,” filled with family values, proper nutrition, and safe sex. David and Jennifer possess new identities as Bud and Mary Sue and they are stuck in this new world. As the twins begin to practice this new space, they soon realize that not only them but also all other residents are confined in Pleasantville living according to certain restrictive roles and rules. In fact, what make the town pleasing at first glance are actually prominent emblems of domination, control and confinement. The presence of these two strangers leads some residents to a process of questioning about whether their own life-styles and customs are actually pleasing or oppressing. Consequently, this discomfort ends up in a transformation from confinement to resistance as some residents set their desires and emotions free.

The film has been extensively examined from a variety of viewpoints such as race¹, gender², suburbia³, theology⁴, levels of reality,⁵ memory⁶, utopia⁷, Bourdieu’s sociology⁸, Bakhtinian chronotope⁹ and cinematic digital technology¹⁰. This study investigates how space

contributes to a better understanding of the mechanisms of control and resistance in *Pleasantville*, using Foucault's study on heterotopia as a theoretical framework. Primarily, the connection between heterotopia and utopia will be presented which will be followed by an illustration of how the town Pleasantville inherits the characteristics of both a utopic and a heterotopic mirror. Then both the town Pleasantville as a whole and the specific places in the town such as prison, courtroom, Lover's Lane, library, and soda shop will be scrutinized according to Foucault's heterotopology in order to point out how ideas of control and resistance are manifested in this heterotopic landscape.

The term heterotopia that is a combination of two Greek words *hetero* meaning "the other, different" and *topia* meaning place¹¹ "is originally a medical term referring to a particular tissue that develops at a place other than is usual"¹². There are three occasions in which Foucault outlines the notion of heterotopia: first, in his preface to *The Order of Things*; second, within a radio broadcast as part of a series on the theme of utopia and literature; and finally, in a lecture presented to a group of architects¹³. The lecture given in 1967 was published under the title "Des Espaces Autres" in 1984 without any revision just before Foucault died¹⁴. This text was translated into English either as "Of Other Spaces" (Jay Miskowiec) or "Different Spaces" (Robert Hurley)¹⁵.

Foucault's conceptualization of the term is criticized for being unfinished¹⁶, slippery¹⁷, groundless¹⁸, inchoate¹⁹, unpolished²⁰, or all-encompassing²¹. Although the theory has such flaws, the term is one of the most popular theoretical frameworks used in understanding the spatial elements in both fictional and nonfictional sites and has received critical attention from different disciplines such as arts, literature, cinema, architecture, and geography. Indeed, it is this open-endedness of the term which has resulted in a vast range of scholarly interpretations²². The heterotopian-related papers generated every few months or so indicate that the notion of heterotopia is not losing its popularity²³.

In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault declares the twentieth century as the epoch of space in contrast to the obsession with history in the nineteenth century. Then he provides a short snapshot of what he calls the history of space in Western experience starting from the medieval space –what he calls the space of emplacement—in which “there was a hierarchic ensemble of spaces”²⁴. The space of emplacement, due to Galileo's “constitution of an infinite, and infinitely open space,”²⁵ was substituted by the idea of space as extension in the seventeenth century. Then Foucault examines the final stage of space history declaring that “[o]ur epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites”²⁶. There are significant qualities of the

contemporary space that Foucault stresses: it is heterogeneous, relational, and not entirely desanctified²⁷.

The sites that Foucault is interested in are the ones “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect”²⁸. According to Foucault, there are two types of these spaces which are linked with and contradict all other sites: utopias and heterotopias²⁹. Utopias, which “are sites with no real place” “present society itself in a perfected form, or else the society turned upside down”³⁰. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are “real places” “which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”³¹. The mirror, according to Foucault, is both a utopia and a heterotopia: It is a utopia because it is a “placeless place” in which the gazer sees its reflection in a virtual space; It is a heterotopia because it exists in reality and it makes the gazer’s place “at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there”³².

Foucault’s examination of mirror provides a good lens to examine the town *Pleasantville* because the town stands as a vigorous illustration of a mirror that has the “mixed, joint

experience”³³ of utopia and heterotopia. In the beginning of the film, the town is a precious illustration of utopia especially in terms of its contrast to the 1990s. The utopic quality of the town and the depiction of a relational topography are evident in “the distinction between violent, jaded, contemporary American culture, and the bland, sexless utopia of family values represented by the reruns of the 1950s television show Pleasantville”³⁴. In the beginning of the film, David’s present day apocalyptic society filled with anxieties and fears are juxtaposed to the utopic qualities of safe Pleasantville. As Dickinson explicates “[t]he contrast is clear: Pleasantville is good, safe, warm, and loving; Presentville is fractured, unsafe, and scary”³⁵.

The forms of perfection are still visible after David and Jennifer’s transportation since in the town which “represents a stable and homogenous utopia”³⁶, there is no conflict, challenge, difference, unhappiness, fire, catastrophe, unemployment, homelessness, or poverty. In addition, the weather is always good, basketball team always wins and family and neighborhood ties are strong. The town stands as a perfect community living in peace and order. However, there are two sides of the coin and as the events unfold, it becomes clear that “pleasantness has its price”³⁷. These depictions of control, peace, and order in the mirror are coupled with the scenes of restriction and confinement. In this monochrome world, the books are empty and residents are confined in the suburban boundaries since they “never travel

beyond Main Street, no one knows of any world outside”³⁸. Musing on this image of imprisonment, Aichele comments that the inhabitants’ unawareness of an outside world makes it a truly utopia, a nowhere³⁹. Furthermore, in this land “any sexual activity beyond the occasional kiss on the cheek are unknown” and “[m]arried couples sleep in separate beds”⁴⁰. As the people in the town realize that the order is maintained indeed by social and spatial restrictions, they start to liberate their desires and needs and resist against the oppressive codes.

Before the twin’s transportation, the town Pleasantville which “represents a stable and homogenous utopia”⁴¹, is an unreal place presenting the society in a perfected form. Once the twins are transported, the town becomes a real place that the twins experience, thereby attaining a heterotopic quality. Both as a utopia—depicting an unreal place and a heterotopia—presenting a real place, the town serves as a mirror forming complex web of relations with the 1990s America, suspecting, neutralizing or inverting the set of relations especially those regarding control and resistance. The relation between the topography of Pleasantville and that of the 1990s society takes new forms as the images in the space of the town changes from control to resistance and finally freedom. In this regard, Pleasantville which stands as a mirror directed to the present world reflects dynamic images contesting the contemporary space with its both fantasies and phobias.

Before a more detailed scrutiny of the heterotopic landscape of *Pleasantville*, it would be wise to summarize the six principles of heterotopology outlined by Foucault. The first principle is that heterotopias, although they may take varied forms, have been and will be evident in each culture. These varied forms may be classified under two categories. In the first category, there are crisis heterotopias such as boarding school, or the spaces of military service and honeymoon which are reserved for individuals in a state of crisis and in the second category, there are heterotopias of deviation such as rest homes, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and retirement homes which are designed for individuals whose behaviors are deviant in relation to the required mean or norm⁴². The second principle of a heterotopia is that “it has a precise and determined function within a society”⁴³. The third principle is based on the idea that a heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing several spaces in a single real place⁴⁴. Foucault maintains the examples of theater, cinema, Persian garden, and carpet for this principle. The fourth principle underlines the relation between heterotopias to time explicating that they are indeed heterochronies always linked to slices in time. These heterotopias which accumulate time are oriented toward either the eternal such as museums and libraries or the temporal such as fairgrounds and vacation villages⁴⁵. The fifth principle is a comment on the heterotopia’s presupposition of a system of opening and closing. The entry into heterotopias may be shaped

by compulsion such as barracks or a prison, by submission to certain rites and purifications such as Muslim hammams and Scandinavian saunas or by exclusions such as American motel rooms in which illicit sex is hidden⁴⁶. The last principle emphasizes that heterotopias “have a function in relation to all the space that remains”⁴⁷. This function can be the creation of illusion as evident in brothels or compensation as apparent in colonies⁴⁸.

The heterotopic qualities of the town are more potent when Foucault’s heterotopological principles are kept in mind. Foucault, stressing heterotopias’ link with slices of time, advocates that they open onto heterochronies⁴⁹. According to him, “the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time”⁵⁰. The break with the 1990s and journey to another time and space enable the flow of references to many past events. As Grainge explicates, “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”⁵¹. The introduction of sexual experience into the lives of Pleasantville residents is a reference to sexual liberation, Betty Parker’s questioning and challenging the roles attributed to women is reminiscent of the feminist movement, and the “[s]cenes in which mobs of young men menace the 'coloured'

Betty Parker . . . and smash Bill's mural at the soda fountain carry nasty reminders of the Jim Crow civil rights struggle of the late 1950s and 1960s⁵². Furthermore, the scenes of book burnings by some conservative Pleasantville residents are evocative of the “oppressive regime of the Nazi party in the thirties and forties”⁵³ or “the echoes of Kristallnacht”⁵⁴. Moreover, the final courtroom scenes in which Bud and William are charged with using prohibited paint colors and desecrating a public building are reminiscent of McCarthy era⁵⁵. Thus, the town Pleasantville is a heterotopia, a relational topography, which contests and mirrors not only the 1990s but also several other spaces and time periods. The town is a giant mirror reflecting different spaces in which people are either subject to oppressive regulations and policies or learn to liberate and embrace their desires, artistic impulses, rights and tastes.

Also, according to Foucault, “[h]eterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable”⁵⁶. Entry into the world Pleasantville is not free; due to his admiration for the show and familiarity with its script, David is chosen by the television repairman who “acts as a ‘deus ex machina’”⁵⁷ enabling the magical transportation into the space of the soap opera. When David gets out of the script and eats the apple offered by Margaret in Lover’s Lane, the repairman, as “the maintainer of the status quo”⁵⁸, wants to get David out of Pleasantville exclaiming him that he does not deserve

to live in this paradise. In this reinterpretation of the Biblical original sin, the repairman emerges as a god-figure who controls the system of opening and closing in the paradisaical monochrome world. Once David becomes a threat to the homogeneous landscape of this sinless society, the controller or the writer of the script wants him out. However, David prefers to stay and does not give the remote control to the repairman.

The space of Pleasantville in which entry and exit are regulated also operates as a heterotopia of compensation. Reminding the function of heterotopia in relation to all remaining space, Foucault describes the role of the heterotopia of compensation which is “to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled”⁵⁹ and gives the Puritan and Jesuit colonies as an example. Such a contrast is evident between the space of the 1990s world and the 1950s Pleasantville topography. In order to understand the notion of compensation, it is vital to examine the change both the characters and the town space go through.

David, before his magical trip into the town, watches the soap opera and escapes from his messy and jumbled world taking refuge in this perfect, meticulous and well-arranged topology. “The black-and-white world of Pleasantville is clearly metaphoric of the sort of moral stability and certainty that the young David—brought up with his sexpot sister Jennifer by his divorced

mother, and abandoned by his deadbeat dad—so earnestly desires”⁶⁰. After being transported into the town space, David is formerly cautious about behaving according to the script. Then he changes: “David, far from being an obedient spectator, becomes actively involved in the “rewriting” of the script of the *Pleasantville* saga”⁶¹. This unsocial and introvert guy changes into an active agent who challenges the control mechanisms suppressing people’s desires, needs, and tastes. Moreover, after bringing change to the town, David returns home which indicates that “[h]e no longer wants to flee from reality”⁶². Upon his return, he starts to console his crying mother. David’s real mother notices how he is transformed from a social outcast into a self-confident individual, asking him how he got so smart all of a sudden.

Similar to David, experiencing the Pleasantville space has changed Jennifer for good. Jennifer, by introducing sexual pleasure to the residents, is one of the initiator of change in the town space. Her change starts as she starts reading a D. H. Lawrence in Mary Sue’s room. As she breaks free from her former hot and sexy style, the change is gradually depicted as she ties her hair, wears a cardigan and the pair of glasses. “Once the glasses are on, Jennifer looks for a while and then tilts her head back and down slightly, as though moderately surprised by the improvement offered through the magnifying lenses”⁶³. Wearing glasses indicates both a change in how she sees and perceives the world and the disengagement with her sexy style. That night

she rejects her boyfriend Skip's offer to go out and prefers to stay at home and read. After her discovery of literature and intellectuality, she becomes colored and "abandons her former valley-girl style"⁶⁴ and at the end of the film, she decides to stay at Pleasantville for a chance to go to college.

The heterotopic space of Pleasantville is compensatory not only for the twins but also for the town residents. Betty discovers sexual pleasure and challenges the restrictive roles attributed to a housewife. Bill, a waiter who used to spend his life performing the ordered list of tasks each day, has become an artist, a painter freely spreading the colors not only on canvas but also on the windows and walls of a colorless monochrome world. The young residents of the town learn to break free of the oppression as they discover pleasure, art, literature and rock and roll. The men in the Chamber of Commerce are against that uprising evaluating these changes as "unpleasant" and try to maintain order and "pleasantness" by setting rules such as prohibiting the use of paint colors. However, it is an inevitable change; even Big Bob, the head of the Chamber of Commerce, changes after he lets loose his anger and becomes colored.

Apart from the people, there are changes in the spatiality of the town. The resistance and change in the town space is vividly illustrated in the use of color which is "central to Pleasantville's narrative strategy"⁶⁵. "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 awakening⁶⁶. The residents' change is reflected both onto their skin and their surroundings. Thus the new mood in which social diversity, creativity, intellectuality, sexual liberation and freedom are liberated reconstructs the social space, as well. Also, the presentation of the large sign that says "Springfield 12 Miles" is significant for highlighting the change in the topography. "Pleasantville therefore ceases to be a world contained within its own parameters, but a town that forms part of a larger alternative world whose borders have magically expanded as the people's vision has extended through David and Jennifer's actions"⁶⁷. After the newly acquired freedom "the end of Main Street is no longer the beginning and Pleasantville which was once a prison becomes a heterotopia of compensation. For Foucault, "[t]he ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*"⁶⁸. In *Pleasantville*, the journey to the heterotopia of compensation is maintained not by a ship but by the TV remote control. As a result of this journey, the town becomes a compensatory space in which the residents find comfort.

In addition to the heterotopical presentation of the town as a whole, the film portrays diverse heterotopias within the town. One of them is the library which Foucault regards as a heterotopia of eternal, due to its practice of accumulating time⁶⁹. The library in the town was not an accurate heterotopia before the resistance since it was filled with empty books. Only

when some of the residents begin to question the hidden forms of control and oppression and decide to unleash their oppressed desires, feelings and tastes, the books become full and the library begins to function as a heterotopia. Another heterotopia is Lover's Lane, a place where young couples sat hand in hand in cars before resistance. As the couples discover their oppressed desires, Lover's Lane becomes a potent emblem of free sexual experimentation. The drive to Lover's Lane can be associated with the honeymoon trips. Foucault examines that "the young woman's deflowering could take place 'nowhere' and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere"⁷⁰. In this context, Lover's Lane, just like the train or honeymoon hotel, is a heterotopia of crisis. Even if it is not one of the examples provided in Foucault's short text on heterotopology, soda shop can also be regarded as an "other" space, a counter site that contests other sites especially those of control and domination. Aichele comments on the common elements linking library, Lover's Lane and soda shop as follows:

As sites of adolescent social encounter and sexual experimentation, Lover's Lane and the soda shop clearly belong together; it is also surprising that Lover's Lane and the soda shop serve as major beachheads of the color invasion. It is less obvious why the local library should also be so marked, but the townspeople rightly perceive both the

soda shop and the library to be dangerous sites of novelty and rebellion. Both of them become popular gathering spots for the newly colored people, and both of them are eventually destroyed by enraged mobs of “white” people.⁷¹

Three sites—library, Lover’s Lane, and soda shop are heterotopias that can be linked to the rebellion and resistance of the newly colored people. However, in Pleasantville there are other heterotopias which may be connected to control and domination. One of them is the prison which, for Foucault, is a heterotopia of deviation designed for the people with deviant acts and reflects the opening/closing system of heterotopia since entry is compulsory. Similarly, the courtroom can be regarded as a heterotopia because it is the site for judging whether one’s behavior is deviant or not. Bill and Bud, after painting the wall of police station are sent to prison and then to courtroom.

The manifestation of prison and courtroom in the film is significant for reminding that heterotopias are not essentially sites of resistance. Johnson complains about the tendency to associate heterotopias to sites of resistance and transgression because the link is unsubstantiated⁷². Heterotopias are not simply spaces of resistance. Hetherington (although he is one of the figures criticized by Johnson for unsubstantiated use of the term as identical to spaces for resistance and transgression⁷³), is careful about his interpretation of heterotopia: he states that

“I do not define heterotopia as sites of resistance, sites of transgression or as marginal spaces but precisely as *spaces of an alternate ordering*”⁷⁴. For Hetherington, “The power of the concept of heterotopia lies in its ambiguity that it can be a site of order just as much as it can be a site of resistance”⁷⁵. Similarly, Heynen asserts that “Heterotopias can be sites of hegemonic violence and oppression, but they might also harbour the potentials for resistance and subversion”⁷⁶.

Indeed heterotopias seem to be the spaces where the interplay between normative disciplining and liberating transgression manifests itself most clearly. They therefore seem to be able to flip from one side to the other. They can easily be presented as marginal spaces where social experimentations are going on, aiming at the empowerment and emancipation of oppressed and minority groups; they can as easily be presented as instruments that support the existing mechanisms of exclusion and domination, thus helping to foreclose any real possibility for change.⁷⁷

The film *Pleasantville* maintains a good platform to reflect this ambiguity of heterotopia since the heterotopias in the town Pleasantville may be grouped under two categories: the sites of control such as prison and courtroom and the sites of resistance such as library, soda shop, and Lover’s Lane. Therefore, the heterotopic spatiality of the town includes the spaces of both control and resistance.

To sum up, the change from control to resistance and freedom in *Pleasantville* is more explicit when the heterotopic spatial forms are analyzed. Foucault argues that some sites serve as counter-sites on account of the relational and heterogeneous qualities of the contemporary space. The illustration of space in the film is a good example of this relationality and heterogeneity. The town Pleasantville serves as a utopic and a heterotopic mirror in terms of its relation to the 1990s world. However, the relations are not limited to those between 1950s—the space they are transported to and 1990s—the space they are transported from. Pleasantville, as a good emblem of heterotopia and a heterochronie, refers to different spaces and slices of time such as civil rights movements, Nazi era mass book burnings, and McCarthyite courtrooms. Also, it can be considered as a heterotopia of compensation enabled through a journey by a remote control similar to the colonial journeys by ships. The town space is compensatory not only for the twins but also for the residents who acquire freedom after they learn to overcome oppressive roles which keep them in line in a colorless monochrome world. In addition to the heterotopic qualities of the town as a whole, there are heterotopias within the town which reflects the ambiguity of heterotopia, juxtaposing the sites of control and domination with those of resistance and freedom. Keeping all these links in mind, Foucault's

heterotopolgy provides a fresh glance at the dominant motif of the film which is the transformation from confinement to resistance and finally to freedom.

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