PAINTING BY THE NUMBERS: THE DIGITAL INTERMEDIATE

JOHN BELTON EXPLORES THE DIGITAL MANIPULATION OF COLOR IN RECENT HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

“Digital Intermediate” (DI) is a term that refers to the intermediate stage of post-production between the initial digitization of original film material and final transfer of those digital files back to film. DI begins with the digital scanning of an original camera negative that transforms it into a data file. Once this is done, a digital workflow occurs in which various operations take place, including “conforming the negative . . . importing and integrating visual effects elements,” incorporating an edit decision list, performing color correction and timing, and outputting the finished digital file to film.¹

Though it includes virtually all post-production operations, the DI process has become primarily associated with color grading. Digital technology has been used for years for film editing, computer-generated imagery, and special effects. What’s new about the DI process is that it involves the digitization of all or nearly all of the film’s images, rather than the partial digitization involved in these earlier features of the post-production workflow. As such, it marks an important extension of the digitization of the cinema.

For a truly digital cinema, original photography must be digital as well as projection in the theater. Most of us have become familiar with these highly publicized links in the digital chain. But the DI process—the vital stage that transforms the entire chain into a digital chain—remains relatively invisible. The following essay attempts to make this stage of the chain more visible by isolating and discussing examples of DI processing that call attention to the process itself.

Historically speaking, the introduction of the DI process is relatively recent, occurring just before the initial attempts to innovate digital projection. A low-resolution version of DI was initially used in the post-production of TV commercials. Its first appearance in feature film production came in the mastering of Gary Ross’s Pleasantville (1998) in which there were over 1700 visual effects shots, primarily involving the removal or manipulation of color.² Not all of the film went through DI—only the black-and-white fantasy section in the sitcom sequence. In 2000, O Brother Where Art Thou? became the first Hollywood feature to be entirely digitized for color grading and was the first feature to be scanned at a full 2K. (Pleasantville had been scanned at just under 2K, at 1,920 pixels by 1,440 lines.)³ In 2004, Spider-Man 2 became the first film scanned at 4K.⁴

Industry experts estimate that in 2005, slightly less than half of the major studio releases had gone through the DI process, most of them at 2K.³ By mid-2007, the percentage of studio films put through a DI rose to about seventy.⁶ DI is primarily associated with big-budget Hollywood films—in large part, because it is a relatively expensive procedure. In 2004, the cost of a full DI treatment for a Hollywood feature was $250,000 at 2K and $1 million at 4K.⁷ In 2005, less costly, 2K DIs could be found in Hollywood for around $120,000.⁸ But the digital intermediate process is increasingly being used by independent filmmakers as well who can get an HD-SR DI for under $100,000.⁹

The advent of DI has transformed the Hollywood film industry in a variety of ways. It has influenced decisions made on the set during production and has increasingly become a factor during pre-production when filmmakers must decide on whether to go through (and budget for) a DI or not. For example, Robert Richardson, the director of cinematography on Martin Scorsese’s The Aviator (2005), estimated that he was able to “save about thirty minutes a day during production” because he knew the film would go through a DI process and that certain time-consuming lighting problems, such as flagging “light off walls that were too hot” could be solved “faster in DI.” ¹⁰ Newton Thomas Sigel, the cinematographer on Confessions of a Dangerous Mind (2002), said: “The digital intermediate is a tremendous opportunity to have yet more control [over the image]. You’re continuing the process of cinematography when you color-correct your
film, and you can have an impact almost as great as when you did your original photography. With contrast, power windows, recomposing and primary or secondary color correction, you can really reshoot your film in post.”11 In the old days, filmmakers used to say they would “fix it in post—[production].” Now with DI, they tend to say they’ll “make it in post.”12 This aspect of the DI process presents both positive and negative possibilities for the director of photography. Quentin Tarantino, for example, “reshot” both of his Kill Bill films (2003, 2004) in post-production, much to the consternation of cinematographer Robert Richardson who was left out of this particular loop and who did not approve of the director’s retouching of his work.13

At any rate, DI has played an increasingly important role in what contemporary films look like. DI colorists, for example, can isolate individual elements of the image and manipulate them without changing anything else, enabling filmmakers to change the saturation of one particular color of one particular object in a shot, to control the brightness of light coming through a window, to tinker with general atmosphere, or to alter skin tone. As Variety commented: “The DI basically does for movies what Photoshop and similar software can do to enhance still photos, though on a more sophisticated level.”14 One of the most spectacular examples of this quasi-pointillist control can be found in the final fantasy sequence of Finding Neverland (2005), when the interior of the Davis home opens up into a garden. As cinematographer Robert Schaeffer describes it, “In almost every single shot as the camera is panning and tilting, the colors of the flowers are rippling from yellow to blue to orange to pink. We tried to do it conventionally but it wasn’t happening fast enough so the whole thing was done during the DI.”15 This potential for the micro-manipulation of the image became a feature that—years earlier—attracted director Gary Ross to the DI process for the making of Pleasantville.

It is on this area of contemporary digital aesthetics that I wish to focus this essay—in particular on the use of DI for color correction. The hybrid, monochrome/polychrome “look” of Pleasantville has consequences both for our traditional understanding of how black-and-white and color function in classical Hollywood cinema—and for what André Bazin refers to as our “psychology of the image.”16 DI is emblematic of larger issues raised by the digitization of the cinema. Pleasantville’s use of DI to manipulate color foregrounds the different effects of digital and analogue imaging and plays with our understanding of the relationship between digital and analogue (or photochemical) imaging. The use of color in Pleasantville opens a window onto our traditional understanding of the photographic image as homogenous, as a whole constituted by the frame that groups its contents together. The film’s narrative explores the disruptive potential of the violation of the image’s chromatic homogeneity while simultaneously setting in place a mechanism to restore that homogeneity. In this scenario, analogue continuity (figured as black-and-white) is threatened by digital discontinuity—the break-up of the image into discrete picture elements (seen in the appearance of color within a black-and-white frame). This threat is resolved by the restoration of chromatic continuity—black-and-white disappears entirely, leaving an all-color, all-the-time world. This scenario, in turn, can also be seen as a metaphor for the digitization of the cinema. In the digitization process, analogue (in the form of the profilmic event or film of that event) is converted to digital only to be restored to analogue (projection prints) and it is restored to an analogue that is somehow “better” for having undergone digitization.
BLACK-AND-WHITE VS. COLOR:
DIFFERENT DIEGETIC REGISTERS

What makes Pleasantville of special interest is not so much that it was the first Hollywood feature to go through a DI. Nor is it even that the film calls attention to this new technology in ways similar to the first sound, color, and widescreen films by spectacularizing the novel features of the new technology. What makes it unique is that it narrativizes the presence and absence of color and black-and-white. In this way, the film becomes a text about color, black-and-white, and the relationship between the two. This is surely not the first film to be “about” that topic. But the fact that it does so from a vantage point of digital technology’s ability to manipulate images is important for our understanding of cinema in the digital age.

The basic concept of Pleasantville involves the use of black-and-white and color in a single film. In the past, this combination has been accomplished in a variety of ways. Prior to the advent of color negative and positive film, black-and-white film could be hand-painted, stenciled, tinted, toned, or otherwise colored. With the advent of methods of filming and printing in color, brought about by two-strip Technicolor in the 1920s and by three-strip Technicolor in the 1930s, black-and-white and color footage could be combined by cutting together sequences filmed in black-and-white with those filmed in color. The classic example of this is The Wizard of Oz (1939), which features a black-and-white frame story set in Kansas and a color fantasy set in Oz. Like earlier instances of hybrid films made in the transition-to-sound era, such as The Wedding March (1928), Broadway Melody (1929), or Hells’ Angels (1930), conventional narrative material was filmed in black-and-white while spectacle was shot in color. For the most part, each chromatic register enjoyed a different diegetic reality. Black-and-white footage signified one narrative world and color another—but each world functioned as a credible diegetic reality in itself—in part because of its internal chromatic consistency. Moments where footage shifted from one chromatic register to another violated that earlier diegetic world but did so in ways that the larger narrative as a whole ultimately recuperated—such as in Oz which ultimately identifies the color footage as Dorothy’s dream.

The combination of black-and-white and color footage became conventionalized from the sound era to the 1970s when Hollywood continued to make significant numbers of films in black-and-white. Audiences understood the conventional associations (black-and-white equals mundane reality; color equals fantasy or spectacle) and viewed this segregation of spaces as in The Wizard of Oz or times as in Kenneth Branagh’s Dead Again (1991) as distinct but interrelated diegetic registers. By implementing the convention, audiences could readily make sense of hybrid films such as Bonjour Tristesse (1958), in which the dismal present in Paris filmed in black-and-white is juxtaposed to a happier past in the south of France filmed in color. In The Purple Rose of Cairo (1985), Woody Allen reversed the convention, presenting the mundane framing story in color and the central character’s fantasy world in black-and-white. To some extent, Pleasantville could be said to provide an additional twist to Allen’s reworking of the convention. It does so by gradually turning the fantasy world—here a TV show rather than a movie within a movie—from black-and-white to color. Coincidentally, in both films, actor Jeff Daniels plays a character who becomes an object of romantic fascination for an unhappily married woman.

COLOR WITHIN BLACK-AND-WHITE:
The HETEROGENEITY OF THE IMAGE

Pleasantville’s color system violates the “segregation of spaces” convention by introducing color image elements into otherwise black-and-white image spaces. Trouble in paradise begins when a black-and-white character suddenly sees a red rose on a black-and-white bush in a black-and-white garden. Pleasantville is not unique in “integrating” color and black-and-white within a single image. In the silent era, individual objects were often hand-painted but usually along with other objects in the same frame—thus the famous red flag in Potemkin (1925) was seen against a blue sky. As Ross’s film adds more and more color to the frame, the “look” of the film recapitulates the history of color in the cinema from hand-painting to color stencil work to full, three-color Technicolor. The film ends with the lush, saturated Technicolor of the 1950s taking over Pleasantville, while the frame story returns us to the desaturated look of contemporary films.

Aside from silent-era stenciling, single objects in single colors within larger black-and-white images remain rare in the sound cinema. One memorable example would be the blue-and-red Siamese fighting fish in Francis Ford Coppola’s otherwise black-and-white Rumble Fish (1983). The most famous example, of course, is the “red” coat on the little girl in Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993). Spielberg’s red coat is the cause of much critical speculation, in part, because it is not easy to narrativize. On a formal level, it seems to look backward and forward to the framing sequences in the present which were filmed in color. But these scenes are full-color while the red coat images are not. Similarly, there are a number of shots in Robert Rodriguez’s and Frank Miller’s black-and-white film Sin City (2005) that contain single colors, such as the red dress in the opening sequence,
the red tail-light on a car, red Converse sneakers, a treacherous hooker’s deep blue eyes, or the yellow flesh tones of the Yellow Bastard character. Some of these colors look back to Miller’s graphic novels in which color is occasionally used as an accent. But, as in Schindler’s List, these isolated splashes of colors tend to violate the homogeneity of the otherwise black-and-white diegetic narrative space. They rupture the coherence of one diegetic regime, invading it with elements we understand to belong to another. They are perhaps best understood not as realistically motivated but as artistically motivated—as instances of authorial signature.17

Clearly, color manipulation poses a potential threat to our traditional understanding of chromatic and achromatic color systems and their creation of a credible narrative space. The red coat in Schindler’s List inexplicably extends the film’s black-and-white spectrum momentarily to introduce a range of the color spectrum that has traditionally been translated into the greyscale of black-and-white cinematography in black-and-white films. Does every black-and-white object potentially have the ability to open up a portal into another spectrum where its color unconscious is laid bare? DI gives filmmakers the possibility of penetrating traditional barriers. It enables them to create a new chromatic spectrum that includes both black-and-white and color. Pleasantville opens a door onto innovation, but then it retreats to convention. In this sense, it mirrors the course of digital imaging technology which tends to simulate older, analogue, image-making conventions, not to create radically new perceptual modes.

In Pleasantville, Ross narrativizes his unique use of color. Unlike the red coat in Schindler’s List, the colored objects in Pleasantville are realistically motivated. The film’s violation of the wholeness of the black-and-white image has narrative justification. Nonetheless, through this violation the film does raise questions about what Bazin refers to as “the psychology of the image.” This term refers to how we, as subjects, perceive and understand the image. The photographic image, for example, enjoys “a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making” in large part because of what we know about how it is produced (“by automatic means”) in relation to how other forms of images are produced (by quasi-subjective means).18 Though we can all agree that the production of photographic images is not quite “automatic,” we nonetheless do continue to perceive them differently than we do painted images. Digital images complicate any Bazinian psychology of the image that insists on its ontological status. We know that the relationship of a digital image to what it is an image of involves forms and/or stages of mediation potentially far greater than those involved in the typical photographic image. DI represents a perfect instance of such mediation—the mediation of image data during the post-production process. For the most part, it is difficult for us to perceive this manipulation. To the extent that digital imaging, in general, effectively simulates photochemical imaging, it does not effect our psychology of the image—that is, not until it becomes visible—as in spectacular digital special-effects sequences or in digital image break-up.

Pleasantville, however, does make DI visible—even if that visibility is narratively recuperated. And it does so in ways that call into question Bazinian notions of the wholeness of the image. In what way is the image a whole? One might begin with the fact that it is presented and consumed as such. In both instances, the borders of the frame impose coherence—even unity—on the contents of the frame. Rudolf Arnheim argued that sound introduced discord into the “universal silence of the image” by giving speech or sound effects to some parts of the image and withholding it from other parts.19 From the vantage point of the transition to sound, Arnheim’s perception had a certain validity. But within a few years sound was quickly integrated into the world of the image and a new “psychology of the image” emerged that transformed what Arnheim saw as heterogeneity into a new homogeneity.
Unlike *The Wizard of Oz*, *Pleasantville* combines color and black-and-white in the same frame, violating the integrity of the image. The image is revealed as not whole, but made up of parts. Of pixels. This mixture forces us to perceive the image in terms of picture elements, not whole pictures. To cast this in the language of motion-picture technology, photochemical imaging practices necessarily treat the image as a whole; digital-imaging practices necessarily treat the image differently—as an array of discrete picture elements. Photochemical color grading, for example, affects the image as a whole. It is impossible to adjust one color or part of the image without adjusting it all. DI permits more focused adjustments—changes on the level of minute picture elements. *Pleasantville* uses digital technology to do what it can do best—manipulate picture content from within the image. The film foregrounds this manipulation in the form of selective colorization—of objects, people, clothing, places. Selective colorization, in turn, can be understood in terms of the presence and absence of color. In this new dynamic of the image, black-and-white in *Pleasantville* comes to signify an absence of color. It is a lack that the film’s narrative seeks to liquidate. If the image were all black-and-white, there would be no lack. Because it is part black-and-white and part color, we sense the inadequacy of the film’s black-and-white world. In the narrative, it is the old, pre-digital world of black-and-white that is defined as absence. Color is figured as presence. Color rejuvenates the town of Pleasantville. Though figured as a destabilizing element, the novelty of color is quickly contained. The threat that color poses to black-and-white is resolved by the creation of a new social and chromatic conformity that erases all difference. The fantasy world of the TV sitcom embraces the transition to color. Difference disappears; color becomes the new norm.

The bursts of color in *Sin City*, or what one reviewer, linking the two films, referred to as “Unpleasantville,” function quite differently. They do not represent narrative possibility—an alternate world of color to which individual characters might aspire. They are hallucinatory fragments of color that exist in a diegetic limbo—neither quite inside the story space nor outside of it. In *Pleasantville*, Ross desaturated the colors in an attempt to integrate the color elements within the surrounding black-and-white image. The addition of grey brings the color closer to black-and-white. In *Sin City*, Rodriguez and Miller saturate the colors, separating them from the extreme blacks and whites of the surrounding image. At the same time, the color draws the eye to it like a magnet, pulling the spectator out of the diegesis into moments of pure graphic spectacularity.

In the opening scene of *Sin City*, a woman (Mary Shelton) in a red dress walks (with her back to the camera) out across a balcony overlooking the city. The red dress pulls the camera and the viewer’s attention with it. A man (Josh Hartnett) follows her; the woman turns, revealing a pair of red lips the same shade of color as the dress. The man gives her a cigarette, tells her she is “everything a man could ever want,” and then shoots her. When the man lights her cigarette, tells her she is “everything a man could ever want,” and then shoots her. When the man lights her cigarette and tells her that what particularly attracts him to her are her eyes, her eyes slowly change color from black-and-white to pale green. After he shoots her, her body slumps to the floor. An overhead shot reveals her red dress spread out around her on the floor, like a pool of blood. Color draws our attention from one graphic element to another, accenting the romantic aspects of the scene.

The film begins *in medias res* with the middle—or more likely the end—of an archetypal film noir narrative. This opening action hovers in narrative limbo for the next two hours, only to hook up with the main narrative thread at the end of the film when the man returns—this time in a hotel elevator—where he will presumably kill Becky (Alexis Bledel), the blue-eyed betrayer of Gail (Rosario Dawson) and her fellow *Sin City* prostitutes. This opening scene becomes a piece of a jigsaw puzzle that does not find its place in the
overall narrative until the very end. The color red, however, remains in limbo. It is a powerful marker—it is a means of graphic punctuation, but its signification in terms of the narrative remains open-ended. The film develops no color system to anchor it or give it meaning.

To some extent, this echoes the graphic spectacularity of the overall look of the film. Filmed in color against a green screen, Sin City—both the film and the place—is largely the creation of computer-generated imagery. Live action is seamlessly folded into animation, making it virtually impossible to distinguish between the two. This hybridity of the image is nowhere more apparent than in the figure of Marv: the actor Mickey Rourke’s face is so heavily made-up that it seems to be drawn—the product of pen and ink rather than flesh and blood. In this in-between world that is both live action and animation, the traditional rules no longer apply.

The film’s splashes of color tend to work against the lifeless look of CGI. Animated eruptions of color break through the black-and-white skin of the film, functioning like a surrealist musical score to highlight random objects and draw them into a stream of color consciousness, opting for heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. It is color for color’s sake. It is an exercise in graphic stylization that experiments with various digital tools, from Photoshop to Paintbox, to see what the new medium can do. In comparison with Pleasantville, Sin City assumes some of the features of an experimental work. It refuses to narrativize the relation of color to black-and-white, blurring the boundaries between the clearly diegetic (black-and-white) and the possibly non-diegetic or extra-diegetic (color). More importantly, the film refuses to resolve the differences between color and black-and-white. It refuses to restore the homogeneity of the image by creating a single chromatic system. Instead, it explores the new possibilities made available by digital technology for the fragmentation of the image into distinct picture elements, opting for heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. To this extent, it resembles avant-garde film in its exploration of an uncharted area in which previous codes and conventions have been left behind.

**THE DISCOURSE OF COLORIZATION**

Sin City exemplifies state-of-the-art digital imaging and an uncomplicated enthusiasm for new digital technology. Pleasantville is a bit more ambivalent about new digital technology. Paul Grainge has read Pleasantville as a discourse on digital imaging. He argues that the film “revisits the question of digital colourisation” but does so in a way that “reflects a changing attitude toward the digital re-presentation of the past.” Colorization was a form of electronic color manipulation that epitomized anxieties about “an emerging digital age.” By the time of Pleasantville, “digital imaging . . . has become less of a threat and more an intrinsic part of (new) media life.”

“Pleasantville revisits and recasts the issue of film colourisation, adopting a highly reflexive attitude towards the discursive intersection of memory and textuality.”

Color is thus used to “question, interrogate and problematise the forms and values of the (media) past caricatured in Pleasantville.”

Grainge usefully calls attention to the discourse of colorization that surrounds the reception of the film, but he does so at the cost of repressing details as to how the film was actually made. That is, the film uses digital technology to remove color, not to add it. The film might be more accurately described as a parable about the role of digital technology in the process of self-actualization. A signature moment of self-reflexivity can be found in the scene where Bud (Tobey Maguire) applies grey make-up to the face of his TV mother, Betty (Joan Allen) to conceal its new-found color. Like Ross’s DI colorist, Bud masks the color that lies beneath the surface of the image. This effacement of color represents merely one stage in the larger process of self-actualization. As Ross rather tritely and somewhat literally put it, the film moves toward a climax where characters “let . . . out what is inside them—their true colors.”

Scott Higgins has suggested that the film emerges as a watershed in public thinking about the electronic and digital manipulation of color. Before Pleasantville, the electronic manipulation of color was associated with the destruction of important landmarks of our collective cultural memory. With Pleasantville, digital manipulation of color became a creative act, providing artists with hitherto unavailable means of shaping the image and creating new works. The film engages with the discourse of colorization in a number of ways. It does so partially as a means of reference, providing a way for audiences to understand the interaction of the present with the past. But it also rewrites the “trauma” of colorization as a form of rejuvenation rather than as an Orwellian rewriting of the past. Colorization becomes a way of freeing ourselves from nostalgia for a black-and-white past (i.e., the black-and-white world of the TV sitcom).

Colorization is clearly a necessary context for thinking about the reception of the film. The film was made in the wake of the national debate over colorization that took place in the late-1980s. Ross mentions colorization in interviews about the film. In describing the DI process for journalists unfamiliar with that technology, he explains that he worked on the picture with “a colorization company.” Critical reception of the film also refers to colorization, perhaps because the film’s press book said that the treatment of color in
making the film was “similar to ‘colorizing’ an old Hollywood movie.”30 Critic John Calhoun mentioned the colorization controversy of the late 1980s and noted that in Pleasantville those skills had finally been put “to a positive use.”31 Jay Carr, reviewer for the Boston Globe, concluded his discussion of the film’s color with the following statement: “I never thought I could be charmed by anything remotely resembling a pro-colorization message, but ‘Pleasantville’ is the exception.”32

The fact that Ross was thinking about colorization as he set out to make a film in which black-and-white images are turned to color should be no surprise. He began thinking about the film in the mid-1990s, a few years after the polemics over colorization had peaked in 1989. By 1995, Ted Turner stopped colorizing old black-and-white Hollywood films. In the meantime, colorization had already begun to be put to less controversial use—not as a means of rejuvenating old black-and-white images but as a means of generating new categories of images for television commercials as well as motion pictures. Perhaps the most famous example of this is (again) Schindler’s List, a black-and-white film with a color frame and two brief instances of colorization within the black-and-white footage. What’s interesting about the colorization in Spielberg’s film is that it anticipates the focused colorization of single elements within the image found more extensively in Pleasantville. According to Spielberg’s cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, the two instances of colorization include the famous example of the young girl in the red (actually pink-orange) coat and the barely visible blue stamp on Jewish identity cards that permits them to work in Schindler’s factory.33 The fact that Ross was thinking about Pleasantville from the perspective of colorization has anecdotal support in his extensive reliance during preproduction on the advice of Michael Southard who had prior experience “digitally creating color for commercials and music videos.”34 Southard, Ross’ chief color-timer, began his film career at Color Systems Technology, the company that colorized old black-and-white Hollywood films for Turner.35 Ross and Southard were initially uncertain as to whether the film should be shot in black-and-white and then colorized or shot in color and then have some of the color removed. As a result, the idea of colorization was intimately bound up with the conceptualization of the project.

But if colorization provides a historical context for the reception of Pleasantville, the film clearly rewrites the basic terms of the controversy to figure colorization in a more positive light. Color is not an Orwellian rewriting of the past but an “open sesame” to the future. In strictly technological terms, the term “colorization” is, in fact, extremely misleading. The effects Ross created were not achieved by adding color (as Turner did) but by removing it—by turning color images into black-and-white images. In other words, the film works on the premise of the existence of an original color that has somehow been removed. Ross even alludes to this in his screenplay. As David/Bud argues in the final courtroom sequence, it is all about the discovery of one’s potential, the discovery of “what’s in you.” In other words, color is already in the characters; it just needs to be released.

(David/Bud’s insistence that “It’s in you” is amazingly similar to the tag line of a Gatorade advertising campaign that was launched in 1999.36 The text of the ad asked “Is it in you?” and featured a black-and-white photograph of an athlete, Michael Jordan, whose sweat beaded in Gatorade colors. Just as in Pleasantville, the color emerged as testimony to the spirit/energy that was “in you.”)

The film’s rewriting of the cultural meanings associated with the relationship between black-and-white and color is structured around certain significant reversals. As just noted, the film does not so much add as subtract color. In the making of the film, all footage was originally shot on color negative, not on black-and-white. The negative was scanned into a digital file where color was removed from the sequences that were to be in black-and-white. The color of objects or places or people within this black-and-white frame was then manipulated, as it was in the colorization process, to achieve the desired effect.37 In other words, the post-production of the film involved two different forms of color manipulation—color was removed to create black-and-white images and the color of specific aspects of the image was adjusted to add, retain, or alter color.

In the case of Pleasantville, DI is a tool that enables Ross and his director of photography, John Lindley, to produce an entirely new work, not to alter a work from a previous era. Within the narrative, the transformation of black-and-white images into color images functions as an expressive device.
that documents the progressive movement of characters on the path to self-discovery/self-actualization. The narrative is about the destabilization of one “color” regime (achromatic black-and-white) by another (chromatic color)—and the resolution of that destabilization in the acknowledgment of the necessity of change.

In the script, “change” emerges as a historical necessity for the residents of Pleasantville and for the dysfunctional family in the framing story. The TV show Pleasantville is introduced in the format of television reruns that constantly recycle the same episodes. David knows these episodes by heart and is introduced as a character who retreats to this black-and-white world (the past) in response to familial dysfunction in the present. His sister, Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon), is caught up in similarly pointless cycles governed by peer pressure dictating social and sexual conformity; her desire to change is depicted in her sudden shift in interest from boys to books. After reading her first book—albeit one by D. H. Lawrence, she decides not to return to her old lifestyle at home; instead, she goes off to college in the fantasy world of Pleasantville.

David/Bud is one of the last teenagers in Pleasantville to go from black-and-white to color. Perhaps this is because David/Bud is so strongly aligned with the world of Pleasantville and the reassuring order it provides in his otherwise disordered real life. When he does “go color,” it is the consequence of defending Betty and the first adult to turn from black-and-white to color, against the town’s black-and-white bullies. When David returns to the present, he significantly turns off the black-and-white reruns of the Pleasantville sitcom and comforts his “real” mother, who sits weeping in the kitchen. Things do not return (as in Wizard of Oz) to the social and domestic order of the pre-fantasy world. They change—and the characters embrace the uncertainty of the future. In the litany of problems that confront contemporary society in the film—HIV Aids, global warming, and the unlikelihood of ever finding a rewarding job, the future stands in dramatic opposition to the known world of reruns of the sitcom—the dominant signifier of the past in the film. If David and Jennifer can change the past, surely they can change the future. They can do so because the future is digital—and, as we all know, it is therefore infinitely manipulable.

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9. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
17. For a discussion of the terms “realistic” and “artistic motivation,” see David Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” Film Criticism 4, no. 1 (1979): 57.
22. Ibid., 213.
23. Ibid., 215.
24. Ibid., 216.
25. Ibid., 216–17.
27. Scott Higgins, email communication with the author, 24 February 2006.
31. Calhoun, 49.

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ABSTRACT. This essay looks at the digital manipulation of color in such films as Pleasantville and Sin City in terms of their consequences for thinking about the “wholeness” and homogeneity of the image.

KEYWORDS. Digital intermediate, post-production, digital aesthetics, color, colorization.