The Capra Touch: Nostalgia culture in American film

By Laura Crossley

'This is my first time at the White House. I'm trying to savour the Capra-esque quality.'

– *The American President* (1995)

The above quote from Rob Reiner's 1995 film *The American President* is both a reference to the screwball comedies and political films of Frank Capra, but also draws attention to the fact that *The American President* itself is both a political film and a romantic comedy, that in itself mobilizes motifs, thematics and character types recognizable from the Capra/Robert Riskin works of the 1930s and 1940s. As Vito Zaggario – and numerous other film critics and theorists have pointed out – there has been an abundance of Caprian references and narratives in films from the 1980s and then with even more frequency in the 1990s, with examples such as *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), *Fearless* (1993) and *It Could Happen to You* (1994). These films play with notions of both the historical and cinematic past, raising questions about historicity and both cultural and genre memory. In critical terms, the films have frequently been discussed in terms of pastiche and postmodernism. Frederic Jameson (1991) has coined the label 'nostalgia films' for the cinematic works that mobilize visions or certain moments of the past. In his formulation, however, 'nostalgia films' are presented as blank parodies, which strip history of politics. Nostalgia is generally defined as a yearning for a past period. It is my contention, however, that the films in themselves do not promulgate a yearning for the past, but evoke the characters and tropes of a romanticized past in order to comment upon both that past and the present. In a handful of films from the 1990s – *Dave* (1993), *Pleasantville* (1998), *Blast from The Past* (1999) and *The American President* – the themes and motifs of the Capra/Riskin works are mobilized and political and cultural life is put under scrutiny.

Nostalgia, memory and retro stylistics

As film has become one of the most accessible forms of both art and media for the spectator, it logically follows that film should become the medium by which culture may represent itself *to* itself. By this I mean that cultural identity is partly shaped by the way in which that identity is represented. Identity is also shaped by cultural memory, and as Paul Grainge explains, 'cinema has become central to the mediation of memory in modern cultural life' (2003b: 1). This mediation of memory negotiates the differences between history – that is, official history – and popular memory: '[m]emory suggests a more dialogic relationship between the temporal constituencies of 'now' and 'then'; it draws attention to the activations and eruptions of the past as they are experienced in and constituted by the present' (Grainge 2003b: 1). Memory can, when drawing upon Michel Foucault, be viewed as a political force: the controlling of memory and of the representations of history are vulnerable to appropriation and containment by the dominant hegemony, but can also act as a site of resistance to that dominance. Marita Sturken's theory of cultural memory is more varied and is centred on American culture and history. In her formulation, memory does not have a de facto political or cultural identity, but is produced socially, and cultural memory is, therefore, 'a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history' (Sturken 1997: 1). Memory in the present day negotiates struggles over giving meaning to lived experience, while the articulation of memory in popular film allows the contemporary audience to share the experience of a past that they have not actually lived through. This struggle is directly engaged with in *Pleasantville*, where two 1990s teenagers are placed within the confines of a fictional 1950s TV sitcom, allowing both the film's characters and its audience to experience a romanticized version of the past.

When engaging with the critical discourse of postmodernism, Frederic Jameson identifies a current cultural situation where society has 'begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions' (1991: 15).

Postmodern society, as Jameson sees it, lacks its own historicity and so we are constantly looking back at and reappropriating the 'styles and fashions of a dead past' (1991: 284). Similarly, nostalgia films mobilize the past, not through authentic re-creations of the historical past, but by using stereotypes and the 'ideas of facts and historical realities' (Jameson 1991: 279) so that the past becomes something that can be built through previously mediated representations of cultural history. By using stereotypes, the past is mobilized as a simulation; history is, therefore, stripped of authenticity and politics and is, in essence, displaced by the simulacra of media representations.

While Jameson's theory provides a useful starting point for looking at issues of historicity and selective re-remembering, I do not share his more negative conclusions about nostalgia films acting as a signifier of a 'depthless and historically impoverished culture' (Grainge 2003b: 7). Films such as *Pleasantville* and *Blast from the Past* deliberately play with our idea of the past by deploying stereotypes and codes that actively draw attention to our idea of the past and question the validity of those ideas. I prefer to look towards Philip Drake's formulation of the 'retro film' (2003: 188), which he describes as mobilizing 'particular codes that have come to connote a past sensibility as it is selectively re-remembered in the present […] as a structure of feeling and these codes function *metonymically*, standing in for the entire decade' (188). As Drake himself admits, his formulation is similar to Jameson's 'nostalgia films', but his is more concerned with the revising of history through irony and by conveying a knowing and reflexive relationship with the past rather than with the idea of nostalgia as 'historical blockage' (190).

An essential part of 'retro films' is the fusion of past and present and this fusion is, to a greater or lesser extent, a key component of all my case studies. Furthermore, each of the texts engage with sociology and politics either directly (*The American President*, *Dave*) or allegorically (*Blast from the Past*, *Pleasantville*) and provide critiques of American society and ideology that opposes Jameson's notion of nostalgia emptying history of politics. While it cannot be denied that nostalgia or retro films are commercially viable for Hollywood and that the high production values

provide visual pleasure for the spectator, it is overly simplistic to suggest that such films cannot provide critical commentary on society, both past and present.

The Capra connection

As stated in the introduction, many contemporary films have attracted the label 'Capra-esque', from *Back to the Future* (1985) to *Groundhog Day* (1993). In the commentary to the DVD edition of *Pleasantville*, director Gary Ross explains that he was looking for a 'way to tell a modern Capra story', and his script for Ivan Reitman's political satire *Dave* has also been discussed in terms of continuing Capra's legacy. All of which raises the question: what is the Capra-esque quality? In his re-reading of Frank Capra's works, 'It Is (Not) A Wonderful Life' (1998), Vito Zaggario explains that Capra's reputation is generally perceived as being 'a teller of conservative fairy tales' (67). He also posits the theory that the recent 'Caprian revival' (65) is partly to do with the return to fashion of populism. Populism, according to P. Roffman and J. Purdy in their book, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film* (1981), was a central component of most social problem films of the 1930s, irrespective of their narratives being of the Left or Right.[1] Steve Neale (2000) defines populism through Richard Maltby's work on the subject in terms of its 'agrarian and small town dimensions, its emphasis on co-operative individualism' (Neale 2000: 117). He goes on to point out that the model for the Hollywood hero for much of the 1930s was the man of goodwill.

Bearing these criteria in mind, Capra created the definitive populist heroes – men of goodwill, espousing small-town values – in figures such as Longfellow Deeds and Jefferson Smith. Roffman and Purdy's discussion on social problem films focuses on the films that deal with ordinary people, politics and power, and they devote a chapter to Frank Capra. While the general audience may associate Frank Capra with feel-good comedies, there is a notable social commentary running through many of his films, especially those of the 1930s and 1940s. The effects of the Depression on rural America is implicit in the narrative and *mise-en-scène* of *It Happened One Night* (1934) and is directly engaged with in *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), when the plight of the

farmers becomes an integral part of the story. Corruption and the betrayal of the electorate by the political leadership is narrativized in *Meet John Doe* (1941) and, in what is 'arguably the most famous and talked-about film on American politics' (Scott 2000: 7), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). The characters from these films became the iconic representatives of the ordinary Everyman who stands for idealism and decency in the face of political and corporate corruption and moral bankruptcy.

The characters of the Capra/Riskin films are as important – if not more so – than the narratives of the works themselves. They reveal the ideology of Capra's political thesis: '[t]he triumph of lone, rural, innocent heroes – the victory of "democratic man" as Glenn Alan Phelps describes it – over the forces of wealth, power and media megalomania' (Scott 2000: 41). While there is an emphasis on the patriotic individual, Capra's films also stress the importance of 'the masses' in engaging with the political establishment: the integrity and freedom of the individual must be protected, but his films also promulgate a political ideology of communalism. This is reflected in the John Doe Clubs, but also in the unified communities at the climaxes of *American Madness* (1932) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). However, this would be too simplistic a reading of the Capra/Riskin films, for one of the central tensions in many of the texts is the unresolved dialectic between populist individualism and collective responsibility. Heroes such as Jefferson Smith and John Doe call attention to what happens when the establishment forgets that it is a government 'of the people, for the people', and serve as a critique of corrupt institutional leadership, but the threat of the mob mentality is shown during the run on the banks in *American Madness* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. This sophisticated engagement with – and appraisal of – political ideologies is central to the Capra/Riskin canon and has formed part of the template for American political films from the 1940s until the present day.

The positing of the triumphant individual against authoritarian forces also mobilizes a messianic trajectory in many of these films. While the separation of Church and State foregrounds secularism in American political life, the narrative of redemption and the presence of the saviour

figure, as well as Christian symbolism and iconography, place Christian theological trajectories at the heart of Capra's films. Many modern fables that have been assessed critically in terms of their positing a Christ-figure, such as *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *The Natural* (1984), are also frequently cited as belonging to the body of films that bear Capra's legacy. Christ-figures[2] in Capra's works are posited either as potential saviours of the people, as in the case of Jefferson Smith; or, through leading by the example of their own redemption, serve as an inspiration to the spectator, as with George Bailey.

The construction of strong female roles is central to the Capra/Riskin canon – the world-weary cynicism of Babe Bennett and Ann Mitchell serve as counterpoints to the messianic qualities of Longfellow Deeds and John Willoughby, respectively. Robert Riskin's brilliantly scripted, witty, rapid-fire exchanges characterized the 'battle of the sexes' seen in both the overtly political films, and the screwball comedies, most famously in *It Happened One Night.* The construction of the female roles at a linguistic level posited the women as equals, at the very least, of the men. As James Monaco has pointed out, many of the films of this era showed 'a more balanced relationship between men and women than is common today' (2000 [1971]: 296). Riskin's ability to blend idealistic speeches with intelligent, piercing dialogue is a legacy that scriptwriters still attempt to emulate.

Fusing past and present

As Roffman and Purdy discuss, the social problem film flourished during the 1930s and 1940s, at a time when liberal-left opinion had built up in Hollywood during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency. One of their principal theses is that this era of liberal-left social films was destroyed by the activities of the House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC) in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It is interesting that the revival of films that fall within the Capra tradition should gain dominance in the early 1990s, when Bill Clinton's presidency (1993–2001) introduced a Democratic administration after the hardline Republicanism of the Reagan years. The 1980s may

have been the era of glasnost (openness) and seen the official end of the Cold War with the destruction of the Berlin Wall in October 1989, but the decade is generally determined by the militancy of the arms race and the 'Star Wars' missile programme on the one hand, and the capitalist, yuppie culture, defined by the mantra 'Greed is good',[3] on the other. As Ian Scott points out, '[t]he Reagan era […] saw Hollywood increasingly shy away from virtually any kind of political discourse. It was almost as if the 1950s were being revisited' (2000: 83). In cinematic terms, at least, the 1990s became a backlash against the insularity of the preceding decade; and with the Democrats inhabiting the White House and the president a self-confessed movie fan, it is small wonder that Hollywood began to make films that referenced not only the Golden Age of liberal-left film-making of the 1930s and 1940s, but also depicted political characters who resembled the last great figure of political liberalism in the White House: John F. Kennedy. Hollywood is looking back, not just at the historical past, but also at its own cinematic past.

These two notions of 'pastness' are mobilized in, broadly speaking, two different ways in the case studies. *Dave* and *The American President* are set in the present, but by knowingly referencing the Capra/Riskin works and by deploying recognizable character types and narrative tropes, the works evoke a 'structure of feeling' (Drake 2003: 192) of the classic Hollywood era of the 1930s/50s rather than a reconstruction of historical specificity. Nostalgia is evoked through the referencing of cinematic and historical cultural iconography and this evocation, in keeping with Drake's formulation of the 'retro-film', is a stylistic feature of all the works. However, this is not merely nostalgia for the sake of nostalgia – the Capra/Riskin films that they reference mobilize sophisticated debates around democratic ideology, and the contemporary works seek to critique not only the current political situations, but also the complacent idealized mythology of American history. The past and present are fused, literally, in *Pleasantville* and *Blast from the Past.* Both films are set in the present and past and while neither is an overtly political film in the style of *The American President*, both engage directly with the sources of cultural iconography and actively

work to deconstruct an idealized notion of nostalgia and the cliché of America's yearning for lost innocence.

Welcome to 'The Wasteland': Motifs in *Pleasantville* and *Blast from the Past*

The opening sequence of *Pleasantville* takes the spectator through what director Gary Ross calls 'The Wasteland' of contemporary televisual culture, before coming to rest at a cable channel devoted to reruns of 1950s sitcoms – something 'homey and comfortable'.[4] The fictitious series *Pleasantville* is posited in opposition to David's home-life: divorced parents, a rebellious sister and a mother attempting to enter the world of post-divorce dating. David's fandom of the show is split between his knowledge of the plotlines and characters of the show and a secret yearning for the representation of the stable community and nuclear family. This is, crucially, not a yearning for how things used to be, but how things used to be in the movies. The initial stages of the narrative, therefore, mobilize both nostalgia as an appreciation of the cultural past, and the concept of nostalgia as loss. The world of *Pleasantville* the series is metonymically representative of the 1950s – and the 1950s of television culture at that. However, once David and Jennifer are actually placed within the confines of the fictional world, the narrative works towards 'undoing the constrictive limits of its projected cultural fantasies about domesticity, sexuality, gender and community' (Grainge 2003a: 204). The pristine world of the town of Pleasantville reflects the mythical ideology of a 'kinder, gentler world' that never really existed, but is the enduring cultural memory of the Eisenhower years (1953–61). As the film unfolds, Pleasantville is shown to be not kinder and gentler, but a world of Eisenhovian repression. Where, in the opening sequence, Pleasantville was depicted as the oasis of stability amidst the cultural Wasteland and the sterility and implicit menace of the 'real life' empty suburban streets, the reality of Pleasantville's reactionary, right-wing rhetoric that keeps it in monochrome makes the town itself a Wasteland in contrast to the 'Garden of Eden' that is Lover's Lane.

Unlike Ross's film, *Blast from the Past* evokes a definite historical specificity. The film opens in October 1962, on the night that President Kennedy addressed the nation about the Cuban Missile Crisis. The credit sequence takes place against the backdrop of actual newspaper articles and video footage from the time, the iconography signifying 1960s stylistics and nuclear anxiety. Under the mistaken belief that the Russians have dropped a nuclear bomb, Calvin Webber and his pregnant wife, Helen, seal themselves into their nuclear bunker and do not emerge for 35 years. The bunker where their son, Adam, grows up becomes a time-capsule of early 1960s values. Grace is said before meals and Adam is taught languages, science and boxing by his father, dancing and the correct way to treat a lady by his mother. When he finally emerges into present-day Los Angeles, it appears to be a post-nuclear wasteland of drunks, garbage in the streets and a breed of 'mutants' who are apparently both sexes at once. However, this microcosm of prelapsarian America versus the dubious benefits of modernity is presented in a subtly critical manner. Both *Blast from the Past* and *Pleasantville* use pastiche and quotational practice in order to signify the 1960s and 1950s respectively, but the fact that they concentrate on stereotypes of historical representation does not mean that they have evacuated historicist meaning and temporal depth (Grainge 2003a: 207), but rather that they are utilizing postmodern textual practices in order to critique the spectator's sense of both the past and the present.

Pleasantville situates its fictional sitcom within the canon of actual 1950s television series. *Blast from the Past* mobilizes these in a slightly different way. Calvin and Helen's 'normality' is posited against the idealized version of American family life as shown in the programmes they watch. Or, rather, the same episode of *The Honeymooners* (1955-56) that they watch repeatedly. Director Hugh Wilson describes them as '*Ozzy and Harriet* on acid'[5] and while the acting register of the scenes set in the bunker is based on the style of those TV series, this quotational practice highlights the unrealistic expectations of relationships and family life as promulgated by those series. During their 35 years underground, their relationship is emotionally frozen in time: Calvin becomes increasingly remote; Helen seeks refuge in the cooking sherry, while going quietly insane.

> Comment [E1]: reference?

The bunker becomes a nightmare version of the Garden of Eden, while modern Los Angeles above provides both the Wasteland scenario, but also a Garden of its own. The beauty of the sea and sky, taken for granted by modern Americans, is rediscovered through Adam's innocent eyes, and the Webbers' house is rebuilt in a green beauty spot on the outskirts of the city – a little piece of 1960s Americana on the fringes of the modern world.

'I was thinking, in light of the situation, we should call him Adam. That's not sacrilegious, is it?' – ***Blast from the Past***

As I stated previously, the hero of the Capra/Riskin movies is usually the down-to-earth, idealistic Everyman and this is a tradition maintained in the contemporary Capra-esque fable. The eponymous hero of *Dave* is an ordinary working man who is displaced into the corrupt world of White House politics. When President Bill Mitchell suffers a severe stroke, Dave Kovic – his doppelgänger – is brought in to take his place. His idealistic *naïveté*, however, leads him to strip away the endemic corruption and bureaucracy and by doing so inspires the jaded politicians around him. This is highlighted in the sequence where Dave and his accountant friend, Murray Blum, work out how to shave $650 million off the Federal Budget. 'Who does these books?' an appalled Murray asks. 'If I ran my business this way, I'd be out of business.' By setting to work with little more than a calculator, and through a process of common sense and money-management, they achieve their goal, with Dave gaining rapturous applause from the Cabinet as a result. A perfect example in the Capra tradition of small-town values providing instruction and education to the authoritarian ruling powers. This ethos is built upon: Dave presents his idealistic vision of government responsibility for finding a job 'for every American who wants one'. Within the diegesis of the film, this employment programme is compared to Roosevelt's New Deal ethos, thereby fusing the fictional present with the actual sociopolitical past.

As with Dave Kovic, *The American President*'s Andrew Shepherd is also an idealized version of the sort of person part of the American electorate truly wants in the White House. The

film's use of visual parallels between the fictional president and the late John F. Kennedy mobilize a nostalgia for the Golden era of 'Camelot', but also place the Shepherd administration within the inclusive left-liberal tradition of the Kennedy government. The film's opening sequence is a soft-focus montage of memorabilia – from inside the White House itself – of America's democratic heritage, including pictures of Presidents Roosevelt and Kennedy. As the crisis around Shepherd's leadership intensifies, he is frequently framed with a portrait of Kennedy behind him so that the audience associates the fictional character with the charismatic icon of leadership and martyrdom. The left-liberal approach to politics, the engagement with contemporary political issues and the dialogue that emulates the rapid-fire exchanges characteristic of Riskin's scripts, which are so evident in Aaron Sorkin's script for *The American President*, are defining features of Sorkin's later venture, the highly political and politicized series *The West Wing* (1999–2006).

The small-town idealism is reduced to a microcosm in *Blast from the Past* and it is Calvin Webber's dream that, when the time comes, his son should enter the post-nuclear wasteland and 'rebuild America just the way it used to be'. With his combination of wide-eyed innocence and highly educated intellect, Adam is constructed as a more cerebral version of Longfellow Deeds – he is unaware of the value of the stock certificates he owns (10,000 shares of each in IBM, AT&T and Polaroid) in the same way that Deeds seemed to have little interest in the fortune he was bequeathed. However, in a subverting of the expectations of a Capra-esque tale, Adam shows no interest in being the redeemer or saviour of anyone. His priorities lie in taking care of his parents and finding a wife.

The messianic quality that was identified in Capra's films is mobilized to a greater or lesser extent in the case studies. *Dave* follows a repeating pattern of 'rebirth': the corrupt Bill Mitchell is reborn when the idealistic Dave Kovic replaces him. This new, improved President Mitchell then 'dies' in order to make way for Vice President Nance, and Dave is returned to his normal life, but is himself metaphorically reborn with a desire to enter into political life and public service. The legacy of Bill Mitchell and his employment programme is championed by the new president. The

redemption of political ideology through the 'death' and 'rebirth' of an individual evokes the messianic narrative of *Meet John Doe*, but also the quasi-religious fable *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933). Similarly, David in *Pleasantville* becomes the idealistic saviour when, during the trial scene at the climax of the film, his speech releases the inner 'potential' of the town's citizens, including his 'father'. When the doors of the courthouse are opened, the power of David's visionary speech has delivered the entire town of Pleasantville into vibrant Technicolor. While Pleasantville, with its picket fences and apparently harmonious community, initially resembles idealized towns such as Bedford Falls in *It's a Wonderful Life*, it is only after Jennifer and David introduce the empowering possibility of change that Pleasantville becomes the truly ideal town of democracy, inclusivity and tolerance. Yet, despite the messianic quality of David's narrative trajectory, and the fact that *Pleasantville* references every artistic cultural movement from modernism to civil rights and feminism, religion in itself is conspicuously absent.

While *Blast from the Past* eschews political grandstanding, it does engage directly with a religious narrative more explicitly than the other texts. In the belief that they are the only survivors of the nuclear blast, the Webbers christen their son Adam and when he finally reaches the surface, he meets a girl named Eve. The couple are both children of the nuclear age and they present two versions of history – Eve representing the present as we know it, and Adam the present as it could have been. Adam is the original Everyman but is also posited as an ironic – and unwilling – messiah to the down-and-out inhabitants of modern Los Angeles. The family unit – father, mother and son – are seen as the holy family by a local drunk, who then sets up a shrine over the bunker, eventually becoming the self-appointed Archbishop of this new 'Church'. Yet, while Adam has been brought up with Christian values, the film is not advocating a return to those values and does not espouse a rhetoric beloved of the American Christian-right. The film satirizes contemporary society's adherence to New Age religion, but it also satirizes the idealized representation of traditional family values. Adam's anachronistic manners and beliefs are treated with suspicion and intolerance by the people he encounters, yet he himself embraces all people and their beliefs

unquestioningly. In the same way that *Pleasantville* calls for inclusivity and tolerance, *Blast* promulgates the same message, but in a less obvious, more contained way. Yet even though it avoids direct engagement with political ideology, *Blast from the Past* does not lack a political discourse: the historical specificity and use of a certain type of iconography locates its political engagement in global terms.

Iconography in Hollywood film

Icons and iconography can, as Albert Boime (1998) explains, be manipulated for political purposes. For cinematic purposes, the iconic nature of American political symbols – from the buildings in Washington DC to figures such as Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy – becomes a signifier of political discourse. The political works I am discussing utilize these signifiers of American democracy to locate their narratives within the ideological principles that these icons embody. But by deploying these icons within the visual narratives, the cinematic texts also seek to appropriate the icons into their own political rhetoric. In Boime's study, key monuments in American public life have been appropriated through a model of right-wing patriotism. The texts that I am dealing with originate at a time when left-liberal rhetoric was promulgated both in Washington, via the Clinton administration, and in Hollywood. Yet, while they evoke political pastness and former cinematic representations of political life, they are engaging in a highly sophisticated and critical relationship with America's political heritage and the current political situation. Far from emptying history of politics or lacking a present historicity, these films are aware of the heritage of political pastness and the positioning of the political present in relation to the past.

The visual experience of *Dave* and *The American President* is characterized by the exterior shots of the White House and the buildings on Capitol Hill, and through the detailed re-creations of the interior spaces – the staff offices, the residential suites and the Oval Office itself. The scale and detail of these sets are reminiscent of the huge re-creations of the Capitol buildings used by Capra in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*. Films such as *Mr Smith…* posited national symbols as

representing the ideals of equality and liberty that are the foundations for American political democracy. However, Boime's study explores how these symbols have become monopolized by the New Right:

> In the hands of a Jesse Helms or a George Bush, these icons assumed an excluvistic character that directly contradicted their stated purpose. Certain sectors have been allowed to appropriate the symbols of America and to exclude anyone from this association that does not agree with their ideology. (Boime 1998: 8)

Through creating a structure of feeling that recalls the character and ethos of *Mr Smith…* and by placing their fictional presidents very clearly in the left-liberal camp, the narratives work not only to remind how audiences used to view their icons of political democracy (as inclusive and tolerant as opposed to exclusive and xenophobic) but also to reappropriate them to the Left. Boime uses the example of the narrowly defeated 1995 constitutional amendment, introduced by the Republicans, to criminalize flag-burning. *The American President* makes arguments in defence of people's democratic right to burn the flag as a sign of protest. During his administration, President George W. Bush – a Republican – talked about introducing another amendment to criminalize burning the American flag, and that attempt to pass it into law failed by a single vote (Martin 2006).

While *Blast from the Past* and *Pleasantville* eschew iconography of the political past, they both utilize icons of Americana in order to create a satirical iconography of cultural values (Drake 2003: 208). Whereas the films discussed in the previous paragraph engage with icons of political ideology, this pair utilize the iconography of the everyday. Adam Webber's view of modern America is not defined by the lofty idealism inscribed in the architecture of Washington DC, but by the 24-hour supermarkets, interchangeable Holiday Inns and sex shops of downtown Los Angeles. Both films also make narrative use of one of the great symbols of American cultural life: the diner. In *Pleasantville*, this becomes one of the main locations of change and the new, vibrant youth culture that David and Jennifer initiate. The development of suburban LA is charted in *Blast from*

the Past through the local soda jerk, which is erected on the site of the Webbers' former home. Providing milkshakes and work opportunities for the young hopefuls of 1965, it has degenerated into a sleazy, rundown bar by 1999. Similarly, the film also subtly subverts another great American institution: baseball. Despite his father's impressive collection of cards and endless explanations about the rules, the game means nothing to Adam until he actually sees a live game. This game, however, is between the local gay teams, complete with transvestite cheerleaders. While *Blast from the Past* may, on the surface, seem to be espousing a traditional 'family values' rhetoric, Adam's embracing of America's counterculture posits a far more inclusive and subversive ideology than an initial reading reveals.[6]

In his reading of retro/nostalgia films, Philip Drake explores Frederic Jameson's statement that nostalgia films are 'mortgaged to music' (Jameson 1991: 286). Music, for Jameson, becomes one of the signifiers used to evoke nostalgia in the nostalgia film, but without having any ideological meaning or significance. Drake, on the other hand, explores how music can transform 'the meaning of visual narration' (Drake 2003: 186). Music in *Pleasantville* is not just used to locate the events in the timeframe of the 1950s, but it becomes a narrative device in a similar, but less obvious way to the gradual colourization of the town. A pivotal scene, when David tells the gathered youths the stories of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Huckleberry Finn*, is set against the background of two pieces of music: Dave Brubeck's 'Take 5' and Miles Davis' 'So What' from his *Kind of Blue* album (both pieces were recorded in 1959). They are the only jazz scores on the soundtrack and both pieces were important tracks in the evolution of freeform jazz in that they deconstructed and reconfigured traditional jazz. Gary Ross explains that the choice of these tracks was to signify the changing mood in the town – instead of the rock 'n' roll innocence initially associated with the diner, the music signifies the cultural transformation into the folk/beatnik movement and a growing intellectual consciousness. This is also firmly associated with an *American* bohemianism: the artworks referenced in the film are all European movements, but the jazz tracks in this scene are associated with the cultural evolution that foregrounded Jackson

Pollock, Andy Warhol, et al. This is not just the intellectual growing of the young people, but also the cultural development of America itself. Music is also used as a form of repression by the 'non-changist' Chamber of Commerce, who advocate that the only permissible music is Perry Como, Johnny Mathis and 'The Star-Spangled Banner'. Far from simply evoking nostalgia, music is used to narrativize ideological struggle.

Blast from the Past also uses music to provide additional comment to the narrative. This is clearly demonstrated in the final scene, when Adam attempts to convince his father that the Cold War is over. Calvin's refusal to accept that the 'Evil Empire' did indeed give up without a shot being fired appears comical and merely an outmoded reflection of the Cold War mentality. But that xenophobia and paranoia is not so dissimilar to some of the rhetoric we hear today (the 'Axis of Evil', for example, and the ongoing 'War on Terror' that is being taken to new levels by Donald Trump). This final sequence is capped with Randy Newman's 1972 song 'Political Science',[7] which explicates not only America's paranoia that the rest of the world hates them, but also that the solution is to drop a nuclear bomb on anyone who disagrees with them: 'And every city the whole world round / will just be another American town'. Adam's incomprehension of American cultural institutions and his inclusive embracing of the counterculture, his perfect manners and linguistic skills, are reminiscent of the stereotypes deployed by Hollywood to depict Europeans. Adam, the idealized new man of the post-nuclear age, becomes an outsider, not just to modern life, but also to America. It is this inclusive ideology, however, that is promoted in the film's narrative and this, combined with the finale of Newman's satirical song, provides a warning against the insularity of America's sociopolitical ideology.

The dialectic between populist individualism and collective responsibility, which was identified as an integral part of the Capra/Riskin canon, is evident in the case studies, but with the added problematic of the 'Cult of the Personality'. Andrew Shepherd runs the risk of losing his presidency, not because of bad policy choices or ineffectual government, but because he refuses to become involved in a character war with his Republican rival. In the midst of this crisis, however,

he wonders how much of the electorate voted for him out of sympathy over his wife's death. Modern politics is shown to be as much, if not more, about appearance and spin as it is about policy and ideology. People will drink sand, Shepherd tells us, not because they are desperately thirsty, but because they cannot tell the difference between truth and lies. Or what is important and what isn't. The problematic of democratic politics is clearly drawn: the government must be chosen by the people and their individualism must be protected; but strong leadership is needed in order to make the correct decisions for an electorate either too complacent or too ignorant to make them for themselves.

Collective responsibility and the inherent dangers of mob mentality are evident in *Pleasantville*: the right-wing rhetoric of the Chamber of Commerce works to suppress the changes at work in the town, and the townsfolk are caught up in a melee of destructive hatred against the 'coloureds' in the town. Under the leadership of the Chamber, it becomes the responsibility of the town to ensure that no further changes occur in Pleasantville, by instigating a code of conduct that is designed to ensure that all citizens are 'courteous' and 'pleasant' to one another but is, in reality, a severe breach of civil liberties. David's final speech to the court during the trial is, however, both an assertion of the individual, and a call for unified inclusivity to protect the new, democratic Utopia. This dream of inclusivity, similarly present in *Blast from the Past* and *Dave*, reflects the vision of social unity seen in Capra's films from *It Happened One Night* to *It's a Wonderful Life.*

'Memory is almost the last place of hope' – Gary Ross

When writing about the nostalgia film, Frederic Jameson described how it evaded 'its present altogether, [and] registered its historicist deficiency by losing itself in mesmerised fascination in lavish images of specific generational pasts' (1991: 294). This is, I feel, an oversimplification of the way in which film and other media, such as photography, impinge on our notion of what is 'the past'. As the journalist and academic Thomas Kielinger pointed out in an article, the past is a perennial presence through the agency of media images, so that once something is recorded in this

fashion, it may never truly become a 'thing of the past' (Kielinger 2004: 26). The result is that the present is in constant mediation and negotiation with the past and the notion of pastness. Film and cinema, as many theoreticians have stated, is a form of communication and its language of choice is semiotics – the system of signs and signifiers that create meaning. For those signifiers to provide the correct meaning, however, people have to recognize the signs being deployed. It follows logically that the signs will be drawn from a shared cultural heritage. In cinematic terms, the 'Golden Age' of Hollywood constructed the semiotic and narrative frameworks upon which all subsequent cinematic texts would be built. The partnership of Frank Capra and Robert Riskin created the template for screwball comedies and social problem films that are still being used to this day. Almost all the male/female relationships in the films I have discussed – from Sydney Wade and Andrew Shepherd in *The American President* to Adam and Eve in *Blast from the Past* – are characterized by their witty verbal sparring and intellectual equality, recalling the screwball comedies of the 1930s.

These films are not, however, merely looking at the past through 'nostalgia tinted spectacles' (Jameson 1991: 288), but are using a semiotic language in order to critically engage with postmodern culture's relationship to the past. *Pleasantville* and *Blast from the Past* critically engage not only with the way in which we represent the past to ourselves, but also with how we construct our view of ourselves in the present. That, I feel, would be impossible to achieve if we had no sense of our own historicity. The above quote from Gary Ross identifies the nostalgic trend that Jameson discusses. The point of *Pleasantville*, as he goes on to explain, is to deconstruct that particular ideology of pastness and to show how the last place of hope should be the future. Similarly, the films set in the political world may create structures of feeling that evoke the glory days of Capra/Riskin's films, but they are not simply longing for a political life of the fictional past, but engaging with issues that are part of the present political climate. The directors of these films – and various artistes associated with them – may rely on evocations of the past, but by doing so they allow politics to enter into dialogue with culture. While Jameson's formulation may be a starting

point for understanding the nature of nostalgia and how it is harnessed in films, I find it too negative and limiting when applying it to contemporary film. Capra and Riskin left a lasting cinematic legacy and by appropriating their structures and methods, contemporary film is able to enrich the present by exploring the historical past and deconstructing our cultural idealization of that history.

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Suggested pull quotes

All of which raises the question: what is the Capra-esque quality?

In cinematic terms, at least, the 1990s became a backlash against the insularity of the preceding decade…

Hollywood is looking back, not just at the historical past, but also at its own cinematic past.

The partnership of Frank Capra and Robert Riskin created the template for screwball comedies and social problem films that are still being used to this day.

Pleasantville and *Blast from the Past* critically engage not only with the way in which we represent the past to ourselves, but also with how we construct our view of ourselves in the present.

Endnotes

[1] They are referring to films made during the Depression era until the early 1950s.

[2] A Christ or messiah-figure is a real or fictitious character who resembles Christ through their actions or narratives, as opposed to the Jesus-figure, which is an actual representation of Jesus himself (Malone 1997: 76).

[3] The quote came from the film *Wall Street* (1987), but was taken up as an inspirational idea by the very people it was satirizing.

[4] All quotes from the director are taken from his commentary on the DVD edition of *Pleasantville*.

[5] In the featurette *Hugh Wilson: Interview* on *Blast From the Past* (1999), DVD.

[6] Similarly, *Field of Dreams* (1989) converges the counterculture of the 1960s as represented by Ray and his wife with the eternal values of American life, represented by baseball, in what was one of the most significant Capra-esque fables of the 1980s (Brown 1997: 229–30).

[7] In the wake of the war in Iraq, 'Political Science' has been taken up as an unofficial anthem by some US radio stations as a display of anti-Bush sentiment.