

The way we (really) were

Screenplay by Todd Haynes

Directed by Todd Haynes

Julianne Moore ... Cathy Whitaker

Dennis Quaid ... Frank Whitaker

Dennis Haysbert ... Raymond Deagan

Patricia Clarkson ... Eleanor Fine

Cathy Whitaker: That was the day I stopped believing in the wild ardor of things. Perhaps in love, as well. That kind of love. The love in books and films. The love that tells us to abandon our lives and plans, all for one brief touch of Venus. So often we fail at that kind of love. The world just seems too fragile a place for it. And of every other kind, life remains full. Perhaps it's just we who are too fragile.

When I read the above bittersweet reflection from Cathy Whitaker (Julianne Moore)—homemaker extraordinaire in upscale, extremely class-conscious 1957 Hartford, Connecticut, and wife to Frank Whitaker (Dennis Quaid), high-powered sales executive at a leading ad agency—I thought, wow, that's my exact impression of her... and sums up a major idea of the movie. The only problem is I've been back over the DVD several times, and I can't find where anyone says these words! [If any of my readers can locate the statement, please contact me on the Coffee Coaster forum.]

But it's all right, I did manage to find a suitable scene in which Cathy reveals to her best friend Eleanor (Patricia Clarkson) the sad longing for a feeling of simple "aliveness" that she experienced uniquely in her conversations with her "negro" gardener Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert)... conversations that flowered into friendship, and possibly even more:

"You know it's funny this whole time the only person I've been able to talk to about any of this was Raymond Deagan. It's true. Not in the way Mona intended. Nothing like that. We would just talk. And somehow it made me feel, I don't know, alive somewhere. I know it's ridiculous and mad, but I think of him, I do, what he's doing, what he's thinking, I do..."

To which Eleanor responds in an indignant huff. Ellie has had about all of this social consciousness raising she can stand. He's a negro, after all, and any connection between a white woman of Cathy's social standing and a black man, a gardener for chrissakes, is strictly unacceptable—not to mention she's a married woman. Far from Heaven is the all-American reality behind the metaphorical movie, Pleasantville, and let's just say everyone knows his place and change is not good. Moreover, any personal qualities that deviate from what is set forth as acceptable are best dealt with by denial and/or forthright repression.

I've just given you an indication from Cathy's wistful sentences of a good part of the plot: obviously, we're looking at a world where what matters is on the surface of things. The fact that Cathy and Raymond are discovering they could be true soulmates is so liberating as to be dangerous... because it blows a hole the size of a Buick through all the superficial pretend-life sociology of the time. Nor is our own time immune from such pretense. (One wonders if the pretensions are sometimes simply turned around: consider the mixed-race couple who hook up primarily as an act of rebellion rather than from a true commonality of spirit or values.)

The actors are terrific: all four of the major stars listed above, as well as the remaining cast. Elmer Bernstein creates this mesmerizing score, which suggests the saccharin smarminess of those old melodramas in the 50s, but then carves out a unique and honest expression of its own... in conjunction with the sad yet hopeful realizations of the primary characters.

So we know the movie deals with racial stereotypes and the problems of true love in a closed-off world that way. Unfortunately, the film is difficult to discuss without also talking about what it is in Cathy's married life that leads to such heart-wrenching soul-searching in the realm of (potential) romantic love. Let's just say her husband Frank—the chosen one on the fast track to the top of the company and number one banana at

the country club—has a sexual-orientation issue. This is a jolt out of the blue to Cathy who's stuck trying to comprehend something that in that era of sexual oblivion is simply incomprehensible.

The story of *Far from Heaven* is really the struggle of both these characters, Cathy and Frank, to learn how to become what they are. We are sympathetic to them both, especially considering the odds stacked against them: you can cut the ignorance/hostility —what Eckhart Tolle would refer to as unconsciousness—of their society with a knife. (Another appeal of the movie is in nostalgia, because one twisted benefit of ignorance is (at least the appearance of) simplicity. I think back to when I was eight years old (in 1957) and living in the middle-class suburbs of Kansas City, and how there was such a nice "order" in the system... at least for kids, and seemingly the adults, in my circumstances.)

What Haynes does with the story is weave an incredibly watchable battle of discovery and liberation in the context of a social system that wants none of it—and in fact a social system that is about to be upended with all that is good and bad about the 1960s. The insights into the thinking and feeling of everyone in that setting are fascinating, and would breed hours of meaningful discussion of everything from the Sexual Revolution to *Organization Man*. Again, I'm not very good at getting the symbolism of things, but this movie carries a lot of freight: what the cinematographer does with the colors reminds me of *Dick Tracy*, with all the rich reds and greens and blues, except when a problem is coming out... in which case the screen turns so dimly lit you can hardly see anything.

Well, the movie is excellent. It was nominated for four Oscars and won several other awards, chiefly for Julianne Moore, for writer/director Todd Haynes, and composer Elmer Bernstein. It feels like *Pleasantville* with much the same passion and tender individualism, but I think many viewers will be more moved by the realism of and self-identification with *Far from Heaven*.

2008 August 29

Copyright © Brian Wright | The Coffee Coaster™

Far from Heaven | Julianne Moore | Life in the 1950s | Repression