“Far From Heaven” [2002, directed by Todd Haynes]

Many of the films used in classes relevant to social science touch on expectations and whether people adjust when these expectations are not met. Among other things, this film addresses the concern for the tacit or explicit view that every society or component of a society has rules or norms that are supposed to govern individual and group behavior. It is often suggested that breaking these rules causes problems for individuals as well as for their families and communities.

In her article on families [“The Way We Never Were”], Stephanie Coontz notes that, while it is common for Americans to see the 1950s as the “normal” decade—after the abnormal 1930s [of the Great Depression] and 1940s [of World War II] and before the turbulence of the 1960s—in fact, that decade was an aberration. It is generally accepted that a reaction to the previous two decades and the spreading of post-war prosperity were linked to a significant but not total degree of conformity, especially among the rapidly expanding middle class. The film is set in 1957, the year more Americans said they were optimistic about their future and the future of the country than was the case in any other year, before or after. Perhaps this outlook was connected to the idea that things will keep improving if “you don’t screw up and if, to get along, you go along.”

The director of the film, Todd Haynes, attempts to look at the norms and attitudes of the late 1950s with overlapping concepts. The cinematic elements—cinematography, music, dialogue—are right out of some of the overblown movies of the 1950s, films directed at a mass audience but, ostensibly, with a special appeal to women of the time. These elements might make the film appear strange to a younger generation accustomed to a different style of filmmaking. At the same time, while Haynes is not making fun of the ‘fifties, it is inevitable that he—and we—are grounded in the twenty-first century, a time when, regardless of one’s personal views on homosexuality or race, many people at least know someone who is gay or someone in a multiracial relationship, which was less likely to be the case in the 1950s. It may also be important that Haynes is an openly gay director while it would have been more likely for gay directors of the 1950s to be in the closet. One should keep these elements of “historical sociology” in mind while watching the film.

There are some other things to consider while watching the film: The interior design of the house in the film does not particularly “go” with that type of home. Is Haynes suggesting that the family’s money might be “new,” and therefore not paired with coherent tastes? The husband, Frank, refers to service in the navy, probably during World War II. Does this mean he was a beneficiary of the G.I. Bill? The main black character meets the criteria for black characters in films of the late 1950s and the early 1960s, at least those who are not playing domestic servants. He has to be a paragon of middle class values and virtues, well-educated and well-spoken.

Middle class housewives of the 1950s operated in a limited sphere of other women and children. The few outlets included gossip and quite a bit of drinking. Conversely, in the world of middle class men, the only women were subordinates, not peers. It is interesting that there is no mention of churches for the white characters, only for the African-Americans. Among the issues of style: Women would not go out without gloves and men always wore hats [although never in an elevator, something Frank does in the film].

A final question: Is it important to know that the director is gay? Is it important to know that the director of the Godfather films [or the creator of “The Sopranos”] is Italian-American? If so, why? If not, why not?