

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Green Card* (1990)**

Peter Weir

OVERVIEW

Director Peter Weir (1944-) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He participated in what has been called the Australian New Wave in the 1970s, directing distinctive films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977) that made use of Australian settings. Weir's global status grew with *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir went on to make several Hollywood movies, including the acclaimed *Witness* (1985) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), both also Oscar winners. Weir began making films less frequently in the 21st century but has maintained an international reputation.

Film *Green Card* was based on an original script by Peter Weir. The film marks Weir's initial foray into the comedy genre; Weir has stated that he was inspired by the classic 1930s Hollywood romantic comedies, such as *It Happened One Night*. His film tells the story of a fake "green card" marriage between New Yorker Brontë Parrish (Andie MacDowell) and Frenchman Georges Fauré (Gérard Depardieu). When the marriage is questioned by the immigration authorities, Brontë and Georges must get to know each other for real in order to play the part of a couple.

Background Weir began writing the screenplay for *Green Card* after the critical and commercial failure of *The Mosquito Coast*. He intended it as a straightforwardly commercial picture. But the project did not come to fruition until Weir realized he wanted the male lead to be not an Englishman but a Frenchman, played by Gérard Depardieu. It was thus after Weir directed *Dead Poets Society* that *Green Card* was actually made. Shot in New York City, it features music by Mozart, Hans Zimmer, and Enya. Broadway star Bebe Neuwirth, playing the heroine's friend, joined MacDowell and Depardieu in the cast. *Green Card* received mixed reviews.

SYNOPSIS

New Yorker Brontë Parrish is introduced to a Frenchman named Georges Fauré by a mutual acquaintance; they marry at City Hall and then say good-bye. Armed with her marriage certificate, Brontë applies for an apartment in an exclusive building. The committee reviewing applications tells her they prefer a married couple to a single person, and that they are glad she is a horticulturalist and thus can take on the responsibility of managing this unit. She gets the apartment, which turns out to include an extensive greenhouse filled with plants. Soon, we see Brontë at work with a group calling themselves the Green Guerrillas, who plant plants in depressed inner-city areas. She is halfheartedly dating Phil, one of the other people in this group.

Before long, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) shows up at Brontë's door wanting to speak to her and Georges in order to confirm the validity of their marriage. Brontë finds Georges, and they pretend to be really married and living together during an interview with two INS representatives. They are unconvincing, though, and are told to come to a second interview the following Monday. Threatened with deportation (for him) and prison (for her) if they fail, Georges and Brontë agree to spend the weekend living together in the apartment and actually getting to know each other. They swap life stories, eat together, and stage photos of their supposed vacations and experiences together. Although they differ extensively, they also find points of connection. Nevertheless, Georges answers one question about Brontë incorrectly during the second interview, and he makes a deal with INS to submit to deportation if they let Brontë go unpunished. Before he leaves, he makes an overture to Brontë, and they realize that they have fallen in love for real. They smile and agree to keep in touch, even though he must leave.

CHARACTERS

Brontë Parrish – American woman living in New York City
Georges Fauré – Frenchman trying to find a way to stay in New York City
Mr. Parrish – Brontë's father
Mrs. Parrish – Brontë's mother
Phil – Brontë's boyfriend
Lauren Adler – Brontë's friend
Mr. Adler – Lauren's father
Mrs. Adler – Lauren's mother
Mr. Gorsky – INS official
Mrs. Sheehan – INS official
Anton – mutual acquaintance of Brontë and Georges
Oscar – Brontë's doorman

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Brontë Parrish

Brontë is a single woman in New York City whose life revolves around plants. She supports many liberal causes and has “hippie” habits like eating healthy vegetarian food. She works with a group, the “Garden Guerrillas,” that takes plants to New York’s inner-city communities.

Liberal When going through a photo album with Georges, Brontë points to the photographs of herself as a college student attending demonstrations and says that she supported “every” cause. We see that Brontë eats muesli, decaf coffee, and no meat, and we also see her engaged in one of the projects of the “Garden Guerrillas,” a group planting plants in the inner city.

Plant-loving The one thing Brontë cares about most is plants. She marries a stranger not just to help him get a green card but also because she too wants something “green”: a greenhouse that is attached to an exclusive apartment. We often see Brontë eagerly tending plants, especially at times of stress. She always wants to get more plants and to share them with others.

Georges Fauré

Georges is a Frenchman who has overstayed his visa in New York City. He has told Brontë that he is a composer, but it is unclear whether this is true, or more generally why he wishes to remain in the U.S. He says that he comes from a poor family.

Blue-collar Georges says that he comes from the “gutter” and shows Brontë some amateur tattoos from his youth. When called upon to play one of his “compositions” at a dinner party, Georges bursts into a chaotic piece that he characterizes as “not Mozart.” Speaking as a poor person, Georges expresses doubts to Brontë that her work with the Garden Guerrillas actually helps.

Positive Despite his rough upbringing, Georges has a positive attitude and accepts challenges with enthusiasm. He sincerely calls the U.S. the “land of opportunity” even though it is not clear what specific opportunities he seeks (he is fired from a job as a waiter). Georges brings Brontë gifts and works hard to prepare for the INS interview.

Traditional Georges has a traditional day-to-day lifestyle; he wants to consume meat, not vegetables; croissants, not muesli; and real coffee, not decaf. He smokes. It does not seem to bother him that Brontë has opposite preferences, but neither does he wish to modify his own. Georges expresses a more traditional masculinity than that of Brontë's boyfriend, Phil.

THEMES

Liberalism *Green Card* poses the question of whether the work Brontë and her friends do to support liberal causes is actually worthwhile. It does not question their sincerity; the Garden Guerrillas are seen working hard and speaking passionately about their actions. Nevertheless, Georges voices skepticism about what they are doing. Trees are wonderful, he says, but you cannot eat them, and these are poor people who need to eat. Brontë insists that seeing plants where they live gives people hope. The film neither supports nor undermines this assertion. We learn that Brontë has a long history as a liberal do-gooder; she shows Georges pictures of herself in college, attending demonstrations for what she calls “everything.” Brontë is a vegetarian, drinks decaf coffee, and eats healthy food like muesli (which Georges calls “birdseed”). But Brontë insists, “I like birdseed,” and the film does not include any instances of her changing her mind about food (such as eating meat cooked by Georges and declaring that it is wonderful after all). Regarding both her dietary habits and her work with plants, Brontë seems to be doing what she genuinely likes, as well as what she believes to be right.

Immigration Georges is in this situation in the first place because he wants to be in the United States but is running up against laws that restrict foreigners’ right to do so. Having outstayed his original visa, he turns to marriage to an American citizen as a way to get a green card and thus be allowed to remain legally. According to the INS agents who interview Brontë and Georges, the White House has recently issued a crackdown on fake marriages entered into only for the sake of a green card. Georges is a foreigner living in a country that is very concerned about foreigners. When Brontë tells the committee reviewing her application for the apartment that her husband is in Africa, they anxiously ask whether he himself is African; they are visibly relieved when she replies that he is French. As a white European, Georges thus has something of an advantage over black and brown immigrants. Still, he is ultimately deported back to France for getting just one trivial detail about Brontë (her face-cream brand) wrong in the final INS interview. *Green Card* unquestionably presents the position of would-be immigrants to the U.S. as a difficult one.

Love *Green Card* sits squarely in the romantic comedy genre. Its tagline was “the story of two people who got married, met and then fell in love,” and its main focus is the relationship between its two leads. As with many romantic comedies, the two characters are quite different and spend the better part of the film negotiating those differences. They do not fall in love at first sight. Instead, they learn to appreciate each other as they get to know each other better. The film does not construct much of a romantic history for Georges, but we are told that Brontë has had two serious relationships with men in the past, in addition to her current relationship with Phil. As portrayed in this film, love inheres in supporting someone in spite of difference. For example, Georges helps Brontë obtain for her Garden Guerrillas group the trees that Lauren’s parents are giving away, even though Georges expresses doubts that the Garden Guerrillas’ work is really helping inner-city residents. The point is that he is supporting her project because it matters to her. *Green Card*’s ending offers a twist on the genre’s usual ending: the two leads have fallen in love, but they are separated by Georges’s deportation.

Environmentalism While Georges wants a green card, Brontë has a green thumb and wants a greenhouse. She lives for plants. The first thing we see her do is buy and smell a flower at an outdoor market; she also eats a vegetarian diet. Brontë agrees to a Green Card marriage in order to present herself as married and thus be able to secure a particular apartment that comes with a greenhouse but is controlled by a board that prefers married tenants. Trained as a horticulturist, Brontë tends plants in the greenhouse, on the apartment building’s rooftop, and through her work with the Garden Guerrillas, planting plants in the rubble of inner-city decay. When Georges raises questions about the usefulness of giving poor people plants as opposed to food, Brontë insists that plants give people hope. Whether or not this is true for others, it is clearly true for Brontë herself; for example, we see her rush over to the greenhouse and start shoveling dirt into a pot in a moment of stress. Brontë’s knowledge of plants comes in handy when she and Georges are stuck in a traffic jam en route to their INS interview and are able to take a shortcut across the park because she knows it well.

Social class One of the characteristics differentiating Georges and Brontë is social class. Georges describes himself as coming from the “gutter.” He tells Brontë that he left school at age ten to be a “bad

boy in the street” and spent some time in jail for theft; he shows her the amateur tattoos on his arms. Georges’s working-class background complicates his identity for the American characters (and for American audiences), who typically associate France with cultural refinement (as Lauren expresses by referring to a French movie and a French restaurant when she first meets Georges). Brontë’s class status is not totally specified, but there are various characteristics of Brontë that, taken together, suggest that her class position is higher than Georges’s. These include her college education, her friendship with the wealthy Lauren, her first name (chosen, she says, by her writer father), her ability to afford rent on a nice apartment, and her work for charitable causes. *Green Card* spends little time with the inner-city residents for whom Brontë is planting plants. The film mildly satirizes wealthy people, both through Lauren’s parents’ dinner party (at which women fawn over the Frenchman Georges and show off their knowledge of composer Gabriel Fauré) and through the snobbish opinions of the other residents in Brontë’s apartment building.

Quest *Green Card* follows the traditional narrative pattern of the quest. This is particularly true for Georges. From humble beginnings as the son of a mechanic and a “bad boy of the streets,” Georges is trying to stake out a better life for himself. He has taken a major step in coming to the United States; as with most questers, his journey is geographical as well as figurative. All quests are, of course, fraught with challenges and setbacks. Georges’s chief adversary is the Immigration and Naturalization Service. In their eyes, he has already committed a crime by overstaying his original visa by several weeks. Although the two INS representatives featured in the film are not portrayed as villainous (they seem eager to find in the couple’s favor and apologetically state that the White House has ordered them to crack down on green card marriages), the INS as an institution is an enemy that ultimately triumphs over Georges, ordering his deportation. Nevertheless, the film’s ending has a positive tone because Georges and Brontë have realized that they have come to love each other. In a way, they have triumphed in a side quest they did not know they were on: the search for love in other human beings.

Appearance vs. reality Throughout the film, the relationship between appearance and reality is complicated. The first lie is Brontë’s attempt to hide her marriage from everyone she knows except for Anton. While spending the weekend together, Brontë and Georges construct a story to tell her friends to explain his presence in her apartment—namely, that he is an old friend visiting from France and writing music for a political ballet. Meanwhile, they have to convince INS that their marriage is based on a real romantic relationship. The majority of the film charts the process by which the appearance they are trying to craft for INS takes on a kind of reality. The vacation photos they stage are fake, for example, but they really do have fun taking them together. Georges looks serious and emotional while sitting alone and looking through the album they have made with these photos. During the final interviews they do separately with INS agents, Brontë and Georges are able to sincerely speak of each other’s good qualities. The final twist is that after INS officially refuses to accept the story of their marriage, they reveal to each other that they have developed real romantic feelings. When the sham marriage collapses, the real relationship begins.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did you find yourself rooting for the relationship between Brontë and Georges? Why or why not?
2. Some male reviewers of this film characterized Brontë as uptight and selfish. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Some commentators have compared *Green Card* to Weir’s earlier film *The Plumber*. If you have seen *The Plumber*, what similarities and differences does it have with *Green Card*? If you have not seen *The Plumber*, think about a different film of which you were reminded while watching *Green Card*.
4. Brontë is both a confirmed city-dweller and a lover of plants. How does the film use images to create a feeling of nature in the midst of the city?
5. Weir wrote and directed *Green Card* a few years after having come to Hollywood from Australia. Discuss the film’s portrayal of the experience of a foreigner in the United States.

SCENES

Wedding – A young woman buys a flower at an open-air market as a boy wearing a “New York” tee shirt drums on an overturned bucket. She rides the subway. She meets a man she calls Anton at an establishment called the Afrika Café. She says she is nervous, and he says that it’s normal to be nervous on your wedding day. A man appears at the window; Anton addresses him as Georges. The woman and Georges emerge from City Hall together, surrounded by couples wearing suits and wedding dresses. “Nice to meet you,” Georges says. “You too,” she replies, “Good luck with your music.” Anton emerges and hands them each a piece of paper; he says they will never have to see each other again.



Apartment application – The woman sits across from three older people. She tells them that her husband, a composer, is in Africa but would love the apartment. They express approval that the woman is a horticulturalist, as well as noting that “the board” would prefer a young couple have the apartment, rather than a single person. The woman says that she could bring the garden back to the way “the late professor” had it, proceeding to give details about the plants in the apartment’s greenhouse and the care that they require. Finally they get the apartment they want. The young woman enters the apartment and goes straight to the attached greenhouse, filled with plants. She begins to tend them.



Urban Planting – A man drives up in a truck and shouts, “Brontë! The city fathers give their blessing to the project!” The young woman from the earlier scenes looks up and smiles at him. She is standing with some other people in what appears to be a garden planted amid rubble from a destroyed building. A young man comes over and talks to her, with his hand on her buttocks. People plant various plants, accompanied by children speaking Spanish.



Waiter – Brontë (the young woman), the young man (addressed as Phil), and two other people from the group go to a restaurant to eat. Their waiter turns out to be Georges. They order fish, being vegetarians. Brontë and Georges smile at each other but do not reveal that they know each other.



Questions about Georges – The doorman, Oscar, addresses Brontë as Mrs. Fauré and comments that she has not received any mail from Africa; “he must still be on safari?” “Something like that,” she says. Brontë plants some plants in a rooftop garden, wearing pajamas. She comes back down to her apartment and gets a visit from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), asking to speak to her and her husband. She goes to the restaurant where she saw Georges as a waiter; he is not there, but another waiter says he knows where Georges is.



Bad performance – Georges arrives at Brontë’s apartment building, where he is enthusiastically greeted by Oscar. Brontë lets him in to her unit. Soon after, a man and a woman from INS arrive. They interrogate Georges and Brontë about their relationship. The phone rings, and Brontë goes to answer it. The INS man, Mr. Gorsky, asks Georges to show him where the bathroom is; Georges finds it eventually but has to open several other doors first. Mr. Gorsky frowns.



A plan – Brontë speaks to her lawyer. He tells her that she should let Georges spend the weekend at her apartment before their follow-up interview with INS on Monday so that they can really get to know each other in order to convince INS that they have a real relationship. The lawyer impresses upon Brontë that she has broken the law.



Different tastes – Georges comes to Brontë’s apartment with a koi fish to put in the pond. She accepts it. She makes him coffee, but it is decaf, and he says it tastes terrible. They work together on a story about themselves to tell her friends if they run into any of them over the weekend. They go food shopping together; she picks up some muesli, which he refers to as birdseed, and she insists that she likes birdseed, even though he says that he could get some croissants instead.

Meeting friends – Brontë sees a woman in the store and quickly turns the other direction. But the woman says “Brontë?” Brontë addresses her as Lauren and hesitantly introduces her to Georges. Georges invites her over for a lunch that he is cooking at Brontë’s apartment, and she accepts. Georges explains that he is writing a political ballet in New York and is an old friend of Brontë’s. Over lunch, Lauren tells Brontë that her parents will be leaving New York soon and might be interested in giving Brontë’s “Green Guerillas” group their plants.



Trying to understand – Lauren, having left Brontë’s apartment, calls to say that Brontë is invited to a dinner party at her parents’ that night. Georges is invited as well. Later in the day, Georges leaves the apartment and reappears with some new plants he has bought for Brontë. Although he has accidentally displaced some of her existing plants in order to plant the new ones, Brontë is grateful for the gift. She explains to Georges that it was in order to get the apartment with the greenhouse that she married him. She also tells him about her work with the Green Guerillas, which he says is okay if it amuses her but cannot really help the poor children of New York City; he knows because he is from “the gutter” himself.



Dinner party – Brontë dresses up to go to the dinner party at Lauren’s parents’ house. She has not invited Georges. Georges suggests that she wear her hair down, which she does. Brontë arrives at the dinner party; sometime later, so does Lauren, with Georges in tow. Several women at the dinner party pay a great deal of attention to Georges. Brontë speaks with Lauren’s mother about her plants; it is clear that Lauren’s mother is hesitant to give the plants away to Brontë’s group. Georges plays the piano. He sings a song in French about trees.



Learning about each other – Brontë and Georges return to Brontë's apartment. He studies her possessions and takes notes. She sets up bedding for him on the sofa and thanks him for helping her get the plants from Lauren's parents. Georges and Brontë stay up late telling each other their histories. Among other things, Brontë explains that her father is a writer and named all his children after famous writers.



Working hard – On Sunday, Georges and Brontë continue to work on their story that they are really married. They write letters to each other that were ostensibly written in the past, and they stage various photos of themselves as though they were on vacation, getting married, and so forth.



Parental visit – Brontë's parents drop in on her. Brontë tries to get Georges out of the apartment before they arrive but is unable to do so. Georges talks with Brontë's father while Brontë and her mother look at the plants in the greenhouse. After they leave, Brontë and Georges go to Central Park and continue to learn about each other's histories. Brontë then sees Phil across the street and tells Georges to go back to the apartment while she goes to talk to Phil.



Rivalry – Brontë and Phil go out to dinner, while Georges compiles a photo album of the Polaroids he and Brontë had taken earlier. Phil and Brontë come back to her apartment, where she tries to get him to leave. When he is reluctant to do so, Georges emerges and shouts at him to go. He is shocked, and Brontë is mortified, but he goes. Then Brontë shoves Georges out the door, too.



Running – The next morning, Brontë emerges in her bathrobe and realizes that Georges is still right outside the apartment door. She lets him back in, and they begin fighting. Then they realize that they need to rush to get to the INS interview on time. There is a traffic jam, so they run across the park together.



Interview – Brontë and Georges arrive at the INS office and are led into separate interview rooms. They separately tell the interviewers all about themselves and each other. The one thing discrepancy is that she identifies her face cream as “Monticello,” while he says that it is “Monte Carlo.” They leave the INS building together; Brontë says she can leave his things with Oscar and then begin divorce proceedings after his green card comes through. She wishes him good luck with his music, and they say good-bye.



Second thoughts – Brontë returns to her apartment alone and immediately begins shoveling dirt into a pot in the greenhouse. She looks at the tomato plant Georges gave her. Oscar comes and gives her an envelope that he says Mr. Fauré left for her. She opens it; it is sheet music for a song entitled “For Brontë.” On the back, there is a note saying that he would love to say a last good-bye.



Together, apart – Brontë goes to the Afrika Café. She waits there for a while. Then Georges appears; he and Brontë embrace and kiss. Then one of the INS employees appears. Georges tells Brontë he made a deal so that he will be deported but she will not be imprisoned and can keep the apartment with the greenhouse. He says he will write every day. They smile at each other as he gets into the car with the INS man.

