

The Truman show: warning for the future

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Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* is a film of great satirical intellect and poignancy. However, beneath the facade, this "comedy" conveys important social messages that provide a warning for the future. It mocks human beings' automatic acceptance of what they are presented with and shows how manipulative and addictive the media can be. On a deeper level, the film also cautions against accepting absolute authority, the interminable hunt for Utopia, and the evils inspired by the desire for wealth. Whether *The Truman Show* is a satire, a comedy, a documentary, a fable, or even a hoax is debatable, but what is impossible to question is the need to consider its themes and digest its principal lessons. The international populace is influenced, manipulated, and shaped by the world they live in and the media they are exposed to. Truman Burbank, the primary character of *The Truman Show*, provides a perfect depiction of modern man, because he accepts the facade created by the society in which he dwells for most of his continuously-televised life. Having been cast from the moment of his birth as the unwitting star of a popular reality TV soap opera, he is unsuspectingly moulded by his society (the people, social standards and media he interacts with), all of whom are meticulously controlled and directed by the show's creator, Christof. By tolerating the absurdities that often occur in his life and not questioning why they happen, Truman permits himself to be dominated by invisible sources that force him into service as a profitable breeder for the creators, a source of amusement for viewers, and a lifestyle for the professional actors and technicians involved. Truman's naivete, as Christof explains, is possible because, as humans, "accept the reality with which we are presented." It is not human nature to question the "truth." Very few question the information they are fed by self-proclaimed "reliable sources."

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Societal pressures and the desire to conform easily guide even the most perceptive participants. However, as Truman and the fictitious spectators of The Truman Show prove, the consequence of allowing opinionated representations to infiltrate a person's life is subconscious self-enslavement that eventually leads to exploitation. In modern times, the media is powerful and exploitive, yet it remains alluring to its audiences because it is programmed to their needs. For the sake of selfish enjoyment, the made-up viewers in The Truman Show accept the heavy expense Truman unknowingly pays. They are mentally bribed by the show's appeal into not opposing the invasion of privacy and the other ethical issues that are inevitably raised. Truman's vulnerability and defensiveness (as apparent from the numerous high angle shots of him) are ignored. Viewers are oblivious to the irony of a man who "jealously guards his privacy" initiating a program with no restriction to another's. While many will doubt the likelihood of The Truman Show becoming reality, the fact is that a similar neglect of ethics when fulfilling needs, wants, and fantasies already occurs, whether the public is conscious of it or not. When savvy moviegoers watch TV programs or movies, they enjoy the image the creators are portraying. However inadvertently, as they familiarise themselves with that image, they are embracing the opinions and popular culture displayed in the dominant reading. Because the celluloid audiences of The Truman Show see raw footage of a life instead of an artificial movie, the real viewers are in an advantageous moral position, and it is thus unfair to compare reactions. But when the public indulges in celebrities' exposed secrets or watch Princess Diana's private recordings, they are in fact perpetrating the same offence as the viewers in The Truman Show. The film correctly exposes the artificial

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nature of spectators, who in the process of pursuing entertainment, are hypnotized and suspend their better moral judgement in order to oblige their needs. The millions of imaginary viewers who plug in to intrude upon Truman's "privacy" in its circular matte are captivated by the perfection of his world and the dramatic events of his life. However, their obsession leads them to abandon their moral responsibilities for the victimized when they tune in, thereby endorsing The Truman Show's activities. The line between fantasy and reality blurs as the audience's reliance on the show is prolonged. Everyday obligations are ignored, and the program becomes the epicentre of their lives. This is best demonstrated by the viewers who tune in 24 hours a day, by the young couple who ignore their baby to concentrate on Tru Talk, and by the customers who purchase fragments of Truman's engineered reality. Instead of endeavouring to attain a more satisfying life of their own, the audience literally lives through Truman. People innocently believe in the media's integrity because is so delightful. However, the incapacity to remove oneself from a particular media such as The Truman Show is no different to being addicted to gambling, drugs, alcohol, or tobacco. In The Truman Show, Christof is associated with God and his unscrupulously actions are designed to cautions viewers when following the commands of an omnipotent being. The cast and crew obey his instructions almost blindly, except in the scene where he resorts to violent weather to intimidate Truman into returning to Seahaven. They succumb to his whims, dishonesty and sadism and ignore their better values and beliefs. They are obedient and true devotees of a faith. Director Weir questions this absoluteness. Should God be perfect, and restricted by right and wrong? Could he be immoral? Should people permanently accept his teachings or exercise judgement? Is rebellion

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immoral? In short, is it better to have free choice but also experience dilemmas or better to accept the control imposed by a supreme being with superior wisdom? For most of his life Truman lives in his constructed Utopia with no freedom, and no dilemmas. Yet despite being provided with an environment that is constrained to perfection, Truman is not content because he is ensnared in a town where he is unable to realise his dreams. Weir constantly uses film techniques to create threatening moods, e. g. the low angle shot of Truman been framed by Meryl and his mother suggesting that he is overpowered by the dominant figures in his life and trapped. In his only real choice, Truman decides to abandon The Truman Show, informed that he will ruin investments, destroy the careers of people with genuine affection towards him, and obliterate the pleasure he brings to millions. Nevertheless, the viewers were heartened by Truman's escape, and Weir signifies Christof's similar admiration by the low angle shot of Truman silhouetted against the sky: confident, heroic, and in total control. Truman's proficiency in digesting the earth-shattering news he has received, his preservation of humour in crisis and his courage in entering the uncertainty of the "real world" where he knows there is disease, violence, depression, deception, and poverty endears him further to the audience. His triumph in escaping is also the triumph of the people who live through him. From this, it is possible to see that The Truman Show clearly insist on free choice. The Truman Show is the fantasyland of perfection men have searched for since civilisation, yet it's termination in the end of the film with Truman's departure shows that such flawlessness cannot exist. For Utopia to survive, mankind itself must be perfect. Yet with gluttony, selfishness, hate, jealousy, arrogance, conflict, differences, boredom, unhappiness, fear, and other

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human characteristics, this is impossible. The movie illustrates through Truman that even if Utopia did exist, it would ultimately disintegrate. Humans possess a relative amount of intelligence, and intelligence inspires freedom, adventure, competition, change and challenges. Truman's life of perfection offers him none of these, and therefore his life is imperfect. While perfection is what people crave, it is unsustainable because it is monotonous and can offer no competition, adventure, or challenge, all of which require distinctively human attributes that cannot exist in Utopia. Truman's plight is a marvellous representation of the extremes incurred when greed encounters no boundaries. Truman Burbank was adopted and raised by his corporate parents for exploitation. In the course of generating massive personal rewards, Truman's biological parents, Christof, and media executives ignore their own morals and values as well as Truman's right to truth, reality, and civil liberties. Similarly, the professionals hired to be involved in Truman's life and convince him of its excellence and legitimacy, as well as the crew involved in the set, design, music, and advertising of the show are bought off, and remain complacent to Truman's oppression. When this revenue, equivalent to that of a small country, is threatened, these characters are willing to jeopardize Truman's life to protect it. These actions enforce the hollow nature of human goodness and the strength of greed. In conclusion, The Truman Show contains relevant messages for the future that must be considered. It argues that the media's debauchery is only possible because viewers themselves are willing - even enthusiastic - to sacrifice their control over themselves in return for pleasure and conformity. Correspondingly, it discourages people from searching for a Utopian-like society and sacrificing ethics for material interests, and encourages people

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to question the nature of God and other omnipotent figures. Unfortunately, the message, in the current political, social and economic climate, appears not to be reaching its audience.