

The truman show: predicting the commodification of victimization

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Upon its initial release, few moviegoers could possibly have predicted that The Truman Show would not remain pure fantasy for decades to come. The very concept that millions of Americans would ever sit around 24/7/365 watching what essentially amounts to a secret recording of a kidnap victim's daily life as if he were some kind of actual celebrity was clearly the most outrageous and fantastic conceit of the movie. While The Truman Show was clearly intended as satire, the fundamental quality of satire is that it retains some distance from reality and the distance between that conceit and the ugliest realities of society that the film was satirizing seemed permanently detached. In less than two decades since its release, however, The Truman Show can be seen as an almost eerily prescient prediction of the commodification of victimization as entertainment in a process that increasingly makes viewers complicit partners rather in exploitation rather than victims of a more passive nature.

Watching The Truman Show and dismissing its premise of watching a kidnap victim live out his life as entertainment for the masses as something that could never be accepted by American society is no longer something easily accomplished. The show within the film presents what at the time appeared to be a satirical extension of the concept of the reality show to its most impossible extreme. Truman is, after all, from a legal perspective nothing more nor less than victim of the federal crime known as kidnapping and it is only obliviousness to his situation is the only aspect of his condition which allows for the secret filming of that life to become entertainment. He is kept against his will; such a situation is definitively against every aspect of American values. This element of the film was thus so far removed from

expectations of the possibility of the future of television that it is clear evidence that Truman's situation was not designed to be a reflection of reality and, therefore, was intended more as the last final footing lost on a slippery slope. Over the years, however, such an unlikely scenario is actually moving closer and closer to becoming something that could happen any day now. That slipper slope in real life has already taken viewers from Big Brother to Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire. Clearly, the American ability to accept what was seemed clearly unacceptable has gone through a state of de-evolution.

The film also points the way to a society where victimization is the new entertainment and there no longer seems to be a boundary over which content producers won't cross when it comes to exploiting victimization for the sake of entertainment. Truman seems far happier than most real life "stars" of so-called "reality TV shows" but this is likely due to the fact that he is not aware that he is the star of a reality show. On the other hand, the actors paid to play parts in Truman's life—including what amounts to a prostitute playing out the role of his wife—do not seem particularly happy. Even as recently as 1999, it seemed laughable to suggest that billions around the world would tune in to watch the mundane and—let's face it—utterly boring daily routine of a person's life on a 24 hour basis, but the rise of YouTube sensations who do absolutely nothing of any real interest has made that assumption laughable now. YouTube and live streaming just taps the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the intrusion into the most private moments of a person's life. In a way, The Truman Show also foresees the

coming of the NSA spying program in the way that so many Americans so quickly and passively accept it.

One of the less explicit satirical targets of *The Truman Show* is how it works to present a stark warning about the coming devaluation of the professional creative artist. Although there are professional writers and actors who work in front of and behind the camera making the reality show that is at the center of movie, its success is entirely dependent upon the non-professional participation of Truman himself. The movie thus becomes a show business satire proven to be right on the market when it comes to the very real future of how non-creative aspects of the television industry (network executives, conglomerate CEOs...producers) have joyously latched onto the cheaper production cost of reality shows as a means for devaluing the creative input from professional. When a teenage boy who makes six seconds home videos featuring such brilliantly creative plots as his through the snow is actually handpicked by the producers of a dancing show and sold to a complicit audience as a “star” there seems to be little more need for further evidence to prove that the value of professional creative artists in the entertainment industry rests at its lowest ebb ever.

A much more explicit and far more potent warning about the future of entertainment to be found in *The Truman Show* is how it becomes one of the first satirical critiques of entertainment media to target the consumers as being every bit as complicit in the negative aspects of media as those producing that content. One of the standard arguments to be found in any critique of the film is that delivers a message that audiences are becoming

less and less resistant to the power of the media to shape and control the message they deliver to audiences. Closer critical scrutiny reveals just the opposite message is at work. Without an audience willing to watch a man go to the bathroom or sleep or live what is essentially a fairly boring life, the show's creator, Christoff, actually becomes less the God figure implied by his name and more of a minor autocrat employed on a work-for-hire basis by his viewers. In fact, the only person genuinely lacking any complicity in the criminal behavior that is the reality show in which he is the star is Truman himself. One can only imagine that if the film were remade today, the ending would be far less of a triumph for free will...Truman would likely join in the compliance by demanding triple the salary of his highest paid co-stars.

The Truman Show began life as an outrageously unlikely warning about the multiple effects of the reality show genre taken to a periphery that was too extreme to ever masquerade as genuine reality. Over the nearly two decades since its release, the extreme quality and easily accepted doubt that such a show could ever actually come to fruition has waned to the point where few would ever be surprised to learn that their favorite reality show is one in which the star really doesn't have the slightest idea that his victimization at the hands of the producers and consumers is being exploited solely for the purpose of entertainment designed to distract millions from the real problems going on outside their own reality show taking place inside their homes.