

The Meaning Of The Truman Show

In the last few years, America has undergone a significant cultural change. Previously, almost no criticism of the media reached the public, except for some of the complaints of business interests and conservatives. The media controlled the "means of communication" and it used that power to censor virtually all discussion of its own role in shaping events

But now -- at last -- we are starting to get some public debate over the way the media manipulates public opinion and routinely creates fictions that masquerade as facts. The change has taken place in large measure because the media itself has become so powerful and so out of control, there is no longer any way for it to keep what it is doing under wraps.

Ironically, one of the voices that is being raised against it is none other than that of the ultimate media machine, Hollywood. While celebrities take on the tabloid photographers who follow them around, the movie and television industry is giving us depictions of venal reporters and scheming entertainment conglomerates, which pull no punches when it comes to revealing how amoral our culture industry has become.

Recently, there have been two important examples of this trend. In the flawed but interesting movie, *Bulworth*, Hollywood has given us a depiction of a politician who challenges the phony world of media-politics by offering bluntness in place of rhetorical manipulation. In the brilliantly-conceived (and imperfectly executed) satire, *The Truman Show*, it shows us a character who also challenges -- and ultimately escapes from -- a contrived world that is an invention of media. Both movies have the same message: we will have to stand up to the manipulators of television and news if we want to protect ourselves from the absurdity and falsehood that now surrounds us at every turn.

As most people know by now, *The Truman Show* conveys this message by depicting a series of fateful events in the life of Truman Burbank, (played by Jim Carrey) who has grown up, and lives, in a fake town full of actors. The town is enclosed in a giant dome decked out with high-tech simulations of sun and sky, in which the rain and wind are courtesy of the special effects department. Truman alone has no idea he is in a giant TV studio, as the rest of humanity watches him go from one staged situation to another in a nonstop telethon of reality programming that lets audiences enjoy a little pathos and vicarious emotion.

But into this ersatz paradise, there inevitably appears a snake. After the crew makes mistakes that cause the seamlessness of the illusion to break down, Truman figures out that his surroundings are full of staged scenes and events. He then tries to make his escape, only to come up against both his own fears, which keep him from leaving, and the obstacles put in his way by the producer-director who has made billions trapping him in a stage set and playing God with his life.

Thus does the movie offer us a metaphor for our own situation. The fake landscape Truman lives in is our own media landscape in which news, politics, advertising and public affairs are increasingly made up of theatrical illusions. Like our media landscape, it is convincing in its realism, with lifelike simulations and story lines, from the high-tech facsimile of a sun that benevolently beams down on Truman to the mock sincerity of the actor he mistakenly believes is his best friend. It is also rewarding and masquerades as something benevolent. And it is seamless -- there are almost no flaws that give away the illusion -- at least until things start to go wrong.

Truman's fear of leaving this invented world, once he realizes it is a fraud, is similarly like our own reluctance to break our symbiotic relationship with media. His growing suspicion that what he is seeing is staged for his benefit is our own suspicions as the media-fabricated illusions around us begin to break down. And the producer-director of this stage-set world, who blocks Truman's effort to escape, is the giant media companies, news organizations, and media-politicians that have a stake in keeping us surrounded by falsehood, and are prepared to lure us with rewards as they block efforts at reforming the system.

What gives this metaphor life is the way the movie depicts two attitudes we routinely take toward media. In one, we are absorbed by it; we accept its rendition of reality because it occupies our view. We are like children whose parents define their world. The lifelikeness and seamlessness of media fabrications and the fact that they are entertaining, help induce this attitude in us. We frequently experience it while reading news stories and watching television and movies.

In the second attitude, we distance ourselves from media. We examine its meaning and try to understand the intentions of its authors. This second attitude is what makes criticism -- and freedom -- possible.

In life, we frequently switch from one attitude to another and mix them together. In watching television, we may easily become absorbed in the program. Then something will jar us out of our spell, such as a breakdown in the illusion or the expression of ideas we disagree with. As a result, we will suddenly distance ourselves

from what we are watching, and perhaps ridicule it or suspect the intentions of its creators. The critics of media have been trying to get us to cultivate this second attitude, so we will see through the falsehood we are offered on a daily basis.

The movie depicts just such a change in attitude as a transformation in the way Truman sees his surroundings and as a physical journey. First, Truman is absorbed by his stage-set world. He is convinced it is real and it occupies his view. Then, as a result of flaws in the seamless illusion, he begins to question it. He develops a healthy paranoia -- are they watching him; can he know what is authentic? As he makes his escape, and the producer of the show blocks him at every turn, that is the creators of the movie telling us that we too have to take a journey -- of mind -- and distance ourselves from this media landscape, if we want to secure our freedom.

The movie also depicts the critics who invite us to see through media illusions in the form of characters who try to warn Truman he is on television. Most notably, there is the woman who reveals to him that he is on TV, before she is removed from the set. His dream of finding her is also the dream that, at first, he doesn't know he has, of finding the truth of the outside world, where there are genuine relationships in place of the saccharine marriage he believes is authentic.

The movie wants to play the role of just such a critic for us. It tells us to look around and break the spell that keeps us believing in the media-fabricated illusions of popular culture.

Of course, the movie is also a form of media. As it conveys these ideas to us in dramatic form, we are absorbed by its own take on the meaning of things. Like Truman, we are manipulated and entertained by its lifelike simulations and story line. We identify with Truman and psychologically become a part of his world. So the movie uses the manipulations of media in order to manipulate us into seeing through the manipulations of media.

As with many other forms of media, we are enriched by allowing ourselves to be taken over by its theme. But we also need to create a more critical distance, escape its invented world, and think about its meaning and effect on us, so we can use it to enhance our perceptions instead of allowing it to use us.

What is said here is true of all media -- including this site. It too seeks to draw you in; to try to structure your perception of things. It too requires a critical distance, so you can use it to enhance your perceptions and not merely be manipulated by it.

That brings us to another element depicted in the movie -- you (and me). The movie isn't only a satire of television and other forms of media. It aims many of its most pointed barbs at us, the audience. After all, as we watch the characters hanging on Truman's every expression so they can feel something, that is us we see depicted on the screen. We are the ones who make this system possible, the movie tells us. The willingness of the audience to exploit Truman so it can enjoy his life as entertainment is our own willingness to exploit an endless parade of human victims of news and reality programming because they have the misfortune to be part of some "newsworthy" event. And both the audience and Truman portray our willingness to experience an easier and more exciting substitute for life, which is what fuels the media machine.

So Truman and the audience depict us. We're the villains and victims and heroes of The Truman Show. And, ultimately, the only illusions we have to escape are the ones we create ourselves.

Are We Being Watched?

Truman believes he inhabits a benign and uneventful world. Little does he suspect that everything he does is monitored, controlled and contrived. When he realizes something is wrong and tries to break free, he then discovers the totalitarian face of his apparently innocuous life.

Like other depictions in the movie, this one is based on a disturbing characteristic of contemporary society. Everywhere we look, today, we see powerful shapers of media -- including entertainment companies, news organizations, corporations and political groups -- offering us a benevolent face, with promises of enjoyment and an easy life. But, behind the mask, we increasingly find surveillance, manipulation and social control.

A good example are the Disney theme parks in which surveillance technology, and efforts to manipulate visitors and keep everyone in line (literally as well as figuratively), are concealed by the benevolent facade. This characteristic has inspired the architect-essayist Michael Sorkin to see in Disney a hint of the future: themed fantasy environments in enclosed settings full of surveillance and social control.

Even many of those who consider this benign in a theme park will have to admit it looks more disturbing when the entire culture is dominated by media institutions that collect information on customers, competitors and critics. Consider the Internet, this idyllic arena of themed sites designed to create a pleasant and entertaining effect. As you "travel" the Internet, you may be disturbed to learn that some Internet Service Providers reserve

the right to monitor, and keep records on, what you look at and do online.

Are they actually doing so? There's no way to know because news organizations and politicians have refused to make an issue of it. The collective silence of these groups obviously isn't as airtight as the conspiracy depicted in the movie or the corporately controlled space at Disney World. But it is part of a conspiracy of silence that now shapes public debate, in which journalists and politicians help cover up most of the deception and surveillance that pervades society because they are participants in these activities and because they don't want to take on the big media companies and other corporations.

Or consider a mall. Behind the themed storefronts in these faux idyllic settings is a system of hidden video cameras and undercover security guards, once again there to keep things under control. This too begins to look less benign when you consider that malls (as Sorkin would point out) are functioning as town squares so that many of our public spaces are controlled and contrived environments shaped by the interests of marketing.

Not surprisingly, many works of fiction before *The Truman Show* depict this same combination -- phony idyllic settings that mask a system of surveillance and social control. This theme can be found in written stories such as "The Machine Stops", by E. M. Forster, *The Futurological Congress* by Stanislaw Lem, and *The City and the Stars* by Arthur C. Clarke; in movies such as *Logan's Run*, and in television programs such as "The Cage", which was the pilot episode for the original *Star Trek*.

The message of all these works is the same -- today's affluent societies are in danger of becoming controlled environments, as media and advanced technology become the tools of those in power. But protecting our freedom from this new abuse of power is made all the more difficult by its ability to put on such a pleasing and enticing face.

Environments Of Illusion

Throughout the 20th Century, the creators of popular fiction have told stories about characters who are imprisoned in false paradises of technology and simulation, and other environments of illusion. In the book, *The City and the Stars*, by Arthur C. Clark and the movie, *Logan's Run*, for example, entire societies are shown trapped inside enclosed cities of high technology and self-indulgence, separated from the world of nature and from human nature. Inside these gilded cages, the inhabitants live a charmed and inconsequential life.

In the book, *The Futurological Congress*, we see another variation on this theme, with a depiction of a society that is trapped in a shared, drug-induced, illusion. The inhabitants believe they live in a world of futuristic conveniences when everything is in a state of decay and collapse. Beyond their false perception of the world is the terrible truth concealed from humanity -- nature itself is on the verge of a catastrophe that will destroy civilization.

These works generally tell the same story, which is only barely concealed by variations in the characters and settings, suggesting that we are looking not only at a popular plot idea that has been borrowed by various authors, but also at a primal fantasy or an archetype that reveals something essential about the mind. Many begin by showing us characters who are happy in their falsified worlds. The story is then set in motion as things begin to happen that challenge the characters' acceptance of their surroundings. It may be that the characters have an inner urge to find out what is beyond their limited lives or there may be flaws in the seamlessness of the illusion that cause it to begin to break down.

As a result, a process of recognition sets in, in which the characters begin to realize they are prisoners. What they thought was the world begins to look like a cage. What they thought was a life begins to look like a lie.

In the next phase in the story, the characters try to make their escape. But it turns out there is a malevolent simulator who is responsible for trapping them inside this fraud, and he, she -- or it -- tries to make it impossible for them to leave. Generally, the character must overcome both fears in themselves and the external obstacles put in their way by these futuristic prison keepers to finally be free.

In the end, they escape and discover the world they had been isolated from. Their new home has at least three essential characteristics: it isn't controlled by others; it allows them to see things as they are, and it allows them to become their true selves.

Thus, these works show us characters who go from a life that is controlled, inauthentic, regressive and full of illusion to one that is free, authentic, and progressive and that allows them to see beyond sensory simulations and psychological illusions. As recounted on another page, these manifest stories all tell another set of hidden stories, which are disguised but easy to discern once one knows what to look for. They recount stories about societies and individuals being freed from dictators; babies being born; children growing up and leaving controlling families; and minds being freed from neurosis. They also re-create myths about people being freed from malevolent supernatural beings.

In telling these stories, they generally rely on the following dichotomies, with the element on the right depicted as the desirable one. Even the nonfiction essays on themed environments and simulation, found in other parts of Transparency (the domain where this site is located), and in essays and books found elsewhere, make use of these dichotomies.

"unreality" versus reality
physical and sensory simulations versus accurate perception
psychological illusions versus self-awareness and honesty
inauthentic life versus authentic life
containment versus escape
fears and external obstacles versus freedom to leave
manipulation and exploitation versus autonomy
regress versus progress

neurosis versus psychological health
childhood versus maturity
failing to be born versus birth
symbiotic attachment versus growing up and mature relationships
addiction versus freedom
a life of pleasure and idleness versus work and responsibility
a life of fantasy and play versus work and responsibility

Of course, not all the stories referred to above offer precisely this plot sequence or set of elements. They mix things up, creating variations on this story. In "The Cage", for example, the character is trapped by malevolent simulators who have the ability to immerse him in lifelike virtual realities of heaven and hell, through mind control. He doesn't start off satisfied in this realm of regressive illusions. Instead, the malevolent simulators who hold him prisoner try to tempt him into becoming content with it, and addicted to it, after he has known the actual world. But the rest of the plot sequence is the same -- the character refuses to be addicted and sees through the illusion, so he can be free and return to an authentic, uncontrolled existence in which he sees things as they really are.

In Toys, a movie with Robin Williams, there is another variation, which isn't based on the distinction between regressive addiction to illusions versus growing up. Instead, the distinction is between the military use of an environment of simulation and technology for power, deception and killing, versus its constructive use for an anarchic life of delight and play. The movie transposes the 1960s battle between the military and counterculture onto 1990s themes about simulation and technology. Here, a life of endless pleasure and fantasy is positively valued. It is what the main characters seek.

The existence of so many similar works suggests that humanity has been using these stories to warn itself of the dangers posed by technology and media. Only now, it seems, with the attention being given to The Truman Show, are we finally starting to hear the message.

Product Placement

As we saw on previous pages, Truman has no idea he is living inside a television studio, surrounded by actors. Nor does he know that some 5,000 cameras placed around the city record his life for the TV audience, 24 hours a day.

Since the television program that is his life plays nonstop, without commercial interruption, it has to make money through product placement. Advertisements are not-so-seamlessly woven into dialogue and scenes, turning Truman's life into a continuous commercial, as well as a form of entertainment.

Thus, when Truman drinks his favorite beverage, he is actually doing a strange kind of celebrity endorsement. The actors who surround him know it is all a commercial, of course, and in the middle of conversations with him they will begin to describe the wonders of a product. Truman thinks they are just being enthusiastic. He has no idea they are talking to a TV audience.

The Truman Show's depiction of the way product placement is woven into Truman's life is an effective satire on the commercialization of our own lives. Today, forms of entertainment are commercials; commercials are forms of entertainment; and the boundary between both, and the rest of life, is becoming blurred.

Taking the point one or two steps further, we can say that the media would have us live inside a world of fiction that is the most glorious commercial ever devised, for a system in which life, sales, and entertainment are interfused. "Product placement" and testimonials for this emerging system of entertainment-marketing capitalism are being seamlessly woven into our lives.

(Quelle: <http://www.transparencynow.com/trusig.htm>)