



## Escaping the Panopticon: Utopia, Hegemony, and Performance in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*

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### ABSTRACT

*Peter Weir's The Truman Show (1998) has been studied as an example of Debord's theory of the spectacle; as such, many theorists have shown how Truman is a commodified object constructed for "entertainment" for the masses, also noting how we ourselves are complicit in the consumption of media that dehumanize. In this essay, the author argues that, while a decided exemplar of postmodernism's "society of the spectacle," the film is also a corporealization of poststructuralist Michel Foucault's (Discipline) concept of the panopticon, illustrating how a consideration of social spaces (mental, medical, penal, laboral, educational) yields a fuller understanding of Truman's predicament as (un)knowing prisoner/performer. Through an analysis of power, ideology, hegemony, and whiteness as they are re-presented in The Truman Show, we can more thoroughly articulate Truman's condition as a panoptic object who is regulated and hegemonized under the watchful eyes of a Master—himself synecdochic of Authority, Reason, and Truth—and those of a voracious public. The result is an indeterminate, postmodern, dystopian vision of mediated masses and the power apparatuses they/we wield through the act of watching.*

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at.

—Oscar Wilde

We are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.

—Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

## “I’m a Pretty Dangerous Character”: Introduction

Not much critical work has been done with director Peter Weir’s filmic text *The Truman Show* (1998), especially from a utopian standpoint.<sup>1</sup> As Jonathan Rayner suggests in his excellent compendium on Weir’s work, this is unfortunate, for the film—a sophisticated hybrid of contemporary suburban-set films like *Pleasantville* (1998) and *American Beauty* (1999)—demonstrates one of Weir’s major talents: “the extension or subversion of star personas” (2003, 227). As with Mel Gibson, Harrison Ford, and Robin Williams before him, popular actor Jim Carrey steps outside Hollywood’s limitations through Weir’s crafting of the art form: “Weir establishes his own visual and thematic hallmarks and, through their inclusion in his contracted Hollywood commercial material, unites European auteur style with the American auteur’s genre revision” (Rayner 2003, 8). While Weir’s oeuvre includes films concerning pedagogical utopia/dystopia (*Picnic at Hanging Rock* [1975], *Dead Poets Society* [1989]), technological utopia/dystopia (*Cars That Eat People* [1974], *Mosquito Coast* [1986]), and ideological utopia/dystopia (*Gallipoli* [1981], *The Year of Living Dangerously* [1982], *Witness* [1985], *The Way Back* [2010]), *The Truman Show* marks his most sustained critique of Western media. Ironically (or perhaps aptly), *The Truman Show* is also the biggest critical and commercial success of Weir’s dozen major films (it ranks 95 percent fresh at RottenTomatoes.com [2010] and grossed \$125 million in 1998, or the equivalent of \$213 million in 2010 dollars [BoxOfficeMojo.com, 2010]).

In *The Truman Show*, Weir has created a biting dystopian social commentary in which the protagonist is cosmically naive. Truman Burbank (Carrey) lives in the idyllic town of Seahaven, a prototypical and nostalgic fifties suburbia complete with friendly neighbors, healthy routines, and maintained shrubbery. As Jameson writes, Americans have a certain fondness for the mid-twentieth century: “One tends to feel, that for Americans at least, the 1950s remain the privileged lost object of desire” (1991, 19), though the type of

nostalgia Jameson writes about is an empty, dead nostalgia, a fitting concept for the fabricated nature of Seahaven. It is almost as if “what is mourned is the memory of deep memory: what is enacted is a nostalgia for nostalgia” (Jameson 1991, 156), a kind of pre-postmodernist fantasy that likely partially explains the diegetic audience’s motivations for spending so much time with Truman.

Seahaven—which is a linguistically reinforcing play on Truman’s past trauma at the town’s edge, where his father “drowned” in the *sea*, presumably to go to *heaven*—is actually Seaside, Florida, a “master-planned” community whose architectural rigidity afforded Weir the perfect opportunity for shooting *The Truman Show*. Of course, in the film, this town is no such thing: It is a fabricated stage, a massive, self-contained, dome-like set piece constructed as an elaborate “world” for Truman, the first person whose entire life has been captured on camera for the viewing public since conception. As philosopher and theorist Hannah Arendt astutely observed in *The Human Condition* in 1958, the power of birth is unmatched: “The newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting” (1998, 9). The film cleverly lets its extradiegetic audience in on this secret of “acting” through the strategic use of an all-too-familiar TV show advertisement, a trope used often throughout the film. This works to remind us, as it were, that what we are witnessing constitutes a contrived, regulated, and bounded world and in that selfsame reminding, to produce a postmodern self-reflexivity in the film’s very dissemination. Moreover, that the adult Truman—“true man”—fails to recognize the signifieds of this constructedness points less to Truman’s disillusionment per se and more to Weir’s aim at implicating his diegetic audience and, by metonymical extension, the film’s extradiegetic audience—us.

Careening into his midlife crisis, Truman begins to question the performance in which he has always so unwittingly partaken as he discovers with increasing abjection (in Julia Kristeva’s sense) the *fabrication* of his very existence. Metaphorically and generically, Truman’s downward spiral stands in for the daily troubles of the Everyman; literally and narratologically, though, he represents the excess of mass media, the obsession with 24/7 “coverage,” even in this case the “covering” of a person’s entire life. Yet the intent of *The Truman Show*, the television show, does not coincide perfectly with the intent of *The Truman Show*, the movie; that is, the critical distance between us and Truman, knowingly provided by Weir, in some ways may prevent us from becoming deluded as well, or it may just present the illusion of our having

agency in resisting the delusions that mass media encourage. Weir is careful to maintain that critical distance throughout the film, at times allowing us a measure of knowing and of perspective that Truman (seemingly) wholly lacks. So the film's diegetic audience is essentially encouraged to misread Truman's unknowingness as a utopian ideal: ignorance is bliss; Truman's life is so neat and pretty and, to an uncritical eye, idyllic and ideal. Thus, Weir discourages his extradiegetic audience from falling for the same illusions, but at the same time, his cinematographic style encourages us to become immersed emotionally in the very story we are to view critically, creating an ideological tension in the extradiegetic viewer that is certainly not accidental.

Put simply, whereas everyone else within the film sees Truman's life as utopian, he obviously would not agree; *The Truman Show* therefore subsides in a space utopian and film studies scholar Tom Moylan has termed "critical utopia," which he defines as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous [audience] to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre" (2000, 74). The extradiegetic audience of this critical utopia feels at once alienated from and connected to Truman and his cosmic predicament: At first we may interpret his life as desirable, but soon we feel separate from (and perhaps more intelligent than) Truman, yet we also desire to witness his escape, and in that way we are aligned with him. The result is an indeterminate postmodern critique of modernist hegemony and commodification vis-à-vis Truman's corporealization of alienated desire in a *panopticon-masquerading-as-the-world*.

Of theorists who have engaged this particular text, many have fittingly explored the film in terms of media, paranoia, and the spectacle (Best and Kellner 1999; Bishop 2000; Jagodzinski 2005; McCarthy 2001; McGregor 2004; Wise 2002), while others have noted its replication of certain capitalist doctrines or spaces, including urbanism (Cunningham 2005) and the Kantian sublime vis-à-vis gender construction (Hammett 2003). These readings are beneficial and certainly compelling: Truman is indeed something of a spectacle, a grotesquely naive signified of (post)modern alienation and identity diffusion amid a cybertechnological world that demands "entertainment" at all times. But there seems to be a more complex power dynamic at play in *The Truman Show*, one that suggests that thinking of Truman *solely* as a spectacle renders interpretations of it somewhat untenable. As Garoian and

Gaudelius point out, “Both the body and technology are intertwined, each being necessary to support the function of the other” (2001, 340). Therefore, I propose to read the text not only in the ways discussed above but also in terms of the Foucauldian concept of the *panopticon*;<sup>2</sup> specifically, I see Foucault’s treatment of institutionalized spaces as integral to understanding Truman’s existential problem as (*un*)*knowing performer/prisoner*.

Briefly, it should be noted that though Truman is clearly not entirely privy to his own performance, he shows signs early on in the film of an unconscious or even repressed awareness that something is askew, representing more than simple paranoia, almost akin to stage fright. Due to Weir’s not entirely determinate communication of how the film should be understood, I discuss Truman as Debordian/Postmanian spectacle, demonstrate how a Foucauldian reading enriches the film, examine Truman as panoptic object, and investigate the film’s re-presentation of white suburbia in order to tease out its multifaceted thematic arrangement. Implications are then drawn pertaining to this text’s place in studies of culture, of media, and of utopia. In focusing on the *performed* nature of utopian figurations, I wish to stress the existence of several ways of understanding that performance studies affords, as Jon McKenzie states so eloquently in *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*: “Because performance assembles such a vast network of discourses and practices, because it brings together such diverse forces, anyone trying to map its passages must navigate a long and twisting flight path” (2001, 4).

### “Cue the Sun”: Truman, the Spectacle, and Power

First, let us consider the work done thus far on *The Truman Show* in media theory. McCarthy writes that “fears of manipulation are the basis of a long-standing Hollywood formula, in which media paranoia takes on occult and insidious forms—from the ‘50s ‘cult classic’ film *The Twonky* [1953] to more ‘serious’ middlebrow critiques, like *A Face in the Crowd* [1957] or more recently *The Truman Show* [1998]” (2001, 101). Indeed, since *Truman*, other films (like the horrid *EdTV* [1999]) along with “reality” TV shows have proliferated immensely—not to mention the Internet’s YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook sensations—to the point of intense and unending performativity. Rather prophetically (in the vein of McLuhan and Postman in the literary world and of *Network* [1976] and *Videodrome* [1983] in the filmic world), the film forecasts

the techno-voyeuristic-entertainment scheme that we now consider endemic in contemporary media and representations. Much like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) nearly two decades prior, *The Truman Show* offers a chillingly accurate portrayal of a voraciously consumptive audience, a portrayal that eerily resembles and is not far removed from the mediated world of today. As Best and Kellner point out, "Whereas Truman Burbank . . . discovered to his horror that his life was being televised and sought to escape the video *panopticon*, many individuals in cyberworld *choose* to make televisual spectacles of their everyday life" (1999, 148; second emphasis added). They go on to theorize a "highly addictive . . . deep-seated voyeurism and narcissism in the society of the interactive spectacle" (1999, 148). This distinction is vital if we are to understand Weir's satirization of an insatiably self-gratifying body politic: The film's *commodification of the watched* sardonically parodies our own obsession with watching. As Jim Carrey recently wrote in a retrospective in *Entertainment Weekly* of the "100 Greatest Characters of the Last 20 Years," on which Truman places ninety-fourth, the film tackles "where we could possibly go as far as taking the life of a human being against their will and making them part of our entertainment" (2010, 92).

Indeed, as a media commodity, Truman is thoroughly objectified—even to the point of product placement through the mouths of his loved ones, delivered splendidly by the remarkable Laura Linney: After his wife, Meryl, delivers yet another cunning advertisement to the audience, Truman, now beginning to catch on, asks emphatically, "*Who are you talking to?*" This question is startling for a couple of reasons: (1) Truman seems to suspect something; (2) Truman still does not seem able to cohere his suspicions into the epiphany we expect; and yet, (3) we (and Truman) have borne witness to several strange, even superpanoptic (as theorized in Mark Poster's *Mode of Information* [1990]) goings-on throughout his life—there are several instances of an outsider attempting to spill the beans, as it were (the man who pops out of the Christmas present being a memorable example). Why, then, doesn't Truman figure things out earlier? The fact that so many hints of Truman's fabricated world are revealed to him without any ostensibly epiphanic effect suggests Weir's artistically caustic view of contemporary media, of Truth, and of the scientific rationality that comes with observation. Truman's world seems real to him, and so he has no reason (yet) to doubt its authenticity or to suspect the presence of an "invisible hand," to use Adam Smith's famed synecdochic figuration; as Truman's confusion and suspicions continue to

mount, though, he comes closer to realizing how grotesquely inauthentic his world is. Consequently, the hegemony of the dome begins to collapse first metaphorically (in relation to Truman's oppression) and then symbolically (in relation to Christof's [Ed Harris], the producers', and the advertisers' economic interests), though never literally beyond the fissure created by the door in the sky-wall at the film's memorable end. Ironically, it is this very breaking that finally sutures Truman to the extradiegetic audience via our identification with his climactic emergence into a (somewhat) truer sphere.

Earlier in the film, his attempts to truly understand, of course, are rapidly *reabsorbed*, as French poststructuralist and semiotician Roland Barthes would say, under the media myth of which he is the main performer: a falling panoptic light fixture quickly becomes part of a deficient aircraft, the return of the actor who played Truman's dead father is shoved away onto a bus under the name of homelessness, and the ever-fidgety Truman is constantly confronted with signs encouraging him to stay put (the drowning of his father and the guilt and fear that water subsequently brings; a poster of an electrocuted airplane at the travel agency; various newspaper headlines—"Best Town on Earth," "Who Needs Europe?"—and not-so-subtle reminders to Truman that this is "another beautiful day in paradise"). Though he is not a prisoner in the traditional sense of the word (and indeed is often aligned by Weir with the status of a sort of postmodern slave), Truman as Everyman—as a commodity packaged and sold—re-presents synecdochically our own postmodern condition: always already hegemonized, even if, as we realize in Daniel Quinn's novel *Ishmael*, the bars of the cage in which we are imprisoned are invisible. The cult of the social, as Arendt demonstrated, erodes away at both the public and the private spheres; as such, any socially constructed "utopia" is necessarily beset by its own preconfigurations. According to Margaret Canovan in the introduction to the second edition of *The Human Condition*, Arendt demonstrates that "the curious sterility of utopias comes from the absence within them of any scope for initiative, any room for plurality" (1998, xviii), and Truman's predicament surely illustrates the impossibility of a perfect world even in a world deliberately constructed for the security and (forced) happiness of just one person.

Ernest Laclau, extending Antonio Gramsci's conception of "hegemonic agencies," describes the machinations of postmodern enslavement in a way that Truman's world demonstrates acutely: In such a world, despite the commonness we share, "collective wills are conceived as unstable social agencies,

with imprecise and constantly redefined boundaries, and constituted through the contingent articulation of a plurality of social identities and relations” (1993, 283). In the context of this film, such enslavement/imprisonment calls out any attempt at intersubjective, plural agency: Despite his various efforts to find the interstices within his social space (the panopticon)—interstitial ruptures possibly leading to escape—Truman becomes reinscribed into the dominant ideology pervading the habitus he perceives as “real.” At the same time, his role as “the star” is complicated by his status as Othered object, with the voracity of his fans who surveil/survey him lending support to Postman’s polemic in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that “by ushering the Age of Television, America has given the world the clearest available glimpse of the Huxleyan future,” one in which the people have “become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy” (1985, 156, xix). Whether Truman the character, “Truman” the diegetic program, and/or *Truman* the film fit(s) the description depends of course on the various audiences’ epistemological frameworks concerning television, entertainment, and the nature of voyeurism.

Readings of the film as a treatment of Debord’s (1967) theory of the spectacle point out that the film works especially because the extradiegetic audience gets the chance to witness a man’s gradual realization of his own “deceived gaze” (quoted in McGregor 2004, 113), a psychological, spectatorial effect suggesting Weir’s intent to implicate his audience (a rhetorical/narratological move made most recently by *Wall•E* [2008] and *Wanted* [2008]). McGregor rightly calls Truman “the epitome of a commodity that has become image or spectacle” (2004, 113), and Truman’s *life-as-performance* supports this thesis well. After all, Weir is very careful about reminding us of Truman’s viewers every so often: bar mates, lady friends, the man in the tub, and so on, effectively conflating the diegetic with the extradiegetic. Gardiner illustrates the machinations of such a spectacle: “By its perfection of domination, the spectacle manages to project itself as a totalizing, universal entity, the expression of a seamless and monolithic power. History is arrested; the present system thus appears natural and inevitable, insulated from human intervention” (1995, 105). But does the possibility of escape remain? According to McGregor, “As Truman abandons the security of acting in Christof’s illusory world[,] are we also challenged to leave the security of being merely audiences to others’ stories, and to begin living our own lives?” (2004, 114). That challenge seems apparent in the text, but there remains a level of power and control over the



objectified within the text that becomes self-reifying via Truman himself and which requires further inquiry.

In light of this entangled voyeuristic complicity, I argue that since the myth system in Truman's world is never truly illusory for us (e.g., since we are aware of our own suspension of disbelief), it is primarily Truman who is co(s)mically deluded here (notable to us especially in Weir's use of the iris lens and other paranoia-inducing mise-en-scène techniques: the signifieds of *surveillance*). The Barthesian "pleasure of the text" (quoted in McGregor 2004, 114)—the spectatorial delight concomitant with the necessary cinematic misidentification that makes films so compelling—comes by way of following Truman as he attempts to escape this dystopia-masquerading-as-paradise (which, again, closely resembles our own) in his search for "true" utopia: an authentic, private, meaningful, satisfying life. Whether or not that is possible is not supplied by Weir, but it seems fruitful in any case to examine Truman's situation more completely. With a fuller understanding of his predicament beyond his role in the spectacle, we may come to better understand our own "postmodern condition" as well, a condition in which we do "not know what [we] are laughing about and why [we have] stopped thinking" (Postman 1985, 163).

### **"Beautifully Synchronized, Don't You Agree?": Bentham, Foucault, and Weir**

In addition to these lines of thought, I find particularly useful for understanding Truman's condition Foucault's treatment of the *panopticon*. As theorized by Jeremy Bentham in 1785 as a system of controlling and surveilling prisoners, such an architectural structure would function primarily through the inability of any one inmate *to not be seen* as a consequence of the strategic placement of the guards/observers in centralized and elevated positions. This system of discipline would work secondarily on the prisoners' mere *knowledge* of their being watched and their nonknowledge of the angle or vantage point from which they are being watched, a condition now totalized in our superpanoptic postmodern surveillance society. With an observer or camera virtually everywhere, one cannot presume that one is in a private sphere at any time, and thus, Bentham theorized, the prisoners would begin to self-regulate, producing a self-propelling machine of fear, paranoia, and *watchedness*. As is well known, Foucault put forth an analysis of power

and discourse in his immensely influential *Discipline and Punish* (1977), in it investigating the *mental, medical, penal, laboral, and educational* systems of power through his understanding of Bentham's *Panopticon*. In *Power/Knowledge* three years later, Foucault explains to interviewers Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot that in *Discipline and Punish* he "wanted to find out how the . . . gaze was institutionalized, how it was effectively inscribed in social space" (1980, 146). The social spaces he looked into (the asylum, the hospital, the prison, the workplace, and the school) were revealed to be governed by a set of power relations, space configurations, and overarching schemes of control, which Foucault saw as both necessary and insidious. He remarks that the overall goal of those in charge of these social spheres is to maximize subservience and minimize protest/unruliness: "By such means[,] power, even when faced with ruling a multiplicity of men, could be as efficacious as if it were being exercised over a single one" (1980, 152).

Oddly enough, that is exactly the case for Truman in Weir's text, but there remains a difference, of course: Truman is not literally a prisoner, for he has done nothing illegal, but he (along with both audiences in play) could be read as metaphorical/paradigmatic incarnations of postmodern malaise and ennui, arguably a result of the modern era's insistence on Truth, Rationality, and Science. In a sense, then, Truman is prisoner, as are we. As Gardiner reminds us, modernity's strong hold on personal freedoms is difficult to break, and there are semblances of modernity in *The Truman Show* for sure: "Under modernity, in short, imaginative and creative human activities are transformed into routinized and commodified forms, and the exchange-value of things holds sway over their utility, their use-value" (1995, 98). Hyperbolized through Truman's occupation in the hyperbureaucratic realm of insurance corporations, this sentiment echoes Arendt's eschatological concerns about the erosion of the public/private distinction in modern society such that many humans labor less than they leisure: "The danger is that such a society, dazzled by the abundance of its growing fertility and caught in the smooth functioning of a never-ending process, would no longer be able to recognize its own futility" (1998, 135). Similarly, Foster argues that "modernism . . . has eroded our traditional social bonds" (1984, 70). The film's diegetic audience therefore plays a crucial role in Truman's existence, since it is they who fuel the modern capitalist engine that keeps Truman's "world" in motion, in turn highlighting our own roles as extradiegetic witnesses to this intrusive voyeurism and

as co-participants in the metacommentary Weir encourages us to identify with. Indeed, as we as the extradiegetic audience come to recognize the diegetic audience's fixation with *watching* as one wholly our own, some unease sets in: Is Weir implicating us? Are we being lectured? Is there a "message" we should derive from such re-presentation? Weir's critique of modernism from a postmodernist perspective questions why the spectacle enraptures us at all, whether we feel responsible or not: After all, the embedded solitude of one person is being consumed by the masses as *pure entertainment*.

As we might expect from a panoptic perspective, every camera angle, shot duration, and fade-out of Truman's performance is manipulated by the auteur par excellence, the director of the proceedings himself, Christof: His gaze is *cast* (in both senses) to the detriment of Truman's sanity; Christof's panoptic gaze truly inscribes itself in Truman's space (while also wryly pointing at the "real" auteur, Weir himself). Meanwhile, the eyes of the diegetic audience do not come to affect Truman until the very final stages of his paranoia/realization shift and Christof displays Truman's image on the sky itself. Moreover, Christof (a not-so-subtle biblical allusion) constructs himself as Truman's God, the purveyor of Truth and Reason: Responding to Truman's queries, Christof, safe inside his "omnicam ecosphere," finally supplies the indeterminate, "I am the Creator," followed by a particularly pregnant pause and then, "of a television show that gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions." Truman replies, "Then who am I?" to which Christof answers, "You're the star." A Kristevan abjection sets in for Truman as he realizes "his capacity for renewing the order in which he is inescapably caught up" (1986, 29): He literally "played a part" in his own subjection and objectification. Yet, as the metonymic character Sylvia (sylvan = nature = exoticism = Fiji = escape [Natascha McElhone]) reasons, "He's not a performer; he's a prisoner!" While Sylvia seems to conceptualize performance solely as something actors do for money, Truman is and always has been a performer, unknowingly. In that sense, he is also a prisoner: a man bound by the constraints of panoptic hegemony. And he is of course neither of those, for he closes his "performance" by bowing, hermetically sealing off that space as *fabricated* and his body as *postperformative* from that point forward (though one imagines the media frenzy that would likely flock to him upon the broadcast of his "escape").

## “The World Is Watching”: Truman as Corporealization of the Panoptic Object

Here it seems prudent to explicitly highlight the distinction between Foucault’s penal panopticon and Truman’s primarily performative one. As mentioned previously, Foucault stresses that, as an apparatus of power, the panopticon functions precisely as a result of a duality: the prisoners’ *awareness* of their being watched and their *unawareness* of exactly when or from what angle they are being watched. The result, at least theoretically, is that the prisoner would *voluntarily* behave under the Godlike gaze of the powerful. That prisoners often fail to self-regulate points to the unraveling of the power apparatus itself and the realization that institutionalization is not an end-all solution. The conditioning they receive begets their eventual discipline, which is essential for maintaining order: “Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault 1977, 138). Truman’s panopticon is unique because he suffers from a *double unawareness*: He does not know *that* or *how* he is being watched, though he begins to sense the gaze as the film progresses. Initially *out of the loop*, then, Truman can be read as a conflation of Foucault’s spheres of panoptic power: He is *institutionalized*, under the gaze of the asylum’s two-way mirror; he is *admitted*, as if a diseased specimen to observe; he is *incarcerated*, enclosed, imprisoned; he is *employed*, farcically, at an insurance agency; and he is *enrolled*, both in a simulation of school (“Oh, you’re too late. There’s nothing left to explore!”) and as a perpetual pupil under close watch. Despite his temporary ignorance, Truman thus corporealizes Foucault’s panoptic object in a fusion with Debord’s spectacle that suggests nuances of each theorist’s formulations that we might otherwise not notice, such as the potentiality for an *unwitting* spectacle and for an *uninformed* performer/prisoner. These areas of grayness—Is the show ethical? opportunist? exploitative? And what of its viewers?—suggest the nonvisible nature of hegemonic configurations of power.

Let us return briefly to “hegemony” as conceived by Stuart Hall (1991) in the poststructuralist seventies. As Hebdige explains, for Hall, “the term ‘hegemony’ refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by ‘winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural’” (1979, 16). This process self-reifies, as Barthes has

made apparent in his formulation of myth in *Mythologies* and as Hebdige has conceptualized vis-à-vis *naturalization*: hegemonic goings-on that insidiously masquerade *that which is constructed* as *that which is “normal.”* In Truman’s dome, he accepts his “reality” because it has presented itself as such (as Christof reminds us) and therefore seems grounded in reason. As Thompson observes, perception and ideology metamorphose into hegemony when there exists a “state of *doxa* in which the established structure is not questioned” (1992, 49). Enthymematically, he reifies his own delusion; “tricking” him into believing in the reality of his world is not even necessary: No one ever says to him, “This is real,” because Truman himself actualizes his own oppression. That we all are players in our own self-delusion is slyly implied by Weir, all the more indicative of his desire to comment artistically on the path on which postmodernity is taking us: to hypermediation, to 24/7 voyeurism, to unwarranted surveillance, and ultimately to the destruction of integrity, freedom, democracy, and any semblance of a private sphere that may have survived modernity’s “transformation,” to invoke Habermasian terminology. Weir asks us to contemplate our own fantasies of narcissistic centrality and of an Edenic, utopic dream-place, pointing out how the eye of Big Brother is always surveilling, always in control, always hegemonizing, a sentiment not common to major Hollywood productions outside the espionage subgenre (*The Conversation* [1974], *Enemy of the State* [1998], *Eagle Eye* [2008]).

Thankfully, Truman unravels his story and manages finally to disrupt the power system, however fleetingly: Soon, despite the panoptic gaze, Truman ironically succeeds, in that “power is no longer substantially identified with an individual. . . . [I]t becomes a machinery that no one owns” (Foucault 1980, 156). Christof’s unveiling results in an epiphany for Truman akin to Dorothy viewing Toto pulling back the curtain to reveal the “wizard,” and it provides the protagonist the opportunity to expose the fabricated nature of the antagonist, reversing the initial hierarchy. Of course, the machinery of capitalism, consumerism, and commodification will indeed go on without Truman, but now Truman can *see* Christof, and with that recognition comes the hope that *he* can overcome the Master, if not the hope that everyone can. With the power of Reason (Christof) in flux—Reason itself exposed as another illusion—Truman can now create the fissure in his world’s hegemonic structure and quite confidently walk through the soundstage door that had always been camouflaged into the painted sky-wall. Now, Truman has begun to affect real change in his life, but whether for better or worse Weir is unwilling to

supply. Even so, as Foucault might argue, now Truman has broken free of the paradigm between the *subject* (the captor: Christof, God, the viewer) and the *object* (the captive: himself). Yet, as Foucault explains, Bentham's *panopticon* "describes, in the utopian form of a general system, particular mechanisms which really exist" (1980, 164), so Truman is likely to encounter the same hegemonic gaze of authority "on the outside," as it were. Indeterminately, Weir provides a polysemic ending: Is Truman "free" now? Can one ever be "free"? And most interestingly, is Truman's dome-world much different than our own?

### "There's Nothing Fake about Truman": Truman and the Power of Whiteness

Before I conclude, it should be noted that *The Truman Show* re-presents not only a hypermediated spectacle, or only a panoptic object, or only an example of postmodern hegemony, but also an instantiation of whiteness that has the potential to reify our decidedly modern conceptions of a white, clean, pure, suburban America. Richard Dyer's contributions to this field are integral to understanding Weir's filmic text as more than straightforward satire. As he writes, "White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular[, and] when [it] does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial" (1988, 44), a framework he later develops to a greater extent in the book *White* (1997). Critically examining mediated representations of whiteness, Dyer's observations align with those of Ruth Frankenberg, who has argued that locating and discursively analyzing whiteness does not by necessity (re)centralize whiteness as the norm; rather, such a process can lead to an enhanced understanding of race relations in the broader sense. Acknowledging this risky playing field, Frankenberg writes that "there are also tremendous risks in *not* critically engaging whiteness" (1997, 1; emphasis in original). Truman's whiteness is not questioned in the film, and in fact, there are very few nonwhite characters in Truman's hermetically sealed "world": The stereotypically white suburban neighborhood is actualized by Weir's choice to situate Truman's reality in a bygone era of friendliness and neighborly goodwill. This rhetorical choice should be investigated if we are to reflect honestly on our own conceptions of "normalcy," "suburbia," and indeed "America."

The 1950s palette composing the interior of the dome is notably cliché: There are the usual cookie-cutter housing developments; the picture-perfect

lawns, roads, mailboxes, building facades, and so on; the standard(ized) “small town” feel of Truman’s daily interactions; and the traditional heteronormative milieu of a largely intolerant and repressively puritanical society. Notably, the single instance of nonwhite re-presentation in the film occurs when Truman delivers his perfunctory nicety near the film’s beginning to the wholesome black family across the street. Fortunately, nonwhite characters are not objectified in the usual way (e.g., by playing the roles of criminals, laborers, and helpers to the white folk). However, the sealing off of the black family in the house across the street performs several rhetorical functions for several characters and audiences: (1) Truman, the protagonist, is constructed in contradistinction to a set of voiceless Others—safely across the street; (2) the diegetic audience (presumably mostly white, given the makeup of those audience members we do see) may come to identify with this normalization of whiteness as a safe, accurate, satisfying portrayal of their world; (3) the extradiegetic audience witnesses these happenings as they uncritically unfold without being prompted in any way to consider the way Truman’s white world may signify societal tensions about urbanization; and (4) the same audience, aligned with Truman and his attempts to escape, likely interprets his final exit as a liberating, freeing, nonconstrictive act, which it certainly may be—however, this erasing of race also deproblematizes Truman’s sense of his own racelessness. Moreover, our spectatorial position when Truman waves to the token black family at the beginning of the film is that of the family’s standpoint, looking directly at Truman, whom we are to take as an embodiment of a normalized *Leave It to Beaver* version of mid-twentieth-century conceptualizations of whiteness as goodness and purity. What is left behind when Truman exits the dome, of course, is a carnivalesque (in the Bakhtinian sense) copy of a time that really never existed. That sense of nostalgia is clearly applauded by the diegetic audience (literally), but Weir does not fully critique the diegetic audience’s conceptions of white suburbia, never really prompting his extradiegetic audience to do so either.

Of course, it is easy to fault any artist for his or her so-called shortcomings, and that is not precisely what I am trying to do. Rather, I argue that Weir’s pastichic naturalization of white suburbia, while transgressive in some ways, does not *undo* any of the regulatory enactments of monolithic whiteness that it reveals in: While Truman is assuredly freer at the end of the film than he was at the start, the pseudo world he is leaving is not ultimately uncovered as a fabricated illusion for the diegetic audience the way it is for us. As far

as we know, the diegetic audience does not, for example, question Truman's friend Marlon's (Noah Emmerich) role in corralling Truman back into his deluded state throughout the film: He is simply a "natural" buddy who actually liked to hang out with Truman, like "white guys" do (Pfeil 1995). When Marlon shows up at the Burbanks' house in the thralls of a nearly facade-exposing fight between Truman and Meryl, his presence is justified by the six-pack he carries joyfully into the kitchen: To the diegetic audience, he is not trying to regulate Truman, only befriend him, but we see Christof's backstage maneuvering orchestrating the whole ordeal as a director would coordinate a "scene." Similarly, the diegetic audience seems to *revel* in the stereotypically white suburban scenery constructed for their visual pleasure, perhaps scopophilically yearning themselves for a nostalgic bygone era, "the appeal of some simpler time" (1993, 4), as utopian film scholar Peter Fitting puts it.

This of course is part of Weir's very point about postmodern übermediated "entertainment," and to be fair, more than one "Free Truman" pin can be spotted amid the *mise-en-scène* of the various diegetic audiences, signifying that they at least recognize the artificiality of his existence, if not necessarily the artificiality of the white world that has been imprisoning a human being for some thirty years. It reminds one not only of the classic Omelas story (re) told by Ursula K. Le Guin—in which an entire society's utopian happiness depends directly upon the suffering of one locked-away child who must live his/her life engaged and neglected—but also of the element of choice inherent in Truman's situation, in this case to continue to live a lie or to discard his dome-life altogether and experience a birth into the Real, foreclosing the future of Omelas/Seahaven. One imagines the thousands of cast and crew members receiving their pink slips as the dome is dismantled around them, denying them—through Truman's emancipation—their continued line of work in a thoroughly work-free environment, that is, disrupting, rupturing, and undercutting the workers' own utopian senses of Seahaven, a town that is not even real. The closing shot of *The Truman Show*, in Hammett's view, communicates that "as Truman steps outside of his media-created and -controlled womb, giving birth to himself, the film imagines the possibility of an auto-genetic self, a self capable of repudiating the social structures that have so thoroughly constructed it" (2003, 79). Does Truman truly repudiate his ultra-white "world," or does he simply step outside of it? Weir's insistence on the extradiegetic audience *not knowing* what ultimately happens to Truman once he escapes is certainly compelling as far as narrative indeterminacy goes, but



it remains somewhat troublesome in terms of its re-presentation of a pristine, safe, white suburbia.

### **“We All Think Like This Now and Then”: Implications**

Media theorists McLuhan, Debord, and Postman have each warned us rather vocally about the tendency of the medium of television to thwart intellectual thought, to dull discursive capacity, and to break down the interpersonal connections among us. To take up McLuhan’s canonical 1964 text, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, I would like to highlight how society discourages us from acknowledging that the “subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact has made them prisons without walls for their human users,” producing a subjective positionality comparable to “*rigor mortis*,” “*somnambulism*,” and “*synaesthesia*” (1964, 34, 37, 275). As he goes on, “The age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy” (1964, 56). Perpetually dissatisfied in our age of cybercommunications, hypersurveillance, and spectatorial commodification, we are nevertheless eager to consume what is offered up on television, in turn propelling the machine of capitalist consumerism. According to McLuhan, when the age of the electric image took hold of the West, “the entire pattern of American life went on the screen as a nonstop ad” (1964, 205), always continuing to tantalize its audience with the *jouissance* of a voyeuristic gaze onto seeming perfection, in many cases a conspicuously white perfection. That this narrative takes its extradiegetic viewers along its protagonist’s emancipation through the deployment of such a masturbatory *mise-en-scène* should provoke audiences to question their presumptions of the “naturalness” of their constructed realities, racial or otherwise, in this era of simulacra.

Utopian theorists have sounded the same warning bell from the vantage point of criticizing society’s tendency to gravitate toward dystopian visions of severely reduced and regulated life. As Peter Fitting has shown, the utopian/dystopian film is especially popular and has been for some time; it is through the examination of such texts that we can come to re-view our own sometimes sensationalistic society. While Weir is not as dystopian as many s-f writers have been, including of course Orwell, Huxley, Delaney, and many others, his film does require of its viewer a certain level of eschatological autoexamination: Does our society resemble Truman’s or that of the fans

who gaze upon him? Who is watching whom, and to what effect? Where is the line between entertainment and invasion of privacy? These and other questions have served as foundations for any number of polemical tales of the postmodern and even posthuman condition. *The Truman Show* happens to articulate that malaise spot-on; consequently, it may be of particular use for media studies, critical/cultural studies, and utopian studies scholars who wish to incorporate film into their pedagogical methodologies. It might also be helpful in demonstrating many aspects of Foucault's enormous body of work in an approachable fashion depending on the class level, size, and so on. But even outside the classroom, when we encounter cameras and surveillance equipment everywhere—at ATMs; on traffic lights and in parking lots; near schools, banks, and hospitals; not to mention in most public transportation systems—and we witness the abutment of this *involuntary surveillance* with *voluntary surveillance* such as social networking, perhaps we can hone our own critical skills in our own lived realities. For Truman's "teacher" was surely erroneous in her declaration that "there is nothing left to explore."

### "What Else Is On?": Conclusion

Interestingly, Foucault goes on in *Power/Knowledge* to stress that simply inverting the system—that is, putting Truman in the position of gazer, in Christof's position—would not be any less damaging than the show's standard power dynamic: "Do you think it would be much better to have the prisoners operating the [p]anoptic apparatus and sitting in the central tower, instead of the guards?" (1980, 164–65). As crafted by Weir, Truman does not seem to aspire to such a position: He desires *authenticity*, not power. As the postmodern television series *Prison Break* (and all its filmic predecessors) reminds us, simply putting the powerless in a position of power replicates the binary, however foolishly: better to *refuse* to attack the powerful head-on, like Truman; better to *neutralize* the dichotomy through temporary resistance followed by swift dismissal. To invoke a particularly dynamic phrase by Barthes, one might say that Truman has chosen to "baffle the paradigm" (2005, 6), to walk away from the game, to exit the stage door: the only possible way to defeat hegemony, ending its circulatory, self-propagating nature. Barthes's seminar series of lectures in *The Neutral* provides a useful template for further understanding the utopian possibility of neutralizing dualistic paradigms, one of which

he identifies as the *panorama-panopticon* dichotomy: “panopticon: endoscopic device: presupposes the existence of an interior to be discovered, of an envelope (the walls) to be pierced: vital metaphor = the shell that needs to be cracked in order to access the core ≠ panorama: opens onto a world” (2005, 163). For Barthes, the relationship consists in “a power of appeasement” (2005, 163). Indeed, the translators of that text have added a useful etymological note for our purposes, writing that *panorama* derives “from the Greek *pan*, ‘all,’ and *horama*, ‘what one sees, spectacle’” (2005, 247n54). Now that Truman is fully cognizant of the panoptic illusion he had been operating under as “reality,” standing in the dome’s doorway, Truman’s ideological horizon expands, allowing him to finally view a genuine panorama outside the dome in which he is not the essence of the spectacle, though he would undoubtedly encounter “fans” for many years to come, leaving the ending of the film decidedly bittersweet.

In other words, Weir’s intermingling of panoptic hegemony and panoramic freedom comes to problematize *The Truman Show*’s extradiegetic audience and their own conceptions of “reality,” calling into question what is *real* and what is *simulated, fabricated, staged*. When and where does control end and freedom begin? According to Burke, “In freeing oneself perpetually, one would in a sense remain perpetually a prisoner, since one would never have definitively escaped” (1969, 36): Will Truman ever be free, or has he simply entered a more expansive “dome”? The binary of domination/freedom or power/freedom, like any dialectic, contains elements of each on each side of the slash: That is, domination/power always requires some level of freedom (one cannot be killed in order to be dominated, for example); likewise, freedom always requires some level of domination/power. As Laclau puts it, “The relationship between power and freedom is one of permanent renegotiations and displacement of their mutual frontiers, while the two terms of the equation always remain” (1996, 52). Since, as McKerrow writes, “the discourse of power creates and perpetuates [social] relations, and gives form to the ideology which it projects” (1989, 99), how can one ever escape *x* relations or *y* ideologies? When Truman finally breaches the wall of the panopticon, and the gaze of Christof and the gaze of the world no longer burden him, he recognizes that he is free to “direct” his own departure, at last being *agentic* and therefore *genuine* in his mantra of “good afternoon, good evening, and good night,” perhaps synecdochically standing in for the film’s extradiegetic audience, suggesting that we turn our own gaze inward, possibly neutralizing the tyranny of the panopticon. Maybe for Truman, the postperformative

sphere can finally be thoroughly and delectably *unknown* and *unowned*. And if not, Jameson reminds us of the true usefulness of a critical utopia, changing the lived world: “The best Utopias are those that fail most comprehensively” (2005, xiii), for in that failure we recognize the failures of ourselves, as well as our perpetual duty to continue to “demand the impossible” (Moylan 1987).

### Notes

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2008 Conference for the Society of Utopian Studies. I wish to thank Dr. Naomi Jacobs and the two reviewers who were instrumental in the success of this essay.

1. All heading quotes are taken from lines in the film or taglines from its marketing (see Weir 2005).
2. This abutment is akin to Michael D. Amey’s treatment of the panoptic society of Zamyatin’s *We* in “Living under the Bell Jar: Surveillance and Resistance in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*” (2005). Those under Zamyatin’s One-State, like Truman, were also contained, in this case enclosed within a glass-like structure. The difference, of course, is that the subjects of *We* were astutely aware of the separation and the surveillance, but that of course did not prevent them from being frozen just the same by the constricting gaze of the Other, the Benefactor, the Christof, and in fact they were discouraged from autonomous thought. With varying levels of totalitarian overtones, the “dome” metonym has been used beyond Zamyatin and Weir in a more public (commercial) sphere, with *The Simpsons Movie* (2007) and Stephen King’s *Under the Dome* being recent instantiations.

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