

Theme One: Surveillance

This is a modern panopticon, wherein the cell of privacy is open to an impersonal gaze, and the sense that someone is always watching, potentially at least, is part of the structure of feeling of modern life. (Carey 1998, 129)

The Truman Show takes Baudrillard seriously. Writing in the 1970s and citing the example of the Loud family on PBS, Baudrillard (1988) argues that "the most intimate operation of your life becomes the potential grazing ground of the media. . . . The entire universe also unfolds unnecessarily on your home screen" (p. 20-1), which he terms "obscenity." For Baudrillard this is not just an argument about privacy but about economics and consumerism. The "inexorable light of information and communication" (his phrase) feeds a capitalist consumerism in which everyday life becomes commodified, even our symbolic life (so that we are reduced to uttering commercial catch phrases to each other over our fast food).⁸

Both regimes—discipline and control—are in evidence in the film. Truman has been disciplined to stay in Seahaven (a town built on an island) by making him deathly afraid of the water. When Truman was young, he and his father went sailing, a storm blew up, and his father was supposedly drowned—a traumatic experience. Now he cannot bring himself to get on a ferry or even cross a bridge over water. Throughout his life, the actors that surround him present him with constant reminders that life is perfect in the town, and that life elsewhere is terrible, and that he is very lucky to be where he is and to have what he does. The purpose of all this is to have him internalize these notions and remain in the town (and on the show). At the heart of a disciplinary regime is violence, at least implied violence. Security on the set is tight, intruders are quickly manhandled out of the way. The violence underlying "The Truman Show" reveals itself during Truman's first escape attempt (he is surrounded, netted, and tackled) and in the search for Truman at the end of the film (the friendly neighborhood dog becomes a snarling tracker).

But the dominant regime in evidence in the film is that of control. Surveillance is, obviously, essential to the situation; television cameras are everywhere. But crucially, Truman is unaware that he is being watched or manipulated, which makes this the surveillance of the control society rather than discipline.⁹ As the character of Marlon says early in the film, as if to confirm Deleuze's insight, "nothing on the show is fake, it's merely controlled."

Toward the end of his essay, "Postscript on Control Societies," Deleuze (1995) writes,