

The Truman Show: How's it going to end?

Michael Brearley and Andrea Sabbadini

brearley@globalnet.co.uk; a.sabbadini@googlemail.com

Australian director Peter Weir's work shows a variety of thematic interests and includes such original films as *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *Witness* (1985), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Fearless* (1993) and *Master and Commander* (2003). He is particularly skilled at exploring characters who find themselves in isolating or alienating conditions, where normal situations get confused with others quite beyond our understanding, thus often creating a disturbingly 'uncanny' feeling in his spectators.

The Truman Show, which Weir directed in 1998, tells the story of Truman Burbank (the splendidly well-cast Jim Carrey), a person who has been chosen as a new-born baby to be separated from his parents and 'legally adopted by a corporation', a television network, in order to become the subject of a bizarre experiment: a real-life soap following him from birth to death. We, the spectators, gradually discover that, unbeknownst to him, everyone in his life is in fact an actor, and that the whole story is masterminded by the sinister director-within-the-film, Christof (Ed Harris). So what hits the audience is not just the surprise of such a discovery, but also the horror of realizing its implications for the man who has unwittingly become its victim.

Adopted children, even under the most favourable of circumstances, always have to deal with issues about their origins and therefore about their 'real' identity. In Truman's case, the combination of growing up without biological parents and the bizarre experience of living a life entirely taking place in the context of an artificial environment, a fact reminiscent of what also happens to many children in abusive families, may give us a sense of the traumatic effect all this must have had on his emotional development. Furthermore, as is often the case with only children like Truman who cannot rely on the reality testing and support provided by siblings, he had to become more dependent upon the external adult environment, a malevolently fake one in his case.

At the start of the film, Truman Burbank, now a young man in his twenties, begins to suspect that the apparent parameters of his life, including his marriage, his friends and his job, in the small island community of Seahaven which he has never left (a real American town that looks like a film-set – or is it the other way round?), are somehow false. But, as we can read on the badge worn by the girl whose existence will eventually allow him to rescue himself by linking up with reality, *How's it going to end?*

Behind the blandness and the comedy of Truman's situation, partly *because* of the blandness, this is a chilling film. A good part of the chill comes from the falseness of Truman's world even taken at face value, that is, even without the dimension of frank manipulation. It is as if human relations had been reduced to soap opera dimensions; as if this horrifically antiseptic soap had become reality;

as if the hero, and everyone in his world, had become nobodies, ciphers, two-dimensional people with no insides.

The psychological function of such fashionable live 'reality' television programmes as *Big Brother*; the worldwide, contagious phenomenon of voyeuristic addiction to such programmes; the dangerous power of the media to manipulate audiences (and not always just for commercial purposes); the psychotic mechanisms mobilized whenever reality and fiction, truth and lies, are confused and the boundaries between them kept unclear: all these issues are raised, if inevitably left unresolved, by *The Truman Show*.

David Thomson, in his much respected *New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, describes this work 'as one of great American movies, magically balanced between farce and dread, a unique exploration and prediction of America's nature and fantasies' (2002, p. 923). We would add that, being itself a Hollywood product for mass consumption, and having been rewarded by Hollywood with three Oscar nominations, it belongs to the very culture that, at the same time, it self-referentially and effectively denounces. We are tempted to observe in this respect that we may for a moment delusionally believe that what we have just watched are actors who play the part of being the real inhabitants of Seahaven in order to deceive Truman Burbank. But, of course, Truman Burbank is himself nobody but an actor, and all the other characters – his mother, wife, best buddy, colleagues, shopkeepers, passers-by – are actors (ironically named 'Meryl' or 'Marlon', after famous Hollywood stars) who play the part of being the actors who play the part of being the real inhabitants of Seahaven ... 'The Truman Show', in other words, is a show within *The Truman Show*.

Instead of further indulging in such epistemological considerations on the nature of what is 'real' and what only appears to be so, we shall now focus on specific features of the Truman character. We first propose to consider the phenomenon of his existence and the trajectory of his experiences as the filmic representations of developmental traumas rooted in childhood. Our suggestion is that *The Truman Show* is a movie that fits in the genre known in literature as *Bildungsroman*. In other words, although Truman is described as having all the conventional attributes that define him as an adult (such as a wife, a home, a car and an office job), his condition at the start of the film is prototypically adolescent. So-called grown-ups seem at times to him, as indeed they do to many young people, as inauthentic as if they were actors playing a part; and without even realizing it (consciously, at least) Truman feels trapped into a familial and social world to which he tries to conform while being unable to entirely identify with it, believing he has no other choice (other than through the fantasy of fleeing to a deserted antipodean island).

How's it going to end? Eventually, Truman gains sufficient awareness of his condition to 'leave home' – developing a more mature and authentic identity as a man, leaving his child-self behind and becoming a *True-man*. This he achieves with the help of a brief encounter with his father, whom he believed to be dead, and with the inner strength provided by his love for a girl, Sylvia (or by her love for him) – herself an adolescent who, however, had already succeeded in freeing herself from the fictional role allocated to her in the television show – an actress who wanted to become a real woman instead of just playing a role.

This major developmental step, however, can only take place gradually and with much effort, represented by Truman's boat journey, away from the island of his

childhood. There is a whole literary tradition – from Homer to Coleridge, Melville and Conrad – of sea voyages as metaphors for life itself, where man has to adjust to, or struggle against, the overpowering forces of nature and destiny, and bravely or creatively make use of his own physical and emotional resources to survive them; only thus can he realize his true self and feel that his life has been worth living. Indeed, we could think of Truman in the last memorable sequences of Weir's film as a contemporary Odysseus, having to overcome all sorts of obstacles to reach Ithaca and reunite with his woman.

In the film's powerful finale, Truman overcomes his trauma-induced phobia of water and tries to escape his fate by boat. Christof realizes that what he believes to be his own creature, and therefore his possession, is getting out of control and is growing – not unlike Pinocchio – from a puppet into a man. But the show must go on: Christof, now appearing in his true colours as a malevolent god in charge of the natural elements, remorselessly uses his electronic devices to create an artificial yet potentially deadly sea storm, in the hope of scaring Truman into submission. Christof's manipulation of his dangerous machine reminds us of Stanley Milgram's (1974) social-psychological experiments to demonstrate man's potential for submission to authority and for violence: subjects were easily subdued by scientists-in-white-coats into increasing the voltage of an electric-shock machine that, if real, would have led to the death of innocent individuals.

At the end of his tempestuous journey – or is it at the beginning of a new one? – Truman's yacht crashes into a painted backdrop, a thick boundary to his universe, an apparently insurmountable last barrier to his freedom. Yet, for those like Truman who dare to look further, the wall hides a door, a passage towards autonomy and an exciting, if always uncertain, future. Of course, we can only speculate on how well he will eventually adjust to life outside the artificial and manipulative, yet in many respects also protective, environment where he has always lived, and away from the bespectacled watching eyes of his father-like, God-like, puppet-master Christof, and from those of the millions of emotional television viewers of *his* show (Christof's, that is, not Truman's) scattered around the globe.

Of course, the form of psychological sadistic abuse Truman has had to endure throughout since birth – extreme not because patently obvious to him but, quite the opposite, because concealed through such skilful technological manipulation – would not be a typical scenario for adolescent development. However, even under more 'normal' circumstances, the efforts of any teenager to find an autonomous sense of identity always involve a re-experiencing under new conditions of the original separation-individuation phase of early childhood (Mahler et al., 1975) and a renegotiation of never entirely resolved oedipal strivings. The task for young people consists in resolving or coming to terms with the painfully conflictual need to rebel against, and leave behind (symbolically, if not also literally) those loved-and-hated parental objects upon whom they had hitherto been dependent. Rebellious against 'the parents' – authority, tradition, old values – can at times be dangerously self-destructive, but it can also be the necessary, if not sufficient, condition for bringing about truly creative transformations in the self, which in turn can also have positive effects on others coming into contact with them.

A psychoanalytic concept that might help us to think further about Truman's artificial world is Winnicott's notion of *false self* (1960). Winnicott's argument is that the false self is, in its extreme manifestations, both a primitive defence against

damage to the unrealized real self, and a space for hope, a refuge from which a real self may be nursed into being. Winnicott's basic presupposition is that early development requires the exercise of, and permission for, a healthy omnipotence, in which the baby can feel that its wishes create that which satisfies. It wants the breast, mother provides it, and the baby feels it has created it. This process allows the baby to 'go on being' and promotes the beginnings of a sense of self, or continuity of self, as well as the foundations of a feeling of belonging in the physical and psychological real world. Inevitable and gradually increasing limitations to this infantile omnipotence will introduce the baby to notions of the externality and otherness of the world. In ordinary good cases there is, then, a development of a *true self*, where what comes from within can be permitted, and the consequences tolerated and negotiated.

It is against this background that Winnicott's account of the primitive defence of *false self* functioning arises. This is the defensive structure brought into existence to deal with a world that is damagingly uncongenial to the infant's self, when the mother is not able to cater to the baby's needs – perhaps due to ill health, to problems on the child's side, or to failures in maternal holding and provision.

The main form of uncongeniality is what Winnicott (1952) calls *impingement*. Impingement could derive from an inadequate availability or openness to the baby, or else from a forcible imposition of the adult's perspective and priorities. Winnicott sees the baby, and later the child and the adult, as likely to deal with this kind of predicament (when it is systematic) by the strategy of a false self. Such a person is liable to become stuck in a false, that is, an inauthentic or unconsciously insincere orientation or attitude to the world, notably one in which there is a great emphasis on conforming. It is as if the person says to him or herself: '*I will be a good boy/girl at least until I find someone who will recognize the real me*'. The false self is, Winnicott says, a kind of 'caretaker self' (1954, p. 281), waiting for the chance to give up having to manage and keep protected and hidden the undeveloped potential of a true self.

Truman Burbank strikes us as such a figure. Part of the pain of the early scenes of the film lies in this sense of his inauthenticity: his over-friendly smile, exaggerated politeness, forced joking. Much of his language is cliché-ridden and repetitive: 'The whole kit and caboodle' as he says to the newsagent, or 'Good-afternoon, good evening, and good-night', or (to his 'best friend', Marlon) 'Right together, wrong together'. Those close to him are also inauthentic. Their acting of love strikes us as just that, acting – though his 'best friend' acts so well that we too are liable to be taken in, until we find out that the whole of Truman's life is a lie.

However, there is hope, and that hope is lodged in the protagonist's growing suspicion – a kind of divine discontent – about the world surrounding him. This emerges partly as a result of the slippages in the purity of the delusionary system – the fall of the spotlight that represents the star Sirius, the lift with no back wall, the disappearing traffic jams, the mistake in allowing Truman to hear the film-director's instructions on his car radio. As Truman becomes more rebellious, more panicky, more unpredictable and more determined, these errors become more frequent and revealing, as when his wife Meryl becomes scared by his anger and gives everything away: 'Do something,' she shouts to the director, adding: 'it's not professional!' (meaning, for her as actor to have to go through all this).

On the societal level, one might say that mainstream culture tends to objectivize the subject, and that this is shown in allegorical form in the film in Christof's objectivization of Truman. The film may be taken to show how our whole orientation, belief-systems, and life are controlled, limited, and made risible or pathetic by a systematic religious/political mentality of power. The ordinary citizen has his subjectivity warped and falsified by prevailing powerful unconscious attitudes which reside, amongst other places, in the media. Truman's rebellion may thus be seen as the rebellion we all need to make against a pervasive, globalized, dominating tendency.

More fundamentally, Truman is upheld in his attempts to change and challenge the system by the memory of Sylvia/Lauren, the young woman who loves him and who had already made an aborted attempt to disillusion him. Her image lies behind his consistent and increasing efforts to get outside the limits of his world. He buys magazines in order to try to reconstitute her face, as if trying to firm up his memory of the good, true object. She represents the good third object who intervenes to interrupt a disturbed and pathological dyadic relationship to one parent figure – in this case, a sadistic and controlling one. The film admits of either of two interpretations, that Christof may be seen to represent an imprisoning mother or a cruel and controlling father. Truman dreams of going to Fiji, to follow Sylvia where he believes she had been dragged to. Fiji is also a place which is, as he puts it to Marlon, 'as far away from here as you can get, before you start coming back'. It is a real, yet also mythical, place which includes 'islands with no people in them'. In other words, Truman wants to move as far as possible away from his Seahaven world of falsehood and lies, towards the world of an authentic human being who, loving him for himself, might help him tolerate the truth. Or at least to a place where there might be no people, i.e. no people in on the game or act which we know – and he too is beginning to realize – controls his life.

With his film, Peter Weir gives us an analogy. This is not only a story of the first person adopted by a TV programme to be its unwitting star, or even a story of the pervasiveness of 'soap mentality'. It is a story of the limitations imposed on all of us to some extent, and on some of us to a much greater and more damaging extent, when our 'spontaneous gestures' are hijacked to someone else's ends and we are squeezed into – or under intolerable pressure squeeze ourselves into – a false mode of being. Then we are no longer ends in ourselves but become means to someone else's ends, existing not in our own eyes, but only in those of others.

Christof will stop at nothing to maintain Truman's prison. Truman's phobias of dogs and the sea are deliberately and, quite sadistically, fabricated as a result of the ruthless requirement of the creator and maintainer of the world imposed on Truman to ensure that he stays put; they are not merely allergies to the falseness of the environment he is forced to inhabit. In such a context, *The Truman Show* reveals also the terrible dilemma for someone exposed to such an upbringing: he is forced to choose between believing himself or his objects. Either *he* is mad, or *they* are. The only reassurance they can offer him is a false reassurance; they say, 'This will pass', or 'You're having a breakdown' (Meryl); or 'If all this is false, then I'm false too' (Marlon). The shift to greater understanding involves Truman in increasing variability of his emotional states – from depression, mania, desperation and fury to a growing conviction and determination to get away, to become a true man rather than someone else's cipher. But ... *How's it going to end?*

Christof informs us at the beginning of the film: 'There is nothing fake about Truman'. This, however, is not so. Think of the 'death' of his 'father'. Truman could never work through it properly since in fact it never happened. In one sense, Truman's only true relationship is that with Christof. Everyone else is an actor, in on the game. Christof may be a control-freak and a sadistic tyrant, but at least he is real, and his relationship with Truman takes place in the real world beyond the fantasy land of Seahaven. Only Christof – and the brief interlopers – speak to Truman from beyond Seahaven. But until near the very end, Truman has no knowledge of Christof.

Towards the end, a brief 'philosophical' debate takes place between Christof (a sort of off-Christ figure?) and the heroine who aimed at the truth (Sylvia). Are 'bread and circuses' as much as men can tolerate? Is happiness merely a humdrum possibility, achievable through acceptance and resignation? Is the only reality we can bear that of conformity and obedience? Our pain as viewers is partly a result of our identification with Truman, and part of that pain is our ambivalence, for we too wish to be the centre of everyone's attention. If others watch our every move, we may feel paranoid, of course, but we may also feel narcissistically gratified. In his infantile omnipotence, the child would like his parents to watch and admire his every move. So we both long for and hate being watched, being the centre of everyone's look.

Should we accept the world we are born into, and be content with the safety of a protective creator and maintainer of our situation? 'In my world,' says Christof to Truman in the last moments of the film, 'there is nothing to fear for you.' Is the false self the best that most of us can achieve? After all, if Truman were to stay inside the island and inside the false world, all his ordinary needs would be catered for: 'You belong here with me,' says Christof, 'you can't leave'. Yet the other side is the way of truth, involving escape from falsity and from the artificial limits of an imposed world. In the film the limits are memorably represented as those of a stage set, where the horizons are made of plaster-board. On this side risk is important, since aiming higher means more chance of falling short. For our protagonist there is also the fear of the unknown, represented by the emptiness beyond the 'Exit' door. When Truman finally walks into this dark space beyond it, the door itself is left open. Perhaps this gives us a clue to the nature of Truman's predicament as opposed to that of people who have had less distorted lives – for him there is no movement between reality and falseness, since everything is weighted too heavily on the side of the latter. Undoubtedly there were moments of spontaneity in his friendships, his relations to his mother, wife and colleagues, but all was so drastically skewed.

Another element of risk is the prospect of an unknown self. The same argument is presented in the dialogue, at the end of the film, between Christof and Truman; it is also present in the opening moments of the film. 'There is nothing fake about Truman himself,' announces Christof. Truman, gazing into the mirror, speaking to himself and to the television audience, says: 'I'm not going to make it. You're going to have to get on without me'. Perhaps he is saying that at some level he knows what is happening, that his television audience won't have him for long. Christof then speaks of Truman as someone who brings comfort to millions. Truman, perhaps addressing Christof, perhaps himself, replies: 'You're crazy'. To one side, life-lies are the closest to truth we need to get; to the other side, this is madness, something from which one has to escape as from psychic death.

We might also ask if the door marked 'Exit' through which Truman goes at the end of the film, leaving behind the world he had known until then, is in fact death. Does he commit suicide? Winnicott remarks that suicide is one possible outcome for the false self personality, even the only way to keep the true self safe. In a more metaphorical sense, though, in the healthiest outcome the old self has to be killed off in order to give freedom to the true self – not suicide then, but a kind of re-birth (see Milner, 1952).

We think similar arguments can come up in relation to psychoanalytic practice. Are we always justified in interfering with our patients' defences, with the lies and deceptions that may have become part and parcel of their identities, and have been put in place to deal with intolerable realities or prospects? If there is too little of a solid kind in place, if there are no good internal objects, no 'going on being' of a true self which can have some sense of this being acceptable or bearable, if there is too much hatred or destructiveness – is it ethical in such cases to begin to dismantle defensive systems that have enabled someone to get by? Is such an enterprise at times arrogance, or even cruelty? Are we always to take the strenuous and heroic side of the courageous Truman himself?

Psychoanalysis also parallels the film in other ways. Just as Christof knows all about Truman, but Truman knows nothing of Christof, so we know a great deal about our patients while they know much less about us. To some patients this is itself a cruel situation; it implies, they feel, that, since we can predict what will happen, we are complicit in the intention to bring it about, and are therefore condemned as cruel observers or experimenters – and of course psychoanalysts could get sadistic satisfaction from such power or such knowledge. The transference is itself a kind of fictional reality, an 'as-if' reality available for treatment and help. But there is also a real relationship, the one that develops between a patient and another adult, the psychoanalyst, who does or does not face up with appropriate courage or firmness or tact to the demands put upon him. In satisfactory cases, there is mobility or fluidity between the two kinds of relationship: the transference can be used, but by the end of most sessions there can be some realization of its 'as-if' quality. The transference is powerful, but outside and inside the session it can be reflected on and recognized to be a part of the patient's life and relationships in the real world.

We admire Socrates when he suggests we should prefer to be dissatisfied human beings rather than satisfied pigs; and in *The Truman Show*, like the television viewers within the film, we all cheer Truman on. We side with his girlfriend and with his own heroic efforts to bow out. We see his panic, suspicions, anger and resolution as signs of a true self, a healthy disturbance of what would otherwise be a shallow, false-self existence. Like the audience within the film, we are relieved at our hero's escape from perverse entrapment, including perhaps from our own sadistic and voyeuristic, unconscious attitudes towards him. But we may fear for his sanity in the next, imaginary instalment, outside the walls of his false world. *How's it going to end?*

One final thought. Every form of actual psychological abuse has as its correlative a fantasied abuse of the same kind. There are many cases of abuse of children; but we must accept that many of them may only be imaginary ones. This film suggests not only what we know to be the case, namely a person's struggle with a lifelong subjection to lies and deceptions, but also a parallel case of someone with paranoid

delusions of self-reference, like the man one of us met in a mental hospital who spoke with admirable sanity about everyday matters, except when his voice took on a conspiratorial tone of quiet conviction about the fact, undoubted to him, that every death in 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland occurred because of his own murderous wishes or thoughts. In most cases, if a person told us, as Truman in effect does, that the rain fell only on him, or that like Odysseus he was subject to a God who summoned storms to keep him from escaping, or that his movements were being monitored and commented on by invisible watchers whom he could hear on the car radio, or that traffic jams were especially engineered to keep him prisoner, or that his father was drowned to induce a phobia of water and thus of travel in him, we would be right to be suspicious of his state of mind. For every case of a traumatized Truman, there must be many whose beliefs and fears are indeed paranoid.

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