

Bulworth and The Truman Show: The New York Times' Mr. Rothstein responds

David Walsh
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The sudden appearance over the past half-year of more critical films (*Wag the Dog*, *Primary Colors*, *Bulworth*, and *The Truman Show*) has obviously not gone unnoticed in certain circles. The resulting nervousness has now found expression in a half-page article in the June 8 edition of the *New York Times*, entitled *For the Media's Dupes, Perhaps Thinking Makes It So*, by Edward Rothstein.

Mr. Rothstein is perturbed by *Bulworth* and *The Truman Show*, in particular. His reaction to the latter is to criticize 'its numbing insistence that we are the victims of higher media forces that have constructed a prefab stage set, who pull our strings and force-feed us useless products. And we, unknowing, turn from our empty lives to submit to the moguls' intoxicating fantasies. We are insistently told that we are duped, manipulated, controlled.'

Of *Bulworth*, he writes: 'In fact, his villains are the same moguls and producers who put on the televised 'Truman Show' in Carrey's movie, enslaving Truman to a life of staged broadcasts. In Beatty's fantasy, the conspiracy is even more nefarious, because it extends so deeply into the pockets of corporate America and keeps so many Trumans in penury.'

Mr. Rothstein goes on to ask: 'Whose interests, after all, are being served by seeing the world in this way?' A very interesting question. Whose interests indeed? Certainly not those of the editors and owners of the *Times*. That is enough cause for an indignant, angry response. After all, in recent years, nearly everything poured forth by the media has served the interests of the wealthy few and they were getting quite used to having things that way. Along come these uncouth filmmakers with their 'crude political doctrines.' It's all a bit too much.

The *Titanic* phenomenon takes on a more precise and

sinister character seen in the light of Rothstein's response. From the point of view of those who run society, that was a film-despite its supposedly radical view of class relations-that was not objectionable in the slightest. On the contrary, it reinforced a kind of empty, lazy dreaminess that threatens no one.

Mr. Rothstein is no fool. He doesn't speak directly as representative of the 'moguls.' Oh, no, not he. He is a defender of the little people, defamed by their supposed defenders, the makers of *Bulworth* and *The Truman Show*. Both films, you see, condescend to those they claim to be championing- *Bulworth*, to inner-city blacks, *The Truman Show*, to the show's television viewers.

Our concern, of course, is not to defend word for word and image for image those films or the conceptions propelling their creators. The latter can speak for themselves. But we are obliged to defend the right of artists to speak critically to and of their audiences. If someone throws up his hands and says, 'Oh, people are hopeless, nothing can be done with them,' that's one thing. But when a filmmaker directly confronts prevailing ideas and moods, and says to his audience, more or less, 'Look, this is dangerous and inadequate, if you go on like this it will end disastrously'-well, that is all to the good, and if it offends anyone, so much the worse for him or her.

Rothstein asserts that Beatty and Weir-Niccol have the following vision: 'a world of flaccid, dull-witted oppressed and untrustworthy citizens who can't see what is in front of their eyes except to watch a screen.' The films themselves give the lie to this assertion. In both there is precisely a rejection, by ordinary people, of the manipulated version of events they are fed. This is what disturbs Mr. Rothstein. After years during which, for a combination of historical and political

reasons, wide layers of the population were content to accept the official story, whether they fully trusted it or not, there are stirrings of opposition. The response of the *New York Times* and the real estate developers, bankers, Wall Street operators, and ridiculously wealthy and philistine layers it speaks for is to slap this down.

Four films have presented critical views. One's appetite has only been whetted. Who's next?

See Also:

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