

The Truman Show: Further signs of life in Hollywood

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In *The Truman Show* comic actor Jim Carrey plays a 29-year-old man, Truman Burbank, whose entire life, unbeknownst to him, has been a television program, broadcast to the entire world, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The town he lives in is a giant set rigged up with thousands of hidden cameras; all the people he has ever known, including his wife (Laura Linney), are actors.

Since there are no breaks for commercials and the camera is always on the show's star, the other members of the cast are obliged to hold products up to the camera or pose by billboards, while conversing with Truman.

Everything is false. His best friend (Noah Emmerich) touchingly tells Truman, while they sit by the sea at sunset, how much their friendship means to him; the words, in fact, are being fed him by the show's director. Truman, for his part, is exploitable not because he is a fool, but because he naively expects the best of people and things. It is their conscientiousness and basic goodness that makes human beings vulnerable, not their wickedness.

The mastermind of "The Truman Show," which has earned untold millions for its producers, sponsors, and network, is a paternalistic fellow named Christof (Ed Harris), who imagines himself a god-like artist, a benevolent creator of a human life.

Seahaven, Truman's perfect little "hometown," is located on an island linked to the mainland by a causeway. (All of this is located inside a giant dome, one of only two manmade structures—the other being the Great Wall of China—visible from space, a cheerful television announcer tells us.) He has been programmed with memories, of his father dying in a boating accident, that make him terrified of crossing the water. Since childhood he has been discouraged from leaving Seahaven in any fashion. In a flashback we see Truman tell his elementary school teacher he wants to be an explorer like Magellan. She quickly pulls down a map of the world and explains

that "everything has already been discovered."

A series of trivial incidents cause Truman to become suspicious. He begins to see through the fakery. This awakens other suppressed feelings. He has long harbored the desire to take off for Fiji, where he thinks he will find his lost love. Every obstacle is placed in his way. A poster in a travel agency shows an airliner hit by lightning; "This could happen to you" is the inviting message. The agent tells him she has no flights to Fiji. He settles for a bus ticket to Chicago. The bus driver strips the gears and immobilizes the vehicle. Truman manages to cross the causeway in a car with his wife, but a roadblock set up by the authorities, ostensibly to protect people from an accident at a nuclear power plant, frustrates his plans.

Now the desire to escape from this nightmare of a town becomes an obsession. Truman's flight from his television life provokes a major crisis. The town's population is mobilized to hunt him down. His ostensibly friendly neighbors and acquaintances turn into a vigilante mob. In the end, he faces the choice of remaining in his comfortable, soul-deadening cocoon or making his way to the outside world.

The film, directed by Australian Peter Weir and scripted by New Zealander Andrew Niccol (and starring Canadian Carrey), is disturbing and quite amusing at times. Its premise is a legitimate one: the shock and violent internal crisis undergone by an individual beginning to see his world for the first time, *really* see it, really see *through* it. A smiling face might suddenly suggest hidden malice, a cozy street complacency and even suffocation. This is not paranoia, but the beginning of knowledge.

The film is animated by a real disgust for an ersatz, media-manipulated culture, a fake world of people and events, organized in the interests of private gain. Carrey is excellent in the lead role. The underlying anxiety, melancholy, and desperation that one always sensed underlying his performances finds a legitimate outlet here.

I was left somewhat dissatisfied by the film. Nearly everything to do with the town, his wife, his co-workers—all the tragicomic horror of his situation—I found compelling. But the film felt only partially realized or worked out. Of course, some of its subversive implications were perhaps beyond the reach of the film’s creators. Truman’s lost love seemed an afterthought and extraneous. The Ed Harris character failed to convince. The filmmakers, one assumes, wished to avoid the stereotyped media mogul. Fair enough. But their alternative—a beret-wearing, sensitive manipulator—led nowhere. The glimpses that one catches of the viewers of “The Truman Show,” although in the end refreshingly optimistic, were also too cursory and too enigmatic.

Frankly, I wanted more of what I found interesting. The subject is a vast one. All in all, I was left with the feeling that *The Truman Show* was the first act of a considerably longer, more involved work. But it was a first act that I found intriguing and persuasive for the most part.

Weir’s career is an interesting and instructive one. Born in Sydney in 1944, he began making films in the late 1960s. After several short films “full of anti-establishment attitudes,” he made a series of almost Gothic tales (*The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Last Wave* (1977)) and the antiwar *Gallipoli* (1981). Interestingly, in light of current events, his last Australian film was the only major feature work to touch upon, if only obliquely, the 1965 Indonesian military coup and subsequent bloodbath, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982).

Like many of his counterparts in the Australian New Wave (Bruce Beresford, Fred Schepisi, etc.), Weir found the attraction of Hollywood irresistible. This is not entirely incomprehensible. The US studios offered vast resources, major projects, a large pool of talented actors and technicians, and instant access to a world market. On balance, however, the results achieved by Weir and the others have not been remarkable. Of course, they arrived at the studios at a bad time: the Reagan-Bush years.

Witness (1985), the first film Weir made in the US, was a perfectly intelligent crime drama, but essentially unmemorable. *Dead Poets Society* (1989), a tale of a teacher’s impact on his students, was more of an attempt at a statement, but not one that was going to get him driven out of Hollywood for radicalism. *Green Card* (1990) was pretty disgraceful: a romance that justified, or registered as an accomplished fact, the coming together of “bohemia” and the self-absorbed Manhattan middle class. Weir wasn’t the only one who should have been

ashamed; Gérard Depardieu had something to answer for too.

With *The Truman Show*, Weir appears to have regained his voice. He told a reporter from *New York* magazine that the Persian Gulf war had encouraged him to think about the role of the media in “the blurring of the line between reality and unreality.” He noted, “The Gulf war was one of the first live shows we all watched. It was pretty obvious how that came to be, with the very controlled coverage, a sanitized video game.” He expressed, for example, particular disgust for the Disney company’s remodeling work in Times Square in New York City, to change “the image and feel of the place to one of childhood, essentially, before there were serious questions to be dealt with in life.” This last is a critical point.

One seems to sense signs of life in Hollywood. In the past six months four films have appeared that, to one degree or another, take a relatively hard-hitting look at contemporary American society: Barry Levinson’s *Wag the Dog*, Mike Nichols’s *Primary Colors*, Warren Beatty’s *Bulworth* and now *The Truman Show*. In certain of these cases, people who haven’t done much, or who haven’t done much of significance, in the past decade or so seem to be reviving. Two general processes must be at work here: first, an increasing sensitivity on the part of filmmakers and artists to the social crisis in the US, as well as to the danger of another slaughter like the Persian Gulf war; second, perhaps more significantly, an intuitive understanding by these same artists that critical views will be favorably received by growing numbers of people.



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