

“In Case I Don’t See Ya, Good Afternoon, Good Evening, and Good Night.”:  
Transforming Television through Digital Technology in Peter Weir and Andrew Niccol’s  
*The Truman Show*

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Amid the coalesce between television and technology, thousands of channels have become available on television. Entertainment choices and channel surfing have become endless, and the war for the most viewership has begun: a new cinema emerges. Peter Weir and Andrew Niccol’s 1998 film, *The Truman Show*, highlights a new age of broadcasting using advanced developing technology with a 24-hour live feed of a television show. The life of a corporation-bought orphan becomes a televised immersive interaction, engulfing an audience with the ability to remain a part of the orchestrated screen beyond using the remote control. *The Truman Show* utilizes film techniques to showcase Truman’s fabricated life and thus critiques cultural transformations brought by digital technologies such as broadcasted television and their effects on viewership consumerism.

Though the audience watching the film, as well as the audience in the film, are aware of the falsification of Seahaven Island’s and its production design, they are still expected to believe in it as a real place. The mechanics of this can be credited to Christof, the creator, and his control center located in a moon-shaped dome above Seahaven Island. At the beginning of the film, Truman is seen leaving his home to go to work, stating his catchphrase to his neighbors. As he attempts to enter his car, he is interrupted by an abrupt studio light falling from the sky and plummeting into the ground. Truman hesitates to get near the lamp, carefully approaching the object unbeknownst to him. He finally picks it up and reads its label, ‘Sirius (9 canis major)’. The lamp’s function as an artificial star in the “sky” yields to a sense of plausibility prior to its reveal. Stephen Prince remarks in “Perpetual Realism” that unreal images can be referentially

fictional while still atoning as perpetually realistic. The illusions within Seahaven are set and almost immediately broken through the display of a fallen production light. The significance of this scene breaks the lamp's pretense as a bright "star" in the sky, thus exposing its inverse indexicality as an actual object, insisting Prince's notion that even "unreal images" can pass off as realistic. Despite the audience's knowledge of the fake sky, we still interpret it as real from the production design's advanced ability to manipulate our perception using the anchoring of indexical images with mechanical false. Prince states light as one of "the most important cues to be manipulated in order to create a synthetic reality that looks as real as possible" (33). The heavy light and others that are digitally controlled just like it sit perched up to impersonate the reality of a bright sunny morning. The shadows of the buildings and trees and the sounds of the chirping birds surrounding Truman as he approaches the lamp in bewilderment anchor this very artificial light as perceptual reality, displaying "a bridge between live-action and computer-generated environments" (33), or in this case, computer-generated mechanical cues from the control center.

Later in the film, the world within the film receives an interview from Christof where he is asked why he believes Truman has never questioned the validity of his reality and inhabited world until now. He answers by stating, "We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented." Based off his answer, one can assume he is aware of the various fundamental conventions of film and its makeshift proficiency to engineer a well-crafted new cinema of attractions acceptable by a human eye. Christof's mockery of Truman's incapability echoes the viewers' consumption of the show he created, and their position as fallen victims to Truman's orchestrated world.

The fallen studio light also serves as Truman's first indication of the fabricated mise-en-scene in the show and his limitations on a horizontal plane. The light's six-second fall is accompanied by a loud whistling sound, establishing its original location as extremely high. Shortly after it begins its descent, the camera shows a wide bird's eye view shot of Seahaven's neighborhood, its white picket fenced houses uniformly aligned in sectional blocks. The camera then reverts to the lamp's descent, crashing headfirst into Truman's anchored life within a liminal horizontal space and simultaneously merging its opposed force as an object originally assigned to an upward vertical axis within the world. The juxtaposed verticality reflected is established through Christof's lunar room omni-cam ecosphere, which is situated on the 221<sup>st</sup> floor and camouflaged within Seahaven as the world's artificial "moon". Christof's physical position above his conceived reality manifests his resistance to gravity on a vertical plane. Although the world does not reach beyond the fake sky or below the fake world, Truman's maker controls it with an absurd interpretation of a God-like omnipotence, deliberately encompassing a brand-new trope in film that visually persists. Christof's character inertly represents that of a god, as he uses technological advances to control the weather in Seahaven and uses a sea storm to kill Truman's father, creating trauma for him and simultaneously drowning Truman's own desire for freedom and ambition to become an adventurer.

Christof's attempts to keep Truman on a horizontal plane and entrapped within the walls of the fictional world come to a halt when Truman overcomes his fear of the water and punctures the wall with his boat, crashing into reality. As he touches the wall with his hand, he closes his eyes, grunts in defiance, and begins to use his body to try and break through the wall. Upon giving up, Truman looks up with frustration and we are reminded of his placement on a horizontal plane and as a powerless pawn. The emotional musical score plays as Truman's

determination guides him to an upward staircase camouflaged to the blue sky wall. His first opportunity to reach verticality and become unchained as a prisoner to the depths of despair and limitedness in Seahaven has been unveiled. As he begins walking up the stairs, the camera cuts to Christof intently watching through a portable camera device where he can choose to be “alone” with Truman and intimately speak to him as a last resort. Christof’s voice pounds into Seahaven, startling Truman as he stares up into the artificial sky and beaming sun. He has turned to face the verticality of Christof and the technological advances within his own show one last time. At last Truman can surpass the fabrication of his reality and step into the real one, extending beyond Christof’s power and onto hope for his new life.

As Kristen Whissel states in “Tales of Upward Mobility”, “Verticality thereby facilitates a rather literal naturalization of culture in which the operation and effects of (social, economic, military) power are mapped onto the laws of space and time. Hence, in recent blockbuster films, vertically oriented bodies and objects imply a relation not just to the laws of physics but also to the spaces and times that define a fictional world’s prevailing order” (23). Christof and the fake stars in the sky, which are entitled as his objects of property, exude their power and reign over Truman during his time inside the island. Verticality is utilized in this film through Truman and Christof’s dynamic to reaffirm Truman’s inescapable position as an immobile character and Christof as a powerful authoritative figure above the island itself. The screen in turn functions as a mirror, or reflection of ourselves as consumers and thus subordinates to technological advances and its rapture onto television itself. The relationship between technology and television allowed Christof to make a profit and turn Truman’s humanity into a commodity for the sake of viewership. The audience of that world tuned in for the nature of the show as a spectacle only capable through the hands of a new media: technology. The customers at the diner, the man in

the bath, and the elder ladies watching from the couch all pause their lives to consume hours of Truman's. Technologically advanced television culture beyond the diegetic world likewise generates profit the more we consume the given media, placing itself as the ones in control and asserting its dominance and governance in our lives.

To keep Truman inside the island, Christof recounts how he has been watching him since he was born, reminding both the diegetic and non-diegetic audience of the show's thirty yearlong commence. The Truman Show began as a one camera show. The host of Trutalk, Mike Michaelson, outlines the journey of the show and credits its transformation to an ever-evolving technological world: "As he grew, so did the technology. An entire human life recorded on an intricate network of hidden cameras and broadcast live and unedited, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to an audience around the globe." The ability to broadcast Truman's life is displayed through the power of five thousand hidden cameras dispersed in the island. This voiceover is paired up with a montage to especially highlight the use of POV and/or subjective shots. The cameras hide in various ordinary items, such as the neighbor's shirt, or Truman's wife Meryl's gold necklace, confining Truman to the screen through his interactions with people and destabilizing any intimacy. The camera also hides in the radio of his car, which records his commute to and from work. The camera lens function as the eyes of the audience watching the everyday life of a fictional character, mimicking the ways in which ones views a gameplay or plays a character in video games. Instead of the neighbor or Meryl interacting with Truman, the audience can play as the character in Seahaven and have an inward moment with the main character. In "Origins of the First-Person Shooter", Galloway notes how "video games and films are influencing and incorporating each other", which transforms cinema into an omniscient lens. Instead of the abrasive connotation involved with POV shots in film, the influence of the

subjective perspective in video games converts ‘predatory vision’ into ‘active’ vision’ (69). The use of POV shots is a key component to remind the audience viewing the film outside of the diegetic world that the shots we are watching are also shots coming from the thousands of hidden cameras placed throughout the diegetic world. One of the most important POV shot objects for the audience members of the show itself is Truman’s father’s ring, which he began wearing after the fake death of his father in the storm. These shots allow us to fully hone control of Truman’s perception and motion, which deliberately places the audience as the silly likeable protagonist off to do his daily routine. While POV shots have been subjugated to negative connotations, the film pulls these POV shots away from just invasions of privacy and manufactures them into a source of connection between the audience member and the subject. Christof poses the loss of Truman’s privacy as a celebration of living harmoniously through the person loved by millions around the world.

Upon finding the exit of Seahaven Island, Christof laments to Truman how he knows him better than he knows himself. Truman responds, “You never had a camera in my head”. Although everything about his life was controlled, Truman’s mind and thoughts remained his own and uncontrolled. Despite the proficiency of the studio’s technology to record Truman’s every move and his own perspective through thousands of cameras, his response is crucial in establishing the film’s message as an ode to prevalent times and the continued progression of a new digital age. Christof’s sympathetic message to Truman is the merging of corporation with soul, promoting himself as a caretaker who truly loves his character, despite treating him unethically and making a profit off him. *The Truman Show* displays ubiquitous mechanisms brought by technology to film to paradoxically criticize the broader advances of it, such as broadcasting television and generated commands made possible by computers. With the

assistance of technological transformations in cinema, this film possesses the ability to blur the barrier between fiction and nonfiction and simultaneously challenge reality through its theatrical premise of it. The diegetic world comes to life through unreal images interpreted as perpetually realistic. Anchoring indexical images becomes essential in creating a spectacle for an audience to get hypnotized by. The juxtaposition of Truman on a horizontal axis and Christof on a vertical axis within Seahaven Island distributes the world's hierarchical order. The verticality exhibited between the dynamic of Truman and his maker is a depiction of our relationship to the emergence of television and technology, indicating our placement as consumers. The use of POV and subjective shots give both diegetic and non-diegetic viewers the access to an active vision through Truman himself, his peers, and surroundings, impersonating the vision seen through first-person video games. Technology's rapidly expanding nature infiltrates the diegetic show and in turn, the film plays with the cultural transformation of media. *The Truman Show* makes its audience synchronously question their reality and submission as viewers while unconsciously moving on to the next compelling form of media. Once Truman takes a final bow and disappears from the screen, the transmission ceases, but the surfing resumes, and a new cycle of consumption reverts onto a continuous loop.

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