

The Truman Show (1998)

“We accept the reality of the world with which we’re presented. It’s as simple as that.”

--Christof

Major Credits:

Director: Peter Weir

Screenplay: Andrew Niccol

Cinematography: Peter Biziou

Cast: Jim Carrey (Truman Burbank); Laura Linney (Meryl Burbank/Hannah Gill); Ed Harris (Christof)

Background:

The Truman Show was released four months before another American feature about a young man stranded within a television show, *Pleasantville*. Although both films were well reviewed, they seem to have cancelled each other out in terms of garnering awards or sustaining scholarly interest; nevertheless, both reward repeated viewings and serious study, particularly in light of the proliferation of “Reality” television that *The Truman Show* uncannily anticipates. Andrew Niccol’s script might have been inspired by the all-but-forgotten prototype for the Reality genre, *An American Family*, a 12-part documentary that aired on PBS in 1971. Unlike the stars of that program, the Loud family, however, Truman does not realize he has been filmed for the past 30 years.

The Truman Show was marketed primarily as a new turn towards seriousness by its star, Jim Carrey, whose career had been previously defined by over-the-top comic performances in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *Dumber & Dumber*, and *Liar, Liar*. Peter Weir, who was chosen over the screenwriter, Andrew Niccol, had established himself as an art cinema *auteur* in his native Australia with *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *Gallipoli* (1981) before directing successful American “quality” pictures like *Witness* (1985) and *The Dead Poets Society* (1989).

Truman’s home of “Seahaven” was shot on location at Seaside, Florida, a planned community designed to imitate the mythic appearance of small-town America.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. On the Special Features of the dvd, the production designers describe how Peter Weir asked them to create a “hyperreal” look through such devices as excessive fill light and saturated colors. The designers used postcards as models for the “look” of the film.
2. *The Truman Show* stands at the cusp of Hollywood’s conversion from traditional special effects to computer generated images (CGI). (*Titanic* had been produced the year before.) While the existing buildings of Seaside, FL were used along with specially built sets, computers were used to create the illusion of higher floors while still conforming to the village’s zoning restrictions.
3. In her article for *Film Criticism*, Simone Knox delineates how the visual style of Christof’s “The Truman Show” can be distinguished from Weir’s *The Truman Show*. Note, for example, the use of “masking” at the edges of the frame in the earliest shots of Seahaven or the later montage

sequences that cut from Truman to Christof in the control dome to the television audiences reacting to the show.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Truman might be compared with the eponymous hero of *Forrest Gump* (1994): both men are, in Roger Ebert's words, "good men, honest, and easy to sympathize with." While each embodies a kind of mythic innocence, do their stories present different ideological positions? Can either film be thought to be subversive?
2. *The Truman Show* reflects the hybridization of genre that marks much modern filmmaking. Note how the film mixes romantic comedy, melodrama, science fiction, documentary, and mystery. In particular, why does the film eschew any sustained effort at mystery by making it easy for the audience to figure out how and why things are not as they seem, letting us in on the secret Truman only gradually uncovers? What is the impact of knowing from the very first shot that Seahaven is a simulacrum? (Note that the film's trailer strongly hinted at the film's premise.)
3. The "money shot" of *The Truman Show*—the image that stays with us and resonates in the mind—occurs when the prow of the Santa Maria pierces the outer wall of the dome. This moment is followed by a stirring panning shot right as Truman "walks on water," discovers the stairway to the exit door, then takes his final bow. How do the various elements of this scene contribute to the emotional and philosophical climax of the film?
4. Weir's *The Truman Show* (the film we are watching) steadfastly maintains a philosophical critique of Christof's "The Truman Show" (the television show *they* are watching). But both film and tv program are subject to the same Platonic critique—and perhaps Christof is closer to "truth" when he claims "It isn't always Shakespeare, but it's genuine. It's a life." Which representation of "reality" ultimately comes closer to truth?
5. Think about how *The Truman Show* anticipates the popularity of Reality TV in the next decade. Why are mass audiences drawn to watching ordinary lives? How are contemporary Reality shows fundamentally different from *The Truman Show*?
6. What does the film think about such issues as consumerism, technology, and privacy? What is the significance of the fact that it has taken Truman nearly thirty years to discover the truth about his existence?