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Truman Burbank as a Žižekian Symbol for Society's Sons

The symbolic creator of “The Truman Show”¹ sees Truman Burbank not as a window into the human condition, but as a mirror. “While the world he inhabits is counterfeit, there's nothing fake about Truman himself,” he says in an interview on “Seahaven Tonight.” As the creator, Christof, proudly overlooks the island from the comfort of the Lunar Room, Truman Burbank unknowingly carries on with his fated life as the star of his own show; live from “the world's largest studio”, it's “The Truman Show”! The 1998 film classic that presents this show within the movie embodies the realities of capitalism through it's commentary on control and mass media, lending itself to a sharp cultural critique by the political philosophy of Slavoj Žižek.

Peter Weir's film *The Truman Show*, starring Jim Carrey, follows the production of Truman Burbank's life and, unbeknownst to him, a TV show where he is the star. Truman has been the center of attention since his neonatal adoption by the OmniCam Corporation, unaware that he is being watched by millions of people around the world and thousands of cameras hidden across his “small idyllic city, a consumerist paradise,” which is actually a Hollywood set (Žižek, 2001). From the unwitting perspective of Truman, he follows a cheerful and ordinary life as a husband and life insurance salesman while living in a picturesque neighborhood of the American utopia. Truman has fully accepted the reality with which he was presented, innocently

¹ For the sake of clarity, “The Truman Show” as the show within the movie will be stylized in quotes throughout this essay, while *The Truman Show* as the movie will be in italics.

playing his part as an independent quotidian person confined to the town of Seahaven. Behind the scenes and thousands of feet above the set, however, the producer Christof takes on the role of the omnipotent figure. Able to dictate the functions of the show—from the cast of the show to the weather in the set—he has followed, dictated, and filmed Truman’s every move since the day he was born, all while maintaining Truman’s ignorance. By manipulating Truman’s life into a documentary soap opera, Christof slyly achieves the hyper-monetization of the incognizant everyday man, Truman Burbank, captivating audiences around the world that obsessively muse “How is it going to end?”

Once released in 1998, *The Truman Show* received critical attention from major publications for its social commentary on the influence of mass media, advertisement, and social control. The Chicago Tribune published a review piece analysing the lessons that can be taken from the movie, arguing that it is a commentary on our ego-centric view of the world and how "we are willing to focus all our attention on things like movies and TV" (Stanley, 1998). These superficial reviews focusing on the effects of the media and technology were prevalent when the movie was first released and even in retrospective analyses. In 2020, a political commentary on Donald Trump, the “reality TV show president”, channelled *The Truman Show* to criticize the exploitative and dishonest nature of reality TV (Harrison, 2020). Another recent article takes on religious affection, arguing that the film is symbolic of the divine hierarchy and that Truman is the “most relatable character in Hollywood to theologically raised children”(Rahal, 2016). Once in the hands of academia, analyses of the movie turned to a more sophisticated evaluation of the film as a symbol of social control, receiving repeated comparisons to Bentham’s Panopticon prison. Most evaluations from an academic point of view have not gone further than analysing

the broad functions of a hypothetical system of control, stopping short of an application to society today.

While conventional analyses and critiques of the film have focused on the symbolic representation of mainstream media and forms of social control like religion, politics, or prisons, an examination of *The Truman Show* through a Žižekian lens reveals a more pointed critique of the apparatus that functions within and controls our contemporary society. By combining the criticisms of both modern media and social control, we can derive a precise, symbolically packed commentary on the repressive functions of capitalist ideology. Through Žižekian cultural theory, Truman can be evaluated as a prime subject of Lacan's psychoanalytic triad as it relates to capitalism by observing the effects "The Truman Show's" ideology has on the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. Only then can we begin to fulfill Christof's (and Peter Weir's) intention of examining the true human condition through Truman's mirror.

"Inhale...exhale...same old thing"- Truman Burbank

At the start of the movie, it is not abundantly clear that the movie is presented as a show-within; the premise is hidden behind the veil of Truman's ordinary routine. Much like Truman, the first-time viewer of the movie remains unaware that the society of Seahaven is being carefully coordinated by Christof and the production team of "The Truman Show." The existence of Truman Burbank is initially introduced as that of an ideological dream, wrapped in a perfectly functioning schema that makes Seahaven the "planet's top town" (Weir, 1998, 5) Filled with happy residents and smiley neighbors who wave hello to Truman, the true physical and symbolic structure of the set are precluded from the beliefs of Truman who continues to innocently wander off to work every "glorious morning in Seahaven" (Niccol, 1998, 3). Blind to

the true nature of his existence, Truman embraces the functions instilled upon him as he buys his favorite magazines and regurgitates corporate insurance talk with the utmost enthusiasm.

The world behind Truman's reality encapsulates the essence of the Žižekian concept of the Symbolic. In *How To Read Lacan*, Slavoj Žižek writes that "the symbolic order, society's unwritten constitution, is the second nature of every speaking being: it is here, directing and controlling my acts...It is as if we, subjects of language, talk and interact like puppets, our speech and gestures dictated by some nameless all-pervasive agency" (Žižek, 2007, p.8). Here we are presented with the concept of the big Other, the authoritative father that orients our desires, beliefs and actions. In a literal sense, Christof serves as the big Other by physically controlling the functions of the show, which in turn manipulates its way into the actions of subjects. Moreover, Truman adopts all of the described characteristics of the controlled puppet through both his actions and language; even the supporting cast, despite their knowledge of the all-pervasive agent Christof, become enveloped in the symbolic order.

In the film, it is self-evident that the all-pervasive Christof has groomed Truman into the perfect reality TV star, as he is coerced into doing, or not doing, by the supporting cast which consistently nudge Truman along at the orders of Christof. While some critics of the film assume Christof's control is symbolic of a relationship to god or Christ, the peer-reviewed publication *Film Criticism* makes a closer assessment about the set designed by Christof: "With the high-tech surveillance cameras, the control tower inside the fake moon, and the use of both the moon and sun as searchlights, Seahaven is a space specifically designed for totalitarian control" (Knox, 2010, p.16). This description of totalitarian control opens the door to a much more specific criticism of the totalitarian ideology of capitalism. The specific capitalist trope is evident in the end goals of Christof's surveillance and control; maintaining the TV empire, keeping it on

schedule, keeping Truman productive and ignorant, and integrating product advertising into the show. A scene that perfectly illustrates this influence is the forceful interactions from the doppelganger businessmen (actually second assistants Ron and Don) who are in charge of stopping Truman on his way to work by pushing him against a Kaiser Poultry poster, buying screen time and boosting revenue by presenting advertisements for the viewers of the show to see. Moreover, everything in the town of Seahaven has been commodified by Christof, “everything you see on the show is for sale -from the actors' wardrobe, food products, to the very homes they live in--”, mirroring our capitalist society’s need to incessantly commodify everything (Weir, 1998, 65).

The sense of capitalist control seeps into the language and actions of the TV show, to the point where Truman’s wife Meryl has interpolated herself as the commodified. In the show, she is responsible for product placement by introducing products to Truman and, with an eye to the camera, the audience of the show. In the midst of Truman having a mental breakdown as he begins to realize the inauthenticity of his relationship to Seahaven, Meryl retorts “Why don't I make you some of this new Mococoa Drink? All natural. Cocoa beans from the upper slopes of Mount Nicaragua. No artificial sweeteners--I've tasted other cocoas. This is the best,” she says as she holds the package in front of the hidden camera (Weir, 1998, 53). By applying Althusser’s theory of ideological interpolation, Meryl has been “recruited” by Christof to represent his capitalist ideology and “transforms” her into a subject of the ideological apparatus (Althusser, 1972, p. 86). Žižek expounds the semiotic functions of the big Other in perfectly coincidental rhetoric, explaining that the big Other is “the inexorable logic of an automatism that runs the show, so that when the subject speaks, he is, unbeknownst to himself, merely 'spoken', not master in his own house” (Žižek, 2007, p.40). In the Žižekian sense, it is this ideological fantasy created

by the big Other, Christof, that structures the reality of Truman Burbank even in his own house, unconsciously subject to the capitalist language and functions imposed on him by his wife, neighbors, and the production of the show.

"Unconsciously, all his life, it would have seemed that there was something, and he never knew what it was. That something caused him to be a performer. It's as if there was a will from those around him to be entertaining, to be funny, to be 'on'"

-Director Peter Weir, on the character of Truman (Paul, 1998)

The film's climax is incited by a series of blips in the production of the show that leads Truman to realize that the unconscious structure of his reality is being formulated. In par with Lacanian theory, the imaginary realm of Truman Burbank is characterized by a traumatic lack of the outside, of his squandered curiosity, and lack of exploration. In the film, Christof explains that in order to keep Truman on the island, he had to implant a trauma that would confine him to his production. Christof explains that "As the show expanded, naturally we were forced to manufacture ways to keep Truman in Seahaven [by] demonstrating that every venture is accompanied by a risk" (Weir, 1998, 64). This trauma came in the form of the staged death of Truman's father, killed off by Christof in a sailing accident when Truman was young, stripping him of his father-figure and more deeply entrenching Christof's rules as the authority. From there on, Truman has been crippled by the fear of traveling and water, confining him to Seahaven and securing years of TV production. In addition, design in the production has instilled this fear by including subtle reminders of the perils of travel such as posters showing planes struck by lightning and comments on the radio. Despite the inhibiting trauma, Truman's desire has always been to explore and leave Seahaven, plotting to escape to Fiji or elsewhere. Here we can apply Žižek's understanding of "what was foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real of the

symptom.” Where Truman’s lack of adventure and spontaneity was foreclosed from the oppressive Symbolic realm created by Christof, it returns as a symptom that yearns for exploration and curiosity.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek explains that “the symptom arises where the world failed, where the circuit of the symbolic communication was broken” (Žižek, 2008, p.79). Not only did the big Other Christof fail to account for the manifestation of the traumatic gap in Truman’s curiosity, his world literally failed on multiple occasions, which subsequently leads Truman’s symptom to surface. The system’s first failure occurs when a light mechanism from the set falls from the sky and crashes in front of his house. Although this failure was quickly rectified, a series of production malfunctions thereafter leads Truman to continue questioning the nature of his existence. The moment that finally sets off the full emergence of Truman’s symptom is literally a broken circuit of the symbolic communication, in line with the exact words of Žižek. As Truman drives to work, the radio frequency malfunctions, switching to the production communication frequency that reveals the voice of assistants following his every move: “Stand by one. He’s heading west on Stewart...he's making his turn onto Lancaster Square...” (Weir, 1998, 30). Following this scene, Truman, in a heap of confusion, unpredictably skips out on work, throwing the entire program into frenzy.

True to the critique of capitalism, Truman’s unconscious gap begins to be filled only upon his disobedience to his manufactured routine of production. As he walks away from the life insurance office building, Truman catches his symptom, realizing that his actions are powerfully dictating the way Seahaven is functioning—he can stop cars and busses on the road, people are watching and following him, and no one reacts to his erratic behavior. Finally, he conceives that he is “mixed up in something” (Weir, 1998, 34). Following this realization, Truman begins the

process described by Lacan as transference, placing truth onto his symptoms retroactively in his pursuit of truth. As he attempts to make sense of what is happening, Truman analyzes the events through misrecognition, claiming that it must be about his father, that he thinks he is being followed, and that the regular-looking people seem to be in on it. By saying this, Truman places the truth on the 'subject supposed to know', the other, and begins his quest to understand his symptom (Žižek, 2007, p.27).

“Where shall we go? Where shall we go? Spontaneity is what it's all about.”

-Truman Burbank

Truman's cynicism leads him to question the motives of his wife and everyone around him, becoming more and more unpredictable for the supporting cast and producers to follow. This erratic behavior brings the reality of the set to the surface and helps Truman understand the symbolic order, literally. As he contemplates the happenings, Truman sits in the car observing passerbys through his rearview mirror, finding the predictable sequencing of the production's extras: “We will see a lady on a red bike, followed by a man with flowers, and a Volkswagen Beetle with a dented fender” (Weir, 1998, 46) This confrontation with the unveiled symbolic order leads Truman to an explosion of spontaneity, breaking away from Christof's capitalist scheme that he has been subjected to his whole life. As he frantically speeds around Seahaven in search of escape, the burst forms the “fissure within the symbolic network itself” which Žižek describes as the monstrous Real (Žižek, 2007, p.72). Despite the production's attempt to stop his escape by manufacturing traffic, forest fires, and an accident at the nuclear plant (all byproducts of capitalism), Truman comes to understand that he *can* leave, he *can* go against his fated life within the system that has been imposed on him, therefore creating the fissure that is the Real.

As Truman's possibility for escape starts to come to fruition, the film finally unmask the big Other for the film viewer. Christof is formally introduced through an interview segment where he is asked about the features of the show and takes questions from callers. One caller, a former cast member, accuses him of being a "liar and a manipulator" and imprisoning Truman, symbolic of the liberal opposition to Christof's capitalist ideology. The confrontation provides us with various lines of dialogue to be analyzed. First, Christof reacts by saying "The world...the place you live in...is the sick place. Seahaven's the way the world should be" (Weir, 1998, 67). This interjection represents the perceived gap between the Utopic capitalist ideology of Christof and the true capitalist ideology of the outside world. It is unsurprising then, that the viewers of "The Truman Show" are so affixed to the screen, as they too desire what they lack, looking to Truman to fill their gap. This desire that can never be satisfied is the *objet petit a* to the core, the void that eludes both Truman and the viewers. To the caller's point of imprisonment, Christof says "He can leave at any time. If his was more than just a vague ambition, if he was absolutely determined to discover the truth, there's no way we could prevent him." What we come to learn subsequently is that this is a false reality, that Christof is functioning in the same way Žižek describes ideology, as "only a system which makes a claim to the truth - that is, which is not simply a lie but a lie experienced as truth, a lie which pretends to be taken seriously" (Žižek, 2008, p.27)

*"There's no more truth out there than the world I created for you,
same lies, same deceit."* -Christof, to Truman

Truman's confrontation with the void begins with a visit to the mirror camera in the morning; he stands staring into the mirror and begins an act, drawing himself as an astronaut using a bar of soap against the glass. In an act of defiance and newfound independence he says "I

declare this planet Trumania of the Burbank Galaxy” before winking at the mirror, showing that he is now conscious that he is being watched (Weir, 1998, 71). That same night, Truman sneaks out of his home by tricking the producers into thinking he was asleep, and with complete disregard of his own trauma, Truman sets sail away from Seahaven. Upon realizing he was gone, Christof organizes a massive search party across the island, switches on the sun to help locate him, and finally finds him on the boat. In this scene, the “claim to the truth” of Christof’s ideology is uncovered as a lie as he literally turns oceans into hurricanes in an attempt to stop Truman from escaping with a complete disregard for Truman’s life.

Miraculously surviving, Truman continues sailing his boat until he suddenly crashes into the sky-blue wall, the end of the set. He walks along the border of the wall to stairs that lead to an exit door, but before he could step out, Christof begins to talk to him through a speaker. In his final plea for Truman to stay, he explains everything that has happened. The shot shows a close up of Christof’s face looking straight into the camera, almost as if he is looking at the viewer, he says “There’s no more truth out there than the world I created for you, same lies, same deceit” (Weir, 1998, 92). This dialogue serves as a commentary on the movie itself, in a way breaking the fourth wall to tell the audience of the movie that the lies and deceit portrayed in *The Truman Show* are the same outside of the theater, in the real world. This pivotal line marks Peter Weir’s argument, transcending the movie itself as a reflection of modern society.

As Christof continues with his monologue, claiming that Truman is too scared to leave and that he is better off staying, Truman turns his back to face the door. Despite his plea, Truman’s final act of defiance is that of a bow, to Christof, the audience of the show and the movie, before stepping out into the dark doorway. After his traumatic investigation of his reality, Truman’s conscious decision to depart from the repressive system he was created in cements him

as a Žižekian hero. Although it may be true that Truman will find the same false truths in the outside world, his sheer defiance and determination against his void and Christof's authority leads Truman to conquer and discover his own truth, fulfilling his ambitions of exploration. This act of critical thinking and autonomous decision making frees Truman and is exactly what Žižek wants us to do with his theory. *The Truman Show's* deeply symbolic representation of the true human in a capitalist system provides the reader with a mirror to examine their own place in ideology of being wrapped up in a consumerist machine. Žižek maintains that, like Truman, it is only through questioning and reflection that we can understand how our thoughts and behaviors are shaped in the face of Christof or the big Other. In such, we can bring the unconscious to assume the full truth of the Real and free ourselves from the repressive control of ideology that has been imposed on us. Otherwise, we can continue to live as the unknowing star of the capitalist reality show.

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