

How does the film 'The Truman Show' reflect social anxieties about power, free will and control in a surveillance and spectacle age?

In this essay, I will discuss the film 'The Truman Show' within two different contexts, the first is in a modern version of a surveillance society, the film is set in a TV type scenario with people controlling Truman like he's on a television set, in this essay I will be looking at this in the context of modern technology the most important of these being how social media can be used to survey people and how this can then be used to control them into consuming more products or trusting/distrusting the government etc. The next context that I will look at this film is the idea of spectacle in a way of trying to pacify the masses through constant consumption of advertising, or trying to tell people how to directly act such as caring about appearance, this is seen in 'The Truman Show' as he doesn't question his actions as no one else in his world does either in a certain way the actors in the universe of 'The Truman Show' are just as complicit in the spectacle of the world they have presented as Truman is. The reason I have chosen to look at 'The Truman Show' for this essay is because of its themes of surveillance and control, the ethical implications of observation and the different power dynamics at play between surveillance and the population who are subjected to it. The film also tackles issues of freedom and free will throughout the film Truman's free will is challenged which leads to him wanting to escape, seek freedom and take control of his life, this speaks to the human desire for freedom or at least an illusion of freedom within a constructed society. The rise of entertainment and media as a means of making the world more conformist and unquestioning the film shows the ethics of using someone's real life in order to distort the truth for commercial use, this can also be seen in the modern age with influencers distorting their own personal lives in order to make more money.

The theoretical perspective that I am looking at this is The Politics of Desire, firstly through the idea of surveillance, one way to look at this is through the lens of the panopticon, the panopticon is an idea for a prison that was developed by Jeremy Bentham, wherein prison guards could be watching all prisoners at the same time, the idea is that prisoners will stay in line even if they aren't being watched as they will have no idea if they are being watched or not. The idea of the panopticon has now evolved into what is now the digital panopticon, an idea that people will be controlled by technology and surveyed by it in such a sophisticated way that people will not even realise that they are being monitored and controlled. Michel Foucault is one of the perpetrators of this idea, he posed the idea in his book Discipline and Punishment that government have gone from physical punishment to psychological punishment, it is stated that this psychological control is now so sophisticated that people don't realise that they are falling in line even if they think they aren't. Michel Foucault wrote in his book Discipline and Punishment "Surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" this is to say that now that we live in a surveillance culture and it has become normalised, then it becomes the standard to the point that people are so used to it that they will keep in line even if the camera has no watching it.

This leads on to another key thinker in this debate, Gilles Deleuze who posed an idea that people will willingly give up their freedom as they will perceive control as freedom, an example of this in the modern day is buying a phone and having the illusion of choice when getting one even though it is always at the whims of companies to appeal to the masses and also governments

can then control what people are even allowed to look at on their phone. He said in his 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' that "We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world." Massive corporations have convinced people that they have the people's interests in mind and that surveillance is just a byproduct of giving people freedom and small amounts of dopamine. It could also be argued that giving up privacy can actually be a good thing as it leads to more security in people's lives.

Stuart Armstrong wrote about how a world entirely run by ai and total government can actually be enjoyable, he looked at several key elements and examples of this included lower crime rates, lower need for a police force, knowing what types of weaponry other countries have, and pandemics can also be quickly taken care of. As he said in his book 'Smarter Than Us' "If an AI possessed any one of these skills—social abilities, technological development, economic ability—at a superhuman level, it is quite likely that it would quickly come to dominate our world in one way or another." This is an interesting idea and brings into question if people are more interested in privacy or security, according to the Data and Marketing Association "In the UK, 31% of consumers are data unconcerned, meaning they show little or no concern about their data privacy." This isn't a high number when it comes to data however it does show that a percentage of people think that they have nothing to hide and aren't worried about being tracked because they have worth tracking anyway. This suggestion is one that is supported by a lot of people as they are continually led to believe that the only reason an organisation would want to track you is for your safety however this is not the case online when posts can make people change their political and social beliefs etc.

As for the spectacle aspect of this essay, the most important figure when it comes to the spectacle is Guy Debord. The spectacle in the broadest sense means a mediated society, one that is commodified by representations of things rather than the thing itself. For example human connection which is turned into a marketable product as people become increasingly concerned with being an idea of a person, think when people try to emulate celebrities that they look up to in the broadest sense to try and get people to like them more. More prominently the spectacle can be used to have power and control over people giving them a set a rules that are appropriate but having these rules have so many options that they give an illusion of choice an example of this could be jobs as there are hundreds of them but they are still limited but give the illusion that they encompasses everything someone might want to do with their life. Dubord wrote in his book 'Society of the Spectacle' "Just as early industrial capitalism moved the focus of existence from being to having, post-industrial culture has moved that focus from having to appearing." It is now much more important now to appear to have something than having the something . An example online would be influencers appearing with rented sports cars to appear that they have wealth or power.

The first context that 'The Truman Show' will be through the lens of a surveillance society. One of the main aspects of Trumans life in the film is the constant surveillance that is monitoring him throughout the film, this definitely spoke to growing concerns of privacy at the time as security cameras were getting more discreet and more common place. In a 2013 report, the British Security Industry Association (BSIA) estimated there were between 4-5.9 million cameras in the UK, this number is estimated to have gone up since. This is without mention the rise of home camera surveillance systems according to Statista "The global number of households with

smart security cameras was forecast to continuously increase between 2023 and 2027 by in total 81.84 million households” this is not mentioning the amount of phone cameras too. This is an exponential amount of growth in surveillance since the film came out, this might explain the reason ‘The Truman Show’ is still such a relevant film and speaks to anxieties about privacy that are more prevalent now than they were in 1998.

When looking through different philosophies about surveillance ‘The Truman Show’ has many interesting details that relate to different philosophies. First is the work of Jeremy Bentham and his idea of the panopticon, ‘The Truman Show’ portrays a panoptic level of surveillance there are very few scenes in the movie that don’t have a camera on screen that could be used to survey Truman and also make the audience watching feel like they are also watching the show, a lot of the camera angles in the film are positioned where they would be if it was a real show.



Next is the imbalance of knowledge presented in the film as Michel Foucault wrote “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” This shows a intertwine between power and knowledge, it makes sense that in a world that is entirely monitored by government that they would also be able to dictate the amount of Intelligence that can be achieved. In the film Truman seems to show an exceeding amount of knowledge considering the world that he has been presented with since birth, we see this at the part of the film where he wants to leave and travel the world as he starts to become more suspicious of the world around him. This could suggest that there is too much information being fed to him about the outside world which is ultimately the undoing of the whole universe they have presented him with. This relates to the work of Stephen Cave who wrote extensively about intelligence and how a people are able to lead and reason, he looks a lot at the work of Sir Francis Galton who wrote the book ‘Hereditary Genius’ as he wrote in the book “It is in the most unqualified manner that I object to pretensions of natural equality.” He uses an example of a blacksmith who might be able to build muscle by working but is still limited by their own mental capacity to their abilities. This is to say that Truman shows an amount of awareness about the world that he has been presented with, that could only happen if he already had an innate idea of what the world would be. This could be seen as proof, at least within the confines of the film, that a surveillance on this mass of a scale would be unnecessary and most likely would not work in order to control people. One important aspect of control is the ability to control people by limiting the amount of information that is shown to them, during the rain scene in the film Truman is aware that it is

abnormal for him to be the sole victim of rain, this type of abnormal behavior is ultimately the undoing of the entire operation.

This can be seen in the work of Giorgio Agamben and his work on the 'State of Exception' this is an idea that is described as a state where normal rule of law no longer applies under an emergency which then allows for previously strange or unusual things to become normalised during this emergency period, as Agamben wrote "One of the essential characteristics of the state of exception-the provisional abolition of the distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers-here shows its tendency to become a lasting practice of government." An example of this could be nuclear weapons after World War II. Christof is the creator of the constructed world in which Truman inhabits, this world is a 'state of exception' where the normal rules of society no longer apply to create a controlled for entertainment purposes. During the film Truman's free will is suspended which mirrors the way in which a state of exception may impose a controlled reality onto the population, through this stripping of Truman's



free will Christof claims to give Truman a perfect life that is void of suffering and uncertainty. It could be said that Truman's eventual realisation that the world around him is manufactured speaks to a real life want for free will which will always overcome manufactured control.

Next is the work of Isaiah Berlin and his papers on trading privacy for for security, 'The Truman Show' poses the question of what is freedom? Does Freedom allow people the opportunity to pursue the life they want or does it just prevent them from doing certain things.

"Both liberty and equality are among the primary goals pursued by human beings throughout many centuries; but total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted." (Berlin, I. 1959)

He also coined the terms Positive and Negative Liberty in his book "Two Concepts of Liberty, they are defined as follows "Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense." and "Positive liberty is the possibility of acting — or the fact of acting — in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes." In the film Truman's negative liberty is restricted by the bounds that Christof has constructed for him, things like his

relationship and the actions he is able to commit, within the boundaries of Seahaven Island. Truman can then believe that he is free because he is unaware that his life is even being constrained, this highlights that even when a subject is unaware of interference, negative liberty can still be undermined. As for positive liberty Truman deciding to leave Seahaven is an assertion of positive liberty in spite of the condition this self realisation he has, makes it so that he can take ownership of his life. Christof also believes that he is giving Truman positive liberty, however according to Berlin there are dangers involved in co-opting positive liberty "It is that positive theories of freedom, or perversions of them, have been more frequently used as instruments of oppression than have negative ones." Christof assumes he knows what is best for Truman almost treating him as a child in a paternal role, which then makes it so that he is able to have authoritarian control without feeling guilty about it.

During the ending scene where Truman is leaving Seahaven and talks to Christof for the first time, it gives an interesting insight into how Christof views Truman, instead of feeling of feeling apologetic towards Truman he tries to justify his actions to Truman and more importantly himself by telling Truman how much he inspired the people watching the show, he also gets annoyed at Truman for not being able to answer his questions, this shows what type of person Christof is and how he doesn't view Truman as a victim of spectacle but rather as a child who should be happy he has been sheltered from the outside world.

When looking at this film through the lens of the spectacle it brings up interesting ideas about the Truman Show. One work of interest is the work of Naomi Klein's book 'The Shock Doctrine' the book focuses on different ways that capitalism can be used in order to create a fabricated narrative in order to maintain power. One way of doing this according to Klein is to take advantage of shocks that destabilise society, examples of this include natural disasters and wide scale wars that then allow for governments to rebuild new systems in their place. As Klein wrote "Extreme violence has a way of preventing us from seeing the interests it serves." This is in line with the way that Christof in the film uses constructed systems in order to keep Truman in the dark about the policies that he is creating for him. One way that these powers operate is by enforcing harmful changes through the lens that there is no other solution by keeping the population unaware of alternative solutions. In the film Truman has trauma associated with water because his father drowned whilst out at sea with Truman as a boy, it's these things that keep Truman in line to ensure that he doesn't question his world as he wouldn't be able to escape even if he wanted to. Klein wrote in her book 'Doppelgänger' "Our education did not ask us to probe the parts of ourselves that might be capable of inflicting great harm on others, and to figure out how to resist them."

As for how The Truman Show parallels contemporary dialogues in the modern age about technology and monitoring, first is mass surveillance which as previously stated has increased by not only governments but also corporations who don't have the best interests of public safety in mind and are more interested in profiting from consumers. Like Truman who isn't aware to the extent of which he is being tracked, people in the modern world are also unaware of how much they are being tracked through data, using data governments are able to keep track of people without needing to literally watch them through camera surveillance. Social media platforms are able to collect a large amount of data through surveillance and AI without clear consensual communication, often times these are hidden in the terms and conditions which a majority of

people don't read or understand regardless, a customer shouldn't be expected to read these terms and conditions and there should be a different simpler way to present this information to the public. As for the spectacle, the film shows how the entertainment industry would evolve over the coming years to focus more on reality and making life a spectacle, shows like 'Big Brother' and 'Keeping Up With The Kardashians' would come out years after the film and would be about turning private lives into spectacles the same way that the audience craves Truman's life to be filled with fake dramatics. Social media often blurs the lines between reality and the want to have a speculative life that can be entertaining to other people, they curate entertaining narratives the same way Truman's life is curated by Christof, trends online can often dictate what is and isn't appropriate to post there is an unwritten set of rules that certain things can only be posted as they have to be entertaining to the people looking at them, this makes it so that people don't show the realities of their lives but rather an exaggerated version where they are able to make an entertaining narrative for their followers.

In conclusion, 'The Truman Show' offers an interesting insight into surveillance and how it can be used for entertainment and spectacle, as well as keeping people safe and dictating lives. The film uses the idea of the panopticon in many different ways, its use of surveillance in this way can definitely be compared to modern day anxieties about mobile phone and technology tracking, it is known that in the modern world if requested the police and government can track activity and even look at private messages sent on WhatsApp etc. so what's stopping governments from tracking other information as well as provoking people to see certain things that could make them vote certain ways which means that browsers and websites can have agendas that make it easier to swing elections or make people accept things as normalised etc. Next the film shows a way that people will give up their free will without even realising it, this is certainly true for Truman however this is also true for the actors who are willing participants in the delusion, this could also be a way of showing how people if they contribute to a society even in a consensual way they are still contributing to the larger delusion of a constructed society. Stuart Armstrong's ideas of that some people may enjoy being a part of a world that is entirely governmentally controlled is not supported at all within this film, we see multiple people in the film leave Truman's life as they start to feel genuinely sorry for him as well as provoking him to understand that the world around him isn't real, more obviously Truman takes the choice at the end of the film to leave which definitely supports the idea that a majority of people want freedom and free will at least in most aspects of their day to day life they want to be able to feel like they are making significant decisions and choices that matter. The film certainly reflects a lot of social anxieties about the world today as well as touching on themes of surveillance and spectacle, the biggest thing that dates the film in today's climate however is attention span which wouldn't adhere to a long form show like this however when everybody on social media is Truman and only shows the most interesting parts of their lives it makes the film a lot more relevant today than it even was at the time.

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