

LIVING WITHIN A PANOPTICON: THE TRUMAN SHOW'S SURVEILLANCE, POWER, AND EXPLOITATION

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Abstract

*This study explores *The Truman Show* (1998) through the lens of Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism to understand how surveillance functions as a form of control and exploitation in contemporary media. By employing a qualitative descriptive method with textual analysis, the research investigates how Truman's life, embedded within a reality television setting, exemplifies the normalization of surveillance. The film reflects real-world parallels such as social media's invisible influence and celebrity exploitation, notably Britney Spears' conservatorship. Through selected scenes, the study identifies mechanisms of control ranging from spatial boundaries and routine normalization to emotional manipulation and audience complicity. Findings reveal how surveillance extends beyond external observation and becomes internalized, shaping identity and behavior. Ultimately, *The Truman Show* portrays a critical view of entertainment media's capacity to commodify human life and violate individual autonomy under the guise of entertainment. This paper contributes to the discourse on media ethics, human rights, and the ethical implications of surveillance in digital culture.*

Keywords: Entertainment, Exploitation, Human Rights, Surveillance, *The Truman Show*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis *The Truman Show* (1998) dengan menggunakan teori panoptisisme Michel Foucault untuk memahami bagaimana pengawasan berfungsi sebagai bentuk kontrol dan eksploitasi dalam media kontemporer. Melalui metode deskriptif kualitatif dan analisis tekstual, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana kehidupan Truman yang berada dalam program realitas televisi menggambarkan normalisasi pengawasan. Film ini mencerminkan realitas dunia nyata seperti pengaruh tersembunyi media sosial dan eksploitasi selebriti, seperti yang dialami oleh Britney Spears dalam masa konservatoriumnya. Dari sejumlah adegan, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi mekanisme kontrol, mulai dari batasan spasial, normalisasi rutinitas, manipulasi emosional, hingga keterlibatan penonton. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pengawasan tidak hanya terjadi secara eksternal, tetapi juga menjadi bagian dari identitas dan perilaku individu. *The Truman Show* pada akhirnya mengkritisi bagaimana media hiburan dapat mengkomodifikasi kehidupan manusia dan melanggar otonomi individu atas nama hiburan. Studi ini berkontribusi pada diskursus etika media, hak asasi manusia, dan implikasi etis pengawasan dalam budaya digital.

Kata kunci: Hiburan, Eksploitasi, Hak Asasi Manusia, Pengawasan, *The Truman Show*

I. INTRODUCTION

Released in 1998 and directed by Peter Weir, *The Truman Show* tells the story of Truman Burbank, a man who unknowingly lives his entire life inside a massive, artificially constructed television set. From birth, Truman has been the unwitting star of a reality TV show broadcast to millions around the world, with every aspect of his environment including his family, friends, and hometown carefully scripted and controlled by the show's creator, Christof. Set in the idyllic town of Seahaven, Truman begins to sense inconsistencies in his world, leading him to question the reality around him. As he uncovers the truth, the film evolves

into a compelling exploration of surveillance, manipulation, and the illusion of free will. Through its unique premise, *The Truman Show* offers a powerful commentary on the consequences of constant observation, making it an ideal subject for analysis through Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism.

The Truman Show is a science fiction psychological drama that blends elements of satire and dystopia to critique modern media culture. The film centers on Truman Burbank, an ordinary man whose entire life has been broadcast live on television since birth, unbeknownst to him. His hometown, Seahaven, is actually a giant set enclosed in a dome, populated by actors, and controlled by hidden cameras and production crews. The show is masterminded by Christof, a powerful television producer who monitors Truman's every move and manipulates his environment to maintain the illusion of a perfect life. However, as Truman begins to notice strange occurrences such as a falling stage light, repeated patterns in daily events, and a voice on the radio describing his movements he grows increasingly suspicious. The story follows Truman's psychological journey as he struggles to break free from the manufactured reality and discover the truth about his existence.

In addition to its commentary on surveillance, *The Truman Show* also invites analysis through the lens of psychological theories, particularly Attachment Theory. Developed by John Bowlby, Attachment Theory emphasizes the importance of early emotional bonds and relationships in shaping an individual's development and behavior. Truman's relationships, especially with his parents, wife, and best friend are all artificially constructed by the show's producers to maintain his emotional attachment to Seahaven and prevent him from seeking the truth beyond the dome. These attachments are strategically used to manipulate his decisions and emotions, reinforcing his dependence on a false reality. For instance, moments of doubt or rebellion are often countered with staged emotional appeals from those he trusts, keeping him psychologically tethered to the environment. By analyzing Truman's interactions through this framework, we can see how emotional manipulation becomes a tool of control, reflecting the deeper ethical concerns of media exploitation and fabricated intimacy.

This study is motivated by the lack of attention to how emotional attachment functions as an internalized form of control in surveillance-based narratives. Previous discussions have mostly focused on visual observation, leaving a gap in exploring emotional manipulation as a complementary strategy of power.

This study aims to explore how *The Truman Show* illustrates the concept of surveillance as a method of control and exploitation through the lens of Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism, while also considering the psychological implications using Attachment Theory. The central research questions guiding this analysis are: (1) How does the film represent surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism in line with panoptic theory? and (2) In what ways do emotional attachments reinforce control within the surveillance system depicted in the film?

Recent scholarship has contributed to understanding the film's relevance to media, psychology, and power structures. Setiawan and Suryani (2021) examined surveillance and media control in *The Truman Show* as a reflection of contemporary societal issues. Similarly, Ramadhani (2022) analyzed how emotional manipulation in the film aligns with psychological control, emphasizing Truman's relationships as tools of dominance. More recently, Zhang and Li (2023) explored how Foucault's panopticism can be applied to reality television culture, using *The Truman Show* as a key reference. These studies underscore the film's continued relevance and provide a foundation for a deeper interdisciplinary analysis that incorporates both Foucauldian theory and psychological perspectives. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute to the understanding of modern surveillance practices by combining panoptic theory with psychological frameworks in media analysis.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design with textual analysis as the primary method. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative descriptive research allows for the interpretation of meaning within texts and visual media. Textual analysis, as applied here, is ideal for examining film as a cultural artifact shaped by ideology and power. The Truman Show (1998), which was directed by Peter Weir, is the main object of the study. The data is collected through close reading and interpretation of selected scenes, dialogues, character behavior, and visual symbolism that reflect surveillance and control. The analysis is guided by Michel Foucault's theory of surveillance and power, particularly the concept of panopticism. It offers a sociological and philosophical framework for comprehending how ongoing observation can influence and shape human behavior.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Michel Foucault's theory of surveillance, which is the idea of panopticism as it is presented in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977), is used in this study to analyze *The Truman Show* (1998). In exploring this topic, we find that Truman Burbank's entire life appears to be situated within a media-controlled panoptic system, where constant visibility serves as a subtle yet powerful tool of control. The fact that surveillance is not only ongoing but also normative in this fictional yet terribly prescient setting reflects Foucault's claim that "visibility is a trap" (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). Truman follows the rules and believes in the world created for him, just like how people today are shaped by hidden influences and powerful systems, like media or government. For example, social media often affects how we think, act, or feel about ourselves, without us even realizing it, much like Truman doesn't know he's being watched and controlled.

Additionally, there are some similarities between Truman's made-up story and real-life cases like Britney Spears' conservatorship, where the media and the law allowed a system that took away personal freedom (New York Times, 2021; Gill, 2007). Spears' lack of control over her own image, finances, and mobility for over a decade exemplifies how celebrity culture intersects with systemic exploitation under public gaze and commercial interests (Cusick, 2021). Spears' loss of control over her image, finances, and personal freedom reflects how celebrity culture can enable systematic exploitation under constant public gaze (Cusick, 2021). Similarly, *The Truman Show* portrays Truman as a subject of continuous surveillance and manipulation, echoing Foucault's panopticism, where observation becomes a tool of control. Both cases reveal how media systems can strip individuals of autonomy for profit, turning real lives into entertainment under the illusion of normalcy.

This reveals not only how surveillance is imposed externally but also how it can become internalized as part of one's identity and sense of reality. In this context, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek sees *The Truman Show* as a tragicomic reversal of the Bentham-Orwellian surveillance model. Žižek affirms that the situation is "a reversal of the panopticon society in which we are observed all the time," suggesting that Truman's anxiety stems not from being watched—but from the possibility of not being watched. The gaze of the camera becomes, for Truman, a form of ontological security, a confirmation of his existence (Žižek, 2005).

The following discussion is divided into some analytical sections:

1. The Technical and Architectural Development of Surveillance in Truman's Setting.

Truman's entire life is structured within a simulated town, Seahaven, built to enable 24/7 observation. His home, workplace, and even the sky are fitted with hidden cameras, resembling a panoptic system where "the inmate is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information,

never a subject in communication” (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). In the pic1, that was the scene during a live interview, a caller asks Christof, the show’s creator, “I was just wondering how many cameras you have in that town,” to which Christof calmly responds, “Somewhere in the vicinity of five thousand.” This staggering number reflects the intensity of the surveillance apparatus in Seahaven and underscores the panoptic nature of the environment Truman inhabits. The design of Seahaven (shown in pic 1) echoes the prison structure described in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. The Psychological and Behavioral Impact of Being Constantly Observed.

Although Truman is unaware of the surveillance for most of his life. In the pic 3 Truman didn't know there was a camera behind the radio tip, his behavior is shaped by social expectations orchestrated by the media team. Which also matches Foucault’s idea that the prison is only opened one- way to the surveillant and not to the prisoner. As Foucault suggests, surveillance works not only through external constraints but through internalized discipline. Truman’s fear of the sea like shown on the pic 3, for example, is a manufactured phobia designed to keep him physically restricted. In this pic 4 the boat symbolizes the psychological barriers imposed. As Truman hesitates at the edge of the dock, too afraid to cross the water, the boat becomes a representation of his internalized fear and the effectiveness of the disciplinary system that surrounds him.

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3. Consent and the Illusion of Free Will under Surveillance. (kristof bilang dia nyimpen kamera baby)

In the picture it shows that Truman’s life is broadcast from birth, and he is never given the opportunity to opt in or out. Yet he appears to exercise free will by choosing friends, a partner, and a job, all of which are artificially controlled. This illusion of freedom reflects Foucault’s argument that power is most effective when it is internalized. In digital media today, users "consent" to data tracking through terms and conditions they rarely understand, similar to Truman’s passive consent to an environment that manipulates his autonomy (Zuboff, 2019). fitted with hidden cameras, resembling a panoptic system where “the inmate is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). In the minute 00:00 Christof, the creator of the show, gives an interview near the end of the movie. During the interview, he explains how Truman was chosen. He says that “Truman was selected from five unwanted pregnancies” These babies had cameras on them from birth, and Truman was the one who was ultimately chosen to be the star of the show.

4. Surveillance as Entertainment: How the Audience Is Involved and Enjoys Watching

The film critiques not only institutional power but also the complicity of the audience. Viewers of *The Truman Show* are emotionally invested, forming parasocial relationships with

Truman while ignoring the moral cost of his exploitation. In picture 6, we can see how enthusiastic people are, as they mark how many days the Truman Show has been running. It says that it's been the 10,900th day since the show started.

This mirrors modern viewers of reality TV or social media livestreams, where the entertainment value often overrides ethical considerations. The phenomenon of "surveillance as spectacle" is well-documented in media studies (Mathiesen, 1997), with audiences becoming normalized to watching real lives unfold as content.

5. Emotional Disruption as Resistance: Love, Memory, and the Cracks in Control.

When Truman develops feelings for Sylvia, a character who briefly enters his life before being kicked out from the set. In contrast to the other cast members, Sylvia attempts to tell Truman the truth, sowing skepticism that eventually blossoms into resistance. In scene number 7 Sylvia convinces Truman by saying "Look, Truman... I don't have much time. I have to tell you something. Something you have to understand. Everybody knows everything you do. They're pretending, Truman. Do you understand? Everyone's pretending." After that, Sylvia is pulled away, and a man claiming to be her father says she has schizophrenia and is taking her "home." But we, as the audience, know she was telling the truth and trying to save Truman. After his meeting with Sylvia he can't stop thinking about her even after his marriage with Meryl. This moment represents a fracture in the surveillance system, a moment where genuine emotion and human connection transcend the script. Foucault notes that systems of control are always vulnerable to resistance, and in *The Truman Show*, love becomes that point of rupture. Truman's growing suspicion, fueled by memory and desire, reflects how surveillance may shape behavior, but not fully erase individuality or the will to break free (Foucault, 1977; hooks, 2000).

6. Reasserting Control: The Return of Truman's Father as a Power Mechanism.

The moment Truman suddenly runs into his father, who is thought to be dead, on the street represents a serious malfunction in the well planned surveillance system. His unscripted return threatens to expose the artificiality of Truman's world. The media team, led by Christof, quickly intervenes, having the father removed and framing the incident within a dramatic reunion storyline later on to contain Truman's growing suspicion.

From Foucault's perspective, this is a time of crisis in the monitoring mechanism. It demonstrates how authority reacts when the subject starts acting differently than intended. The system scrambles to restore order not by punishing Truman, but by reinforcing emotional control through spectacle and manipulation. Truman's reaction of confusion, longing, and renewed distrust also illustrates how surveillance operates not just through watching, but through the orchestration of truth and memory.

This scene reflects how surveillance is not only visual but also narrative. The father's return is not about truth or closure, but about re-inscribing discipline through emotional manipulation.

7. Surveillance Through Intimacy: Meryl as a Disciplinary Agent in Disguise.

Meryl constantly monitors Truman under the guise of marital duty while subtly redirecting his suspicions or emotional disruptions. For instance, when Truman begins questioning reality, she responds with artificial reassurance or commercial-style product placements, turning their private life into a scripted ad. In picture number 8, In this scene, Meryl attempts to pacify Truman's growing restlessness and desire to explore beyond their town by suggesting comfort and intimacy at home. Meryl attempts to divert Truman's growing

awareness by seducing him and reinforcing social norms. She resists the idea of leaving, and instead says, “You know we're on the verge of having a baby.” Meryl’s sudden shift to discussing children and their domestic plans represents the enforcement of normative roles (wife, husband, future parents) intended to anchor Truman in the life constructed for him. Her approach is a tactic to redirect his attention and maintain the illusion of their controlled environment.

From a Foucauldian perspective, Meryl functions as part of the disciplinary apparatus. Foucault (1977) discusses how power does not only function through external institutions but also through the internalization of norms and roles. Meryl helps impose those norms by modeling “acceptable” behavior and subtly punishing deviation—often through gaslighting or scripted denial. Her presence keeps Truman’s emotional and behavioral boundaries within the limits defined by the producers, making her an agent of biopower—the management of bodies and lives in the service of systemic control.

8. Spatial Boundaries and the Illusion of Escape: Fiji as a Symbol of Resistance.

Truman’s desire to go to Fiji is more than just a plot point just like in the scene he went to the travel agency to go to Fiji “I would like to book a flight to Fiji,” he said to the madam. the woman hesitates and says something along the lines of: “I am sorry I have nothing to release in a month” answered the madam. This excuse is clearly fabricated to delay or prevent Truman from leaving. Earlier in the movie, we also see a poster in the travel agency that reads: “It Could Happen to You!” in the pic 11 This fear-based propaganda is another subtle tool of social conditioning, designed to make Truman afraid of the outside world and accept the comfort of staying put.

This scene represents his subconscious rebellion against the invisible structures of surveillance that define his life. a symbolic "outside" a space he associates with truth, freedom, and emotional authenticity (specifically, with Sylvia). But every time he tries to leave Seahaven, the system intervenes just like what the madam in the pic did.

From a Foucauldian lens, this reflects how power controls not only visibility but also movement and space. As Foucault (1977) explains, surveillance is supported by physical structures and spatial limitations designed to produce docile bodies. Seahaven is constructed like a panopticon—Truman *thinks* he is free to move, but every route is monitored, blocked, or psychologically reinforced to keep him in.

Fiji is crucial because it exposes how the panoptic system maintains control not through force, but through manipulated perception. The more Truman desires Fiji, the more the system must react to preserve the illusion of normalcy and discourage resistance. His yearning shows that even under deep surveillance, the human drive for truth, connection, and freedom cannot be fully suppressed.

9. Routine as Control: Normalization Through Repetition.

Truman’s repetitive greetings, movements, and daily rituals, always waking at the same time, driving the same route, meeting the same people are not just quirks of his character, but intentional constructions of control by the show's creators. Director Christof himself points out that consistency and routine are what keep Truman predictable and manageable. His scripted interactions reinforce the illusion of free will, while actually functioning as subtle disciplinary mechanisms.

Truman’s repeated habit of cheerfully greeting his neighbors every morning is a deceptively simple but symbolically rich part of *The Truman Show*. It’s a great example of how routine, normalization, and social scripting are used to maintain control. Each morning,

Truman steps out of his house and greets his neighbors with the same friendly line: “Good morning! And in case I don’t see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night!”. The exchange is repetitive, predictable, and performs normality. This routine is one of the first things we learn about Truman. It shows him as a cheerful, well-adjusted, polite member of his community, someone who fits perfectly into the mold of an ideal suburban citizen.

According to Foucault (1977), one of the key functions of surveillance is to produce “*docile bodies*” individuals who self-regulate their behavior because the system has trained them to do so. In this context, Truman’s routines show how power doesn’t need to exert force directly; instead, it creates norms that individuals *voluntarily follow*. Truman doesn’t resist his routine initially because it feels natural, until disruptions (like Sylvia or seeing his “dead” father) trigger awareness that something is wrong.

10. The Creator Complex: Power, Control, and the Ethics of Playing God.

Christof, the creator and director of *The Truman Show*, represents the ultimate figure of panoptic power: an unseen authority who watches, controls, and justifies his domination as care. He claims, “*Truman prefers his cell,*” implying that people desire the comfort of control over the risks of freedom. This reflects Foucault’s notion that modern power is most effective when it disguises itself as benevolence or protection. In the dialogue he says “There’s no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. The same lies, the same deceit. But in my world, you have nothing to fear.” Christof genuinely believes Truman will choose safety, comfort, and predictability over the unknown dangers of the real world.

In a Foucauldian panopticon system, the goal is not only to observe but also to shape and define what is *normal, desirable, and safe*. Christof uses this logic to justify surveillance: he believes he knows what’s best for Truman. This mirrors modern institutions, governments, tech companies, media corporations that assert control over individuals “for their own good,” while profiting from their data and behavior.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that *The Truman Show* illustrates the complex dynamics of surveillance, power, and media exploitation using Foucault’s concept of panopticism. Truman’s constructed reality serves as a metaphor for the modern individual’s experience under digital surveillance and systemic control. The film’s layered portrayal of surveillance reveals how visibility, normalization, and internalized discipline can erode autonomy and reshape identity. Through Truman’s journey, the audience witnesses the profound ethical concerns surrounding media practices, where entertainment is derived from an individual’s lack of agency. This study highlights the urgent need for a critical reassessment of media ethics, especially as real-life parallels like celebrity control and social media manipulation mirror the film’s fictional narrative.

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