

Surveillance, discipline, and breaking free: a study of the cinematic narrative of *The Truman Show* and its metaphors for the digital age

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Abstract. *The Truman Show* (1998) constructs, through extreme imagination, a "real" life that has been meticulously choreographed for more than thirty years. The protagonist, Truman Burbank, lives in the idyllic seaside town of Seahaven, where his entire life is secretly filmed and broadcast as a television program, all without his knowledge. Blending a thriller-like exterior with a tender core, the film poses the disturbing question of whether, when a cage is decorated comfortably and realistically enough, the disciplined individual can still perceive it—and resist it. This study analyzes the film across four layers: the ontological layer, the narrative layer, the authorial layer, and the cultural layer. Methodologically, the study integrates the film's screenplay, interviews with the creators, and film criticism to conduct a cross-analysis of the film's surveillance spectacle, the protagonist's awakening, its creative origins, and its real-world resonance. The study finds that the disciplinary theme of *The Truman Show*, far from being an isolated on-screen narrative, is structurally homologous with contemporary algorithmic recommendation, social media, and the standardized life. Escaping one form of discipline does not mean attaining absolute freedom, true freedom lies in maintaining a clear awareness of discipline and in keeping the courage to push open the door to reality. This study may serve as a reference for research on media and discipline in audiovisual texts, as well as for discussions of individual freedom in the digital age.

Keywords: *The Truman Show*, discipline, information cocoon, individual freedom

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, media narratives revolving around whether "reality is real" have continued to emerge, and *The Truman Show* is among the most penetrating of them: it pushes the spectacle of the observed everyday life to its extreme, revealing how individuals embedded in a "manufactured reality" can be disciplined without realizing it. This study adopts the theory of discipline proposed by the French philosopher Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* as its analytical framework, focusing on how power techniques such as "hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination" covertly shape docile individuals [1]. As for existing research on the film, scholars have begun to approach *The Truman Show* from the angle of "surveillance and identity deconstruction," pointing out that the film uses continuous surveillance as a form of mass

entertainment and thereby responds to the fin-de-siècle anxiety over the spread of CCTV in urban life [2]. However, research that systematically traces the film's surveillance structure, the awakening of its character, and its resonance with reality from the perspective of disciplinary theory remains relatively limited.

Against this background, this study combines the screenplay, interviews with the creators, and film criticism. It examines the complete disciplinary mechanism constructed by *The Truman Show* through its images across the ontological, narrative, authorial, and cultural layers, and explores its echoes with self-discipline and algorithmic discipline in contemporary digital society. It offers an operational analytical path for research on media and discipline in audiovisual texts, and serves as a warning and reference for examining issues of privacy, freedom, and algorithms in the digital age.

2. The ontological layer: the surveillance spectacle of being watched

The ontological layer aims to answer how the film constructs "surveillance" as a disciplinary apparatus on the surface of its imagery. The opening scene of the screenplay is the most direct presentation of this apparatus: the camera examines Truman through a "two-way mirror" in the bathroom, while he talks to himself in front of the mirror, as if taking part in a television interview. This opening immediately declares that the audience is peering through a one-way glass into a life utterly unaware of being observed. In other words, from the very first shot, the relationship between "seeing" and "being seen" is established: Truman's private monologue, which he believes to be solitary, has long been drawn into a comprehensive, all-encompassing system of surveillance. This "being seen" of which he remains unaware is precisely the precondition for discipline to take effect: only when individuals believe they are free can surveillance shape patterns of behavior without their ever noticing [3].

The entire town of Seahaven is set as "the largest soundstage in the world," and *The Truman Show* is also acclaimed as the "longest-running documentary soap opera." By now the program has been running for sixteen years, and the hidden cameras distributed across the island of Seahaven cover every corner of Truman's life. The ring-shaped set continuously reinforces the metaphor of being "trapped inside". In the film, behind the elevator there is plainly a fake set with no back wall, and the passengers who ought to be there are merely standby extras, every "perfection" of Seahaven serves the panoramic viewing and recording of it, and these carefully arranged sets are precisely the reality constructed by the media behind a costume of signs [4].

From a Foucauldian perspective, the ubiquitous cameras in the film are the most direct visualization of hierarchical observation, and the city of Seahaven itself is a precisely functioning model of a disciplinary society. Truman is precisely a carefully manufactured product of discipline. Here it is necessary to point out the structural homology between Foucault's "Panopticon" and the space of Seahaven: in the Panopticon, a central watchtower can observe every cell on the ring-shaped periphery, while the prisoners, unable to determine whether they are being watched at any given moment, internalize the gaze of the guard into an ever-present self-constraint. The ring-shaped monitoring tower atop Seahaven resembles this watchtower: Truman can never confirm whether a given camera is pointed at him, so his behavior is no longer constrained by external force, but is self-docilized by the possibility of "being seen." What truly sustains discipline in the long run is not continuous gazing itself, but this uncertainty of "whether one is being watched," which transforms power from external coercion into the individual's internal self-discipline [1]. The film wraps this mechanism within a "flawless community" on display, allowing the audience, while appreciating its sweet surface, to also glimpse the most unobtrusive way discipline operates.

3. Narrative layer: from immersion to escape—the awakening

Throughout the thirty-year live-streamed life, Truman initially remains trapped in unconscious conformity, believing his wife, neighbors, and colleagues to be genuine. Yet a series of inexplicable flaws begins to unravel his world: the reappearance of his father, burdened by the trauma of "drowning", the crossed fingers in his wife's photograph, and the crowd lurking behind the elevator set—all of which lead Truman to realize that his "world" may be fake.

These three flaws strike respectively at three dimensions of disciplinary control. First, the sudden reappearance of his deceased father, who is then led away by a stranger, directly undermines Truman's trust in the greatest emotional bond—that of "close kin." When even the shadows of childhood memory may be a deliberately staged drama, the individual can no longer be certain of any intimate relationship. Second, his wife's crossed fingers in the wedding photo (a gesture that, in Western culture, is used to pray for good luck and to offset a lie) unconsciously expose her identity as a "performer," revealing that even the closest person is complicit in this performance—the community of acquaintances thus collapses into a conspiracy unanimously acquiesced to by all. Third, when the elevator doors open, the extras awaiting their cues stand behind what should have been an empty set, allowing Truman to see with his own eyes how the "scene" operates, thereby fully confirming the unreality of the space. These three flaws collapse simultaneously across the dimensions of emotion, relationship, and space. Only then does the "reality" of Truman's world begin to loosen, and his awakening acquires concrete, traceable triggers [3].

Truman's awakening follows a complete and progressive trajectory: immersion, perception, testing, and ultimate escape. When he tries to sail away, the creator even deploys a staged shipwreck in an attempt to drown him. But Truman ultimately overcomes the hydrophobia rooted in his childhood, sails to the edge of the set, touches with his own hand the dome wall painted to resemble the sky, and finally pushes open the door to the real world. In terms of the universality of its theme, Truman has been called "the Everyman of the late twentieth century", his departure from a man-made paradise toward the real world elevates the film from a science-fiction parable to a universal metaphor for the condition of modern people.

Notably, Truman's unique manner of awakening and escape constitutes the most powerful irony and negation of the disciplinary mechanism. He does not regain his freedom through violent revolution or external rescue, rather, by means of a single one-time test—"let's see if I can get out"—he exposes a flaw in the supposedly flawless system. This reveals that discipline, seemingly impenetrable as iron, in fact depends on the acquiescence of the disciplined, who never actively question it. Once the individual begins to assert his own will, the cage instantly becomes visible. At the film's end, Truman bows to the creator and bids farewell with "Good morning, and in case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night"—a solemn expression of gratitude and a resolute parting: he is grateful to the "world" that raised him for thirty years, yet firmly chooses to step into a reality full of the unknown and risk. Equally significant is that Christof, who styles himself Truman's "creator," still urges him to return by arguing that "the outside world is more dangerous and more fake," attempting to persuade Truman back into the cage with fear—which precisely confirms the final operation of disciplinary power: when physical imprisonment fails, psychological discipline imposed in the name of "protection" and "safety" becomes the last means of maintaining control [1]. Truman's answer to this is to walk through the door without looking back.

Viewed through the lens of discipline theory, Truman's awakening is precisely a negation of the "internalization of discipline": the more he realizes he has been disciplined, the more intensely his free will erupts.

4. Authorial layer: creative origins and the "de-darkening" rewrite

Having examined the on-screen surveillance at the ontological layer and the protagonist's awakening at the narrative layer, we now turn to the specific creative provenance behind this textual construction. According to a scholarly monograph on director Peter Weir's films, Weir excels at carrying existential anxiety within stylized visual forms and is known for his "far-sighted" construction of reality [5]. Image and documentary materials surrounding *The Truman Show* likewise demonstrate that the film underwent a shift in set design, structure, and theme—from "dystopian parable" to "light popular parable" [6].

Screenwriter Andrew Niccol is a New Zealand-born screenwriter and director. According to a 2023 interview in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Niccol completed *The Truman Show* script first but, because of a wait for the lead actor's schedule, another dystopian science-fiction film, *Gattaca*, was released first. He also admitted that the film's original creative conception was considerably more somber in tone [7]. Previous articles further revealed that in the early script Truman was portrayed in a darker light, including more sinister plot points such as attempting to drown his wife and an affair with a prostitute, the initial draft was originally set in a parallel-universe New York, whose crow-like urban character was far removed from the final sunny paradise [8, 9].

The turning point came after director Peter Weir took over. Weir felt that Niccol's initial draft was too dark in tone and its urban setting unrealistic, and so rewrote it repeatedly with Niccol, ultimately abandoning the dark setting in favor of a lighter, utopia-shelled paradise setting, choosing as the filming location Seaside, Florida—a candy-colored, carefully planned community [9]. This adaptation of "wrapping tragedy in comedy" is precisely what distinguishes the film from an ordinary thriller: the creators let the audience experience profound shivers about existence and freedom amid laughter. From a critical text addressing technological anxiety to a parable that makes the public "shiver while laughing," the creative choices at the authorial layer are themselves the best footnote to how "discipline" can be effectively disseminated.

5. Cultural layer: the triple "disciplinary cage" of the digital age

If the discipline on screen is director-led and physically visible, the discipline of contemporary society is far more concealed. What traps Truman are sunshine, neighbors, childhood, and the soundstage, whereas the existential predicament facing modern individuals derives from a triple discipline of the self, of the algorithm, and of society.

First, self-discipline. Research has shown that cyberspace has become a new type of disciplinary field, in which people are quietly shaped amid seemingly free leisure and entertainment through information services such as the algorithmically recommended "Guess What You Like," thereby limiting their genuine pursuit and experience of personal well-being during online leisure. The insidiousness of this self-discipline lies in the fact that it never appears in a coercive form, but instead wears the caring guise of "satisfying you" and "understanding you." Every time a user clicks "Guess What You Like," he or she appears to be exercising free choice but is in fact repeatedly confirming the preferences the algorithm has preset for them, and in turn becomes part of the training data for the algorithm. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault points out that the brilliance of disciplinary power lies in making the disciplined participate voluntarily, in the context of online leisure, users precisely complete the discipline of themselves in a voluntary, proactive, and pleasurable manner. At the moment of being "satisfied," individuals jointly participate in a conspiracy to shrink their own boundaries, often without any awareness at all [1, 10].

Second, algorithmic discipline. Recommendation algorithms, in the name of "free choice," push users again and again back into familiar domains, which over time confines them within an information cocoon,

isolating them from heterogeneous information and reducing them to "prisoners" of the algorithm. Compared with the ubiquitous hidden cameras in the paradise, algorithmic discipline is closer to a form of "invisible surveillance". It does not record Truman-esque private life but precisely traces users' attention, emotions, and click trajectories, anticipating what users want to watch before they ever open a screen. Truman is watched by thousands of cameras in the soundstage. Similarly, modern people are watched by the "digital portrait" constructed by algorithms. The former is an enclosure of physical space, and the latter an enclosure of mental and informational boundaries. Both, in the name of "personalization," "safety," and "precision," make individuals walk ever narrower paths on tracks they believe to be free, until they completely lose the ability to access a heterogeneous world [10].

Third, social discipline. From schooling, to work, to marriage, a "standard life" is tacitly regarded as the sole correct track, and individuals unknowingly surrender the autonomy of their own narratives, degenerating from protagonists of their own lives into actors in a social script. Just as Truman's birth, career, marriage, and friendships are arranged, social discipline presets for the individual an equally unquestionable life script: when to study, when to be employed, when to marry and have children, and even what counts as "success"—all tacitly accepted by society as self-evident standards. Those who violate this script often bear disciplinary judgments from family and neighbors, in a situation precisely like the "extras" in the paradise who forget their lines. Furthermore, when this standard is internalized by the majority as a matter of course, discipline completes its full transformation from "heteronomy" to "autonomy": each person is simultaneously a prisoner in the cage and a jailer who builds it [1].

These three forms of discipline form a striking homology with *The Truman Show*: Truman awakens and escapes under physical cameras, whereas modern people may go through their entire lives without perceiving what kind of cage they are in. This is precisely where the film's most contemporary cautionary significance lies: Truman's escape still required pushing down the visible dome wall, whereas the modern person's "dome" is woven together by everyone's clicks, every acquiescence, and social consensus—its boundaries are invisible, and no door can be found. The existential predicament of the modern individual is far deeper than the film's narrative, for the individual cannot even identify his or her own disciplinary situation, which constitutes the most concealed and most thorough operational logic of disciplinary power in the digital age [10].

6. Conclusion

Using Foucault's theory of discipline as its framework, this paper systematically analyzes *The Truman Show* from four layers: the ontological, the narrative, the authorial, and the cultural. The study finds that: at the image level, the film constructs a complete surveillance spectacle through two-way-mirror voyeuristic perspectives, the dome-shaped soundstage, and countless hidden cameras. At the narrative level, Truman undergoes an awakening trajectory from immersion, to perception, to testing, and to escape, ultimately completing the negation of discipline by pushing open the door to reality. At the creative level, screenwriter Niccol's original conception was closer to the dark tone of a dystopia, which after director Weir's "de-darkening" rewrite allowed the film to wrap a heavy disciplinary critique within a light exterior, and at the cultural level, the film's disciplinary theme forms a structural homology with contemporary self-discipline, algorithmic discipline, and social discipline. In sum, this paper argues that discipline has never disappeared, it has merely shifted from visible cameras to invisible algorithms, and from the director's script to society's template.

This paper also has certain limitations, including a reliance on textual interpretation and creator interviews without quantitative analysis of box office and ratings data, suggesting future research could enhance empirical support. Additionally, it notes the need for a deeper exploration of Foucault's discipline theory within the Chinese context, particularly regarding "platform discipline" in digital media. The paper anticipates challenges associated with the metaverse and generative AI, emphasizing the importance of maintaining reality awareness amid the influence of big data and algorithms.

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