

Dystopian Reality: An Exploration of the ‘Demotic’ in *The Truman Show*

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Abstract: About four hundred years ago, William Shakespeare wrote in his play *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage" (2.7.139). Today, when social media, digital surveillance, and reality shows are rampant, the world truly has become a stage. Technological advancements have seemingly accorded people from all strata a means for instant self-presentation, giving rise to the belief that anyone can become an overnight celebrity. This new, apparently egalitarian opportunity seems wonderful, but as Graeme Turner suggests in his book *Ordinary People*, this "increasing visibility of the ‘ordinary person’," which he calls "the demotic turn," might not be as democratic as it seems. Director Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) is a film about a man who, unbeknownst to him, has lived his entire life as part of a TV show. Although the film has been subject to various studies and interpretations relating it to myriad ideas like existentialism, psychological evolution, God, and religion, it can essentially be seen as a dystopian indictment of the falseness and pervasiveness of media. This paper attempts to study Weir's film through the lens of Turner's idea, with the aid of film studies and television studies, showing how the dystopian foreboding offered by the 1998 film remains as, if not more, relevant today.

Keywords: Demotic turn, dystopia, film studies, science-fiction, television studies, Truman Show

About four hundred years ago, William Shakespeare wrote in his play, *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage" (2.7.139). Today, when social media, digital surveillance, and reality shows are rampant, the world truly has become a stage. The proliferation of digital platforms seems to have accorded people from all strata a means for instant self-presentation, giving rise to the belief that anyone can become an overnight celebrity. This apparently egalitarian opportunity seems wonderful, but as Graeme

Turner suggests in his book *Ordinary People and the Media*, this "increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person'," which he calls "the demotic turn," might not be as democratic as it seems (2).

Director Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) is a film about the eponymous man who has, unbeknownst to him, lived his entire life as part of a TV show. Although the film has been subject to various studies and interpretations relating it to myriad ideas like existentialism, psychological evolution, God, and religion, it can essentially be seen as a dystopian indictment of the falseness and pervasiveness of media. This paper attempts to study Weir's film through the lens of Turner's 'demotic turn,' with the aid of film studies and television studies, showing how the dystopian foreboding offered by the 1998 film remains as, if not more, relevant today.

The word "demotic" stems from a few Greek words: "*demos*," meaning "the people", "*demotes*" meaning "one of the people", and "*demotikos*," meaning "popular" (Oxford UP). The word demotic thus relates to the increase in popularity of the common people. The development and popularisation of electronic media platforms such as reality TV, DIY websites, video sharing websites like Youtube, and countless social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have virtually provided everyone with an opportunity to broadcast themselves and become popular instantly. Graeme Turner observes that "celebrification," the process through which 'the ordinary'—the seemingly untalented individual who does not have prior media presence—acquires a heightened media form highlighting both his public and private lives, "has become a familiar mode of cyber-self-presentation" (*Ordinary People* 14).

The widespread influence of reality shows and social media platforms has enabled a shift in the focus of the entertainment industry "from the elite to the ordinary" (Turner, *Ordinary People* 12). Commenting on this shift, Chad Hurley, co-founder of Youtube, opined that "the playing field has truly been levelled" (Levy 7), while John Hartley labelled this new kind of entertainment as "democrataintment" (154). This implies an unprecedented social equality in the entertainment industry in which ordinary people have the power to influence both the consumption and the production of

entertainment. Turner argues that the shift in the focus of the entertainment industry does not necessarily carry such a positive connotation.

While Graeme Turner says that the demand for turning ordinary people into celebrities has always existed in the entertainment industry, he agrees that the focus on 'the ordinary' has reached new heights with the spread of reality television and the internet. However, even though there is greater visibility and diversity in the media presence of common individuals, Turner argues that this new, heightened focus on ordinary people can potentially have only an accidental or occasional democratic carryover (*Ordinary People* 16). The proliferation of reality shows, DIY websites, and social media has had a bearing on ordinary people, having increased visibility and, at times, even some individual expression, but rarely does this result in individual empowerment. The focus of the media continues to be on the serving of its constantly increasing commercial interests.

In *Ordinary People*, Turner postulates that rather than the apparent "egalitarianisation of celebrity," the more significant shift in the entertainment industry is the "scale upon which the media have begun to produce celebrity *on their own*" (15). Turner suggests that the media now has more direct access to influence the "cultural constructions of identities and desires" (15). The burgeoning presence of diverse electronic media platforms has accorded the media greater control over the production, marketing, and consumption of 'ordinary celebrities.' This phenomenon of ordinary people turning into celebrities is expounded by historian and social theorist Daniel Boorstin in his book *The Image*. Boorstin critiques the emergence of a media-dominated world where the idea of fame is being severed from greatness, famously defining the celebrity as an individual who is simply "well-known for his well-knownness" (57).

Chris Rojek, in his book *Celebrity*, further refines Boorstin's idea by delineating a classification for the concept of celebrity. Along with Turner's theory, the research builds on Boorstin's and Rojek's ideas on celebrity to specify the nature of Truman's celebrity in the film. The proliferation of reality shows and social media appears to have facilitated the acquisition of "achieved" celebrity, a type of celebrity achieved through superior skill or talent; this is in contrast to

the predetermined “ascribed” celebrity acquired through celebrity lineage. However, as is the case with Truman, this new kind of celebrity is usually “attributed;” it is essentially a product of the self-serving constructions of the media (Rojek 17-18).

In line with Boorstin and Rojek, Graeme Turner states that the modern celebrity can usually claim “no special achievement other than the (short-term and intense) attraction of the public” (*Understanding Celebrity* 3). This sudden but usually short-lived attraction is often attributed to the ordinary person by the media to serve its commercial interests. In Weir's film, Truman, an ordinary unwanted child, is adopted by a media company that secretly turns his whole life into a popular television show that he is oblivious to. His town is an artificially constructed set, and everyone he meets, including his friends and family, are hired actors. Truman is famous, but he cannot enjoy his fame; Sylvia's remark about Truman's condition holds true for anyone who is promised overnight fame by the media: “He is not a performer. He is a prisoner” (*Truman* 1:07:38-1:07:40).

The pervasiveness of the media is such that every moment of Truman’s life is made open for public viewing, starting from when he is in his mother's womb. There are five thousand secret cameras that capture Truman's life. Peter Biziou’s cinematography helps bring this to light. Biziou makes use of camera angles like low-angle shots, dutch-angle shots, and shots using a fish-eye lens, which make us feel as if we, too, are part of the intrusive, voyeuristic audience that is taking delight in watching Truman's personal life. High-key lighting, usually accentuating a bright and upbeat tone, is used ironically to add to the monotony and nauseous artificiality of the controlled world depicted in the film.

The film’s theme of the artificiality of media-constructed society is accentuated by the “star persona,” or the image constructed and systemised by an amalgamation of studio, industry, media, film, actor, and audience (Dix 215), of its identifying star, Jim Carrey. While Carrey does well in a darker role, it is his persona of an over-the-top, slapstick comedy star that becomes an apt fit for a film satirising an artificially created, controlled reality that has no room for honest individual

expression. Other actors are suitably over-earnest in their performances; even the broad smile of Laura Linney, playing Truman's wife, Meryl, works as a symbol for the falseness of television.

On the other hand, Ed Harris's performance as the show producer 'Christof', a wordplay on Jesus Christ, is characterised by a calm restraint that highlights the authoritarian indifference of giant media conglomerates. While the film portrays big media houses as having a God-like authority, it does not represent them as benevolent gods. Christof represents powerful media houses that can go to any lengths to achieve higher ratings. Truman's father, who, unbeknownst to Truman, is also counterfeit, is seemingly killed off and then brought back to life years later. When Truman finally breaks down in tears during his reunion with his apparently long-lost father, his emotions are perversely captured, broadcasted, and exploited by the media.

The research builds on Krishan Kumar's work on modern dystopian literature to delineate the pervasive influence of media in Weir's film. Kumar uses the term "anti-utopia" instead of dystopia. This implies an apparently safe and ideal world that, in reality, has no space for privacy and individual expression and that is characterised by control and conformity. Truman, oblivious to the ubiquitous presence of media in his life, goes on living his supposedly idyllic life, even if he is disillusioned with its banality. It is only when he becomes aware of his controlled existence due to a technical glitch that he decides to escape it. However, when Truman confides in his wife his fear of inhabiting his false reality and his desire to escape it, he is implored by her to "go home where you will feel safe" (*Truman* 00:50:11-00:50:14). Christof does everything short of killing Truman to deter him. Referring to the real world as "the sick place," Christof proclaims that his artificially constructed world is just like the real one but only safer—it is even named 'Safe-haven'—because it is controlled.

At the end of the film, Truman manages to break free, doing what his heart wants, and finally becomes a 'true man.' The source material of Weir's film, however, offers an alternate conclusion. The germinal script by Andrew Niccol was inspired by an episode from the show *The Twilight Zone*. The episode portrays a man named John who finds out that his life, just as in *The Truman Show*, is controlled and broadcast twenty-four hours a day. However, unlike Truman, who desires to break

free from the pervasive influence of the media, John ultimately decides that he prefers the comfort of his controlled existence on television and begins to act unaware again. Although Weir's film ends on a more positive note, it implores us to wonder, what if there had been no fortuitous technical glitch in the first place? What if there were no realisation of the subtle constructions and control of the media?

Christof remarks in the film, "We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented" (*Truman* 1:06:11-1:06:15). This is a comment not just on Truman's existence but also its consumption by the audience. Christof's remark seems to reflect what Jean-Louis Baudry postulates in a much-anthologised essay, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." Baudry states how the screen world appears misleadingly natural, coherent, and inevitable to the spectator, making it a ripe ground for reinforcing norms and stereotypes. This is even more the case for reality television and social media, which blare out their apparent aim of presenting reality.

By inversely applying Baudry's idea, however, by using films and shows to portray the problems that lie in reiterating and conforming with hegemonic norms and stereotypes, and by offering an alternative, one can also help break such norms. Weir's film does this by essentially deconstructing the staged reality created by the media, thus making both Truman within the film and the audience outside the film aware of the hegemonic workings of the media. This can also be observed in the deconstruction of advertisements and product placements in the film. Products like the multi-purpose knife that Meryl brings and the Cocoa powder are put on display for the audience through their subtle inclusion in the show and Truman's life. The Film shows how the media creates a phantasmagoria of images and words, using the influence of its celebrities to construct and propagate a culture for their gain.

Truman gradually realises that all the people are going around in a loop; he realises that what he sees only appears to be real. This 'apparently real' phenomenon can be seen as a defining trait of television, especially reality television. Weir's film shows how participants in reality shows are trapped in a cycle of curated commodification by the subtle hegemonies of the media. These people,

seduced by media-created myths and desires of other media-created celebrities, are used and disposed of by the media according to their wants and needs. Chris Rojek calls such short-lived celebrities “celetoids” (9). They are simply seen by the media as industrial solutions to satisfy consumer markets.

The film suggests that reality shows enjoy such success because they can provide the kind of paradoxical amalgamation of realism and escapism that the audience seeks. Christof sums it up in the very first scene of the film: “We have become bored with watching actors give us phoney emotions...While the world he inhabits is, in some respects, counterfeit, there’s nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards. It isn’t always Shakespeare, but it’s genuine. It’s a life” (*Truman* 00:00:18-00:00:48). Such shows and the innumerable social media platforms that are available today present a ‘staged reality’ that actually offers an escape from reality for people who are, or who are made to believe that they are, leading dull lives.

A study conducted by Lundy and others suggests that reality television predominantly serves as a voyeuristic escape for people. In 2002, Bellevue Hospital attending psychiatrist Joel Gold bore witness to many cases in which people suffering from schizophrenia started thinking that their lives were reality TV shows. This was later called “*The Truman Show* delusion”, a disorder in which “the patient believes that he is being filmed and that the films are being broadcast for the entertainment of others” (Gold J and Gold I). The film suggests how, while Truman is physically trapped, the consumers are passive participants also trapped by the sociocultural constructions of the media. In the film, the audience watches Truman twenty-four hours a day, every day, almost living his experiences. They even rejoice in his triumphant escape, but as soon as the show is over, they are ready for the next show, the next performer, the next ‘Truman.’

In conclusion, the paper demonstrates how *The Truman Show* works as a cinematic representation of Turner’s ‘demotic turn.’ Building on ideas from film studies and television studies, the research leverages Turner’s theory to study how Peter Weir’s film deconstructs the apparently utopian world constructed and controlled by the media. Released more than twenty years ago, Weir’s

film was seen as a satire: an exaggerated portrayal of a media-run society where everything, at all times, is under ceaseless surveillance and scrutiny by an unseen audience. While this may have been a dystopian dream then, the paper evinces, by conflating the film with Turner's ideas, how it is becoming reality today. In one scene in the film, Truman, having decided that he wants to escape his media-controlled existence, visits a travel agency to book a flight. Such is the pervasive influence of the media that he sees a poster of an aeroplane being struck by lightning at the travel agency. The caption that accompanies the picture is a subliminal message meant not just for Truman but also for those who are watching Weir's film: "IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU" (00:42:54).

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