The God Behind the Screen: Pleasantville and The Truman Show

Linda A. Mercadante
Methodist Theological School in Ohio, lmercadante@mtso.edu

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Abstract

Two films from 1998, *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*, provide a possible basis for theological discussion. They introduce questions of illusion and reality, control and freedom, viewing and being viewed. These two products of the media world themselves ask how much our own interpretations of reality are influenced by our culture's modern media. Have Americans developed an obsessive interest in watching without being known (voyeurism)? Do the films portray society's worst fears about God? What aspects of human freedom and what aspects of God are left out? Effectively raising the questions, the films require richer resources to provide answers regarding the character of God and the power of human freedom.

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Life was good for Truman Burbank. He lived in safe and pleasant Seahaven Island. He had a respectable job, an attractive wife, a best friend and a comfortable home. Everyone liked him. The weather was mostly perfect and no one was depressed.

In Pleasantville, too, life was good. Rain never marred a beautiful day. Firefighters spent most of their time rescuing cats from trees. Teens trusted their parents and they liked school. The work was easy, everyone had friends, the basketball team always won, and no one had low self-esteem

Contrary to what we might expect - trained as we are by disaster and superhero stories - in these film scenarios from *The Truman Show* (directed by Peter Weir) and *Pleasantville* (directed by Gary Ross), what you see is basically what you get. Everything is predictable, pleasant and safe. All seems fight with these worlds; all is according to prevailing standards. Both films focus on a world created by a television situation-comedy and each has a controlling figure behind the screen who maintains the pleasant illusions. Both films construct this ideal environment out of our fondest desires and in opposition to many of our common complaints today. Both depict a devoted audience willing to be absorbed by this carefully constructed image.

It all seems benign enough. However, not everyone is aware that these worlds are constructed, that they are actors, and that they are being viewed. Both films present characters with differing levels of awareness about their true roles and situations. As their knowledge of the situation grows, the characters gain freedom and choice, but they also experience risk, pain, and uncertainty. In each of these film stories, then, "well enough" does not get left alone.

But let's not jump to theological conclusions and assume these are "Adam and Eve" type stories of perfection, temptation and fall. Instead, these are stories of illusion and reality, control and freedom, viewing and being viewed. These films allow us to raise several questions about an age when so many of us spend so much time captivated by moving pictures. Have we become a culture of voyeurs, looking in on manufactured lives? Or are we, instead, the ones being watched? Are we evaluating or regulating our own lives in terms set by the filmic gaze? Also, how adequate are our contemporary desires and how much are we willing to give up to attain them? If someone could produce all the necessary ingredients in the contemporary formula for the good life, would it be enough and what would it require of us?

It is especially engaging that these questions are suggested through the work of an image-producing industry. For this is the same industry that is a major contributor, along with television and advertising, to the panoply of images that

attract people today and which feed desires for the typical middle-class Western version of the good life. Regrettably, however, their filmic solutions remain "within the box," that is, within the terms set by popular culture.

In spite of this failing, there is more here than a good parody of some contemporary problems. I don't want to put theological intentions into the minds of the film-makers and I'm not saying these are "Christian" or even "religious" films. Nor am I decrying them as the opposite. Instead, a theologically-attuned interpreter can see how these films -- especially when considered together -- are intriguing because they reflect some common fears and fantasies about God, human life, and freedom. They illustrate well - but provide their own answers for - a contemporary nightmare that God may be the controller behind the screen of our lives, that we are merely actors unaware, and that our best interests are not being served.

As a theologian who builds bridges between cultural and theological issues, I search for films like these that open up productive avenues for discussion in classes, youth groups, and churches. I have used films this way for the past twelve years, and have focused primarily on how seminarians and church people interpret them. My interest in turning a theological eye toward film, then, has grown out of this attention to a particular audience, its viewing habits, and its integration of filmic themes into its theological perspectives.

Media Dominance

It has been frequently noted that we live in a "media-saturated" culture. Images from television, film, advertisements, bill-boards, and photo-journalism are everywhere we turn. Yet the situation goes deeper. For more than just media inundation, we have come to live in a media-mediated culture, where our understanding of life, reality and our own experience is filtered through video frames. Most of us in the industrialized world (and many outside of it) have become reliant upon modem media, especially television and films, as we make our interpretations of reality. Without realizing we have become so dependent, we frequently look through these frames as we seek understanding, comfort, reassurance, vision, and structure for our disparate sensory intakes. This is so, even though the images in these frames do not give us a consistent, trustworthy, or self-cohering interpretive pattern.

In the West's past, and in many other cultures', the prevailing religious vision often has provided such a coherent interpretive grid. Today, instead, there are competing visions, many of them poorly developed or self-contradictory. Varying understandings of reality, and prescriptions for life, are given to us through news programs, commercials, soap operas, and the many stories we see on television and in film. Even though it is harder to chart a course amid competing images, the human need for some sort of grid has not changed. Therefore, although

the assortment of images we now see are fragmented -- and we are the ones who must pick and choose -- nevertheless, we do select, usually unconsciously, from this salad bar of images as we strive to find and make meaning in our lives. To paraphrase John Calvin, today we look through the "spectacles" of media.

The recent films Pleasantville and *The Truman Show* are arresting precisely because they highlight an aspect of this situation "from within". Who should know better than the image-makers how constructed these video frames really are? Likewise, in an industry which must gauge, as well as influence, audience desires to ensure its own survival, who should know better the extent of our malleability? And, finally, in an industry well aware of its monetary dependence upon "product placement," who should be more certain about the variability of the components of the good life?

Although the two films do not give the above issues equal weight, both are important as social markers, especially given that they were released less than six month from each other (in 1998) and treat these issues in some similar ways. (The interpretive net can be widened by noting that several others released somewhat later - such as *Existenz* and *Blast From The Past* - also deal with related issues.)

Comparing *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*

In these films knowledge brings control, and the key battle is around predictability and change. At the top of the hierarchy of knowledge is a controlling god-like figure who understands everything, and who takes complete responsibility for sustaining the actors' roles and maintaining the perfected environment. These controllers know what they want and are willing to be adaptive, up to a point, in order to get it. Through advanced technology, they are able to keep an eye on the characters at all times and to direct their actions.

How much power each controller has, though, is different in the two films. In *Pleasantville*, the controller (played by Don Knotts posing as a television repairman) is not the creator of the sitcom world, although he does maintain it. He can adjust it by putting people into the world, or taking them out. The controller is very careful about bestowing this privilege. Only those who truly long to live in this idealized world are eligible. He only finds one suitable candidate, the teenager David (played by Tobey Maguire) whose real life is disruptive enough to cause him to immerse himself in the details of the program. His twin sister Jennifer (played by Reese Witherspoon) gets dragged along inadvertently. But when David wants to get them out of Pleasantville, the controller is personally offended. He had expected only cooperation and gratitude for this special girl. He becomes petulantly angry, won't make contact, and works against David's wishes.

In *The Truman Show*, Christof (played by Ed Harris) is the creator, not just the maintainer, of the sitcom world. The show is his idea and passion, and he believes completely in his own vision of utopia. He commands a large number of workers and actors, sophisticated equipment, and a world-like dome to contain it all. He can withdraw or insert characters into the show. In the case of Truman Burbank (played by Jim Carrey), Christof feels the right to make life and death decisions about him, especially since Truman was the first baby to be legally adopted and raised by a corporation. Though distant and unknown to Truman, Christof believes he loves Truman, has given him the perfect life, and does it all for Truman's own good. Yet it is clearly his own will that Christof loves. He is determined to let nothing ultimately alter it. To maintain his ideal world, Christof must go to great lengths to keep Truman in Seahaven and in the dark. Christof does this by frustrating Truman's hopes, instilling phobias and fears, and having his screen father eliminated. When Truman's growing knowledge causes him to act unpredictably, Christof is even willing to have Truman killed.

Next in the hierarchy of knowledge and power are those who know they are in a show. In *Pleasantville*, that is only David and his sister. David tries to maintain the status quo, but Jennifer works against it. Both feel they are benefiting the others. In *The Truman Show* everyone knows it's a show but Truman. Their job is to insure the show follows the will of the creator. The actors are tightly controlled and must

sustain an ongoing deception of Truman whether as coworker, wife, or best friend. Their jobs on this lucrative, successful show are always at stake. The workers feel controlled by Christof, who appears even in the middle of the night to check on things. Although they protest, they can't prevent Christof from trying to drown Truman in the fabricated storm.

Finally there are the actors who have no idea they are on stage. On the surface they seem content and have no desire for change - at least the controller believes this. But time reveals that they are vaguely unsatisfied. Not knowing change is possible, however, they feel they must cooperate and adjust. As they gain knowledge, things do begin to alter, but not always in their favor. Relationships end, the weather gets worse, choice and risk are introduced, confusion and pain set in. Fulfillment and growth come at the expense of placidity and predictability.

The male lead actors are opposites in these two films. David who becomes Bud in Pleasantville has a fair understanding of the difference between fiction and fact, although he prefers the fictionalized world of the show. For Truman, on the other hand, fiction and fact are the same. David's dissatisfaction and longing get him into the show. Truman's nascent dissatisfaction and growing suspicion are what get him out. Knowing the truth, neither wants to remain in these static worlds. But David/Bud (and his sister) becomes concerned to free the others, while Truman simply wants to free himself.

The shows' viewers have an intriguing place in this hierarchy. They are seemingly free: they know the truth and they are on the outside. But, although they are well aware that this is a television program, they are so absorbed by it that it colors or even replaces their own lives. Thus, even though they have considerable knowledge, they don't affect much change. In *Pleasantville*, we learn from the controller that the viewers simply want the reruns to stay the same. In *The Truman Show*, through their viewing habits and purchases, the audience potentially has the power to keep the show alive or to end it. They could alert Truman to his situation, or turn off the set. But most don't do these things because they are so captivated by eavesdropping on him. Some leave it on twenty-four hours a day, and many are formed by this show, owning its products, working in its businesses, intently discussing the characters, arranging their lives around the episodes.

Social Commentary

At first glance, these films seem very irreverent towards the cultural ethos that supports their own industry's existence. They suggest that audiences are easily manipulated, overly caught up in screen stories, and also quite fickle. The last scene in *The Truman Show* is exemplary. Two garage attendants, one minute so obsessively caught up in Truman's life that they ignore their business, the next minute when he's gone just look, with very little emotion, for something else to watch. Perhaps, instead, the films simply represent an in-house poke by movie-

makers at the more superficial stories of television programs. But they would know the two media's audiences overlap.

More trenchantly, these films prompt questions about our media-cultivated voyeurism. A voyeur has an obsessive interest in watching without being known or noticed. In the case of screen stories, we know we watch actors, but the best films are the ones that most convincingly foster the illusion that we have a ringside view of a real life. In *The Truman Show*, this voyeurism is real. Through some 5,000 hidden cameras anyone can watch almost every aspect of Truman's life without being known by him. Of course humans have always watched and evaluated each other, but media-viewing is a peering without chance of participating. So much pseudo-intimacy can only exacerbate for viewers the common contemporary complaint of alienation. In the two films, community of a sort is formed around watching and discussing the shows, but when the program dissolves, there is little left to link the people.

But the filmic gaze does not go only one way. As Michel Foucault indicates, a society that closely watches its members in order to control them is most successful when it gets the members to internalize the gaze and police themselves. Truman does not know he is being watched, but he's been controlled through the camera all his life. No matter what impulse he's ever had to act unpredictably or to break free, he finds himself amazingly blocked. He takes this as a matter of course

and adjusts his behavior. But when he eventually figures out the truth he is willing to risk death in order to get off camera. Are we controlled by the filmic gaze? At first glance, we believe we are the viewers, not the viewed. But self-assessment and self-regulation happen regularly as we adjust our self-image and behavior in order to conform more closely to the ideal presented to us through the video frame. In addition, hidden video cameras are an increasing factor in everyday life.

What solutions do the films offer? In *Pleasantville* sex is equated with liberation. As characters gain sexual knowledge, they become more fully human (and colored). Also, it is ironic that other fictions and images help liberate them. (All the books that surprisingly get words on their formerly blank pages are classic stories, as well as a book of modern art.) Even though the film opens by having teachers in the 1990s giving students dire predictions about the world, the innocence and placidity of 1950s Pleasantville is boring to the time-travelers. But they have nothing to offer except what they have just left. Change, rather than simply being inevitable, is presented as a value in itself

In *The Truman Show*, too, the problematic standards that prompted the need for an idealized world in the first place are all the film-makers have to liberate Truman. Thus, individual freedom and autonomy, the ability to break connections and defy authority, are the only options for Truman. He can't redeem or reform his community, he can't form a relationship with Christof; he can only rebel and leave.

Both films show, though, that change will bring pain and risk, not just liberation. They are realistic about the price of freedom and knowledge. And they are good at exploding our idealized fantasies about how much we would love the perfect world. However, their image of perfection is limited to material security, comfort, predictability, good weather, and placid relationships.

Theological Issues

Whether or not intended, these films graphically portray some of our society's worst fears and fantasies about God, and about God's relationship with humankind. As I said earlier, this is not to claim that the films are 'religious,' 'Christian' or 'anti-Christian.' Nor can they only be read in this way. But I know from experience that some audiences will, in fact, pick up on a film's potential theological implications, and incorporate, dialogue with, or be challenged by them. Although this is often done fleetingly or unconsciously, the process can be accessed and explored when a group gathers to discuss particular films. I believe this effort creatively links theology and culture in ways we can and must productively pursue, especially given the influence of media today.

In *Pleasantville*, the god-figure is not the creator, but simply the maintainer of the status quo. He has some significant power, but is not omnipotent or sovereign. Reminiscent of George Bum's portrayal of God in the *Oh God* films, this

god speaks to his characters from a television set, so he can be visible when he chooses. But he doesn't necessarily come when you need or want him. In fact, this god comes across as immature, vengeful, easily upset, and sulky when disappointed. He does not have his characters' best interests at heart, and yet has a self-centered need for gratitude and appreciation. If his own interests are at stake, however, he becomes fearful and amenable to compromise.

Doesn't this sound like the root of many persons fear of God, and resulting compliance or rebellion? God is recognized to have great power, but cannot be trusted to use it in a loving manner or for our good. "He" is only available when he feels like it, but is constantly evaluating us from afar. This God seems to have an inordinate interest in getting his own way; his will must be done. In order to avoid trouble, or to get what one needs, one must work to placate such a God and find out what he wants. At the least, one must give the appearance of going along, being grateful, and not disrupting his plans. The only other alternatives, according to the film, are to similarly trick or use such an inadequate God. Or, ideally, one can maturely reject this God and bravely face uncertainty and risk with human strength alone.

The god-figure in *The Truman Show* is more powerful, but also more dangerous and less reasonable. His ultimate creation doesn't even know he exists. He is never visible, always distant and inaccessible, but his creation feels the

control. This god is the ultimate voyeur. He jealously protects his own privacy while giving none to others. With his advanced technology, nothing goes unobserved and uncontrolled. This god is dependent upon his creation; he lives to control it. The world is his grand experiment and those who know him fear him. They rightly recognize him as creator and sustainer, and know their roles and livelihoods depend on obeying and pleasing him. He is creative enough to adapt a measure of unpredictability into his overall plan, but true freedom is not allowed.

This is an excellent parody of a more sophisticated, but no less problematic, theology of God. On the plus side, it is often said that God (like Christof) is determined to have the divine will done, but that we can trust this plan because God knows best. It is said that God is not a petty or petulant despot (unlike the Don Knotts character in Pleasantville). Like Christof, God is uncontrolled by our machinations and is able to accommodate all our choices into the divine vision. Like Christof, too, God does not force people to be robots, but gives them a measure of freedom. In this type of theology, God, from behind the scenes, makes sure everything goes according to the ultimate plan. God has created us and loves us even when we don't realize it. (In a parody of this, Christof is shown stroking Truman's sleeping image on the television screen). Like both Christof and the Don Knotts character, God is constantly watching, and has a hidden side which is inaccessible to humankind. These are standard components in many persons' view

of a sovereign and benevolent God. But what is wrong with this picture, when transposed into film?

The gods in these movies (especially *The Truman Show*), although incorporating some key elements in a contemporary understanding of God, skew or omit others. In both films, full human freedom goes against the gods' arrangements. They are not god enough to permit it. Nor are their plans as good and benevolent as they believe. Christof, in particular, is a self-deluded and obsessive god. He does not truly love Truman - even though he shows some affection for him. This is not a god who created out of overflowing love and is determined to work with humans until they can enjoy true partnership. He is not self-sacrificing and never tries to form a relationship with his creation. Indeed, it is key to the whole scheme that he keeps his existence hidden from Truman. Rather than longing to be known, this god needs to remain secret. In addition, Christof does not really fight evil or remove it from Truman's world. Instead, this god just keeps the prerogative for himself.

Again, all this reflects common, though problematic, views of God. But the films suggest that if we prize our freedom, we have no choice but to rebel and depart from gods such as these. If we are content to believe such a God has our best interests at heart, the films indicate that we, like Truman, are sadly deluded. The implication is that we are allowing ourselves to be bought off by petty favors in order to avoid the risk and pain of bravely facing life on our own strength. Even if

we don't put much stock in God, the film hints that we may nevertheless be God's grand experiment, controlled without knowing it, being watched obsessively, subconsciously conforming to the divine plan. The films indicate, too, that we may not always know the difference between illusion and reality, or fiction and fact, and are more malleable than we realize. Even the names in *The Truman Show* could be taken as tongue-in-cheek parodies. Christof is 'of Christ,' but really an obsessive control-freak. Truman, who seems representative of the ideal or 'true man,' is really just a grand experiment mentally conceived in Burbank, a prime location of the image producing industry.

Both films, then, are good at making graphic some inadequate perceptions of God. This makes it easier to start a theological discussion around the issues. But such a discussion will also challenge believers who have relied on such views or who harbor them unknowingly. As useful as the films are at starting a discussion, however, they give no good answers for people of faith. They show no alternatives for mature human beings except to reject God and accept the consequences. They offer no standard of discernment when trying to separate fiction and fact, no way to tell if we, on a cosmic scale, are the watchers or the watched, no guide for knowing how free we are or how much controlled.

These films offer only flight, change and individual freedom as routes to human liberation, even though they honestly recognize that these contemporary

values are not unmixed blessings. But they find the risks preferable to a world where we have only stasis and the illusion of freedom. Many believers would agree with them. In framing the issues this way, the films open up the classic questions of free will versus determinism, or our will versus God's. But it is we who have to ask the further questions. Does the living God stand against human freedom? Does God only support the status quo, or permit, even encourage, change? If God supports freedom and change, what is the price? Can we still trust that God's promises and plans will triumph in the end? And what do we use to help answer these questions?

Anyone leading a theological discussion around these two films should be prepared to depart from the filmic "texts". In any case, this is the key in using films as a bridge to theological discussion. While we should first try to understand the film's point of view, evaluate why it appeals or repels, and appreciate its ability to give pleasure and meaning, we can't stop there. If we want to speak a prophetic, critical, or constructive word to our culture, we will have to deepen the conversation which the film has so graphically launched. In using these two films, facilitators will have to do their homework, and be prepared to present a much richer array of theological options about the character, intentions, and power of God, and a more realistic evaluation of human freedom, with all its potential, limitations, and risks.