

S T U D Y **F I L M** G U I D E
EDUCATION

Includes support
material for the main program
BBC LEARNING ZONE

LIVE

DAY 10,909

the **TRUMAN** show

Teachers' Notes

This study guide examines Peter Weir's film 'The Truman Show' released on October 9, 1998. It is aimed at students of GCSE, A Level, Scottish Standard, Scottish Higher and GNVQ Media Studies and English Language.

Areas covered in this study guide and the accompanying BBC Learning Zone television programme focus on representation and reality, forms and conventions within the film world, the popularity of docu-soaps and issues they raise and their place and effect within the media world.

Synopsis

Truman Burbank has the feeling that he's being watched. He doesn't know how right he is. Every second of every day, from the moment he was born, for the last thirty years, Truman Burbank has been the unwitting star of the longest running, most popular documentary soap -opera in history. The picture perfect town of Seahaven that he calls home is actually a gigantic soundstage. Truman's friends and family - everyone he meets, in fact - are actors. He lives every moment under the unblinking gaze of thousands of hidden television cameras. Welcome to 'The Truman Show'. The whole world is watching.

the **TRUMAN** show
Director Peter Weir

Certificate *PG*
Running time 103 mins

E-mail: postbox@filmeducation.org
Website: <http://www.filmeducation.org>

Introduction

'The Truman Show' is a film which charts the life of Truman Burbank, a boy adopted at birth by a fictitious television company - Omnicom. He is filmed twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year so every second of his life is recorded for 'live' television. Truman doesn't know this. He doesn't know that his friends and family are all actors. He doesn't know that the events in his life are all carefully monitored and controlled by the production crew of the television network. He doesn't know he is the star of a television show nor that he isn't living in the real world.

As far as we know, the concept of this film is not yet a reality, as Peter Weir, the director, commented that he thought of the film as taking place twenty years or so in the future.

However, in the search for new scheduling ideas and greater audience figures, television networks become increasingly involved in filming the lives of ordinary people as television entertainment.

- Having read this do you want to see the film? What is it particularly that interests you?
- Do you agree with the concept of 'The Truman Show'? What moral and ethical problems do you see with making a programme of this nature?
- What practical problems might there be?
- Do you think it might happen? Why/why not?

The Documentary

Recent television documentary programmes have continued a long tradition of attempting to show real life in documentaries. This generates debate about the responsibility of filmmakers and the representation of the subject.

Throughout the history of the moving image audiences have been fascinated by the idea of film depicting the real lives of 'other people' at work or in the home. One of the earliest documentaries, 'Nanook of the North' by Flaherty (1921), depicted Eskimo life with the help of local participants. Owing to the constraints of the hand-held camera, insensitive film stock requiring artificial light, and appalling weather conditions, Flaherty had to ask his subjects to do their normal activities in special ways and at special times. Because the Eskimos knew that Flaherty was helping them to place on record a vanishing way of life they provided and influenced the contents. The events of this film were manipulated, and the film was a huge success with audiences who were keen to find out about the minutiae of other peoples' lives.

Since those early days of documentary film-making, techniques and styles have evolved along with the introduction of new technology, such as smaller and more sophisticated cameras and sound equipment which allow the subjects to be less aware of the film-making process. 'The Truman Show' is supposedly made with the help of 5,000 cameras controlled by Christof the mastermind, creator, producer and director. Christof, from his mammoth control room, is the godlike figure who monitors, manoeuvres and manipulates Truman's environment.

The control of the production of the television documentary and the effect on the audience is central to the debate about the responsibility of programme-makers. According to Michael Rabiger in his book 'Directing the Documentary' (published by Focal Press, 1992) there are three types of documentary.

Task 1

Which of the three definitions shown applies to 'The Truman Show'? Explain how you have come to this decision.

1. Those produced to give a definite message to the audience and therefore only give a one-sided view of the subject. These programmes are usually produced by an advertiser or a political group.
2. Both sides of a story are given equal coverage in the telling of a story to an audience that needs to be educated and entertained.
3. Programmes made to show the complexities of human life whereby the audience is engaged in making difficult judgements about the programme-makers' quest for truth in portraying a real life situation.

The idea of Truman being an unwitting subject of the television programme has some parallels with the production of the television documentary made in 1963 called '7Up'. The programme took as its inspiration the Jesuit saying, "Give me a child until he is seven and I'll show you a man.

The programme-makers took fourteen children from a cross-section of society and filmed them at seven-year intervals with the objective of finding out the extent to which a child's future is determined by their social class. The most recent of these programmes was broadcast this year. '42Up' intercut footage from previous programmes alongside recent interviews with the participants. Several of the original participants are no longer involved in the programme, with one member leaving in 1990 making the following statement: "I have had enough of being used for small screen entertainment...the images of myself and of the other children have been simplified to the point where they have become false. Please don't think the programmes tell you anything about me. If you want the truth turn off the television and come to Liverpool." In a similar way to Truman Burbank, these participants who co-operated with the programme-makers were only children in the beginning and had no idea of the dramatic affect their participation, at seven-year intervals, would have on their lives. As adults they are now concerned that representations of them shown by the programmes is not accurate.

The recent glut of television documentary soaps such as, 'Hotel - The Adelphi', 'Driving School', 'The Cruise', 'Airport' and many others have put the spotlight on many areas of life, making the 'woman/man on the street' the celebrity. The programme about the Hotel Adelphi and the learner driver saw real people becoming celebrities through television exposure.

These programmes combine elements of soap operas as storylines with the characters being followed from one week to the next. There are elements of documentary-style television as the camera follows the subject in a seemingly unobtrusive way allowing them to behave in a naturalistic manner. This genre is relatively cheap television depicting real people, not actors and actresses who will need to be paid. They are also extremely popular and therefore guarantee high audience ratings and advertising revenue.

Task 2

Imagine that you had been involved in the making of a television programme like '7Up'. How have you changed since you were seven in terms of your looks, behaviour and opinions? To help you in this task look at photographs of yourself at seven-year intervals. Ask parents and guardians about what you were like at that age. If you knew you were to be filmed every seven years how might this affect what you choose to do with your life, both in terms of your career and personal life.

Task 3

How have the lives of people who have become celebrities by television exposure been affected both in a positive and a negative way?

Morality and Ethics

There are issues of human rights and ethics of programme-making which are at the heart of 'The Truman Show' with which the audience can identify. These are the same issues which are at the heart of representing any 'real' people on television. Infringement of the rights of the individual within these television programmes is a major concern.

In the UK, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, is an independent body set up to protect the rights of the individual and considers complaints of unfair treatment or unwarranted infringement of privacy while monitoring matters of taste and decency.

In the annual review produced in 1997-8 the Broadcasting Standards Commission expressed concern about the recent spate of docu-soaps and programmes made by viewers themselves. "1997 was undoubtedly the year of the documentary. Many are pretty light-hearted but from time to time they raise important issues worth wider discussion, not least, whether they are truthful."

There is no doubt that many television viewers are keen to watch someone else's daily life story. Therefore, there can be little doubt that many who choose to take part are happy to be included. It is sometimes easy for broadcasting professionals, for whom television is a daily experience, to forget that for many others contact with the production process and appearance on the screen is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that they might live to regret.

- Do they always understand what they are getting into?
- Do they appreciate what the consequences might be?
- Have they given truly informed consent?

In all television interviews or footage the participants are asked to complete a 'release form' which gives their consent for the footage shot to be used in a programme. These forms are legally binding and are completed to protect the programme-makers from any legal action that may arise. The footage is edited and whilst the single uncut shot of events might be as an unbiased record of events, as soon as two shots are put together they could create a false impression. Every cut in a film makes a claim that two things are related in some way but in fact are not. The production of a one-hour documentary involves 30-40 hours of original filming which means that a great deal is not shown. The decision to select what is shown and how it is edited is in the hands of the director.

If the participants were aware of the 'broadcast use' would they allow themselves to be filmed carrying out their daily activities? As mentioned before, a recent example of this is the second series of the extremely popular BBC series 'Hotel'. Britannia Hotels, the owners of the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool, wanted editorial control of what went into the series which was seen by the BBC to tip the balance of the programme from being an 'honest documentary' to a 'corporate video' for the hotel chain.

Task 4

Imagine a programme similar to 'The Truman Show' is currently being broadcast on UK television. Write a letter to the Broadcasting Standards Commission explaining what you think are the main arguments against the programme.

Task 5

Imagine that your headteacher has been approached to allow a television series to be made about your school or college. Do you think the filming would be allowed? If not what would the reasons be?

Another example of people and organisations becoming wise to the effect of being filmed for these programmes was the recent refusal by MPs to allow the filming of Parliament by a particular production company. The reasons being that MPs had wanted editorial control and believed that because the programme was scheduled to be broadcast at peaktime on Sunday night the emphasis would be on entertainment.

Task 6

Imagine you were producing a documentary programme about your school or college. Construct an idea for a television programme that shows the school in a) a positive light and b) a negative light. What sets, characters, conversations would you use? Which characters in your school do you think would become celebrities?

The World of 'The Truman Show'

"We accept the reality with which we are presented."

Christof creator of 'The Truman Show'

When we are watching a film we, as a sophisticated cinema-going audience, know we are watching a constructed sequence of events. We are aware that the filmmaker will have chosen certain images to show us and that these images will have been edited together in a specific way to present a certain image.

In this way the filmmaker is presenting us with what he/she wants us to see - their representations of the world within the film. In fictional film and television this is of little consequence because the people, places and events all exist only in the imagination of the filmmaker. However, when we are watching a film or television show about the lives of real people we have to be aware how the constructive devices have been used to present a certain image and whether this image might influence us in any way.

The world of 'The Truman Show' is an extremely complex one. There are many different layers, each representing a world contained within a world, centred on Truman Burbank himself. The beginning of the film is especially confusing for us as the audience because we are confronted with people from all of these constructed worlds but we don't know who belongs to which.

The film's narrative is interesting, depicting the story of the television series within the film.

- In two columns draw a map of events within the television series and the film to see where they overlap.

Look at the diagram on the following page representing the world of 'The Truman Show'. Working with a partner, try to place the people, objects and events that follow in whichever circle you think they belong. When you have done this, answer the following questions:

- Which of these gave you the most problems to place? Why do you think this is?
- How did you resolve the issue?
- Can you think of another diagram which might better display the world of 'The Truman Show'?

“What if everybody is just an actor in my story?” Jim Carrey.

“We are always actors playing someone else - this is just an extra step.”

Noah Emmerich who plays Marion in ‘The Truman Show’.

- i) Do you believe these two statements? Explain your reasons for believing or not believing them.
- ii) If you could construct a perfect world for yourself what would it be like? Think very carefully about this. What would it look like? For instance, would you want the sun to always shine?
- iii) You have been asked to construct a trailer for ‘The Truman Show’. Which elements of the film would you choose to present it as a film with a message? Which elements would you use to construct a comedy trailer? Which would be the most accurate representation of the film?
- iv) Look back at the synopsis on the inside front cover of this study guide. Which audience do you think will be interested in this film?

Constructions of Reality

After we have been watching the film for a while we can easily recognise which world we are seeing. This is not only because we have become familiar with the characters which populate each world but also because we have become aware of the conventions of style within each world.

The most easily recognisable features of the world of Seahaven are the sets and costumes.

Sets

Peter Weir, the film’s director, initially thought of using Los Angeles studio backlots to create the town of Seahaven from scratch, however he considered, “The town needed a feeling of having been purpose-built, and built all at one time as with any television or movie set”

The actual town used in the film is Seaside, a 90 acre planned community in northwest Florida USA, founded in 1980. Comprised of over 300 cottages, it is used by all-year-round residents and guests on vacation. Seaside features its own local post office, art galleries, antique shops, boutiques, bookshops and restaurants all within walking distance of each house. The residents of the community all conform to a specific building code to create the ‘storybook’ cottages they live in, and each of Seaside’s streets leads to the ocean.

“It looked like it had been built for our show. I knew we could enhance it to create the ideal setting for Seahaven,” notes Peter Weir.

Costumes

Wendy Stites, the film's visual consultant, took her inspiration for the costumes from a variety of sources including Norman Rockwell paintings, Jean Cocteau, a book containing 'Everyday Fashions of the 1940s', the Saturday Evening Post magazines and photographs of the actor James Stewart. Working with costume designer Marilyn Matthews, Wendy set out to create clothing to reflect Truman's world.

Marilyn Matthews says, "Our challenge was to avoid making the costumes too cartoonish and also not to make them too tied into a specific period of time."

With this in mind Wendy and Marilyn avoided colours such as lime green and orange - which would have given the film a contemporary feel. They concentrated on using colours such as red, black, yellow and checked patterns, and rather than buying or finding ready-made garments, the costumes for the film were made to order.

Wendy Stites says, "Truman Burbank is the only person on 'The Truman Show' that dresses himself- the others are all dressed by the wardrobe department of the television show - so I wanted his look to be a bit different, not quite as polished."

Peter Weir says, "I always thought of the film as taking place twenty years or so in the future, and that Christof the show's creator would have created an idealised environment for Seahaven based on elements from the past that he particularly admired."

- What elements from the past can you identify in the film?
- In what ways does Seahaven look like a storybook town?
- Would you like to live in Seaside (the real town)? Explain your answer.
- In what ways might the costumes be perceived as 'cartoonish'?
- Do you think Truman's costumes are different from the others? In what ways?
- How do the costumes reflect the personalities of the people within the community of Seahaven?

There is another constructed world within the film 'The Truman Show'; that of the production centre and the audience watching the television series.

Task 8

- i) Examine the image of the production centre. What sort of world is implied by the costume and set design? From where do you think it takes its inspiration? Does this confirm Peter Weir's vision of the film? How?
- ii) How does this contrast with the world of Seahaven and the 'real' world of the television audience? What sets and costumes do we see from the world of the television audience?
- iii) Redesign the world of Seahaven from its seemingly cosy, comfortable world and give it a sinister, nightmarish quality. Draw or describe your ideas on how to achieve this. If you wish, start completely afresh, or use the existing sets and costumes and alter them.

Conventions of Film Style

Sets and costumes are not the only way in which we are made aware of a world we are watching. Film style, particularly the use of camera angles, is an important indicator of where the action is taking place. One of the conventions of film is that we never see the camera. This works well in portraying the world of the production crew and television audience of 'The Truman Show' as it gives us the feeling that we are watching a 'real' world.

Peter Weir wanted to convey the idea that Truman was being filmed under surveillance and enable us, the cinema-going audience, to distinguish when we are observing the world of Seahaven. To do this he used a variety of techniques:

- wide angle lenses
- unusual camera angles (not used in dramatic filming)
- shooting through oval or circular 'masks' giving the impression that these hidden cameras are built into various parts of the landscape
- special 'cameras' hidden in more mobile and surprising places (in a ring which Truman wears, another in his wife Meryl's necklace and the 'buoy cam' bobbing along the surface of the water ready to capture Truman should he venture offshore)

The idea of having hidden cameras for surveillance scattered around the town of Seahaven influenced the way in which the town of Seaside was adapted to function as a film set. Certain buildings had architectural features added so that the miniature hidden cameras could shoot the story. The elegant piece of sculpture near the entrance of the insurance building, where Truman works, was specially designed so that not only could it house a camera, but also act as a sentry for the nerve centre of production for the 'The Truman Show' television series.

- What unusual camera angles can you remember in the film?
- Comment on the camera angles displayed in the images used to illustrate this section.
- Draw a diagram of the inside of Truman's house in Seahaven. Use your imagination to do this. Mark up any places in particular where you can remember there is a camera positioned. Now indicate on your diagram all the other places where a camera would need to be. Think carefully about the positioning of certain cameras to give Truman some amount of privacy in his own home and not offend network audiences. LI Design a prop for the Truman set which would house a hidden camera.

The speech and behaviour of other characters in Truman's world such as his family, friends and the wider community of Seahaven also indicate to us that we are watching something which is not following the conventions of the film world as we know **it**.

Task 9

- i) Think about the speech and behaviour of Meryl, Truman's wife. In what television genre would you expect to see this? What about that of their neighbours and acquaintances?
- ii) Does Truman himself talk and act differently to the rest of the community? Can you comment on this?
- iii) Which of the characters in Truman's world would you say are stereotypes? What effect does this have?
- iv) Think about the names of the principal characters in 'The Truman Show' - Truman, Meryl, Marlon, Christof. What impression do we get of each character?
- v) What genre would you say the world of Seahaven is reminiscent of? Does this change within the film?
- vi) Several characters are involved with product placement in the show. What products can you remember as being advertised? How does this add to the atmosphere of Seahaven?
- vii) Write a short scene involving three characters in which a product is advertised. Aim to make the advertising fit in as naturally as possible, as Meryl tries to do in 'The Truman Show'.