



This essay begins with a discussion of the paradoxical desire for realistic fiction, then, through an analysis of *The Truman Show*, suggests how that desire, which first comes into historical prominence with the emergence of the novel, always seeks out new means of satisfying itself, ultimately coming to its maximal, self-undoing satisfaction with the advent of television technology.

## Televisual Realism: *The Truman Show*

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**T**he history of realism—by which I mean stories about everyday people living in our everyday material world—as a major presence in storytelling is relatively brief in relation to the history of story in general. As Eric Auerbach writes in *Mimesis*, this notion of realism, dealing seriously with “everyday occupations and social classes [...] everyday customs and institutions,” was “completely impossible in antiquity,” and only became acceptable in “modern literature” (31). Until the emergence of the novel, the impossibly ideal, the fantastic, the supernatural, the plainly not-everyday real, were the normal content for the great mass of storytelling. And such content remains immensely successful, as a look at any of the recent blockbuster superhero films will show. But, beginning especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there has been a continuing large audience for stories that strive to imitate life only as humans in general might plausibly be expected to live: without supernatural powers or events, without perfect or ideal characters, without impossibilities in general.





Scholars have studied novelistic realism for some time. With respect specifically to the appeal of novelistic realism, we have one line of scholars—including earlier writers such as Auerbach, Ian Watt, and Harry Levin, and more recent writers such as Lennard Davis, George Levine, Harry Shaw, and Peter Brooks—who one way or the other follow after Aristotle's explanation of the appeal of verisimilitude. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that we naturally take delight in seeing the real "reproduced with minute fidelity" because it is "through imitation" that we are instructed in our "earliest lessons" about life (51). To choose only one more recent version of this understanding, we read in Harry Shaw's *Narrating Reality* that realism "provides a model of how we might go about processing historical and social realities, of the sorts of things we'd need to take into account and the sorts of connections we might usefully draw" in order to live a better, more critically aware life (20). We take delight in novelistic realism because it gives us a kind of instruction for living.

The other major consideration of the appeal of novelistic realism occurs in the work of Marxist scholars such as Pierre Macherey and Louis Althusser as well as in the work of what I will call deconstructive scholars such as Roland Barthes, J. Hillis Miller, and Michel Foucault. Their explanations hold one way or another that "realism" is an ideological function of a certain kind of discourse. Barthes may have given the most concise explanation of this in "The Reality Effect." Because of the nature of linguistic signification itself, realistic fiction can only give a "reality effect," rather than what readers feel they are getting: a simple imitation of the solidly pre-existing real (148). Realistic fiction appeals because it unconsciously produces and secures a certain kind of psychological subjectivity (a false consciousness), one that takes itself and the real as self-consistent essences, independent of representation. In this understanding, then, realism appeals not as instruction, but as construction.

I want to acknowledge these critical traditions because to use the term *realism* tends automatically to raise critical hackles. But having made the acknowledgment, I need take no position here on the ontological nature of the real or the epistemological nature of realistic representation. In a related way, I need take no position on why novelistic realism became so successful when it did and where it did (i.e., Europe in particular). Needless to say, not all people are novel-readers, and not all have just the same sense of what constitutes realistic fiction. I am claiming only that we may reasonably see the novel as marking a great historical turn toward serious stories of everyday people in everyday circumstances, a claim with which I suspect most of the scholars on either side of the above-mentioned divide would likely agree. And though I am basing my discussion on the kind of realism that came to prominence with the novel, what most interests me is how this peculiar desire for a "story" that is as much like everyday reality as possible has played itself out in more recent storytelling technologies.

In order to get at the peculiar nature of this desire, we may first consider its complement in the realm of nonfiction. The same story-desire underlies both realistic fiction and what I will call literary nonfiction. The content of literary nonfiction appeals because it is not fiction. But at the same time, the nonfictional content by itself is not sufficient. The text must somehow also provide the gripping aesthetic experience of a novel. Otherwise, a report or biography or history would satisfy. If, in a given case, the reader does not feel the emotional grip of a novel, then presumably he or she will just stop reading. But if the reader is held by the text's novelistic quality, and then the nonfiction content turns out to be fiction after all, huge scandals may follow. A recent and sensational example of this involves James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, which was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for her book club, enjoyed enormous sales success, but then was exposed as being filled with fabrications. The scandal that followed was itself enormous, including public rebuke by Winfrey, and both special disclaimer notes and a full written apology by Frey added to all unsold copies of the book. The whole event went back and forth, with some eventual softening on Winfrey's side. But still, the intriguing fact remains: this audience felt not just disappointed, but betrayed at having been duped into enjoying, as real, what turned out to be "only" a fiction.

Whereas literary nonfiction tries to satisfy a desire for real content that reads like fiction, realistic fiction tries to satisfy a desire for fictional content that reads like a report of the real. And the history of the novel shows that this desire is continually seeking out ever more real (so to speak) realistic story. Most scholars agree that the novel begins when *Don Quixote* parodies medieval chivalric romances, condemning that large body of popular storytelling as merely "fabulous and absurd" (940). Cervantes's tale does not strike us as especially realistic today; nonetheless, it is fundamentally realistic precisely because it must be so, just in order to represent Quixote's particular kind of madness. And it is presented (as are most early novels) as a "found" history, a kind of literary nonfiction, rather than a purely made-up story. Further, it does not seem realistic now because the search for yet more realistic realism has continued since the seventeenth century. The early epistolary novels, for instance, plainly outdo *Quixote* as realistic story. *Pamela*, *Clarissa* and all the rest do their best not to seem like fiction at all, but only to be fortuitously gathered collections of real letters written by living people.

Each new marker in the history of the novel has signalled an advance "in fictional technique by freeing itself from the conception of the real currently dominant" (Levine 72). In other words, innovation in the novel typically has to do with rejecting the "currently dominant" notion of realism as one way or the other not adequately realistic. This is the case whether we have George Eliot asserting the realism of *Adam*



*Bede* in relation to the “arbitrary” idealism of the novels of her day (150); or Virginia Woolf explaining that the “materialist” realists of the early twentieth century were failing to get at the essence of the most central reality: “life,” which “is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,” but “a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (150). So even with content that is purely fictional, and even in some cases formally experimental, the goal is to be as much an imitation of the everyday, unadorned real as possible.

With both literary nonfiction and realistic fiction, then, neither a straightforward representation of the real, nor a straightforward fictional story will do. Rather, the desire is for this oddly mixed version, in which real and imaginary are in a kind of intimate contest for dominance that neither can ever quite win. When we enjoy a good realistic novel, we are in part amazed that the story has been made up and yet seems so real. Conversely, with literary nonfiction we are in part amazed that the story is true and yet reads so much like a novel.

Extended prose fiction is not the only means of communicating a story. We know that print technology has played a world-historical part in the history of story, not least with respect to the nature and success of the novel. But moving image technology must be the next largest event in that history (Jackson, “Writing”; *Technology*). And this brings us to the question: what happens when the desire for realism is given this new technological means of satisfying itself? To answer this question I turn to a film, Peter Weir’s 1998 *The Truman Show*.

**T**he *Truman Show* is as meta-narrativistic, and therefore paradoxical, a text as we are likely to find. Most obviously, it is a story entitled *The Truman Show* by Peter Weir that is about a “story” entitled *The Truman Show* by a “director,” named Christof. But more importantly for my purposes, it is a story about a world like ours that is obsessed with an ongoing realistic story.

We have a primary world, a version of late twentieth-century real life, and another world constructed by and enclosed within the primary world. An entire post-card-quality suburb, called Seahaven, has been built beneath an immense ground-to-sky dome. (This pushes the film toward science fiction, but almost no other science-fictional elements appear.) The inner surface of the dome looks like the sky, with day and night produced artificially. The town, situated on an island with no direct connection to other towns, is populated with actors who simulate without pause all the roles and activities that would normally be found in such a place. Seahaven is thickly, but invisibly, packed with miniature television cameras that watch almost everything, including the product placements that finance the production.



Within all this, there exists only one man, the star of the show—Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey)—who is not acting. He has been born and raised to the age of thirty without ever becoming conscious of his actual situation.

But the world outside the dome is very conscious of his actual situation, and watching the show is an obsessive preoccupation for immense numbers of people. At one point we are told that over one billion, seven hundred million viewers were watching at his birth, and that over two hundred and twenty countries watched his first steps as an infant. There are Truman clubs, Truman bars, Truman festivals, an entire subculture built around watching the show. From this description, we can see how improbable the whole thing is.

And yet, because of the film's uncommonly thoughtful directing, writing, and production values, its very improbability makes its thematic concerns all the stronger. It is unmistakably a "fiction resonant with themes found at large in contemporary U.S. society" (Wise 44). We have, among other things, conflicts between ideas of public and private, chance and determinism, the individual and society, conscious and unconscious identity. We can view the film as a satirical "subversive fantasy" (Cardullo 743) that skewers our addiction to mass-media entertainment, or we can view it as only appearing to do so (see Wise, Bishop). But underlying all else, as I will show, is what amounts to an anatomy of the appeal of realism. For Weir's film is, again entirely paradoxically, a fantasy about a perfect "real" "story."

The opening minutes of the film right away thrust us into the issue of storytelling. We begin in the world that produces and watches the show. The show's director, Christof (Ed Harris), is responding to an unseen interviewer's questions about why a show about everyday real life should be so successful. "We have become bored," he says, "with watching actors give us phony emotions. We're tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the world [Truman] 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." These first words are rich with meaning, and so will repay close consideration. To begin, we should notice how strikingly similar this is to those passages scattered across the history of the novel—as in, for instance, *Waverley* (Scott 64), *Adam Bede* (Eliot, ch. 17), *Vanity Fair* (Thackeray 54–55, 80–81), *Shirley* (Brontë 39)—in which authors feel the need to defend their realistic stories. These earlier writers are always working against an implied complaint that realistic content is just too boring, compared to more sensational content. This is in a way unavoidable because, as mentioned above, the default story content for most of human history has been the fantastic and the supernatural. As I have argued at length elsewhere, in consciously rejecting the fantastic, realism is always in



violation of that ancient storytelling norm, and so is defensive at its core (*Technology*). Christof's show is certainly a new attempt at the most realistic story. But though he mounts this standard defence (more about which below), first he must take care of an objection that can only arise with his specific kind of realism.

He claims that "we," the modern mass-media audience, have become bored with the whole idea of embodied storytelling. His statement must have this universal application because all actors are always pretending, and therefore are always being "phony." The implication is that, like audiences before the invention of electronic mass media, we do still want to see story with real emotional impact. But if we want to see emotion that is not phony, then it must be the case that we are bored with, at least, visual *story* of any kind, because if we are to preserve the distinction between "story" as narrative report, as in the nightly news story, and "story" as fictional narrative, then we must have "phony" emotions in any case. We must, then, want to watch the emotions of real people in real life. Christof backs up this idea when he also rejects the unprecedented, purely formal elements of cinematic story: its "pyrotechnics and special effects." But in spite of these comments, he is not suggesting we want to watch documentary film. It must be that we want to watch a visual story of real emotions that occur in some form of artificially determined (fictional) setting that looks like our everyday life; and of course his *Truman Show* is just that.

No matter this defence, some in the audience must be objecting that the "reality" of the show—a construction populated by actors—is still "only" a fiction. The desire for a "real" story stands out very starkly here. For thirty years Truman has taken an artificially created world as simply the real. And yet, evidently, to some viewers it still fails to be the kind of really "real" story they most want. We can only conclude that, whether they consciously know it or not, they must want the impossible: a complete collapse of the distinction between real and fiction.

Christof then defends his version of real story from the other side, so to speak. His claim that "there's nothing fake about Truman himself" continues his defence against those who do not find the show real enough. But the mention of Shakespeare brings up, again, realism's old worry of being boring. His comment is a standard one: you can have art ("Shakespeare") or authenticity (Truman himself), but not both. And yet just the need for this defence shows that both at once is just what everyone must want.

Though the show's viewers are clearly over-enamoured of television, it is not quite accurate to say that "enthralled as this audience is, they will gobble up anything they see on the tube" (Cardullo 745); nor that they are "an unthinking gaggle of mentally moribund celebrity-worshippers" (Bishop 7). We must assume that there are other shows to choose from, but this massive audience wants just this show. Evidently,



late twentieth-century audiences want the same thing that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novel-readers wanted: an engrossing conflation of real and imaginary. The difference is that with the invention of television we have a technology that enables this conflation to be taken to a maximum.

For how could such a story be materially possible without TV? No written story can possibly collapse real and imaginary together in the desired way. This is simply because written story, which strictly speaking can only tell, and not show, can never achieve the narrative fullness of visual story. No written story can show directly to the eye an imitation of what the eye actually sees of the real. Therefore, the maximal satisfaction of the desire for “real story” requires story we can literally see. To imagine what would most perfectly fit this peculiar desire for fictionalized real, we would need some kind of viewable, set-apart space in which living human beings would go along unaware that they were being viewed, voyeuristically, by an audience. This means the audience would have to be somehow invisible from that set-apart space, but also close enough to see faces and eyes, where much of our emotion is most clearly displayed. It is hard to imagine this being literally possible, especially because the separation of viewer and “actors” is an absolute. If the “acting” is to be real, which is to say not acting, then the actor cannot be affected by any sense of being observed in the special way that actors are observed. For these reasons, no staged drama in any usual sense could work.

If we cannot have this limit case, then stories told in moving images will be the next best bet. A filmmaker can present us with stories that are, except for being fictional, strikingly close to the everyday real that ordinary people actually see and hear. This hardly means anyone ever confuses a film with reality. The differences between the filmic image and the real are so vast as not to need mentioning. Still, no other storytelling medium comes so close to an imitation of the experiences of seeing and hearing. But though film can satisfy our desire for realistic story in an unprecedented way, and though realistic content has been a norm in fiction film since its beginnings, it turns out that the desire for realism only finds its maximally possible satisfaction with the invention of another technology: television. Film itself, being a recording technology, can only represent the action of the moment as an already-completed event. Television can do this and more. As Emma Kafalenos puts it, “television is most clearly differentiated from cinema” when it shows “real-time representations of real events in our world” (5). Once we have the ability to transmit what a camera looks at as it looks at it, we have the possibility of looking at the actual real as it happens. Then, to satisfy the desire for realism all we need to add is some element of fiction to some sample of the real.



This technological possibility was exploited in the very infancy of television. *Candid Camera* first aired in 1948, was an extremely successful show well into the late sixties, and reappeared in various forms for decades, “reality TV” being the most popular at present. The show involved hidden cameras watching unaware, everyday people in everyday-world contexts being confronted by something unexpected: often ordinary objects that had been rigged to work in extraordinary ways. The aim was to get laughs, and the distinct appeal of the show was that the main character was not an actor. The viewer watched a real person dealing with what that person took to be real life. And, crucially, the viewer watched the person discover that he or she had been involved in an unconscious performance. “Smile, you’re on candid camera” is the famous line spoken as this happens. This climax is indispensable, because without it we would observe only a raw event, a documentary report, rather than a miniature story. After all, why not just watch the event unfold without the “actor” ever knowing he or she was in a show? That would be truly real. But just the raw real is not enough. The “real” story typically featured a few-minute version of one of the most standard fictional plots. In the beginning the person enters the scene with a certain sense of awareness of self and the world. In the middle the person deals with an unexpected challenge. At the end the person experiences a change of self-awareness as they are told what has really been going on. Obviously this is not any sort of complex literary self-recognition. Still, it is a capsule version of the most basic of plots, and makes plain that the desire for realism and this new technology quickly came together to produce a new version of the “real story.”

We have, then, the historical case of an already-existing desire for a certain kind of story: realistic fiction and/or literary nonfiction. That desire has become a widespread, ongoing cultural phenomenon (nearly a universal). And that desire constantly seeks out storytelling forms that will make it most difficult to decide the winner in the contest between real and imaginary. Evidently, any new technology that can be a means of delivering realistic story will always be recruited to that end. Unlike any previous technology, though, television brings the desire for realistic story as close as possible to getting what it most wants. As a result we have seen for some decades “an apparently insatiable interest in reality-based television among producers and viewers” (Kafalenos 2). What we may call televisual realism, then, carries on and in some ways supplants novelistic realism. *The Truman Show* is very much about just this situation.

To return to our explanation of Christof’s opening statements, we should notice a certain sliding of reference. In defending his show’s realism, he shifts without transition away from Truman the human being, to say “it” is not always Shakespeare; “it” is genuine; and “it” is a life. So, in fact it is the show, not Truman the human being,



that is a life, and the show, not Truman, that most matters. This language shuffles aside an unpleasant element of the desire for, especially, literary nonfiction. As mentioned above, the maximum imaginable case of a real story would necessarily place the audience in a voyeuristic relationship to the unwitting actor(s), for the success of the “story” would depend on the “actors” not knowing they were being observed. This (unethical) pleasure of secretly looking into someone else’s private life brings us back to epistolary fiction. The appeal of such novels, at least early on, depended on the illicit pleasure of reading what was presented as someone else’s real, very private correspondence. But if reading someone’s private letters is an enjoyable invasion of privacy, televisual realism takes that enjoyable invasion to an entirely new level. This turn from speaking of the living human being to “it,” the show, helps put aside the ethical issues that necessarily arise if realistic story is taken this far.

From the interview with Christof we cut to our first shot of Truman. The image, a close-up, is no longer the crisp studio-production quality we have just been seeing. It looks like home video or a surveillance-camera tape. Weir brings this in here at the beginning to further establish the notion of authenticity, instead of art. Grainy film quality is associated with the pure mechanical record of what the camera sees, rather than an image artificially manipulated to look a certain way. We quickly understand that Truman is in his bathroom, staring at his reflection in the mirror of his medicine cabinet. As he speaks, he looks directly, though without knowing it, into the camera, and so at us. A man alone in his bathroom, with the door safely shut: it is hard to imagine a more private moment. This will surely not be “phony.” “I’m not going to make it,” he says. “You’re going to have to go on without me.” And we cut to a black screen that begins the first credits for Christof’s show, though, oddly, not with the show’s title. We read: “Starring Truman Burbank as himself.” We must take it that nothing, not even the show’s title, takes precedence over the idea of the real “star” and the fictional “character” being the same person.

Truman’s two simple statements vibrate with excess meanings. His use of both “you” and “I” to refer to himself is in one way quite normal. But he, more than the rest of us, has two very distinct selves. His own sense of himself as a single individual is real enough. But from the perspective of the viewing world his sense of self is always both “real” and necessarily “phony.” There is no way to decide absolutely that he is either one way or the other. When he says “you” are going to have to go on without me, he addresses himself; but because he lives, unconsciously, in a made-up world, “you” also refers to the audience as an addressee. The meaning of the one word, “you,” is the contest between real and imaginary, and is just what makes Truman so interesting.



The cutting between Christof and Truman in this sequence creates an implied, unconscious dialogue between them. Truman seems to speak as a response to Christof's justifications. His "I'm not going to make it" unwittingly tells Christof and the viewers that he is not going to be able to go all the way with the show, that somehow he will not remain the unconscious star. And when that happens, the world will lose the story upon which it has come to depend, and will have somehow to go on without him. But when we cut immediately back to Truman from more credits, he says reassuringly, again as if directly to Christof: "No way, mister." Then he goes on, "You're going to the top of this mountain, broken legs and all." It turns out that he is only giving himself a pep-talk before starting his day. Still, his words have inserted an idea that will return at the end: the world's dependence on this kind of story.

With Christof's opening defence and Truman's "response" in mind, we may now consider more directly the appeal of televisual realism. Let's face it; watching an everyday life unfold should not be appealing, because most of everyday life is not in itself interesting. This is why soap operas, for instance, must have constant dramatic turmoil. But as has been noted before, Truman's life "isn't blessed with enough narrative or climactic shaping to work as soap opera: there's no murder, no robbery, no backstabbing, no adultery, not even a speck of dirt" (Cardullo 745). So what holds the audience for this show?

The appeal of televisual realism has two aspects, both of which occur at once, both of which are in conflict, and both of which have been issues in the history of realism. The first appeal of the show I will call simply the story appeal, because it arises from the elements of fiction that usually hold our interest: action, character, plot, suspense, etc. The other I will call—because it is aligned with a version of scientific curiosity—the experimental appeal. This second appeal involves a quasi-scientific interest in watching a unique experiment. In a typical laboratory experiment with a living subject, human or animal, the experimenter seeks to control as many variables as possible in order to observe just one element or outcome. *The Truman Show* in one way is a fantasy of the maximum version of such an experiment. If, godlike, we were to control all of the material and the cultural contexts over time, then we could test the nature of (at least a certain version of) life itself.

This notion of realism as experiment takes us directly back to Emile Zola's *The Experimental Novel*, which, like all innovations in realism, attempts to set forth the nature of the "real" realism. Zola explains that the experimental novel, which was in his time just in embryonic form, "still unhatched" (646), involves more than just "photographing the facts" of the story content. The novelist "interferes in a direct way to place his character in certain conditions" and then observes the outcome. This new



kind of realism, he argues, “is a real experiment that a novelist makes on man” (647). Of course Zola was overstating, since novelists make up their stories. But by the late twentieth century this kind of realism had hatched and matured. Television makes Zola’s goal, at least technically, literally possible.

However, Christof differs from Zola in an important way. For reasons that need not concern us here, Zola’s “experiments” nearly always produced dystopian stories. Christof’s experiment is straightforwardly utopian. In order to present a story that is not just the real without any fiction at all, this experiment involves reducing randomness to a minimum; providing comfortable living conditions; regulating economic, political, and social forces so that they have only predictable and positive effects; and doing all this unknown to the experimental subject. All this done, then we can observe, precisely, “a life” as if it were an exemplar of life in general, apart from all the random vicissitudes that constantly beset an actual existence. This is one of Christof’s stated goals. In an interview late in the film he says outright that “Seahaven is the way the world should be,” and that he has given Truman “a chance to lead a normal life.” For the story to be real, chance must play a part. Otherwise, control would be absolute, as it is with the usual fictional story. But with chance experimentally controlled, we may observe what, in Christof’s mind, would be the true normal life.

With such control we can even program in whatever “random” events we choose and watch the specific results. In the same late interview Christof explains how over time the show had been “forced to manufacture ways to keep [Truman] on the island.” As a boy, Truman and his father are out on a skiff when a storm hits, and his father appears to drown. The audience then observes how this “experiment” determines Truman’s otherwise materially unchanged existence. One programmed outcome of this event is a fear of going over water, which means he is “naturally” afraid to leave the island. We must assume that the sense of a utopian normal life justifies, for the majority of viewers, the ethics of subjecting a human being to this kind of treatment.

The two appeals—the story appeal and the experimental appeal—are at odds in a paradigmatic way, which we can see just by considering the possible endings to Truman’s story. The experimental control strives to ensure that Christof’s fiction will continually operate as Truman’s reality. And since, after thirty years, Truman has not deduced the truth, it seems the experiment will continue to succeed. Compared to our usual notions of a story, the experiment is open-ended, like the unfictionalized real itself, what Peter Brooks has referred to as “narrative interminable” (23). It will go on as long as Truman’s life goes on. At one point Christof brags that he intends to present the first live birth (Truman’s child) on television, which means he would then have the next-generation “star” in place, and that the show could go on indefinitely. If



Truman “makes it” all the way in this sense, in the end his story will have satisfied the desire for experimental realism, and the audience will never have had to go on without him.

But while Truman’s death in old age could constitute a proper ending for the experiment, it would not in itself satisfy on the level of story. As Aristotle informed us long ago, the unity of a plot cannot simply “consist in the unity of the hero” (54). A proper story must have a compelling central conflict (or action), because although a single existence may consist of “infinitely various” (54) events, a record of just these events will be a data-like list whose final entry (death) will mean only the end of an existence, rather than the end of a story. The same viewers who constantly hope Truman “makes it” to the natural end of the experiment also constantly, paradoxically hope he discovers the truth and so ends the show. We regularly see posters and buttons that ask: “How will it end?” The moments of highest drama occur when something goes wrong and Truman almost comes to his great realization. Thus, the audience wants Truman to discover the truth about himself, and so to become a story just in the act of ending the show. Only in the moment of knowing the truth will Truman become story-worthy, rather than just experimentally realistic. For Truman never to discover this truth would be like Don Quixote never realizing the truth about his delusions, or Othello never realizing how he has been duped by Iago, or Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett never realizing how blind she has been about Wickham, etc. etc. The examples are countless. The fact that we have the Truman *show* instead of the Truman *story* makes this point as well. Television shows consist of self-contained episodes, but not, in most cases, any plot that climaxes the show itself, because that would mean the end of the show, rather than the end of an episode. Christof’s production is like a show that has one endless, uninterrupted episode.

The anticipation of the end is what makes the beginning and middle of any story engaging. But this anticipation consists of a certain necessary anxiety or “irritation” (Brooks 104). With *The Truman Show*, this effect is ramped up about as high as it can go. The audience wants just what it has enjoyed for so long, the experiment in realism; but it also wants a fictional story, which means it wants the experiment to end. And that can only happen because of some technical malfunction, or because some actor violates the experiment by telling Truman what he needs to know. Either ending will unavoidably involve, in one dramatic event, two mutually antagonistic catastrophes. It will be catastrophic in the negative sense (as in catastrophic failure) for the experimental realism, but will be catastrophic in the positive, dramatic sense (Aristotle’s word for the climax and resolution of the plot) for the realistic story. Just this always-possible, but never-certain, conclusion to an otherwise very unstory-like narrative is what holds so large an audience for so long a time.

The middle of *The Truman Show* consists of the constant possibility of such a catastrophe. I will examine just one example of the technical kind. On the first morning of our first day with Truman, a stage light comes crashing to the street a few feet from his driveway. He cautiously examines it. The audience is holding its breath, wondering if this random mechanical failure will enable him to deduce the truth. He looks up at the sky, but the event remains a mystery to him until, on the way to work, the radio announces that some parts from a passing aircraft had fallen over the town. A random malfunction is artificially conformed to the experiment, which can go on as always. For both crew and audience, it has been a near miss. We are, though, pointedly shown the label—"Sirius"—written onto the light casing. There are brighter celestial objects in the night sky, but Sirius is famously the brightest *star*. The metaphor is perhaps overdone, once we know the whole story. This kind of foul-up is very serious indeed. Truman, if he ends up not making it, will turn out to be the brightest of technologically created falling stars.

The human-caused catastrophe begins when an extra, Lauren (Natascha McElhone), looks at Truman as a real human being, rather than as the unwitting star of a show. The two connect, slip away together, and have a moment on the beach in which she tries to tell him the truth. But the experiment quickly adjusts to this malfunction. A man claiming to be Lauren's father shows up and forcibly drives her away. Improvising, the "father" tells Truman that he is taking Lauren to Fiji. Weir's film, being a story and not an experiment, gives us the dramatic last three days of the show, in which Truman decides to go Fiji in search of Lauren. As he tries to leave Seahaven, he gradually discovers that he is the centre of everyone else's attention, and finally that he is being secretly observed at all times. In desperation he takes a sailboat, over-metaphorically named the Santa Maria, and sets off for Fiji. In the end he literally runs into the edge of the artificial world.

**T**he ending of Weir's film must necessarily have to do with the "end" of the desire for realism. And this happens in a most intriguing way. Once Truman starts trying to leave, we find that Christof does not share his audience's conflicted, ambivalent interest in the show. He is concerned only with keeping the experimental realism continuing. And this is not simply because of his economic interests. It is made quite clear that it is the perfect fictional reality of the show that most matters to Christof. He will do anything in his considerable power (including nearly drowning Truman with a hurricane) to keep his star from making the show into a story by ending the experiment. What shall we make of this split between Christof and the audience?



It turns out that the televisual advance in realism comes with a purely storytelling risk (that is, a risk apart from the obvious moral, ethical, and legalistic risks). It is the mirror-opposite of the risk that has been associated with fictions since the discussions in Plato's *Republic*. The ancient worry has been that the audience would lose itself in the story, especially fantastic story, to the point that it will lose its proper sense of reality. Just this ancient worry produces the story of Don Quixote, who gets lost in the fantasies of medieval romance, and then it produces steadily more realistic realism as the novel evolves. But this entails that as novelistic realism evolves, there should be less and less worry about anyone getting lost in the story. What would be the problem with getting lost in the real? Nonetheless, there is such a problem, though it only becomes possible with televisual realism. It is what happens to Christof, who has become so wrapped up in the experimental appeal of realism that he has lost his proper sense of story.

At the end Christof embodies the desire for the interminable, unstory-like experiment in realism. Speaking as an omniscient voice from the sky, he tries as best he can to talk Truman into staying in Seahaven. But this cannot possibly work. Once Truman knows the truth, the double-sided catastrophe has irreversibly happened. Even if Truman stays, only the real will remain; and the real in itself is not appealing as story. The great experiment in the most real realism is over. Christof cannot seem to comprehend this fact; if he did, he would not be trying to talk Truman into staying. But unconsciously he does seem to admit the inevitable. When Truman asks, "Was anything real?" Christof responds: "You were. That's why you were so good to watch." The "were" obviously means the end has already happened, that the show has become subject to the usual past-tense verbal temporality of stories; and yet Christof seems to have no doubt that the show must go on.

Finally, Truman, dressed for the first time in dark clothes, bows out of Christof's show. He steps through a dark exit door into the "real" real world. The audience is jubilant: better a story that ends in the darkness of everyday reality than an interminable, undramatic experimental utopia, no matter how realistic. We see cheering, high-fives, joyous weeping, and, most significantly, shouts of "he made it!" This latter outburst takes us back to Truman's original prophecy: "I'm not going to make it. You're going to have to go on without me." But now, because of what we know of the show's creator and its audience, the meaning has changed. For the audience, who turn out to be healthily ambivalent, the negatively catastrophic end of the experiment automatically means the positively catastrophic end of the story. It gives them their greatest pleasure, even though they will have to go on without him. In the very last shot we see a couple of viewers already searching out another show. For Christof, who has lost his proper

sense of story, not making it to the end of the experiment is a devastating catastrophe. We last see him draped despondently over his laptop video monitor.

To conclude, then, *The Truman Show* is very much an entry in the history of realism. But it is unique because it portrays realism itself having reached a fantastic perfection. Consequently, in this case the story serves as a corrective to an unhealthy involvement with, precisely, realism, just as earlier examples of realism have served as correctives to unhealthy involvements with fantasy. The history of realism has of course helped us understand this element of the film, but the film has in its turn helped us see in a new and especially clear way the essentially conflicted nature of our peculiar desire for stories of the real. Further, the film strongly suggests that any new storytelling technology that appears on the scene will likely have to attempt to satisfy our desire for narratives that try to split the differences between fictional and nonfictional. But if *The Truman Show* is any evidence, that desire cannot possibly be satisfied in the way that it wishes. Which is of course why it will continue to be with us.

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