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# Of God, Humanity, and the World: Reflections on "The Truman Show"

## **Abstract**

Popular analysis of *The Truman Show* generally has focused on the comments the movie is making about our media culture and corporate influence in our lives. However, as the names of the lead characters (Truman, Christof) suggest, there is more to the movie than a critique of corporate media culture. With echoes of stories of the Garden of Eden, the Book of Job, and promises of heaven, the movie raises interesting and troubling questions about the nature of God and his relation to humanity in the Western tradition. With echoes of Descartes' "evil genius" and how we come to know ourselves, each other and the world, the movie also addresses some fundamental assumptions of modern philosophy. The answers provided by the movie show that *The Truman Show* is a radical critique of commonly held assumptions about God, humanity and the world in which we live.

## **Keywords**

God, Heaven, Human Beings, World

## **Author Notes**

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Popular analysis of the 1998 movie *The Truman Show* generally has focused on the comments the movie is making about our media culture and corporate influence in our lives. This is understandable. The movie depicts the production of a television program that is watched around the world by millions and has become culturally ubiquitous, including its own product line and “The Best of *The Truman Show*” videos. Its “star” has been legally adopted by a corporation that “runs” his life. The ironic references to television and its hold on our lives are endless.

However, there are other domains of meaning in this story. The name “Truman” suggests that Truman Burbank may somehow represent the “true man” or “true human.” He lives his life in Seahaven, an almost paradisiac “heaven” on earth. We learn in the course of the movie of the existence of Christof, the creator of the television show in which Truman is the star. As his name suggests, Christof has been anointed/ordained to look after Truman and thus serves as a kind of savior; Truman was an unwanted child who has been “saved” by being legally adopted by the Omnicam Corporation for which Christof works. In other words, *The Truman Show* seems to be not only about our media culture but—consciously or not—an allegorical tale that challenges many of our traditional Western religious ideas about God, humanity and our place in the cosmos. It is those philosophical and religious issues that will be explored in the following essay.

## The Story

After some preliminary remarks from characters we will come to know during the movie, the story of *The Truman Show* begins with Truman leaving his home to go to work. Some odd light fixture (labeled “Sirius”) nearly falls on him. This falling star, explained on the car radio as the result of an aircraft shedding parts as it flew over Seahaven, is the appropriate beginning for a story that is driven by questioning and unsettledness. We find that Truman is vaguely dissatisfied with his life. This dissatisfaction evolves into skepticism about his world through a series of events: a sighting of his supposedly long dead father, glimpses behind the facade of staged sets that have been constructed around him, rain that falls only on him while he sits on the beach, the choreography of vehicles that pass his house. His suspicions grow as events seem to be designed to imprison him in the world of Seahaven: he is unable to book a flight to Fiji, a bus to Chicago which he boards suddenly has mechanical failure, his attempt to drive off the island is thwarted by a nuclear power plant crisis. All the while we are given insights into the world outside the huge sound stage—the Omnicam Ecosphere—in which Truman’s life and show unfold. We see people watching Truman’s show on television around the world—at home, at work, in bars, and in the control room from which Christof and his heavenly court direct the show. There are *Truman Show* fan clubs as well as a group that protests the show, led by Sylvia, a former cast member in the show who was tempted to reveal the truth to Truman while she was on the show. Eventually,

after his television wife has left him, Truman is able briefly to evade the five thousand cameras that watch him and sets out on the sea in a sailboat in an effort to escape Seahaven. Despite Christof's best efforts to get him to turn back, Truman comes to the "end of the world"—the wall of the Ecosphere. A climactic dialogue between Christof and Truman is then a prelude to Truman's exit from the Ecosphere, to the cheers of his fans watching on TV. Omnicam stops broadcasting the show; it is over (except for the thirty years of reruns available).

### **Christof: A Disturbing God**

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways... You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Psalm 139:2-4, 5 (NRSV)

The figure of Christof is complex, even paradoxical. As the movie develops, a range of characteristics—characteristics commonly used in the West in reference to God—emerge to define him. On the one hand, as already noted, Christof is something of a savior figure ("Christ of"), since Truman was an unwanted child and "saved" from abandonment by Christof and Omnicam. This is not to say that Christof is a Christ-figure—at least not in any straightforward sense.<sup>1</sup> The visual in the movie that zooms into the sky to reveal Christof peering out on Seahaven from the moon as he orchestrates the "resurrection" of Truman's father reminds us—intentionally or not—of all those Christ-as-Pantocrator or Christ-as-Almighty

mosaics and paintings in the domed ceilings of churches and basilicas: calm, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful.<sup>2</sup> The imagery suggests that if Christof is Christ, it is Christ as the Almighty, Yahweh, El Shaddai, God.<sup>3</sup> The identification of Christof with God is reinforced in various ways in the movie. Like the God of our Abrahamic religious traditions, Christof cares for Truman. This is so in a general sense insofar as he has created an entire world for Truman, a world in which he is safe and secure and given a family, friends, a wife, and a job. It is a world in which Christof provides Truman with order, from the routine and regularity of Truman's life to explanations for any apparent anomalies in this world. In addition, more specifically, two scenes in the movie particularly impress upon us that Christof is caught up in Truman's life on some personal level. At one point in the movie, Christof approaches a giant television screen in the studio that is showing Truman while he sleeps. Christof approaches the screen gingerly and puts his hand out to touch Truman's face, the way a father might while watching his child sleep (82).<sup>4</sup> Later, near the climax of the movie, when Christof addresses Truman, he takes a small monitor showing Truman and places it on his lap, and leans down to embrace it, the way a father might put his son up on his lap to tell him something important. The ensuing monologue has Christof fondly remembering Truman's life and the important events in it (106). In the end, Truman is central to Christof's life: he lives in the studio of the Omnicam Ecosphere nearly twenty-four hours a day to watch

over Truman and take care of his needs. In short, Christof shows some sort of caring, personal attachment to Truman.

Yet there is more to Christof. The opening credits of the movie/television show tell us that it was “created by Christof”; an interviewer later calls him a “televisionary, the Man-in-the-Moon himself” (72). That latter reference notes the fact that Christof oversees the giant set that is Truman’s world from the “Lunar Room” 221 stories up in a window on the world of Seahaven and its surroundings. Thus Christof is credited with another set of characteristics also associated with Western religious conceptions of God that coalesce around vision and the unique properties of seeing. Sight, Hans Jonas has noted,<sup>5</sup> is the sense of simultaneity, tending to elevate the static over the dynamic, the fixed over the ephemeral, and thereby gives birth to the idea of the eternal. So, under the ever-present gaze of Christof, despite all the action, things do not change all that much in *The Truman Show*—or outside it, for that matter. On the show, Truman’s life is usually rather routine, even down to the way he begins his day greeting the neighbors, stopping to buy women’s magazines and being approached by a pair of brothers who are considering buying insurance from him. Confirming the stasis of life in this world, his grade school teacher tells him that there is really nothing left to explore (6), i.e., *everything* is fixed and complete. Truman himself, answering a question about how he is, says “Inhale ... exhale ... same old thing” (83). Outside of the show, things do not seem to change all that much either. The film cuts to the same people watching *The*

*Truman Show* day and night: the same bartenders and bar patrons, the same man in a bathtub, the same two garage attendants, the same senior citizens, the same Japanese family. In watching the show, its viewers become transfixed and unchanging.

Furthermore, as Jonas observes, sight helps to create the polarity of subject and object. Vision tends to turn what it sees into an object and to suppress the link between subject and object as the viewer is detached from the object of one's gaze. Hence we are not surprised when Christof explains during an interview that he has never been tempted to do a cameo on the show because he wants to retain his objectivity and not get emotionally caught up in Truman's life (79). That objectivity—even indifference—is confirmed near the end of the movie as Christof threatens Truman's life in an attempt to keep Truman from escaping the Ecosphere. Finally, Jonas notes that the distance and detachment of vision empowers, for one is allowed to see ahead. Vision enables foresight and foreknowledge. Hence Christof can claim from his vantage point on high to know Truman better than Truman knows himself (106). His vision gives him power because it gives him foreknowledge of what will happen. He is thereby able to foresee and thwart any attempt by Truman to leave the Ecosphere.

The movie's emphasis on the visual characteristics of Christof suggests that, no matter how much he seems to care for Truman, there is something dark and sinister about him. There is something manipulative, distant and uncaring in the



vision, in the gaze, of Christof—and in the millions of TV viewers who, made in the image of Christof, keep watch over Truman. He reminds us of Descartes' evil genius in *Meditations I*: "supremely powerful and clever," directing "his entire effort at deceiving" Truman.<sup>6</sup> He works to provide Truman with "logical" explanations for apparent anomalies in his world that might lead Truman to question his world, and moves to oust anyone from this "paradise" that seeks to bring Truman knowledge. Near the end of the movie, he even seems willing to kill Truman rather than allow Truman to escape.

It is as if Christof's gaze imprisons Truman. Indeed, the Ecosphere is reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's ideal prison—the Panopticon—in which prisoners are constantly watched by an unseen warden. One function of the Panopticon, according to Michel Foucault, is to dissociate "the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen."<sup>7</sup> And, of course, Christof himself is largely unseen—and never seen by Truman; he is a mysterious figure to both Truman and the TV/movie viewer. We see him at the very beginning of the movie, though we do not know who he is, telling us about Truman's "authenticity." But other than that, we do not encounter Christof until nearly one hour (more than halfway through) into the story, as he choreographs the "resurrection" of Truman's "father," Kirk Burbank.<sup>8</sup> Truman will not learn of Christof until the end of the story, and still never sees him. To Truman, the ways of Christof truly are mysterious.

However, in this way Truman is controlled and disciplined. As Foucault further notes:

Disciplinary power ... is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection.<sup>9</sup>

How is being seen a kind of discipline and manipulation? Recall Sartre's "ocularphobia" in *Being and Nothingness*, his sense that to be watched robs one of one's possibilities: "I grasp the Other's look at the very center of my *act* as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities. ... The Other as a look is only that—my transcendence transcended..."<sup>10</sup> In other words, Truman's possibilities—past, present, and future—are at the service of Christof and *his* plans. Or, as Jacques-Alain Miller explains, the Panopticon

is the temple of reason, a temple luminous and transparent in every sense: first because there are no shadows and nowhere to hide: it is open to constant surveillance by the invisible eye; but also, because totalitarian mastery of the environment excludes everything irrational: no opacity can withstand logic.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, in the Ecosphere, "there are no shadows and nowhere to hide." Christof is even able to defy the laws of nature by having the sun rise too early when Truman "disappears" and must be found (94-95). Christof's logic and order excludes Sylvia and anyone else who would inform Truman of his situation, excludes the possibility of Truman leaving and striking out on his own, excludes everything that he has not

framed and placed and set before him in the Ecosphere.<sup>12</sup> Just as “the Panopticon, with its hidden and invisible warden, was an architectural embodiment of the most paranoid Sartrean fantasies about the ‘absolute look’,” in which “the disciplining and normalizing function of the gaze was at its most blatant,”<sup>13</sup> so is the Ecosphere. In short, despite Christof’s suggestions that Truman is free,<sup>14</sup> Christof’s omniscience, his super-*vision*, amounts to the supervision, objectification and reduction of Truman’s possibilities—and of Truman himself.

The notion of God as a panoptic spectator empowered by his gaze and directing what happens in the world contrasts sharply with the notion of a benevolent, personal God. It appears that if God is omniscient and omnipotent, then he is not omnibenevolent but controlling and manipulative. On the other hand, if God is “personal” in some fashion, he cannot be omnipotent and omniscient. We get an illustration of this at the end of the movie, when Christof finally does approach Truman in something like a personal way—by *speaking* to and with Truman. In this situation, Christof loses his omnipotence and omniscience. He seems incapable of stopping Truman from leaving and does not know what Truman will say or do. He then is amazed when Truman exits the Ecosphere.

What are we to make of this paradox? Some have tried to account for the contrasting characterizations of God in our Western religious traditions by noting that they correspond to the Greek emphasis on vision and the Hebrew emphasis on the word.<sup>15</sup> However, as should be apparent from the epigram from the Psalms that

began this section of our paper—as well as other references that may be found in the Hebrew Bible<sup>16</sup>—this contrast is not simply one of Greek and Hebrew understandings of divinity. Jewish, Christian and Islamic imagery of God mixes the personal and the transcendent. The character of Christof in *The Truman Show* embodies that mix, and shows us the paradox and disturbing consequences of that mix. Given that Truman ultimately takes leave of Christof and his world, *The Truman Show* offers up an anti-theist view of the world, based in part on the paradoxical (some might even say incoherent) Western religious concept of God.

### **Truman: Paradigm for Humanity**

Many are the wonders, none/ is more wonderful than what is man. / This it is that crosses the sea  
/... He has a way against everything, / and he faces nothing that is to come/ without contrivance/ ...  
With some sort of cunning, inventive/ beyond all expectation/ he reaches sometimes evil, / and  
sometimes good.

Sophocles, *Antigone*, 332ff<sup>17</sup>

As his name suggests, Truman represents the “true man,” i.e., human beings in general, humanity.<sup>18</sup> However, as such, his character as the “true man” of the story is initially ambiguous; the movie and its characters suggest a number of ways in which we might understand how he is a true human being. Coming from our predominantly Christian culture, we initially might be inclined to see Truman as a Christ-figure, that is, a fictional character who resembles Jesus in a significant way,

particularly as a redeemer or savior. Indeed, Truman does have a number of characteristics that scholars associate with Christ-figures in film.<sup>19</sup> He is 30 years old, the focus of a show that, as Christof says, “gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions” (105), with a cult following all across the world. There also are a few visual cues in the movie that might remind us of Christ. While out on the “sea” and ravaged by the storm Christof has unleashed on him, Truman lashes himself to the wheel of his boat in a cruciform position (though how he lashes himself to the wheel is not indicated in the shooting script; 101) and momentarily appears to have drowned, only to rouse himself (as if he had died and been resurrected). A few minutes later, once he has come to the wall of the Ecosphere, Truman walks along a walkway, giving us the visual impression that he is walking on water (as Jesus did in the Gospels; Matthew 14:22-36, Mark 6:45-56, John 6:16-24). Finally, he comes to a staircase which he climbs into the “heavens” toward the exit of the Ecosphere (just as Jesus ascended into heaven; Acts 1:9-11). So, to some, Truman might be the “true man” as Jesus Christ is, according to St. Paul (I Corinthians 15:45), the 2<sup>nd</sup> Adam meant to serve as a new model for humanity.

However, interpreting Truman as a Christ-figure seems strained. First of all, he lacks many if not most of the characteristics associated with Christ-figures. Granted, those who have catalogued characteristics of Christ-figures in the movies do not argue that a Christ-figure must have all the characteristics they list. So, the fact that there is no Mary Magdalene-like figure in the movie and Truman is not

dressed like Jesus (either physically or spiritually) or have blue eyes would not rule him out as a Christ-figure. Truman, though, lacks other, seemingly more essential characteristics of a Christ-figure. For instance, Truman shows no sign of meeting the first of Reinhartz's two sufficient conditions: that the character "extends him or herself on behalf of another." Relatedly, Truman does not sacrifice himself for others or provide service to others (at least not knowingly), which are two of Koslovic's criteria. Truman is not an outsider (like the title character of *Cool Hand Luke*) and does not have mysterious or alien origins (like Superman and E.T., or Klaatu in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*), nor does he have special and extraordinary abilities while appearing normal (again, Klaatu and Superman are good examples, as well as John Coffey in *The Green Mile*). Though he has a large following he is hardly charismatic in the way cinematic Christ-figures are—by being outsiders, rebels, or aliens with special powers. He does not show a commitment to justice (like Superman), nor does he try to redeem or save anybody—except perhaps himself. He does not even have the obvious J.C. initials (like John Coffey in *The Green Mile*, James Cole in *Twelve Monkeys*, or John Connor in *The Terminator*). Indeed, as noted above, the only allusion to a "Chris" in the movie is Christof (who, as argued above, is God Almighty in our allegorical reading of the movie). On the other hand, Truman seems positively un-Christ-like in defying Christof by trying to escape from the Ecosphere, whereas Christ was obedient, even unto death. For

these reasons, it seems we would do well to look elsewhere for how Truman is the “true man.”

One complex of meanings is provided by Christof. Answering an attack on the show by a caller during his interview, Christof claims

He can leave at any time. If his was more than just a vague ambition, if he were absolutely determined to discover the truth, there's no way we could prevent him. I think what really distresses you, Caller, is that ultimately Truman prefers the comfort of his “cell” as you call it (81).

Christof reaffirms this view toward the end of the movie when, trying to keep Truman from leaving, he says “he’s not willing to risk his life. His doubts will turn him back” (100). Thus Truman appears “true” in the sense that, like all human beings, he fears chaos (shown to us, e.g., in his paralyzing fear of the sea) and craves the security. (It is somewhat ironic that Truman is an insurance salesman.) That desire for security presumably includes “blissful ignorance,” since Christof even suggests that this “true man” really does not wish to know about himself and his world. “We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented. It is as simple as that” says Christof (79) in answer to an interviewer’s question. What Christof is suggesting is that, like Adam (and Eve) in the Book of Genesis, Truman is unaware of his “nakedness,” that is, unaware of his weakness and neediness and his dependence upon the Almighty Christof.<sup>20</sup> Such is the nature of the true man in paradise, before his “fall.”

This is connected to another characterization of Truman given by Christof in the opening remarks of the movie:

We have become bored with actors giving us phony emotions. We're tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the world he inhabits is in some respects counterfeit, there is nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards. It isn't always Shakespeare, but it's genuine. It's a life.<sup>21</sup>

Christof would have us believe that Truman is “true” in the sense that he is not acting, that his responses to various situations are not scripted: he is presumably an island of authenticity in an illusory world. Louis Coltrane, who plays Truman's best friend Marlon, reinforces this view when he says in an interview at the beginning of the movie that “It's all true, it's all real. Nothing here is fake. Nothing you see in this show is fake. It's merely controlled.” However, the movie undercuts that interpretation as we find that Truman is made in Christof's image, i.e., is manipulated and hemmed in, directed in one way or another. Christof inadvertently admits this (and thereby contradicts himself) when he notes that: “As the Bard says, ‘All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.’ ... He [Truman] plays his allotted roles as we all do—” (80).

Yet, interestingly, there is one way in which Truman is not made in Christof's image: he does not watch television. Indeed, it is significant that Truman wises up—comes to know that he does not know his world or himself—as he realizes the artifice of what he sees (e.g., the hollow sets, the regularity of the vehicles that pass by his house, that the sky is literally the limit of this world) and after



*hearing* from Christof. Seeing, he realizes, is not believing, leading him to question everything he knows.

This seems to be the direction in which the movie finally wants to take us: to an understanding of the true human being as one who eventually questions and thereby opens themselves to possibilities. By this we do not mean the sort of modern skepticism that doubts for the sake of doubting or doubts, like Descartes, in order to acquire some *fundamentum inconcussum* (including religious faith) on which one can build a knowledge of the world that is certain and unshakeable. Indeed, such a possibility—and its panoptic God—is explicitly rejected by Truman at the end of the movie as he opts to step out into the unknown rather than remain with what is certain and secure. Truman finally is a true human being insofar as he is an explorer, someone on a quest, someone for whom the future is open, in which possibility rules.<sup>22</sup> Christof confirms that Truman was “curious from birth” (79) and, as noted above, we see in a flashback of Truman in grade school that he wants to be an explorer like Magellan when he grows up (6). He owns a book entitled *To the Ends of the Earth—The Age of Exploration* (81) and a stack of *Great Explorers* magazines (28). His apparent fixation on Sylvia—he has her sweater and continually buys women’s magazines in order to acquire elements of a woman’s face to piece together a portrait of Sylvia—falls into the same category: she signifies possibilities unexplored. In his quest he becomes “crafty” and “deceitful”<sup>23</sup> as he tries to contend with forces he does not understand. It is then that Truman comes

alive for us—is most human—as he tries to fight for those possibilities. Even when thwarted, he is more interesting and more alive than when he follows his routine. Thus we are literally on the edge of our seats as he strikes out on the “high seas” for parts unknown. In short, Truman seems to confirm that the essence of humanity is “to be carried by [being], to be driven about by its oppositions and marked by its discord ... to remain exposed to all its sundering confusions.”<sup>24</sup> Rather than settling for safety and security by playing his assigned role, putting his faith and trust in a superior power who controls the world, the true human being calls into question that world and what his or her role is to be.

### **The World: Paradise Rejected**

Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance ... We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.<sup>25</sup>

The world of Seahaven and the Omnicam Ecosphere can be interpreted in a number of ways that have religious overtones. In one sense, it is reminiscent of ancient conceptions of the cosmos: an island of land surrounded by the primordial depths, capped by the solid dome of the heavens.<sup>26</sup> In that sense, it is an entire world unto itself. More importantly, however, the name Seahaven suggests that Truman’s world is a kind of heaven, or, alternatively, heaven on earth, i.e., paradise. The latter interpretation is reinforced by a headline in the local newspaper: *The*

*Island Times*: **The Best Place on Earth.** That is to say, Seahaven is like Eden, a place of luxury, pleasure and delight (the meaning of the Hebrew *eden*), a “divine park” created just for Truman, just as the Garden of Eden was created for Adam. Indeed, it is park-like in its appearance. It is clean and well maintained; there is no litter, there are no slums. The weather is perfect, neither too hot nor too cold, and the general population is friendly and well-behaved. It is literally and figuratively a utopia, i.e., no place, cut off from the outside world, an island cut off from any connection to any other place on earth.

Following this line of thinking, Seahaven represents what Colleen McDaniel and Bernhard Lang call an “anthropocentric” model of heaven. Such models have been popular off and on throughout the religious history of the West; its modern formulations are found in theological writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and live on today in the theology of the Church of Latter Day Saints and in our popular (religious) imagination.<sup>27</sup> Such models portray heaven in sensual, material terms, usually as an idealized life similar to the life we live on earth, a life characterized by productive work, spiritual development and reunions with those we love. So Truman lives in a world no different than the world outside the Ecosphere (except for the absolute safety he enjoys) (106), in which he makes choices that contribute to and shape the world around him, and in which he is reunited with his long lost father. Of course, the details of the sensual, material views of heaven presented in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century theology vary in terms of how closely heaven resembles life

on earth, particularly with regard to the matter of sexual relations. Interestingly, the world of *The Truman Show* has similar problems: there are no cameras aimed at the toilet, and Truman's sex life is "classical music, soft lighting and so on" (81), almost as if these elements of human life do not exist in Truman's world.

Nonetheless, the movie suggests in a number of ways that the world of Seahaven and the Omnicam Ecosphere is a dystopia rather than a utopia or, rather, that any utopia (including God's promise of paradise) is a dystopia that should be rejected by any true human being. We have already noted, for instance, that the Ecosphere is reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison. Another way in which the movie suggests that this is a dystopia is through the imagery of the movie. In the anthropocentric models of heaven of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was common to think of heaven as on the other shore. So in a hymn by Isaac Watts it is said that "Death like a narrow sea divides/ This heavenly land from ours."<sup>28</sup> Correspondingly, Truman sets out from Seahaven near the end of the movie across a narrow sea—and he appears to die. Swamped by storm and waves as Christof tries to get him to turn back, one has the impression that Truman has drowned; the audiences in the control room and around the world bow their heads as if mourning Truman's passing. Regaining consciousness, Truman a short while later touches the heavens as he comes to the end of the world. Walking along the walkway at the edge of the world (giving the visual impression that Truman is walking on water), Truman comes to a staircase, which he climbs into "the heavens" toward the exit

of the Ecosphere. It is at this point that Christof addresses and makes himself known to Truman for the first time.

What follows builds on this imagery to suggest that paradise and true salvation lie on this other shore, outside this world specially made for a man by his “creator.” Standing at the exit of the world made for him, Christof finally addresses Truman, answering Truman’s questioning by saying that “I am the creator—of a television show that gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions.” Truman’s eyes are finally opened. “Who am I?” he asks. “You are the star,” replies Christof. “Was nothing real?” asks Truman, to which Christof responds by saying

*You were real. That’s what made you so good to watch. There’s no more truth out there than in the world I created for you. Same lies, same deceit. But in my world, you have nothing to fear. I know you better than you know yourself ... You’re afraid. That’s why you can’t leave. It’s okay Truman. I understand. I have been watching you your whole life. I was watching when you were born. I was watching when you took your first step. I watched you on your first day of school. The episode when you lost your first tooth. You can’t leave, Truman. You belong here, with me. Talk to me. Say something. Say something, goddammit, you’re on television! You’re live to the whole world!*

Truman is being offered a kind of heaven: living with Christof/God, in a world “that gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions,” just like the Promised Land or the promise of heavenly salvation in Western religions. However, offered the possibility of living in the world as it *should* be (according to Christof), Truman literally bows out. Instead, he opts for the unknown possibilities that await him outside the Ecosphere. His coming to know himself results in a rejection of this utopia, and

rejection of its creator/God (or, at least, the commonly held Western conception of God embodied by the character of Christof). Here too *The Truman Show* inverts the meaning of the creation story in the Book of Genesis, for Truman is not ejected from the Garden: he leaves knowingly. Paradise is not lost; it is rejected. Or, like the story in the Book of Genesis, where Adam and Eve are ejected because they have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, it is the knowledge that Truman has gained that leads to his exit from Seahaven and the Ecosphere. Truman's exit puts the lie to the words of Marlon/Louis Coltrane, who said at the beginning of the movie that "It's all true, it's all real. Nothing here is fake. Nothing you see on this show is fake. It's merely controlled." His exit puts a lie to Christof's remarks that "it's genuine. It's a life." It is not a life; it is not true, because it is completely closed off and not open. Truman's scripted, controlled life is meaningless, because the meaning of human being lies in its possibilities. We cannot win if losing is not an option. If failure is not a possibility, neither is discovery. Hence to reject utopia—even heaven itself—is to reject meaninglessness. The "true man" is not one to have faith in an omniscient, omnipotent God or the salvation and security He promises.

However, like all great comedies, the movie ends equivocally. In a scene that is not in the shooting script, we see the two garage attendants who have been shown watching the show throughout the movie. They are shown looking at the static filled television screen. The one turns to the other and says: "You want another slice? —No, I'm okay. What else is on? —Yeah, let's see what else is on.

Where's the *TV Guide*?" In other words, we, and the audience in the movie, have just cheered the supposedly true human being and the affirmation of the meaning of his life, which has entailed the rejection of the all-seeing, all-knowing spectator of his life. Yet, having "learned" this lesson, these two men still want the security of television and its controlled, antiseptic vision of the world presented by omniscient, omnipotent sponsors, producers, and directors. We are left then to wonder whether they, rather than Truman, are the true human beings.

## **Conclusion**

While occasionally doubling us up with laughter, *The Truman Show*, interpreted allegorically, also doubles up its portrayals of God, humanity and the world, calling each into question. Christof, the creator and director of Truman's world, controls the things, forces, and people within that world and constantly watches over Truman, both in the sense of looking out for and caring about Truman's well-being and in the sense of keeping Truman under constant surveillance. Christof thus shares many of the characteristics we associate with our Western conception of God: omnipotent, omniscient and seemingly benevolent. However, as we have shown, Christof's detached supervision of Truman means that Truman is not free but ultimately an object to be manipulated, confined, and controlled. In the end, this panoptic God of the Ecosphere is malevolent rather than benevolent and rejected by Truman.

As for Truman, he is a “true man,” a true human being. But what does that mean? On the one hand, he (along with his television audience) is tempted to be content with the safety, order and security of his world, in which apparent anomalies find some explanation and everything is as it should be. Nonetheless, because of the anomalies that arise in this “perfect” world, this true human is finally driven to question his world and longs to explore new horizons. Ultimately Truman feels compelled to withdraw from a world overseen by a panoptic director and to reject any offer of a perfect world. With Truman’s rejection of Christof’s world, the movie supports the rejection of a panoptic God that provides safety and security and favors an understanding of human beings that celebrates their freedom and their possibilities. Nonetheless, with its final, unscripted scene, the movie acknowledges that, ironically, those possibilities include a desire for security, closure and confinement surveyed and controlled by a divine, watchful eye.

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of Christ-figures and their characteristics in film, see Adele Reinhartz, “Jesus and Christ-figures” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London: Routledge, 2009), 430-436; Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film, Communication, Culture and Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997); Anton Koslovic, “The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (2004). Online. Available <HTTP: [www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist-print.html](http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist-print.html) > (accessed 29/09/2010 10:55:13 AM).

<sup>2</sup> In another movie (which was first a play), *Inherit the Wind*—based on the Scopes trial—Matthew Harrison Brady (the character based on William Jennings Bryan) suggests that God is on the dark side of the moon when he asks a witness “And when he was wondering about what was on the other side of the moon, did he ever mention the possibility of heaven?” Cf. the comments of the fundamentalist preacher Dr. Greg Dickson in the video *The Long Search: Protestantism USA* (New York: Ambrose Video, 1978): “I believe tonight if you could get into a rocket ship and propel yourself



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beyond the atmosphere, the stratosphere, the ionosphere, on past this solar system of ours, on past the Milky Way that makes up our galaxy and on past a million other galaxies like this, you would come to a place that the Bible calls heaven. And when I say that heaven is a real place I mean that it can be geographically located.”

<sup>3</sup> The Greek Septuagint uses the word “Pantocrator” (“Almighty,” “Ruler of All,” “Sustainer of All”) to translate both “Yahweh” (specifically, *Yahweh Sabaoth*, “Yahweh of Hosts”; see 2 Kings [2 Samuel] 7:8 and Amos 3:13) and “El Shaddai” (e.g., Job 5:17, 25 and 22:25) in the Hebrew Bible. In the New Testament, St. Paul (2 Corinthians 6:18) and the Book of Revelation (1:8, 4:8, 11:17, 15:13, 16:7,14, 19:6, 19:15, 21:22) use “Pantocrator” in reference to God or God and Christ. See *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1985), 684-685.

<sup>4</sup> Page references in the text are to Andrew Niccol, *The Truman Show: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1998). Note that there are (usually small) differences between the movie and the shooting script in terms of dialogue or the placement of that dialogue. Quotes or references to events in the movie without page references are taken directly from the movie.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses” in *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 135-156. For an overview of the importance of vision in Western thinking, see the first two chapters (“The Noblest of Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes,” 21-82, and “Dialectic of EnLIGHTenment,” 83-147) of Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 201-202.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in *The Shooting Script*, Christof does not appear at the beginning of the movie and we catch only *very* brief glimpses of him at pages 18 (scene 27), 36 (scene 50) and 40 (scene 64) (though he is unidentified to viewers of the movie). In both the shooting script and the movie, he does not enter the picture as a major “player” until approximately one hour into the movie (page 68, scene 98 in the shooting script) with the “resurrection” of Kirk Burbank.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, 187.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1957), 352 and the entire section entitled “The Look,” 340-400. Of course, Martin Heidegger preceded Sartre in investigating how the reduction of being—ours and the world’s—has taken place in the history of Western thought (centering on particular metaphors for sight), culminating with our contemporary fascination with technique and technology. See, e.g., *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, revised by Dennis Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 69f, 134, 142, 164ff, 340ff, and *Questions Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) (hereafter *QCT*). For summary analyses of these themes in Heidegger, see Stephen Houlgate, “Vision, Reflection, and Openness: The ‘Hegemony of Vision’ from a Hegelian Point of View” and David Michael Levin, “Decline and Fall: Ocularcentrism in Heidegger’s Reading of the History of Metaphysics” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed.

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David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 87-98 and 186-217. See also William McNeill, *The Glance of the Eye. Heidegger, Aristotle, and the Ends of Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “Jeremy Bentham’s Panoptic Device,” trans. Richard Miller *October* 41 (1987): 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger characterized the essence of modern technology—the summation of a long development of Western thought along the lines of sight—as *Ge-stell*, a kind of “gathered setting” in place of objects before a subject, playing on the meaning of the German word *stellen* (“to place”) and its cognates (e.g., *vorstellen*, “to represent,” i.e., “to place before”). See, in particular, the first two essays in *Questions Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row, 1977: “The Question Concerning Technology,” 19-35 and “The Turning,” 36-49.

<sup>13</sup> Jay, 410.

<sup>14</sup> For example, when an interviewer notes that “Truman has always been very much in on casting,” Christof says: “As with our own lives, the only people he can’t cast are his family. Otherwise he has final approval ...” (76). Later, in answer to a phone call from Sylvia during the same interview, he notes that Truman “can leave at any time” (80).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with the Greek*, trans. Jules L. Moreau (London: SCM Press, 1960), 74ff, and Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 3-25.

<sup>16</sup> For example, 2 Kings 19:27, Psalm 94:11, Jeremiah 12:3, Job 31:4, Hebrews 4:13. See also John 2:24 in the New Testament.

<sup>17</sup> This is David Grene’s translation in *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Volume II, Sophocles*, ed. David Grene and Richard Lattimore (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 174-175. Note that I have referenced the traditional numbering of the lines in Greek; Grene’s numbering in his translation corresponds to the number of lines in his English translation.

<sup>18</sup> “The child was named ‘Truman’ by Christof— ‘We will make of him a “True Man”,’ Christof stated in a press-release at the time” the show was launched; Peter Weir, “Introduction” in Niccol, *The Shooting Script*, xiii.

<sup>19</sup> Reinhartz (431) thinks two characteristics suffice to characterize the Christ-figure, while Lloyd Baugh lists eight characteristics and Anton Koslovic lists twenty-five characteristics.

<sup>20</sup> See John S. Kselman, “Genesis” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1988), 88.

<sup>21</sup> *Shooting Script*, 75. This observation, which Christof makes while being interviewed for “Tru Talk,” has been edited out of the interview (scene 108 in the script) and placed at the beginning of the movie.

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<sup>22</sup> At the close of another cotemporaneous movie that spoofs our nostalgia for the past as embodied by old television shows—*Pleasantville* (1998)—two of the lead characters, now transformed from black and white into color, sit on a park bench and remark that they don't know what is going to happen next. The point, of course, is that life does not follow the familiar "dramatic" arcs of television sitcoms and dramas; it is open-ended.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the pun on *'arummim*, "naked," and *'arum*, "crafty," in the *Genesis* 2:25; 3:1,7. But note too that this is not only the ancient Hebrew characterization of human beings; see Sophocles' *Antigone*, lines 332-375, with its references to the "contrivances" and "cunning" of human beings.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, *Questions Concerning Technology*, 131.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment*, 217.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Joel W. Rosenberg's account of the "firmament" (with an accompanying illustration of the cosmos) in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1985), 309-310. For early Greek conceptions of the cosmos, see, e.g., John Mansley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 3ff.

<sup>27</sup> *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 181ff.

<sup>28</sup> From Isaac Watts' hymn "A Prospect of Heaven Makes Death Easy," quoted in McDannell and Lang, 185.

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