Hollywood cinema in the late 1990s released a number of films preoccupied with the relationship between representation and reality, including *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *Dark City* (1998), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Pleasantville* (1998), *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999). These films have attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention, examining issues ranging from matters of technology, the body and representation, to millennial anxieties concerning the impact of the mass media. Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show* has received some of that critical attention, but more than a decade after its first release, little detailed analysis has been offered on the film. I think it is time to revisit the film, and to pay closer attention to its particular stylistic choices, especially as far as the relationship between the film *The Truman Show* and the diegetic television program “The Truman Show” is concerned. When attention has been paid to this relationship, it has usually been misunderstood, as exemplified in the following suggestion by Emma Kafalenos:

Visually, these borders [between the movie and the television show] are often indistinguishable. Until the transmission of the television program is cut off near the end of the movie, any scenic representation of
Truman may be perceived as a scene in the movie or as a representation of a scene from the television program. (4)

What I think is so engaging about *The Truman Show* is that the complex relationship between the film and the show-within-the-film raises it above any reductive commentary on the mass media. Because it is positioned “on the edge,” because it is both, and shifts between, *The Truman Show* and “The Truman Show,” this text enables (and, indeed, demands) a critical exploration of a range of boundaries and binary oppositions. I will argue that, while the film is ostensibly structured along the rather conventional binary oppositions of cinema/television, disruption/stability, reality/simulation and outside/inside, it subtly problematizes these oppositions in ways that reflexively raise issues around the very status of film analysis itself. What my discussion intends to bear out is how the film approaches the idea of the perpetual fluidity of meaning in a highly systematic way and through a set of precisely articulated choices, requiring analysis that both rigorously unpicks the film’s systems and is reflexively fluid enough to consider the conceptual implications of these systematic choices.

*The Truman Show* tells the story of Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), a thirty-year old insurance salesman living in the seemingly idyllic small island community of Seahaven. Although his life might appear pleasantly ordinary, Truman finds out during the film that he has been the (unwitting) star of a television program called “The Truman Show,” a mix of reality TV, sitcom, and soap opera. This show, in which everyone except him is an actor, is an undertaking on an enormous scale that employs a large number of staff to broadcast live and continuously to a worldwide audience of almost two billion viewers, generating enormous revenues through far from subtle product placement. With the pristine, pastel-colored, and excessively wholesome Seahaven not a town but a studio set, a gigantic simulacrum based on mythical American small town life, it is not difficult to see how, as J. Macgregor Wise puts it, “*The Truman Show* takes Baudrillard seriously.” (35) From the very first shot of the film, it becomes apparent that distinctions between the real and the simulated have become problematic. Christof (Ed Harris), the mastermind behind this artificial world-within-a-world, asserts in a direct address to the camera that: “We’ve become bored with watching actors give us phony emotions. [...] No scripts, no cue cards. It isn’t always Shakespeare, but it’s genuine. It’s a life.” The next shot introduces
Truman (apparently) also looking directly at the camera. However, the camera pulls back from a close up of his eyes to a wider shot framing his head and shoulders on a screen within the screen. The silhouettes of a range of bathroom products line the bottom edge of the frame, and a “Live” caption appears. It becomes evident that Truman is actually looking at and play-acting to a bathroom cabinet mirror, inside which a secret camera – one of five thousand, Christof later reveals – has been concealed. The following shots, the opening sequence for both the film and the fictional television show, feature further “behind-the-scenes” talking head shots of Christof and the two main actors on the show. Hannah Gill (Laura Linney) plays the part of Truman’s wife Meryl, and Louis Coltrane (Noah Emmerich) plays Truman’s best friend Marlon. Hannah/Meryl and Louis/Marlon both emphatically insist on the authenticity and sincerity of the show. As Louis/Marlon puts it: “It’s all true, it’s all real. Nothing here is fake, nothing you see on this show is fake... it’s merely controlled.” This obviously works as part of the film’s ironic commentary, but, given that Louis/Marlon has been on the show for nearly as long as Truman, it also suggests the possibility that these “actors” may have lost the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is simulated. They have begun, as Jean Baudrillard discusses in relation to illness, to “simulate” rather than to “feign,” producing some of the symptoms in themselves.1
After these "opening credits," the film continues with the start of Truman’s working day, and every shot in the short sequence of him leaving his house and walking to his car needs to be understood as a shot from the television show’s broadcast. With the use of stylistic devices ranging from the wide angle lens with vignette edges (as Truman steps outside of the house; see figure 1), the noticeable zoom in (as he jokes with his neighbors; see figure 2), the jerky quality of the camera movement and slight lack of focus (as he walks to his car; see figure 3), to the noticeably low camera angle (as he is just about to get into his car; see figure 4), the camera here does not represent the “objective” camera of the traditionally invisible film apparatus. Instead, it needs to be understood as representing (or, more appropriately, simulating) the "television" cameras employed by the program "The Truman Show." Their presence is potentially detectable and thus needs to be hidden from Truman within the television show’s environment. A diagrammatic map (figure 5) reveals them to be in the neighbors’ front garden across the street, Truman’s porch area, front gate, garden, his jacket and the next-door neighbor’s rubbish bin. The shots of Truman’s neighbors (see figure 6) are stylistically more conventional, not drawing attention to themselves as shots with their smooth compositions and "straight" camera angles.

![Diagram](image_url)

Figure 5
While they may appear at first to be "film" shots, they are actually also "television" shots – these characters are "actors" who are scripted and presumably have earpieces and cue marks, and the "television" cameras of "The Truman Show" plan for these smoother, less stylistically noticeable compositions. Therefore, this transparency highlights that the voyeuristic gaze of the television show not only penetrates every part of daily life, but also shapes and controls that life according to its needs.

![Figure 6](image)

However, as the sequence continues and Truman is just about to get into his car to drive to work, both his daily life and the "television" representation of it are suddenly disrupted. Quite literally "out of the blue," a studio lantern fixture falls out of the "sky" and crashes down in Truman’s road. The first few shots of the studio lantern differ from all the previous shots in the film so far, in that they cannot have been captured by the show’s "television" cameras.

![Figure 7](image)

The first image here (see figure 7) is from an elevated static camera in which the lantern falls along the vertical axis of the frame. As with the shots of Truman’s neighbors, this is evidently a "pre-planned" camera
set-up, but, unlike Truman’s ritual interaction with his neighbors, the fall and crash of the lantern is not an event that could have been planned or predicted by “The Truman Show.” The subsequent close ups of the lantern crashing on Truman’s road (see figure 8) are also “film” and not “television” shots, as the camera is “invisible” and able to anticipate the exact spot where the lantern impacts, which a “live” television show would be unlikely to achieve.

Figure 8

When Truman approaches and picks up the lantern, the shot type reverts back to representing “television” cameras, in which all the camera positions and angles are explicable through the demands and strategies of the television show. The low angle shot depicting Truman’s startled reaction reprises an earlier “television” shot, while the high angle long shot of the road (see figure 9) is not able to focus on Truman or the lantern, which is rather difficult to discern because a shadow falls across it.

Figure 9

As the framing places prominence on the space Truman’s car would usually drive through, this seems much like a shot “The Truman Show”
would be likely to use as part of its daily routine. The following shot of Truman picking up the lantern (see figure 10) frames him rather awkwardly from a low angle between two pillars and uses another zoom in, signaling its status as a “television” shot.

![Figure 10](image)

Even the iconic image of Truman holding the lantern and looking up (see figure 11) – a key moment within the film that was used in publicity material – is not actually a “film” shot, but, as the next shot reveals, a high angle shot taken from a camera hidden in a nearby lamp post.

![Figure 11](image) ![Figure 12](image)

It is the ostensibly rather simple (and much less publicity material-friendly) eye level image of a lamp post against the sky (see figure 12) that represents the first “film” shot to show Truman’s own independent point-of-view. This is confirmed by the eye-line match, as Truman looks to his left in the first shot, and the lamppost is positioned to the right side of the frame in the following shot. The sequence then cuts from the “television” camera to Truman’s point-of-view as he looks at the sky and the lamppost. The *Truman Show* here suggests for the first time that Truman is becoming conscious of another level to his world, that the periphery of his vision might contain a thus far denied presence.
My analysis of *The Truman Show* so far suggests that the film works along ostensibly Baudrillardian lines in the way that existing writing often reductively points out. The film is much more than a mere replacement of reality and authenticity by simulation and the manipulative presence of the mass media. What complicates the film’s discourse on reality and representation is the fact that, beginning with the lantern as the first shown disruption or glitch within “The Truman Show,” it uses “film” rather than “television” shots in moments of (diegetic) disruption. Another key scene that illustrates this takes place when Truman sits alone on Seahaven’s beach at night. A “television” beach camera shows him in profile as he looks sadly out on the sea. This is intercut with a series of images depicting Truman’s father drowning on a sailing trip. Marked by the use of fisheye lenses, vignetted camera edges, and an overly dramatic score, these images do not represent Truman’s own memory. They are a “previously on” and/or “best of” montage that has evidently been pre-prepared and is now being edited in by the makers of “The Truman Show.” Once the emotional montage is finished, *The Truman Show* cuts to a frontal long shot of Truman facing the beach, just as a single rain shower materializes above him, in an attempt by the show’s production team to get him to move. The too obviously manufactured rain shower is then replaced by a rainstorm that it is hoped will allay any suspicions he may have.

The first thing to imply that these shots are not “television” shots, but “off-air film” shots is the “stagey” look produced by the frontal camera and the shallow lighting, which the television show would avoid in its striving for verisimilitude (see figure 13). Moreover, the sequence uses a camera that is positioned in front of Truman and thus would have to be an invisible film camera. It directly cuts from a long shot to a medium shot from the same camera (see figure 14).
A live broadcast would have to either use a zoom/track or cut away to another camera to bridge these two shots. The smoothly composed shots of Truman being chased by the rain shower are therefore inside *The Truman Show*, but step outside “The Truman Show.” Truman definitely appears independently of the “television” cameras for the first time. There is a disjuncture here between the television show, which at this moment is not live on air (possibly having cut from the montage to a forum discussion of the show at the end of the day), and the film, which shows a brief moment of authenticity.3

As this scene affirms, *The Truman Show* explores the artificiality of the mass media by setting up an (apparent) opposition between the more manipulated and manipulative “television” camera and the more truthful “film” camera. This privileging of film over television is, of course, nothing new to either cinema itself or academic discourse. Jeffrey Sconce (168) calls the film’s criticism of television a “predictable instalment” following the tradition of films such as *Network* (1976). Furthermore, if *The Truman Show* proposes a distinction between cinema as truthful reality and television as manipulated simulation, this obviously shows an underlying belief by the film that there is still a (possibly pre-television) “really real” that can be accessed.

What interests me much more than debates concerning whether “the real” was once (or has ever been), indeed, real, is to explore how *The Truman Show* might be far more complex than much criticism gives it credit. I will argue that the film ultimately moves to problematize the binary oppositions (i.e. cinema/television, disruption/stability, reality/simulation and outside/inside) that seem to structure it. *The Truman Show* differs from predecessors such as Philip K. Dick’s novel *Time out of Joint* or films like *Total Recall* (1990) in that it does not ask its audience to work out (along with the protagonist) that things are not quite as they seem. From the opening shot of Christof directly addressing the camera, the audience is provided with the knowledge that Seahaven is a simulation. That the stability of the simulated inside does not stand in an unbridgeable binary opposition to a disruptive reality outside of the television show is already clear at a practical level: The incident with the lantern, the return of Truman’s apparently dead “father” and the past intrusions by members of the public emphasize that the television show “The Truman Show” cannot eradicate (in advance) all potential disruptions.
Every system, especially as big an operation as "The Truman Show," is likely to have glitches — they come with the territory. Although the show swiftly removes any disruptions (e.g. the local radio station explains the incident with the lantern as a plane accident), these disruptions cannot be viewed as unwanted side effects that the show would rather do without. On the contrary, as The Truman Show steps back inside "The Truman Show" following these initial disruptions, it becomes clear that the show benefits from them. They provide far more thrilling "television" footage than the show would have had otherwise. Just as the important moment of Truman approaching and picking up the light fixture reverts to "television" shots (see figures 9 and 10), the moment when Truman recognizes his father is first shown through the smoothly composed shot/reverse shots of an invisible "film" camera (see figure 15), but the dramatic fallout of this incident (i.e. Truman chasing after the bus into which his father has been wrestled) is shown by "television" cameras (hidden, for example, inside the bus wing mirror; see figure 16).

The disruptions make "great television"; more so, they need to be understood as the reason for the show’s enduring ratings success. Indeed, the show’s first break in transmission gains the show’s highest ratings. While, as Christof mentions, the show’s sense of everyday routine and normalcy is comforting for the viewers of "The Truman Show," the show’s promotional tagline "How’s it going to end?" reveals that the real reason for the show’s appeal is the ever-present possibility of an ultimate disruption of the show. It is because the entire show is based on a rather fragile premise (i.e. the simple fact that Truman does not know), and because Truman is thus potentially always about to find out (and, with each passing day, more and more likely to do so), that viewers keep watching "The Truman Show." That the production staff of the show realizes this is suggested not only by
the promotional tagline, but also by the fact that they keep pushing things to the edge. For example, having induced a fear of the sea in Truman with the staged drowning of his father in order to keep him on the island/set, they arrange a work-related boat journey for him that, he is told, is necessary for him to keep his job. Although this risks giving Truman an opportunity and incentive to overcome his phobia, which would enable him to leave Seahaven and thus obviously cause serious problems for the show, it is in the greater interest of the show to keep pushing. Neither “great television” moments of crisis nor the show itself would exist without the constant possibility of disruption. While “The Truman Show” gains exciting footage from these outside disruptions, I would add that the film also benefits from this, not only in the obvious sense that the shown scenes of the television show are also part of the film, but also in the sense that the use of “television” cameras in the immediate aftermath of the disruptions adds a degree of immediacy and urgency to these shots that “film” shots would be unlikely to achieve (see figures 9, 10 and 16). The “television” cameras are inserted into the diegetic world of Seahaven (e.g. the bus wing mirror) and thus suggest a sense of involvement and “being close to the action.” With their connotations of the documentary form, the less smooth “television” shots also give the impression of being less staged, of greater immediacy, intimacy, and liveness.

Already then, there is the suggestion that neither “The Truman Show” nor The Truman Show is founded on an unbridgeable oppositionality of cinema/television, disruption/stability, reality/simulation and outside/inside. Instead, as I will argue, both “The Truman Show” and The Truman Show hinge around the mutually implicating co-presence and co-dependence of such apparent binaries, where each half of each couplet depends on the other for its definition and meaning. This sense of inseparability is further realized by the way in which the apparent opposition between the “television” camera (apparently both part of and showing the simulation) and the “film” camera (apparently the one to show “the real”) is developed as The Truman Show continues. The first important sequence concerning this takes place when Truman is remembering his long-lost love Sylvia/Lauren, unaware that this supposedly private moment is being watched by, as the film reveals, a crowd in a Truman-themed pub. The pub’s television screen shows a dissolve to images of Truman seeing Sylvia/Lauren for the first time, signalling firmly that subsequent scenes,
similar to the montage of Truman’s father’s sailing accident, will be material prepared and edited together by the production team of “The Truman Show.” This status as “television highlights” is confirmed by the vignetted edges of the frame and the unusual camera angles and lenses, as the montage shows Truman falling in love with Sylvia/Lauren, much to the displeasure of the show’s producers, who have lined up Hannah/Meryl as Truman’s future partner. When Truman and Sylvia/Lauren spontaneously rush off to the beach, the television show’s surveillance cameras visibly struggle to keep up with them. Once they are on the beach, however, the conventional over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shots of Truman and Sylvia/Lauren as shown in this ostensible television montage cannot be “television” shots (see figure 17). A previous “television” long shot has established that the beach is empty, and that the particular positions of the camera in the shot/reverse shots would entail their being visible to Truman and Sylvia/Lauren. These shots must therefore be “film” shots from an “invisible” film camera.

At first, this might suggest that the film here is mixing Truman’s own memory with the television show’s montage, disrupting the “television” sequence, and that these moments are available to the audience of The Truman Show, but not to the audience of “The Truman Show.” However, a later repetition of one of these shots on the show’s forum “Tru-Talk” (see figure 18) insists that these shots are available to the television show’s audience. This is done through added scan lines, the frame-within-the-frame (of Truman eating breakfast), and the green tint associated with light sensitive cameras, all of which emphasize the shots’ televisuality and immediacy. These shots are, impossibly, both “television” and “film” shots.

This blurring of the “film” and “television” camera is even more pronounced at the climax of the film, during which Truman escapes from Seahaven on a boat and, quite literally, reaches the end
of his universe (i.e. the sky cyclorama that marks the edge of the television studio). When, via loudspeaker, Christof urges him to stay, the image cuts between Truman and Christof looking at Truman on a television monitor. The smoothly composed shots of Truman himself here should all be “film” shots, considering that the television show would be unlikely to position permanent cameras near the fake horizon – after all, in the unlikely event that Truman gets to this space, the show would effectively be over. Furthermore, the camera is closely positioned and yet invisible to Truman. However, some of these shots of Truman are – impossibly – presented as “television” shots with vignetted edges (see figure 19). This hints that the “television” camera in the end assumes the position of the invisible and potentially omnipresent “film” camera, becoming less bound to notions of diegetic justifiability and logic.

What is more, the image on Christof’s monitor should be a “television” image, yet the vignetted edges are noticeable in some shots for their sudden absence (see figure 20). This implies that these images have been captured by a “film” camera – which, of course, is actually the case – and that the “film” camera here gives up on previous claims to critical distance, authenticity, and access to an outside “real.” In the end, the borders between the “film” and “television” camera, between the film and the television show, and between “the real” and simulation, which have structured The Truman Show up to this point, become ambiguous.

The Truman Show’s narrative ends with Truman leaving the studio set, stepping into an outside space that the film in this moment does not show, only suggesting that Sylvia/Lauren will come to meet him. That the film does not show Truman outside of the studio set raises important questions concerning the nature and status of this outside. Several critics comment that the film’s ending affirms notions of human agency and, more importantly, preserves a notion of an
authentic real that exists beyond the fakery of Seahaven. For example, Dean Lockwood suggests that the film sets up “an unambiguous opposition between illusion and reality [...] ultimately concerned with prophylactic boundary-maintenance” (75). However, I would question this interpretation, because I think what the film suggests is more complicated than a clean and ideologically “safe” separation between an inside of simulation and an outside reality.

I will now argue that one of Jean Baudrillard’s ideas on Disneyland, which he calls “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation” (23), can be used for examining what The Truman Show proposes concerning the relationship between the inside and the outside. Baudrillard writes:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (25)

Disneyland and Seahaven are such enclosed, imaginary, and relentlessly cheerful spaces, carefully demarcated from their surroundings and relying on constant planning and monitoring. Baudrillard uses Disneyland to consider “that the real is no longer real” (25), but what interests me is the material physicality of such structures, which is highlighted by the camera moving out from Seahaven to outer space (see figures 21-23).
A physical structure such as Disneyland (Seahaven) apparently separates two realms, defining them as different from each other, but simultaneously connects these two realms. It is a skin, a membrane that is part of both. What Baudrillard’s argument entails is that Disneyland exists to show, by contrast, that the outside of the theme park is “real,” when it is actually not very different from the inside. (After all, the space immediately surrounding Disneyland – as well as Seahaven – is Los Angeles/Hollywood.) Baudrillard’s idea does not conceive of the two realms as interchangeable or completely separated from each other. Instead, the two realms, the inside and the outside, are never fully complete on their own, depending on each other for their very definition and meaning.

In *The Truman Show*, both the inside and outside can be understood as having a primal lack; an inside cannot be conceived of without an outside. The one requires the other to fill up this lack and complete it. The outside gives meaning and definition to the inside (Disneyland/Seahaven), confirming the inside as inside and, through its “reality,” marking the inside as the space of simulation. Simultaneously, the inside confirms the outside as outside and defines it as real. If both realms are defined “around” each other in this way, then *The Truman Show* is not so much a film about the replacing of reality by images, but is actually much closer to what Jacques Derrida expresses in his dictum “There is nothing outside of the text” (158). This dictum does not argue, as Hugh J. Silverman points out, “that the text is all there is, creating an impossible textualism. Rather, it means that what is outside the text is marked by what is inside the text, and what is outside the text is inscribed by its exclusion in the text” (116). Therefore, there is nothing outside of Seahaven, or Disneyland for that matter, but only in the sense that both inside and outside are marked by each other, “that what adds itself to something takes the place of a default in the thing, that the default, as the outside of the inside, should be already within the inside, etc.” (Derrida, 215).

That the inside and outside are infinitely linked with one
another is implied by *The Truman Show* not only in that, as I have argued, the inside is really just waiting for and preoccupied with disruptions by the outside, but also in that the outside is explicitly preoccupied with the inside. After all, almost every single shot of the outside (e.g. Christof’s lunar room and the various viewers of “*The Truman Show*”) shows the outside watching the inside. The television show’s viewers and producers are on the outside and *know* that they are on the outside, because they are the ones who are watching the inside. If the two realms are infinitely linked, without “some natural, self-present origin” (Norris, 111) where meaning (and definition) can start and come to a halt, then Truman cannot be understood as “breaking out from the ideological suture of the enclosed universe into its outside” (Žižek, 242). Instead, it may be more useful to conceive of Truman as moving about in a “logic of supplementarity” (Derrida, 215), pushing against certain causal chains of meanings, toppling them over like circles of falling dominoes.

In terms of its conceptual implications, this mutually implicating relationship between oppositions such as inside and outside suggests that *The Truman Show* functions according to a hegemonic order. In moving away from conceptions of ideology as “false consciousness” or an Althusserian structure that imposes itself on individuals, this reading emphasizes the ongoing co-presence of struggle, negotiation, conflict, and consensus. The idea that the film functions according to a hegemonic principle is further substantiated by the use and effectiveness of control within “*The Truman Show*.” With the high-tech surveillance cameras, the control tower inside the fake moon, and the use of both the moon and sun as searchlights, Seahaven is a space specifically designed for totalitarian control and surveillance, all for the purpose of creating a television program and therefore necessarily also for the purpose of keeping Truman in the dark. This control is effective in that it produces a television show; Truman’s movements are repeatedly successfully manipulated (or, more appropriately, blocked) by surrounding “actors” and traffic. Any disruptions are incorporated and used by the show for its own benefit. However, to be absolutely successful, the control needs to remain completely invisible to Truman, and in this it fails.

Much writing on the film assumes that Truman is oblivious to the reality of his situation until the incident with the light fixture. Williams talks of “Truman’s initial ignorance of the simulation that he
lives in” (2) and claims that “this ignorance makes Truman a victim of the simulation” (11-12). However, the very first shots of Truman play-acting to his bathroom mirror suggest otherwise. They clearly reflect the level of all-encompassing control and surveillance he is subjected to, but, at the same time, they also suggest that Truman, because he continually delivers a performance of some sort, is not, as the film’s tagline claims, “On the air. Unaware.” At some level, he already knows he is being watched, that he is looking beyond a mirror to a lens, and that he is supposed to give some kind of performance to that lens. Weir’s following comment supports this argument:

One of the first things I thought was that those around [Truman] are all actors. They would have leaned in close to him, beaming away, because they would know they are on camera when they are close to him. Plus, if he liked you, you would maybe get a long-running part. […] At the end of the movie when he is told the full truth about his circumstances, there needed to be a reaction from the character which was, “Oh, so that’s what it was.” Unconsciously, all his life, it would have seemed that there was something, and he never knew what it was. That something caused him to be a performer. It’s as if there was a will from those around him to be entertaining, to be funny, to be “on”, which is not dissimilar to Jim’s own story in a way. (Weir in Kalina, 19)

Even in the hyper-controlled Seahaven, the control and dominance of one realm is not complete, and something “slips out.” There is a sense of negotiation between two sides, a tension between truth/concealment and authenticity/performance that is already inherent in the name Truman Burbank, which fuses the authentic and ordinary “true man” with the Hollywood television studio complex Burbank and its connotations of show business and artifice.

That Truman at some level knows that he is being watched and changes his behavior accordingly, also complicates the links that have been made by several critics between this film and Foucault’s concept of the panopticon. Designed by Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon is conceived of as a prison with a central glass tower from which the guard “sees everything without ever being seen” (Foucault, 202) by the prisoners, who, because they never know when they are being
watched by this unseen eye, discipline themselves. With Christof exercising control from inside the panoptic tower of the moon and with Truman becoming a "docile subject" in the sense that he completely adapts to the exaggerated jollity of Seahaven, *The Truman Show* resonates with this concept. However, it is not a complete fit with the panopticon, because, unlike a prisoner within a panopticon, Truman is not supposed to be aware of the control and surveillance. Therefore, Truman's performance is both a sign that something about the control and surveillance is working (i.e. he produces a television-friendly performance) and that something about the control and surveillance is not working, because it shows that this control and surveillance has failed to conceal itself from him completely.

The relationship between oppositions such as inside and outside has further implications for the project of analysis. Traditionally, analysts are thought of as standing outside of what they analyze, inhabiting a viewpoint that allows them to speak with both truthfulness and authority about the object of their discourse (such as a film). This externality has a hierarchical dimension, whereby the analyst approaches from "outside and above," with the intention to understand, illuminate and comprehend the film text's inside operations. In this way, the analyst seeks a position of mastery over the film text. Indeed, a film's intelligibility, how it makes meaning, is not solely determined by its intrinsic properties. It is also always something that is performed by the very act of analyzing that the analyst 'inflicts' on the film text, which necessarily includes processes of privileging and marginalizing.13 This conventional positioning of the analyst as "outside and above" is one reason why self-reflexive films pose some difficulty for critical analysis at times. As such film texts contain a degree of (self) analysis already, they can be understood as pre-empting analysis, as they do the analyst's job for him or her. Folding in externality, they arguably leave the analyst in an uncertain position from which to speak. Jonathan Culler suggests a related point:

When reading a work that apparently lacks an authoritative metalanguage or that ironically questions the interpretative discourses it contains, critics feel uneasy, as if they were just adding their voice to the polyphony of voices. They lack evidence that they are indeed in a metalinguistic position above and outside of the text. (199)
However, if the outside and the inside are connected and defined “around” each other, then the analyst cannot be situated in some external vantage point, but must be connected to both. No longer a transcendent figure “above and outside” of the text, the analyst does not occupy an unproblematized position of mastery over the object of discourse. Moreover, just as the analyst works to construct the film text, so the film text works to construct the analyst. As Jonathan Bignell observes:

From this perspective [of detailed textual analysis], the object is unpacked by an operation in which the critic or analyst submits himself or herself to the operations of the text. The aim is to produce a sensitive reading, which discovers the functioning of the text and its specific effects on its viewer. The potential danger in this procedure is that the text itself becomes a subject which ‘reads’ the critic as object. What is discovered in the analysis is not a truth about the text as such, as a determinate object, but the production of the critic as an object for that text. The film rewards its critic by producing him or her as a ‘knowing subject’, whose apparent mastery of its [...] textuality is already comprehended by the text. (63)

Indeed, not only does the analyst become constituted as a reader by the film, but also, as Jonathan Culler explains, both the authority and externality of the analyst depend on the film text:

Curiously, the authority of critics’ metalinguistic position depends to a considerable extent on metalinguistic discourse within the work: they feel securely outside and in control when they can bring out of the work passages of apparently authoritative commentary that expound the views they are defending. [...] [T]hey are outside when their discourse prolongs and develops a discourse authorized by the text, a pocket of externality folded in, whose external authority derives from its place inside. (199)

There is thus a relationship of interimplication between apparent oppositions such as inside and outside, analyst and film text, which mutually construct each other through selection and
exclusion, through privileging and marginalizing. This necessarily complicates assumptions that scholarly discourse could achieve an "uncontaminated" critique of its object, and with regard to the film under discussion, it reflexively problematizes the notion of an outside from which *The Truman Show* can be analyzed.

This essay has demonstrated how *The Truman Show* is inscribed with a complex relationship between apparent oppositions such as cinema/television, disruption/stability, reality/simulation and outside/inside that not only demands close textual analysis, but also simultaneously raises such analysis as an issue. While my own writing implies that I am positioned in an outside from which I can analyze *The Truman Show* (invoking Weir as a transcendent author-figure to support my reading), my own writing obviously does not, and cannot, escape the problems of exteriority and reflexivity that I have discussed; I am not “above and outside” of the text either. However, the paradox inherent in writing on the inside and outside does not invalidate my argument concerning how the meaning of each side in *The Truman Show* is continually deferred, but actually reaffirms the perpetual incompleteness of meaning as found within *The Truman Show* and thereby pushes critical analysis further.

**Notes**

1 See Baudrillard 1983.

2 I would like to thank Ian Banks for designing the diagrammatic map.

3 The blatancy of the use of the rain shower to get Truman to go home implies that a certain laziness and arrogance has set in with the show’s production team over the years, which supports my later argument that a certain number of glitches are inevitable.

4 Christof even manages to use the initial glitch of the father’s unplanned reappearance for a tearful reunion, a “great television” moment involving an amnesia plot twist that would not look out of place at the Southfork Ranch.

5 See also Rayner, 249.

6 See also Romney 1998.

7 Truman is on the inside because he is the one who is being watched by the outside, which he, as I will argue, seems to be aware of at some level.
8 Leslie Felperin’s following observation is appropriate here: “Echoing the dome that encases this world, much play is made out of circles and cycles and repetitions: a golf ball is used to explain that Fiji [...] is so much on the other side of the world that, “you can’t get any further away before you start coming back.” Similarly, it’s in a revolving door that Truman’s rebellion begins.” (36)


10 When Truman looks intensely at his bathroom mirror at a later point in the film, this is not very different to his staring at the beginning, but it causes the production staff to get nervous. The major difference here is that, following the recent glitches, the producers themselves think that he is more likely to suspect something and read his performance differently.

11 Weir here touches on the issue of casting Jim Carrey, an actor known for his “facial dexterity and manic energy” (Yacowar, 424), who often plays characters whose “stance is one of eternal performance before an unseen audience” (Kehr, 12), which feeds into the sense that Truman is aware he is “on.”


13 There is evidently a link here to the issue of authorship and the position of the author. Both part of the film text and a transcendent figure that precedes it, the author is frequently used as an instance of authority to validate the arguments the analyst makes, as I myself have demonstrated in this essay.

14 Given the extent to which The Truman Show problematizes issues of externality, it seems both ironic and fitting that several reviews have shared the thought that the film “needed to be written and directed by non-Americans” (Kalina, 56). Peter Weir is Australian and scriptwriter Andrew Niccol was born in New Zealand.

Works Cited


Williams, G. Christopher. "Mastering the real: Trinity as the 'real' hero of The Matrix." Film Criticism 27.3 (2003): 2-17.


