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The Impact of Television on Our Perception of Reality: A Joint Review of Three Recent American Films

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Three Hollywood movies have recently taken a supposedly critical look at American television: Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog* (1997), Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998) and Peter Weir's *Truman Show* (1998). Each film focuses on different aspects of the presence of TV in people's lives.

Wag the Dog is based on Larry Beinhart's novel *American Hero* (1994). Directed by Levinson and adapted to the screen by David Mamet, the film is a fairly stunning satire on the power of US media and their apparently complete control of people's lives. It tells the tale of the final triumph of oblivion. In *Wag the Dog* an imaginary war is being created in order to detract public consciousness from the US president's most recent amorous affair with an adolescent. Cooperating with a Hollywood producer, the president's adviser creates an artificial war situation with Albania; a virtual war which only exists on TV and which justifies itself entirely by the power of the images that have been created in Hollywood studios. At this point some of the representatives of the Old Power interfere. A group of CIA agents stop the president's car in Los Angeles, maintaining that, according to their information, there is absolutely no war with that country. "Our satellite pictures reveal the truth!" replies Conrad Brean, the president's advisor, and manages the situation admirably by giving a long lecture on tradition, duty and patriotism. He talks about loyalty and differentiates between a truth of the eye and a truth of the heart. In the end, the CIA agent (William H. Macy) is convinced. He is convinced that a good American believes in the latter—the truth of the heart.

Wag the Dog is a film about rhetoric. It is a film about playing a role that gradually absorbs the entire personality. And it is a film about the art of creating images that become more powerful and real than reality itself. In short, Brean is in charge of a classical disinformation campaign. Superbly portrayed by Robert de Niro, Brean seems to represent the sort of personality that has turned his mask into his real self. He is a twentieth-century Man for all Seasons with a multitude of faces and no character at all. Dustin Hoffman is equally good. He is the Hollywood producer who wants to finish his career with a kind of big bang, a virtual war that establishes itself as prime reality. There is a grandiose sense of direction when he manipulates the sound of the fake war with Albania. "Gimme some Anne Frank cries!" he shouts in the studio when creating a supposedly gruesome war scene for the national TV news network. He loses it, though, when he asks for production credits.

The film presents itself with a sense of inevitability that is underlined by the film's central metaphor, the *totentanz* or death dance. Medieval frescoes present the figure of the knight, the peasant and the maiden united in a dance directed by Death himself (in his medieval personification). What is visualized here in a kind of implicit commentary is the death of truth itself.

Pleasantville is the directorial debut of former scriptwriter Gary Ross. The film is certainly less spectacular than *Wag the Dog*; nevertheless, it is a highly funny and entertaining movie that should have been a major success. The title points to a fictitious black-and-white TV series from the 1950s, which depicts the life of a family in an American small town by the name of Pleasantville. Week by week the series draws its audience into a world without racial conflicts, sex or violence; Pleasantville represents an America before the killing of John F. Kennedy or the massacre of My Lai. It designates an America before the Fall in which even the fire brigade have very little to do. From time to time they go after cats that have run astray. In short, Pleasantville is indeed very pleasant.

In the film two youngsters from the 1990s (one of them a passionate TV watcher who never misses the series' re-run) are beamed into Pleasantville by some kind of magical trick. David and Jennifer, the two youngsters, both disappear in their TV set in order to reappear in black and white. Apart from their family and familiar surroundings, even their skin has changed in such a way that they have become part of the TV series. Needless to say that both of them undergo an incredibly dull experience. They nevertheless try and make the most of it. David starts to neglect his job in the series (he works in a fast food restaurant) and establishes friendship with a painter, while Jennifer seduces a fellow pupil. Her first tongue kiss introduces a new element of color to the town of Pleasantville. All of a sudden, lips and roses shine in red and faces start to reveal their human complexion. Even the pages of the novels in the town's library are no longer blank; sentences start appearing so that whole books come into existence. However, the youngsters face the rebellion of the monochromes; the rebellion of those town people, that is, who have decided to remain black and white. In this manner, the lack of color turns into a kind of metaphor. All of a sudden, colored people become outcasts; color is linked with a supposedly immoral attitude. Pleasantville's no longer silent majority opts for a world in black and white. Thus, their lack of color turns into a symbolic representation of small-town America and an apparent dictatorship of the WASPs. Still, the introduction of color changes everything in Pleasantville. In the film's best scene, David's TV mother successfully explores her body in a bathtub. She touches herself and her feelings become so intense that, in a kind of metonymical extension, the tree next to her house catches fire. So finally even the fire brigade in Pleasantville gets something to do. However, since they do not know how to extinguish a real fire, they display a highly comic sense of confusion.

Pleasantville has been criticized in America for its open symbolism whereas European critics have unanimously praised the film. I personally see *Pleasantville* as a kind of implicit commentary on the Clinton-Lewinsky case. It comes out that the moral values that have brought Clinton to trial do not come from the Bible, as many representatives of America's Moral Right want us to believe. On the contrary, the film makes it clear that these values are associated with American TV. The Moral Right defends a puritan and purified vision of the world which is raised on the concept of American family series. The film reveals that this vision of America hides a highly repressive outlook on life.

Peter Weir's *Truman Show* tells the story of a man who discovers that his whole life has been televised since his birth and broadcast to the whole world. Truman Burbank (Jim Carey) is a walking soap opera; he is on the air twenty-four hours a day, and his small world is supervised by 5000 cameras that capture every inch of his existence. A daily audience of 1.7 billion people has turned the series into the most popular soap opera of all time, the ultimate TV peep show.

Of course there is a story behind Truman's TV self. His real parents have sold him to the series, and Truman is surrounded by a cast of actors and extras who perform like marionettes hanging on a string. Truman is being manipulated by his "creator" Christof (Ed Harris) who has put a whole set of primal fears in him in order to control him in the most effective manner. Christof is both the producer and the creator of the series, a kind of Dr. Frankenstein for the twenty-first century. By making Truman believe that his father drowned in the sea, he has put a trauma in his actor which, up to this moment, has prevented Truman from exploring boats and ships that might carry him to destinations outside the small realms of Seahaven (the film's equivalent to Pleasantville). Gradually, however, Truman learns to look behind the façade. He becomes aware of his wife's constant product placement, for example, so that his growing sense of rebellion produces some nice out-of-character lines on her behalf: "This is not professional! I can't work like this!" she screams and disappears "off stage," supposedly in front of the cameras.

In the end Truman Burbank overcomes his fear and disappears from Seahaven in a sailing boat. His short journey takes him to a huge white studio wall that appears in the middle of the sea, out of nowhere. Not even Christof can stop him from walking through that door called "Exit." At this moment, monitors die like respirators after the clinical death.

Apparently Truman is undergoing some kind of quest for authenticity that will take him beyond the realms of a theme park. He is going to live up to his name: Truman stands for "true man"; he was the only "true" human being in Seahaven. In this manner, he will leave the second half of his name behind (Burbank/California is, of course, associated with a number of famous studios) so that a "Trumanesque" version of a rebellion against the gods puts an end to the Truman Show and its slogan "in the air-unaware." From now on Truman's slogan will be "off the air and aware!"

It has to be noted that the film's central idea is not as revolutionary as many critics seem to believe. I personally feel reminded of Muriel Spark's first novel *The Comforters* (1957) which tells the story of a woman who finds out that she is trapped in a novel about herself. One might also think of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's famous film *Welt am Draht* (1974) in which the central character gradually realizes that he is only a "puppet on a string" in a huge computer simulation. The film ends with the same desperate quest for the people "at the control panel."

Moreover, *Truman Show* demonstrates how people's most private moments are being filmed as a kind of primal fear of the late twentieth century. Already in the early 1980s an English punk outfit called The Distributors maintained that "All I wanna see is TV me!" (sic). Indeed, TV today reveals a totally different story. Recent shows are full of moronic people who seem to believe that every aspect of their own banal lives makes for great TV entertainment. And people do w a t c h! They watch like patients lying "etherized upon a table"—as T.S. Eliot put it. It seems that the Body Private and the Body Public have finally become one.

It seems that even the internet has gone "TV." As we all know, people display their private lives twenty-four hours a day on cyberspace. They build up an audience of followers who come together in front of the computer screen in order to unite in a kind of holy communion. They unite in the firm belief that somebody taking a shower is about the most interesting thing to watch. "Everybody is a star!" maintains Primal Scream on one of their more recent singles—and so it is.

All these developments lead to one central question: how authentic is Truman Burbank's rebellion actually? Prometheus rebels against the gods to free humankind from a state of slavery. But what does Truman rebel against? The film's central problem lies in the fact that the world outside seems to be the same as the world inside. "Outside," says Christof, "is more of the same." The quest for authenticity, however, always implies that a character has at least a vague idea of the kind of authenticity he or she is supposed to be looking for (talking from the perspective of the author). Andrew Niccols's film script denies that there can be such an idea. So Truman Burbank's rebellion remains a fairly empty semantic gesture; that is very much in keeping with a film that tries to sell media criticism as a media event.

All three films are Hollywood productions that try and look at TV from a critical angle. They aim at a critique of consciousness that, in the case of *Wag the Dog* and *Pleasantville*, is fairly sublime and effective. The common message seems to be that images are no longer the road to authenticity. *Truman Show* carries this critique even further by presenting itself as a more radical version of a "reality soap": Truman Burbank's problem is that he has never signed a contract and that he will never win anything for being part of the "Truman Show." He is a victim of exploitation working in a professional environment in which everybody else gets paid. As far as I am concerned, the film would have made more sense if Truman had asked for his share of royalties. Instead, the film points to an artificial realm beyond the world of television in which authenticity can still be found.

Certain directors in Europe and elsewhere seem to promote the idea that authenticity can no longer be linked to some kind of individual quest. They try to free our experience by challenging and subverting dominant TV and Hollywood aesthetics. There is the French tradition of the *auteur*, for example, which is continued in the films of Laetitia Masson with their short fade-ins and -outs that follow an associational structure. One may also point to Iranian director Abbas Kurastami and his predilection for long moments of silence and a strangely slow narrative pace. Another name that comes to mind is the Danish Dogma group (which is represented by Lars von Trier or Thomas Winterberg) and their specific approach to the medium of film. Although none of these directors aim at a direct critique of TV, they try and free the viewers' senses so that these may re-experience, behind the images on the screen, a sense of authenticity outside the realms of conventional narrative film. I personally believe that the aesthetic mode of a film might contribute more to our perception of reality than the most satirical satire.

Works Cited

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