

PANOPTICISM AND SURVEILLANCE IN THE TRUMAN SHOW: A FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS OF POWER, DISCIPLINE, AND RESISTANCE

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Abstract

*Films not only serve as entertainment media, but also as a means to represent power relations that operate in society. One film that explicitly depicts the practice of surveillance and social control is Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998). This film tells the story of Truman Burbank, a man who has lived since birth in an artificial world without knowing that his entire life is recorded and broadcast as a television program. This study aims to analyze the representation of panopticism, surveillance, and disciplinary power in the film *The Truman Show* using Michel Foucault's theory. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a film analysis approach. The research data are in the form of scenes, dialogue, and narrative elements that demonstrate the practice of surveillance and social control mechanisms. The results show that Seahaven functions as a panoptic space that allows for continuous surveillance of Truman. Power in the film does not operate through physical violence, but through environmental regulation, information manipulation, and the formation of fear that encourages Truman to discipline himself. In addition, this film shows that resistance arises when individuals begin to understand the reality constructed by power. Thus, *The Truman Show* represents the relevance of the concept of panopticism in understanding surveillance practices in modern society.*



Keyword: *Panopticism; Disciplinary power; surveillance*

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought about significant changes in human life. Various daily activities can now be monitored through surveillance cameras, social media, digital algorithms, and increasingly sophisticated data tracking systems. This phenomenon demonstrates that surveillance has become an inseparable part of modern

life. In this context, Michel Foucault's ideas about panopticism are a relevant theory for understanding how power operates through invisible surveillance mechanisms. Foucault (1977) explained that modern society is undergoing a transformation from repressive forms of power to more subtle forms of power through discipline and surveillance.

This concept was developed from the panopticon prison design introduced by Jeremy Bentham. In the panopticon system, a guard can observe all prisoners from a central tower without knowing when the surveillance is taking place. This uncertainty causes prisoners to behave as if they are constantly being watched, thus voluntarily controlling themselves. According to Foucault, the principle of the panopticon applies not only to prisons but also to various social institutions such as schools, hospitals, workplaces, and the media. Through continuous surveillance, individuals are shaped into subjects who comply with prevailing norms and rules. Thus, power no longer relies on physical violence, but rather works through the formation of individual behavior and consciousness.

A representation of this surveillance practice can be found in the film *The Truman Show* (1998). Directed by Peter Weir, this film tells the story of Truman Burbank, who unknowingly lives in a man-made city called Seahaven. All of Truman's activities are recorded by thousands of hidden cameras and broadcast to millions of viewers worldwide as a television show. Truman's life is controlled by the show's producer, Christof, who controls every aspect of his social environment. This film is interesting to analyze because it illustrates how surveillance functions not only as a tool of observation but also as a mechanism of social control. Truman is never physically forced to remain in Seahaven. Instead, he is conditioned through various psychological and social strategies that limit his freedom. This situation reflects Foucault's idea that surveillance can produce discipline and obedience through the internalization of control.

Several researchers have conducted research on *The Truman Show*. Rajan & Krishnapriya (2026) shows that this film represents a form of modern panopticism that combines surveillance and hyperreality. Meanwhile, Iffatuddiyanah (2026) highlights the media exploitation and power relations that occur between Truman and the production. However, research that specifically analyzes the relationship between surveillance, discipline, and resistance based on Foucault's concept of panopticism is still relatively limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the representation of panopticism in the film *The Truman Show* through three main focuses, namely surveillance, disciplinary power, and resistance to social control systems.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a film analysis approach. The research data were obtained from the film *The Truman Show* (1998) directed by Peter Weir. Qualitative research, which is a type of research oriented towards an in-depth understanding of social, cultural, or artistic phenomena based on an interpretive perspective. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a way to explore and understand the meaning given by individuals or groups to a human social problem. This approach was chosen because the object of the research is a film, namely *The Truman Show* (1998) which is a visual text rich in messages, symbols, and others. Thus, an approach is needed that is able to explore meaning contextually and comprehensively, not only measuring numerically. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research makes researchers rely

heavily on information from objects or participants in a broad scope, such as general questions, and data collection is mostly derived from text and data. This method allows researchers to identify themes contained in dialogue, scenes, character behavior, and cinematographic elements contained in the film. This research focuses on how these forms of discipline are applied to the characters in the film and their impact on the characters themselves.

Data collection in this study was conducted through three main techniques: first, documentation, which involved repeatedly and thoroughly watching the film "The Truman Show" to capture every detail of the scenes, dialogue, symbols, and other relevant theories. Second, textual observation, in which the researcher conducted in-depth observations of each scene in the film by recording scene descriptions, dialogue transcriptions, and the meanings contained within the film. Then, the researcher analyzed, classified, and outlined the types of discipline and their impacts in the film using Foucault's theory (1977). Finally, a literature review was conducted to build a strong theoretical foundation to support the data analysis process.

The data for this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Scenes and dialogue were chosen based on four analytical indicators. First, the data had to demonstrate surveillance practices or the presence of cameras positioning Truman as the object of observation. Second, the data had to illustrate disciplinary power manifested through routines, fear, spatial restrictions, or normalization. Third, the data had to reveal a power/knowledge relationship, evident in the information asymmetry between Christof, the production team, and Truman. Fourth, the data had to show forms of resistance as Truman began to question, test, or reject the reality constructed by the system.

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, the researcher repeatedly watched the film and noted scenes and dialogue that met the research criteria. Second, the data were classified into four categories: panopticism and surveillance, disciplinary power and normalization, power/knowledge, and resistance. Third, each data point was interpreted using Foucault's concepts, taking into account the relationships between dialogue, character actions, space, and the scene's context. Fourth, the interpretation results were compared with previous studies to identify similarities, differences, and the specific contribution of this research. Timestamps associated with the dialogue served as references for locating the scenes within the film. However, slight timing variations may occur depending on the specific version of the film used; therefore, data identification was also based on the scene's context and the content of the dialogue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Panopticism

The concept of panopticism originates from Michel Foucault's work in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Foucault used Bentham's Panopticon design as a metaphor to explain how modern power operates through surveillance. In this system, individuals are unaware of their being observed, thus encouraging them to control their own behavior.

According to Foucault (1977), the effectiveness of the panopticon lies not in the direct act of surveillance, but in the possibility of continuous surveillance. As a result, individuals become agents who discipline themselves according to prevailing norms.

Surveillance and Disciplinary Power

Foucault argues that surveillance is one of the primary instruments of disciplinary power. Through continuous observation, institutions can classify, evaluate, and control individuals. Disciplinary power operates through normalization, the process of establishing standards of behavior that are considered correct and acceptable.

In modern society, surveillance practices are carried out not only by formal institutions but also through media and digital technology. Rathbone (2022) states that technological developments have expanded the reach of panopticism into various aspects of everyday life.

Resistance and Power

Foucault (1978) stated that where there is power, there is also resistance. Resistance does not always manifest itself in the form of a major rebellion, but can involve questioning norms and structures considered normal. In the context of panopticism, resistance arises when individuals become aware of the existence of a surveillance system and attempt to free themselves from that control.

In addition to research specifically addressing *The Truman Show*, several recent studies demonstrate that the concept of panopticism remains relevant in understanding contemporary digital society. Rathbone (2022) explains that the development of digital technology has expanded surveillance practices into various aspects of everyday life. According to him, modern surveillance is no longer limited to formal institutions such as schools or prisons, but also exists through the digital devices people use every day. This surveillance encourages individuals to adapt their behavior to prevailing norms because they realize that their activities can be observed and recorded.

More recent research was conducted by Seo (2026) on the concept of the digital panopticon. The research demonstrates that social media and digital technology have created a new, more complex form of surveillance than the traditional panopticon model. Individuals are not only monitored by institutions but also voluntarily present themselves to the public through digital platforms. This situation creates a paradox where individuals feel free to express themselves, yet simultaneously become objects of continuous observation and evaluation.

Both studies demonstrate that Foucault's ideas remain relevant in explaining the relationship between technology, surveillance, and the formation of individual behavior in the 21st century. Therefore, *The Truman Show* can be understood not only as a critique of television media but also as an early representation of a society living in a digital surveillance culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Seahaven as a Panoptic Space

One of the most obvious representations of panopticism in the film is the construction of Seahaven as a space of total surveillance. The city is designed as a closed environment that allows Truman's every activity to be observed through thousands of hidden cameras.

The first finding suggests that Seahaven functions as a panoptic space, enabling total surveillance of Truman Burbank's life. In Foucault's (1977) concept of panopticism, power becomes effective when individuals are placed in conditions that allow them to be watched at all times without knowing when the surveillance is taking place.

In *The Truman Show*, Truman lives in an environment filled with hidden cameras. His every activity is recorded 24 hours a day and broadcast to millions of viewers worldwide. Unlike traditional prison systems where the surveillance is clearly visible, surveillance in Seahaven is designed to be invisible to the subject.

This situation, where thousands of cameras are present in various corners of the city, makes Truman a permanent object of observation. He goes about his daily life unaware that his every action, conversation, and emotional expression are being monitored. This situation aligns with Foucault's (1977) argument that the effectiveness of the panopticon does not depend on direct surveillance, but on the possibility that surveillance can occur at any time. Thus, Seahaven can be understood as a modern representation of the panopticon, where media technology replaces the watchtower function inherent in Bentham's Panopticon design. These findings align with Zazulak (2021), who views Seahaven as a heterotopic panopticon. However, this study adds that Seahaven's panoptic function does not rely solely on the presence of cameras. Truman's urban environment, home, workplace, and social surroundings are designed to facilitate continuous surveillance. Thus, space becomes part of the technology of power, as it limits Truman's ability to realize his true position as an object of surveillance.

The Formation of Fear as a Disciplinary Mechanism

Power in the film operates not through physical coercion, but through the formation of fear, which functions as a disciplinary mechanism. One of the most significant examples is the trauma of the sea deliberately instilled in Truman from childhood. In the film's narrative, Truman is convinced that his father died in a maritime accident. This event is actually a fabrication designed by the production team to create fear of traveling outside Seahaven. As a result, Truman avoids the sea and loses the desire to leave his hometown.

According to Foucault (1977), disciplinary power works by shaping individual behavior through various techniques of normalization and psychological control. In Truman's case, control is not achieved by directly prohibiting him from traveling, but rather by creating a mental state that causes him to limit himself. This situation demonstrates that individuals can be effectively controlled when they internalize the constraints created by the power system. In other words, power operates through individual consciousness, making physical coercion unnecessary.

Findings regarding Truman's fear of the ocean demonstrate that control in the film operates through internalization. Truman does not require physical prohibitions whenever he wishes to leave Seahaven, as the fear instilled in him since childhood has evolved into a psychological boundary. These findings support the work of Iffatuddiyanah and Maulidya (2026), who highlight emotional manipulation as a mechanism of control within the film. However, this study emphasizes that such emotional manipulation fosters self discipline, as it is Truman himself who subsequently avoids the ocean and limits the possibility of leaving Seahaven.

Knowledge as an Instrument of Power

The concept of power or knowledge is a crucial aspect of Foucault's thinking. According to Foucault (1980), knowledge and power are inextricably linked because those with greater knowledge have a greater

ability to control reality. In the film, Christof has full access to all information about Truman. He has known Truman's habits, emotions, fears, desires, and behavioral patterns since birth. Conversely, Truman is unaware of the most fundamental fact about himself: that his life is a television program.

This relationship is clearly demonstrated when Christof states:

Data 1 (01:33:16 - 01:33:18)

Christof : "I know you better than you know yourself."

This dialogue illustrates Christof's conviction that his knowledge of Truman entitles him to control Truman's life. From a Foucaultian perspective, this demonstrates that knowledge is employed not merely to understand individuals but also to control and regulate their behavior. The interplay between knowledge and power highlights the disparity in status between Christof and Truman; Christof is privy to Truman's habits, fears, and behavioral patterns, whereas Truman remains unaware that his life is a television program. This information asymmetry creates an unequal power dynamic: Christof defines what constitutes reality, while Truman is compelled to accept the reality constructed for him. According to Foucault (1980), knowledge and power are inextricably linked, as knowledge serves to understand, organize, and control the subject. Thus, the surveillance depicted in the film does more than simply enable the observation of Truman; it generates the very knowledge used to control him.

Normalization and the Construction of Reality

The next finding relates to the process of normalization that occurs in Truman's life. Foucault (1977) explains that modern power operates by establishing standards of what is considered normal and acceptable by society. In *The Truman Show*, Seahaven is depicted as an ideal city that is orderly, safe, clean, and harmonious. Everyone around Truman plays a role in maintaining this illusion. His wife, friends, coworkers, and neighbors participate in creating this seemingly perfect world. Living in a systematically constructed environment, Truman accepts these conditions as normal. He is unaware that the behavior of those around him is part of a pre-designed scenario. This process of normalization demonstrates how power can shape an individual's perception of reality. When certain standards are accepted as normal, individuals tend not to question the underlying structures. Thus, the construction of reality in the film becomes a crucial tool for maintaining the system of surveillance and social control.

Normalization in Seahaven relates not only to daily routines but also to the shaping of Truman's understanding of reality. The safe, clean, orderly, and repetitive nature of the environment makes this artificial life appear natural. These findings support the work of Iffatuddiyanah and Maulidya (2026) regarding the normalization of routines. However, this study demonstrates that normalization also operates at the level of understanding, as Truman is steered toward accepting specific definitions of what constitutes reality. Thus, the system does not merely regulate Truman's actions but also influences how he perceives the world around him.

Internalization of Surveillance and Self-Discipline

One of Foucault's key ideas is that effective surveillance fosters self-discipline. Individuals no longer require direct supervision because they have internalized prevailing norms. In the film, Truman follows a highly regimented routine. He wakes up, goes to work, interacts with the same people, and returns home at almost the same time each day. This pattern demonstrates that discipline has become integral to his identity. Observations of Truman's routine reveal that discipline has become a part of his daily life. This aligns with Rathbone (2022), who explains that panopticism can lead to the internalization of surveillance. In Truman's case, discipline arises not primarily through physical punishment, but through the social environment, routines, and fears that render his behavior predictable. Although Truman is unaware of the cameras, he has learned to align his behavior with the social expectations established by the Seahaven environment. In other words, he has become a subject who disciplines himself. These findings support Foucault's argument that the primary goal of surveillance is not merely to observe individuals, but to turn them into their own overseers.

Despite the apparent perfection of the surveillance system, the film demonstrates that power is never absolute. Resistance begins to emerge when Truman experiences a crisis of awareness and starts questioning various anomalies in his life. Unusual events such as a studio light falling from the sky and a radio broadcast error lead Truman to realize that the world around him is not unfolding naturally. He begins to observe specific patterns and question the reality he had previously taken for granted.

At this stage, Truman shifts from a passive subject to a critical thinker. From a Foucauldian perspective (1978), this awareness marks the initial step toward resisting the system of power. This process of resistance evolves as Truman actively seeks information and tests the boundaries of his environment. The more evidence he uncovers, the less capable the system becomes of maintaining control over him.

Resistance to the Panoptic System

The culmination of resistance occurs when Truman decides to leave Seahaven by boat. This decision has significant symbolic significance, as the sea has been a source of fear deliberately created by the system since his childhood. By confronting this fear, Truman not only defies the physical boundaries that confine him but also rejects the identity shaped by the surveillance system.

In the climactic scene, Christof attempts to stop Truman by using an artificial storm created from the control room. This action demonstrates how the system of power will attempt to maintain its dominance when faced with threats. Nevertheless, Truman continues his journey until he encounters the limits of the artificial world he has inhabited. This moment marks the collapse of the construction of reality built by power.

At the end of the film, Christof tries to convince Truman to stay at Seahaven. He says:

Data 2 (01:32:54 – 01:33:00)

Christof : "There's no more truth out there than in the world I created for you."

This dialogue demonstrates how power seeks to maintain its legitimacy by defining what is considered truth. Christof claims that the world he created is as real as the outside world. Christof's dialogue illustrates the exercise of power in maintaining a specific definition of truth. Christof seeks not only to physically stop Truman but also to convince him that the world he has created is an acceptable reality. From the perspective of Foucault's (1980) concepts of power and knowledge, power is linked to the production and regulation of knowledge. Christof is in a position to determine what information Truman receives and what is withheld from him. However, Truman rejects this definition by choosing to leave Seahaven. However, Truman rejects the offer. Before leaving Seahaven, he utters his trademark line:

Data 3 (01:34:51 – 01:34:56)

Truman : “In case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night.”

In the context of the film's ending, this dialogue is no longer merely a routine greeting; it symbolizes liberation from the surveillance system that has controlled his life since birth. The final sentence Truman utters carries a different meaning at the end of the film compared to the beginning. Initially, the phrase was part of Truman's routine; by the end, the same words become a conscious act marking a decision to leave the system.

According to Foucault (1978), resistance does not always entail destroying power; it can also involve rejecting identity definitions imposed by the system. Truman's decision to leave Seahaven demonstrates an individual's capacity to reclaim autonomy through critical awareness. Thus, Truman transforms from a subject living out a routine into a subject who consciously determines his own actions.

These findings suggest that *The Truman Show* remains relevant to modern society. The development of social media, surveillance technology, artificial intelligence, and digital data collection have created new and increasingly complex forms of panopticism. While Truman was monitored through hidden cameras, modern society often voluntarily shares their personal information through digital platforms. Online activities, locations, preferences, and social interactions can be recorded and analyzed by various institutions.

In this context, *The Truman Show* can be understood as a critique of the relationship between surveillance, technology, and individual freedom. The film demonstrates that modern power is not always present in visible forms but can operate subtly through persistent surveillance and the normalization of behavior. Although the film was released in 1998, the various issues depicted in it bear similarities to the conditions of contemporary society, which lives under the influence of social media, digital algorithms, and large-scale data collection.

Rajan & Krishnapriya (2026) explain that Truman's life represents an individual living within an invisible surveillance system, where every action and decision can be monitored and directed by those with greater power. They argue that Seahaven can be understood as a metaphor for a digital society permeated by surveillance mechanisms through technology and media. This situation bears similarities to the digital data collection practices carried out by various technology platforms today. Internet users' activities, geographic locations, consumption preferences, and social

interactions can be recorded and analyzed to create specific behavioral profiles. From a Foucauldian perspective, this practice demonstrates that modern surveillance no longer requires physical watchtowers, as in Bentham's Panopticon. Instead, digital technology has taken over this function through systems that operate automatically and without the user's awareness.

This phenomenon demonstrates a new development of panopticism that relies not only on external surveillance but also on the individual's desire to be visible to others. Thus, *The Truman Show* not only depicts the panopticon in the form of reality television but can also be read as a prediction of the emergence of a digital society characterized by continuous surveillance, the commodification of private life, and an increasingly complex relationship between freedom and social control.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the representation of panopticism in the film *"The Truman Show"* using Michel Foucault's perspective. Based on the analysis, it was found that the film represents various mechanisms of power described by Foucault, particularly through surveillance, disciplinary power, the relationship between knowledge and power, and resistance to systems of social control. The first finding indicates that Seahaven functions as a panopticon space, enabling total surveillance of Truman Burbank's life. The presence of hidden cameras throughout the city creates a continuous system of observation and control over every aspect of Truman's life. Although Truman is unaware of the surveillance, his behavior is still shaped by the environment constructed by the production team.

The second finding suggests that power in the film operates not through physical violence, but rather through psychological disciplinary mechanisms. Trauma from the sea, manipulation of information, and the regulation of the social environment are used to limit Truman's mobility and life choices. This situation supports Foucault's (1977) argument that modern power operates through the normalization and shaping of behavior, thus disciplining itself. Furthermore, the study found that the relationship between knowledge and power plays a crucial role in maintaining the surveillance system. Christof, as the creator of Seahaven, has full access to information about Truman, while Truman remains unaware of his own. This imbalance creates a power relationship that allows the production team to control Truman's reality.

The study also shows that as Truman begins to realize the incongruities in his life, he develops a critical consciousness that fosters resistance. His decision to leave Seahaven symbolizes his rejection of the identity and reality constructed by the surveillance system. From a Foucauldian perspective, this action represents an individual's ability to negotiate and challenge the power relations that shape their lives. Overall, *The Truman Show* demonstrates that Foucault's concept of panopticism remains relevant in understanding contemporary society. The film not only depicts the practice of surveillance in mass media but also offers a critical reflection on how technology, information, and social institutions can shape individual behavior through often unconscious control mechanisms. Therefore, *The Truman Show* is a powerful form of cinematic representation of the relationship between surveillance, power, and freedom in modern society.

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