

The Truman Show:
an *Everyman* for the late 1990s

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In the lead-up to the Sydney opening of *The Truman Show* (Paramount, 1998), the film was described in a newspaper interview with its Australian director, Peter Weir, as “the new millennium’s *Everyman*.”¹ Just over a year after its release, *Truman* was in the news again when it was re-screened at the Vatican-authorized Millennium Spiritual Film Festival, a selection of films chosen on the basis of their perceived capacity to “nourish souls and edify culture.”² The official word from the Vatican was that Jim Carrey’s character in the film was to be admired for his fight to retain his human dignity in the face of the “daunting odds” of “a technologically empowered media.”

How literally are we to take the journalistic comment linking *Truman* and *Everyman*? Truman Burbank is, indeed, an “everyman” figure, “a guy whose life is a *Home and Away* set”,³ but what can a Hollywood movie of the late 1990s have to do with *Everyman*, a medieval performance text adapted into English from a Dutch source around the year 1500? How can a film that has been recognised widely as a critique of modern society and the media be aligned with a Middle English play about the process of Christian dying? Truman does not profess any religion, but can he be regarded as a secular *Everyman* with a spiritual message? Can the story of his recognition of, and escape from, the ever-present camera surveillance of “Seahaven” be seen to relate to Christian spirituality? The discussion that follows here takes up these issues. Through its exposition of some clearly definable relationships between the late-twentieth century Hollywood production and the late-fifteenth century play of *Everyman*, it explains how Truman’s determination to face the realities of the unknown beyond the unreality of the only world he has ever known parallels the allegorical pilgrimage of the medieval *Everyman* from the here-and-now to eternity.⁴

Everyman is a medieval English “morality” play, a religious work for public entertainment and, in its sixteenth-century printed editions, for private study. Despite the time difference of five hundred years and considerable changes in religious culture, there are a number of points of contact between *The Truman Show* and *Everyman*. These contact points highlight a reading of the 1998 film as a journey to salvation for the central “everyman” figure, Truman Burbank. In the final days of the twentieth century, *The Truman Show* has, quite clearly, been given a “Papal blessing”⁵ by virtue of its inclusion in the Film Festival in Rome; similarly, *Everyman* had the approval, albeit unspoken, of the Church of Rome in the Middle Ages. Both texts exhibit an interest in the notion of selfhood, and there are a number of circumstantial parallels between the two texts at the level of the plot. Truman’s journey out of the lonely and deceptive Christof-created world of “Seahaven,” while not specified as a Christian undertaking, is analogous to *Everyman*’s acceptance of the loneliness of the journey from life in this world to the celestial sphere of God’s Heaven. By examining the shared details of these journeys, I equate *Everyman*’s Christian self-reliance and willing embrace of death at the end of his journey with Truman’s cute, but heroically defiant, exit-line – “Good afternoon, good evening and good night.”⁶ Truman accepts that he must throw off his past life and accept the possible negative judgment of a “real” life, his “real” performance, in the outside world; *Everyman* accepts that he must leave his life on earth and face the possible negative judgment of the Almighty. The epilogue to the medieval play states an intention to impart a serious message for the benefit of the immortal souls of its audience, virtually to provide a guide for living as well as a guide for dying.⁷ Similarly, but less overtly, the resolution of Truman’s dilemma imparts a message about how to survive with personal integrity in the modern world. In a society where, increasingly, the private is made public property through the media, the maintenance of personal integrity and the acceptance of responsibility for the self is a topic for moral and philosophical

enquiry. Truman's triumph at the end of the film offers the late 1990s a template for living at the eve of the millennium.

Everyman is now rarely staged, and, when it is performed, is usually presented by academic or Christian groups to restricted audiences. Yet the title of the play, which is also the name of its central protagonist, is more widely known and influential than its recent stage history would imply. The play itself is especially valued by early drama scholars not only for its richness as a text for academic enquiry and performance, but also for its place at the forefront of the twentieth-century revival of religious drama. Its first modern production, in 1901, resulted from the efforts of William Poel, founder of the Elizabethan Stage Society, who was advised by a scholarly friend to seek spiritual consolation after the death of his mother by reading the play. It is a matter of speculation as to whether this exercise did provide any spiritual consolation to Poel, who was "a skeptic and a free thinker."⁸ What is clear, however, is that the play so impressed this somewhat eccentric theatrical enthusiast that he instantly undertook to produce it. Consequently, his *Everyman* became the first religious play to be seen on the English stage since the prohibition of such dramas came into operation in the final years of the sixteenth century. Because holy figures and discussion of sacred material had been censored out of the English theatre for three hundred years, there were very considerable obstacles in Poel's way. Even though he promoted his enterprise as an antique piece rather than a purely theatrical one, his initial attempts to gain ecclesiastical approvals to mount the production within the hallowed precincts of Westminster Abbey and Canterbury Cathedral ended in failure. Eventually, the play was performed in London, in the medieval courtyard of the Charterhouse, an old person's home that had once been a monastery. This was a bold experiment and the production was a success – it was, in fact, the only financial success that Poel had in his lengthy career as a producer of ancient plays. *Everyman* toured England and America and became implanted in the modern theatrical consciousness. Its subsequent influence has been seen in the work of a number of twentieth-century writers of religious

plays, such as George Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot (Potter 222-45).

Given Andrew Niccol's comments on his writing of the *Truman* screenplay in the context of his conviction that the life of the individual is their "own particular situation-comedy"(x), no-one would want to claim any direct influence of *Everyman* on this particular work. Nevertheless, the medieval play has impacted on modern culture in ways that allow us to argue that it could exert an impression on this writer, albeit in an indirect way. Many readers of English literature, even though they may not have read the text of *Everyman* itself, will be familiar with the words of one of its characters, Knowledge, that are reproduced in the volumes of the Everyman's Library publication series, founded by J.M. Dent in 1906:

Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side (ll. 522-3).⁹

The meaning of these lines in the context of Everyman's Library is more restricted than their meaning in the original sixteenth-century dramatic context. In the modern publication series, they can be seen to refer to the book in which they appear, or to the knowledge and understanding to be gained from the process of reading. In the medieval play, the allegorical figure of Knowledge has a number of possible meanings, including "moral alertness ... awareness of sin ... familiarity with Christian practice" (Cooper and Wortham 34, note to line 520) and "self analysis and its product."¹⁰ The function of Knowledge in the play is as a companion and guide who directs and accompanies Everyman, the central character, to the House of Confession, where he undergoes penance in preparation for the final stages of his journey to the grave and beyond. Knowledge is, like a number of the other allegorical figures in this play, an aspect of Everyman's selfhood.

Regardless of whether or not they know the text of *Everyman* or are familiar with the Everyman publication series, English-speaking people are acquainted with the name of the central character of the play, because the word "everyman" has a place

in the language. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes parenthetically that it is the name of the “leading character” in the play and defines it as “the ordinary or typical human being.” Truman is not the only film hero who can be associated with the concept of an “everyman.” Richard L. Homan has discussed the “everyman” figures of a number of films from the early 1990s and considered some specific relationships between their stories and the medieval play.¹¹ In a somewhat less specific way, *Forrest Gump*, the hero of the film that bears his name (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1994), has been described as “the southern dunce ... whom the world embraced as Everyman.”¹² More recently, the term “everyman” has been used explicitly, and to emphasise the comic effect of the sequence in which it appears, in the Australian film, *The Wog Boy* (dir. Aleksis Vellis, 2000). When the Greek-Australian hero is being set up as a multi-cultural icon to champion the unemployed in a poster campaign, the Employment Minister and her staff are aiming for a “look” that conveys the sense of “an ‘everyman’ who embodies Australia – Zorba Dundee.”

It is a small step from “everyman” to “tru(e)man.” Truman Burbank is presented to the on-screen audience of the film as a “true” person in that he is the only “character” who is being himself in the show, as opposed to acting a role. His function as “everyman” arises largely from his supposedly shared ordinariness with the on- and off-screen observers of his very ordinary, predictable and repetitive life. *The Truman Show* constructs its “everyman” as hero, and it also constructs its audience as “everymen”/ (everypersons) who share the star’s characteristics and, potentially, in the same way as the audience for the medieval morality play, can share his final triumph. Truman is not the usual Hollywood hero, he is not too clever, or too handsome, or too well built to be anything other than ordinary. He has been trained since birth to be ordinary. His home life is ordinary and his profession, as an insurance salesman, is the epitome of ordinariness. “Seahaven,” the only home and only place Truman has ever experienced, is possibly even worse than merely 1990s-ordinary, because it is trapped in an idealised mid-twentieth century “I Love Lucy”-world of the

early days of television. This is a place that does not really exist except as a set for the show and in the imagination of the viewer. Its location on the maps of the globe that Truman is fascinated with and tries to interpret is purely fictitious. In a sense, “Seahaven” is nowhere but, at the same time, it can be anywhere. In a similar way, the setting for the medieval play of *Everyman* is unlocalised and unreal. It is an allegorical place in the mind, and for that very reason, can be a place where universal truths are enacted.

“Truman”, the name chosen for the central character of *The Truman Show* is explained, in part, and somewhat ambiguously, in “A Short History of the Truman Show” included in Peter Weir’s introduction to the published version of the script:

The child was named “Truman” by Christof - “We will make of him a ‘True Man’,” Christof stated in a press release ... As for “Burbank,” that was where Truman’s studio/home was to be located (xiii).

At the end of the film, Truman confronts Christof, and other meanings of the name emerge.¹³ When Truman asks about his identity and whether anything he has experienced was “real,” Christof replies, paternalistically, “You were real” (105). For Christof, this “true man” is a lone “documentary” figure in a show that is, in all other respects, not a documentary. Ironically, the “star” recognises that his dubiously benevolent director has, in fact, prevented him from being a “True Man”. This is a heavily scripted world that Christof, as “Creator” and director, has fabricated. The God who presides over the medieval *Everyman* is, like Christof, a creator. The difference is that this Creator, despite his disappointment in humanity, has allowed Everyman – and every man/ (i.e. person) – freedom to conduct their lives without constant interference. Christof’s idea of a “true” man is one whose fears, carefully nurtured from birth by Christof himself, will force him to remain, however unwillingly, in an artificial world, a film set, that is “one of only two man-made structures visible from space – the other being the more diminutive Great Wall of China.”¹⁴ Christof, whose own name is a blatant reference to the Christian godhead is, in

fact, the anthesis of God, and, in the end, Truman is firm in rejecting his machinations and temptations. Part of the appeal of the film for the Vatican may have been the central figure's innate ability to recognise Christof as an imposter, a "false god" (Byrnes), who, like the anti-Christ associated with the era before the Last Judgment in traditional Christian thinking, seeks to represent himself as God.¹⁵

Truman's world is hemmed on all sides: by unfinished bridges; by roads that can be blocked; by planes for which bookings cannot be made; by buses that break down; and by the hero's trauma- and guilt-inspired fear of travel across water. As the audience knows, no "real" or "true" man should be subjected to such sinister confinement, nor, they hope, should his sense of selfhood allow him to be so confined. It is the audience's "true" man who rejects "Seahaven", and the (un)"True Man" that Christof has made of him, to face the unknowns of the next world. Truman does not give in to his own fears or choose to accept Christof's definition of what it is to be "real." He journeys forward and off the set with his own view of the truth of his identity intact. Despite the fact that Christof claims to know Truman better than he knows himself, this "true" man, like the "everyman" of the medieval play, is, ultimately, in charge of his own mind and of his own life (and death). With the help of his "Knowledge" about himself and his personal aspirations – what we could define here as "self analysis and its product" – Truman accepts the challenge of the outside world through the "exit" door beyond the painted sky of "Seahaven." Everyman in the medieval play relinquishes his earthly life and ascends to the Christian Heaven, having accepted who he is and how he has conducted himself in the transitory world. Truman Burbank, in like manner, symbolically rejects the safe, but sinister, "heaven" of "Seahaven," and ascends the stairs to the "exit" that will take him to the unfamiliar world outside. Truman is, at that moment, alone, but, in a sense, he has always been alone, since his family, friends and acquaintances have been merely illusions and not real people. Having accepted that, and rejected the offer for the unreal dream-world to continue, he is ready to face the dark and

the outside world and whatever horror and deception might be ahead of him.

As *Truman* opens, Christof is in the control room high above the set. Similarly, in the medieval play, after the prologue has issued a call to the audience to pay heed to the moral messages of the performance, the action proper opens with a scene above in Heaven. God laments the sinfulness of humanity and their blindness to the gift of salvation through Christ, and determines to make an end. This is not quite the end of the world, though, for despite the fact that Everyman is instructed to present an account book of his conduct in life, it is only as an individual that he comes to judgment, not as the whole of the human race at the Judgment Day. Everyman is accosted by Death who instructs him to undertake the “pilgrimage” to the grave. The play promotes a medieval Christian view of the last moments of life for the “everyman figure.” This suggests another point of contact with *Truman*, which, as Peter Weir has commented, “deals with the last few days of a live television program which ran for twenty-nine years – twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week” (xi). The difference is that in *Truman*, the “creator” is unprepared and unwilling for the end, whereas in *Everyman*, it is the central protagonist who is, initially, unprepared for death. After the initial summons, Death allows Everyman only a brief period of respite in which to prepare his account book for the final appearance before God. In this time, Everyman has to accept the failure of the body and its senses as well as the inevitable abandoning of family, friends and earthly wealth on this pilgrimage to judgment. In *The Truman Show*, before they meet at their final stand-off, Christof uses so-called family, friends and financial security to betray Truman and to coerce him into remaining on the set. Truman, like Everyman, has to put all this behind him.

Everyman presents the process of dying as a series of “desertions” or betrayals by allegorical representations of the outside world (Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods) and personifications of aspects of the self (Beauty, Strength, Discretion, Five Wits and, eventually, even Knowledge). These

“desertions,” however, are not to be interpreted in a negative sense, but, rather, as Everyman’s acceptance that he must willingly relinquish all of these things in order to pass over into the next, and, by implication, better life. Unavoidably, he does give up these personal attributes on the journey to the grave as well as his worldly possessions, personified in the play as Goods. Once Knowledge has taken him to Confession and he has received the Last Rites, his progress to the next life depends on none of those he leaves behind him. Everyman is not presented by the play as morally bankrupt: the only real charge of misconduct in this world made against him is his attitude towards Goods. He is deluded about the power of money to save him from death and about the nature of his ownership of that money. But these delusions, once he sees them for what they are, do not exclude him from the happily-ever-after. What does count at the final reckoning is Everyman’s selfhood and his personal integrity expressed through his charitable conduct within the human community. This aspect of the hero is represented allegorically in the figure of Good Deeds, who, unlike any of the others, goes hand-in-hand with him into the grave.¹⁶ When she is first encountered, however, Good Deeds is too weak to stand, and she is only given the power of movement by Everyman’s searching of his own sinful soul and his recognition of Christ as the means of salvation. In the process of this self-examination, Everyman must willingly forgo all the things of this world and dispose of his worldly wealth in a fitting Christian manner, with due deference to his various creditors and to the needs of the poor of his society.

This outline of the play suggests parallels not only with *The Truman Show*, but also with another recent film, *Meet Joe Black* (dir. Martin Brest, 1998). Like the 1934 movie, *Death Takes a Holiday*, on which *Joe Black* is based, the emphasis in this film is more on the “Death” figure than on the “everyman” figure. Nevertheless, *Everyman* can be seen as an analogue to this text for a number of reasons. The humbly named “Bill” (not William) Parrish – a surname that may also have religious undertones – is fabulously wealthy. For all his wealth, though, there is no real suggestion that it has been obtained in a manner

that is anything other than honourable. In this he contrasts with the early 1990s film “everymen” discussed by Homan, most of whose lives are, initially, seen as bad. Bill, however, for all his success in business, is more interested in creating something of the “highest standards” than in making a “profit.” For him, profit and high standards have been, most fortunately, combined, but like Everyman, he is, in the end, clearly concerned about the good that he has done in this world rather than the “Goods” represented by his opulent life style. His world of extreme luxury puts him beyond the realm of an ordinary “everyman,” but his need to come to terms with the idea of dying, of putting his affairs in order and then letting everything go and accepting that family and earthly concerns must be left behind, aligns him with his medieval counterpart. Like Everyman, he is given time between the original summons of Death and death itself, although, in this case, only because Death is “on holiday” and wants to know what it is like to “live,” and especially, what it is like to fall in love. Whereas Everyman looks for companions and guides to take him from the earthly world, Death *alias* Joe Black, initially uses Bill as his guide in that earthly world before he finally reverts to his proper role as the messenger from the “other side.” Bill uses his time to give his blessing to both his daughters, and, at the same time, he, with the help of Death, manages to prevent an immoral takeover of his communications empire that would break it up and sell it piecemeal for pure profit and without concern for consumers or employees. Bill Parrish wants to die with his business intact, “the way he made it.” Although he does not dispense any of his wealth to the poor, as Everyman does, Death affirms Bill’s “first rate life” and leads him, finally, up the hill, over the curved bridge in the darkened garden, onto the other side to the “next place.” In the same way, Everyman ascends to Heaven at the end of his story and Truman ascends the stairs that take him through the painted sky and out of the false “Seahaven” sunrise. Truman may be going out into the dark, but for members of the audience, both on- and off-screen, it is a move of a very positive kind.

Bill, Truman and Everyman share in this final voluntary ascent to an unknown and, supposedly, better world, and they also share a series of betrayals. Bill is betrayed by Drew, a business associate, who poses as a friend and as a suitor for his younger daughter, and he is, almost, and unintentionally, betrayed by his family in the form of his son-in-law. As in the medieval *Everyman*, family and friends are found wanting as his time runs out before death. Just as Beauty and Strength desert Everyman, Bill also finds that his physical powers fail him and he cannot fight his heart condition. Discretion and Five Wits flee from the sight of Everyman's grave and, even given Bill's strong confrontational approach to Drew at the final showdown, it is really Joe Black's clever manoeuvring that finally saves Parrish Communications, not Bill's mental alertness.

Truman suffers the ultimate betrayal: everyone in his "life" is lying to him and all his perceptions about this life are based on unreal premises. He is betrayed by the equivalent of Fellowship, Kindred and Cousin in the form of his best friend, his parents and his wife. Marlon, his pal from school days, mouths the words of support that Christof feeds him as the "Seahaven" community fights to keep its star from quitting. Marlon is there with his six-pack to guide Truman through the bad times, and like the medieval Fellowship, is always willing to provide "good company" (l. 214). But it is clear to both Everyman and Truman that Fellowship and Marlon fall short in their understanding of the kind of support that a friend should offer. Their friendship operates only in situations where there is eating, drinking and making "good cheer" (l. 272). Beyond that, the "friend" is more concerned with preserving his own life, or, in the case of Marlon, with preserving his own livelihood as a permanent member of the *Truman* cast. Truman's glamorous mother and his product-pushing wife quite clearly dislike the star of the show and are as false as, or even falsier than, Everyman's Kindred and Cousin. His father, supposedly a guide-figure for the boy growing up, was written out of the show, ostensibly because he was getting too close to the young Truman. This initial desertion on the part of the family through

“death” by drowning was a cynical move on Christof’s part that removed the potentially troublesome Kirk. It also went a long way to inculcating a fear of the sea in Truman and hence shut down a possible means of adventure and travel for him, and kept him in the “safety” of Christof’s world. Yet even Kirk, when he returns to the show, continues to collude in the deception of his “son.” When Truman begins to invent his own script and eludes the surveillance cameras, Kirk, no less enthusiastically than the slavering “Pluto,” who represents another trigger for Truman’s fears, joins the other members of the cast in the concerted manhunt for him.

Perhaps even more alarming than his betrayal by the people around him, is Truman’s betrayal by the equivalent of the medieval Discretion and Five Wits. In the context of the *Everyman*, “Discretion” represents the “faculty of discrimination, the power to make judgement on sensory perception” and “Five Wits,” “the five physical senses” (Cooper and Wortham 42, note to ll. 660-63). For Truman, in a world where nothing was real other than himself, his senses and his power to make judgments based on them are rendered virtually inoperative by the extent of the deception around him. As “creator” of “Seahaven,” Christof has control of all the stimuli that Truman’s senses respond to. The most obvious abuse of his power over the senses in this movie is his misuse of his ability to “Cue the Sun” (94) and to simulate weather patterns. When things get tough and Truman goes missing, Christof shows his hand as a “false god.” In terms that are a travesty of God’s benevolent command, “Let there be light”, he ignores his duty to Truman – and to his viewers – and activates the artificial light of day at a time that is out of tune with nature. In his desperation to save his creation, he abandons the pretence of “reality” and so puts that creation into even deeper jeopardy. The storm that he centres over Truman’s boat results in a travesty of Noah’s Flood.¹⁷ Truman is, like Noah, a just man, yet Christof, overplaying his self-appointed role as a vengeful god, even to the extent that he horrifies his own production team with his cruelty, is prepared to let him drown. Truman, however, is a match for all this, partly because he is immune to

all aberrations of “nature.” For him, all sunrises have been artificial and no storm has ever been other than fake. When his “creator” wants to drive him indoors, rain can fall on him selectively like the focussed spray of a garden hose. To Truman, therefore, the storm at sea is extreme, but is otherwise not remarkable, for he has never known anything different. His senses have been conditioned to accept the false world around him, and, up until the build-up to his break from “Seahaven” in the boat, his discretionary powers have been deluded. Pushed to extremity, however, although he does not doubt that whoever is doing this to him is in earnest, he loses all fear of death by drowning. He finds his own courage when he begins to suspect that his perceptions of the world around him are false. Like Everyman, he has to relinquish the very faculties that life depends on in order to break through to another, and, potentially, more satisfying, life.

Truman has to accept that his world is “a stage” and that those who live in it are “merely players”.¹⁸ What was for Shakespeare’s melancholy Jacques in *As You Like It*, a grand metaphor for the life of humanity is for Truman Burbank a grimly depressing reality. Christof’s “Truman Show” was conceived as a television program based on the ages of the modern “True Man” where the audience “would watch Truman grow to manhood, facing all of the trials we all face, but in a controlled environment ... nothing less than a record of human life from birth to death” (xv). They had seen his birth and infancy, and had witnessed the early years of his manhood. They had not seen him play all the “many parts” outlined in Jacques’ famous “Ages of Man” speech, but had Christof had his wish, they may well have watched him grow to be an old man and finally die in the last “age”, “Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” (*As You Like It*, II.vii.166).

While *Everyman* does not present an “Ages of Man” story for its audience, other plays from the medieval morality tradition, such as *The Castle of Perseverance*, do just this.¹⁹ The birth-to-death portrayal of the “everyman” figure in *The Castle* is, metaphorically, a journey towards the Judgment seat of God.

In *Everyman*, this journey is represented only by its final stages. Truman's story is also a journey, and is about journeys, in a number of senses, including the medieval "Ages of Man" motif of life's journey. Ironically, many journeys are forbidden to Truman, and yet, at the same time, it is clear from the very beginning of the film, that the journeys of his mind cannot be prohibited. Truman's mind-travels are always of an exaggerated kind, but in view of the final outcome of his story, they cannot be dismissed as mere daydreaming, rather they are a preview of the strength of his selfhood that comes into play at the end of his story. At the bathroom mirror, in the early stages of the film, he fantasizes about mountaineering, about reaching for the summit, about being eaten by his companions if he dies in the attempt. Later, he is the spaceman in the mirror. He visits outer worlds in an imaginary version of the most extreme form of travel yet known to humanity. Ironically, space travel is no more fantastic and impossible for Truman than "ordinary" travel by plane, ferry, bus, or even by private car. Travel has always had an appeal for him, but even when he climbed the rocks at the "beach" as a little boy to see what was on the other side, someone was there to stop him. Later in life, "schoolteachers" attempted to quell his adventurous spirit by telling him that there was nothing left for him to find. Deep down, it seems, Truman was never really deceived.

The courage seen in his fantasised journeys may be what spurs him on to survive the "storm" in the harbour. Yet there are other forces in operation here for Truman. Besides travel, his other increasingly absorbing fantasy is about "Lauren"/Sylvia, the girl who took his eye in the phase of his life as a young man in search of romance. Although he emerged from this phase with "Meryl", his suppressed but growing disillusionment with his marriage expresses itself in his fixation on Sylvia and his covert attempts to create an identikit picture of her from the pages of the fake fashion magazines on sale at the local "newsstand." It is this portrait that he carries with him across the harbour. Romance is what spurs him on to find salvation. The fantasy of finding Sylvia, aided by his conviction that something is going on and that "everybody seems to be in

on it” (67), drives him on his self-exile to the unknown beyond “Seahaven.” He is defeated in his attempts to fly to Fiji, where he thinks his true love has been taken, but, perhaps, he imagines that he can sail there. Like a medieval knight, Truman goes on an impossible quest into the outer world in order to prove his selfhood and gain the prize, in his case, of the beautiful lady of the identikit portrait.²⁰

Although Christof is prepared to let Truman die, the star of the show survives the storm. Yet there is a symbolic drowning scene in which the hero gives every impression of dying only to come to life again when the storm abates. This is, on the one hand, an ironic comment on the many faked deaths of screen figures, but, on the other hand, his “death” aligns him with the fate of the medieval Everyman and also represents the ultimate betrayal of Truman. This time the betrayal is by his “creator” who, despite the obvious disapproval of his assistants, is prepared to kill the “True Man” on television. Throughout this ordeal, Truman taunts his unseen tormentor, informing him that he will have to try harder if he wants to finish him off (101). He goes through this near-death experience in order to be able to go out to live in the other world beyond the clouds of the “Seahaven” horizon. In the final test of his self-esteem, he rejects the dubious “safety” of the Christof-created world and takes his life into his own hands as he goes across to the unknown. Though Christof tempts him to remain, there is nothing to keep Truman in the world beneath the man-made heaven of Christof’s control room.²¹

The Truman Show has been likened to a number of literary works of the twentieth century, to Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *1984*, for example (Smee). Certainly, there are similarities between these texts in which issues of privacy, control and human existence are explored. Likewise, there are links between this movie and others that were released at around the same time. Like *The Truman Show*, *Pleasantville* (dir. Gary Ross, 1998), for example, interrogates the issue of television inventing its own sanitized and restrictive versions of life, and *Ed TV* (dir. Ron Howard, 1999) exposes the danger of

this medium, as news/documentary, becoming unduly intrusive. *Galaxy Quest* (dir. Dean Parisot, 1999) highlights the ironies of the thin line between the “unreality” of television science fiction and the “reality” of the alien world of the “Thermians,” who interpret the “Galaxy Quest” series as “historical documents.” The “Galaxy Quest” team, having experienced the demoralisation of being trapped inside their television personas by their earthly fans, find new self-esteem, and a new lease of life for the series, when their alien fan club puts them into a situation where the fiction must become “real.”

These films all comment on Western culture at the end of the millennium, but the appeal of *The Truman Show*, especially the moral appeal that has been acknowledged by the Vatican, can be illuminated by recognising its links to the Christian spirituality of the Middle Ages as expressed through morality plays like *Everyman*. Truman relies on his own resources as an individual and goes through the “exit” with nothing but his self-respect. Everyman relies on his own record of humane and charitable deeds in this world after he has committed his soul to God’s mercy and accepted physical death in the medieval play. In medieval Christian terms, the worth of an individual was measured in relation to his or her fulfilment of the demands of charity within their community. When Everyman understands this and leaves behind family, friends and worldly wealth and ceases to rely on the functioning of his body and his perceptions, he achieves eternal bliss. When Truman leaves behind family and friends, house and job and abandons his body to the storm, he at least has a chance of achieving happiness. Both Everyman and Truman face death having been stripped of everything they thought was theirs and both win through to their next life because they have the courage to be themselves. Both Truman and Everyman operate as “types” of humanity. The choice of Truman as star of the show is an accident of birth, and so anyone could be him; and Everyman operates in the convention of medieval allegory as a representative of “every one.” Truman, even more clearly than his medieval counterpart, demonstrates the link between the “unreal” world of his text and the “real” world outside by

ascending the stairs to “reality” at the end of the film. The presence of the on-screen audiences for *The Truman Show* also links the real world of the off-screen audience with the unreal world of the film, thus emphasising the ease with which anyone can cross the line into, or out of, the fiction. Truman, as an “everyman” figure, crosses that line as he goes through the “exit”. While he does not share the overt Christian spirituality of *Everyman*, Truman does come to terms with himself in a spiritual and philosophical sense appropriate to the modern context. He is the honest individual who can accept his own limitations and is willing to take his chances to achieve happiness. In the end, like the medieval *Everyman*, he decides for himself what it is that really matters.

- 1 Mary Colbert, “Weir and Wonderful”, *Sydney Morning Herald* (19 September 1998).
- 2 Rory Carroll, “Vatican assembles its vision of celluloid heaven”, *The Guardian* (17 November 1999). The festival was “part of the Vatican’s warm-up” for the 2000 Jubilee, or Holy Year, celebrations. Other Hollywood films included in the list of approved viewing were *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line* and *Shakespeare in Love*. This endorsement of popular entertainment has been marked in the 2000 Jubilee itself by the Pope’s association with a May Day rock concert in which Tim Rice’s and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar*, reviled since 1971 for its “alleged trivialisation of the Messiah,” featured as part of the finale: see Rory Carroll, “Vatican takes a walk on the wild side”, *The Guardian* (29 April 2000).
- 3 Sebastian Smee, “Big Brother is watching, in cinemas everywhere,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (22 October 1998). Manohla Dargis also describes Truman as an “everyman” and the film as “a retread of a favorite Hollywood drama, that of the man in the gray flannel suit”, “Unpleasantville: 1998’s hot indies turn Hollywood upside down”, *The Nation* (5 April 1999, 44).

- 4 The edition used for quotations from *Everyman* in this paper is by A. C. Cawley in *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (London: Dent, 1964). For a recent comprehensive discussion of *Everyman*, see David Mills, “The Theatres of *Everyman*,” in John A. Alford, ed., *From Page to Performance: Essays in Early English Drama* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 127-49.
- 5 Paul Byrnes, “Papal blessing for Private Ryan”, *Sydney Morning Herald* (19 November 1999).
- 6 *The Truman Show: The Shooting Script*, Screenplay, Foreword and Notes by Andrew Niccol, Introduction by Peter Weir (New York: Newmarket Press, 1998), 107. All subsequent *Truman* quotations are from this edition.
- 7 A “doctor of philosophy or theology” speaks the epilogue, see Geoffrey Cooper and Christopher Wortham, eds., *The Summoning of Everyman* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1980), 58, note to line 902.
- 8 Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1975), 2.
- 9 In the paperback series, only the first line is used and is accompanied by the pilgrim logo.
- 10 Allen B. Goldhamer, “Everyman: A Dramatization of Death”, *Classica et Medievalia* 29-30 (1968-9), 610. See other definitions listed by Mills 149, note 24.
- 11 “The Everyman movie, circa 1991”, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 25 (1997), 21-30.
- 12 Steven G. Kellman, “Forrest Gump, Dixie Dolt as Everyman: A Review Essay”, *The Southern Quarterly* 34.2 (1996), 114.

- 13 Some members of the audience might also associate the name with the American President, Harry S. Truman, who held office from 1945-1952. This association is strengthened by the reference to Truman's childhood visit to "Mount Rushmore", famous for its sculpted busts of the presidents who held office before Harry S. Truman. The time frame selected for the show coincides with the Truman presidency. Evidence for this dating is provided by such details as the costuming and the choice of the 1950s sitcom "I Love Lucy" as Truman's favourite TV show.
- 14 *The Truman Show*, caption accompanying image of Truman on his way to the "exit", between 58 and 59.
- 15 The Bible contains numerous prophecies of the coming of the anti-Christ. These were further developed in medieval legendary material. The English medieval biblical plays of the city of Chester present this material in dramatic form, see David Mills, ed., *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition with Modernised Spelling* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992), 388-413. The Hollywood film, *End of Days* (dir. Peter Hyams, 1999), exploited this theme, making specific reference to the Church and religious imagery, and, in so doing, aroused considerable protest: "Religious groups rail at new round of blockbusters", *The Guardian* (26 November 1999).
- 16 Homan implies that Good Deeds is a love interest for Everyman. This is too literal an interpretation, for while we might want to see the feminised personification of his charitable conduct as an expression of what could be termed the "feminine side" of his nature, it is impossible to see "her" as a figure who can be distinguished from the hero himself.
- 17 Noah's survival of the biblical Flood represents a moment of deliverance from death for humanity. In medieval Christian terms, it foreshadows the salvation made possible by Christ at the Crucifixion. In the screenplay, one of Christof's assistants is named "Simeon" and a studio executive is called "Moses". These Old Testament names resonate with the idea of the deliverance of

the people of Israel from the bondage and death of Egypt. These names are not used in the final version of the film.

- 18 Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.vii.139.
- 19 For an edition of this play see Mark Eccles, ed., *The Macro Plays*, EETS 262 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 20 In this instance, there is a resemblance to the film heroes described by Homan who achieve redemption through love.
- 21 Truman's rejection of the old-fashioned television version of life can be compared with Jennifer Wagner's acceptance of it in *Pleasantville*, when she passes up her chance to return to the 90s with her brother.

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