Abstract

Both released in 1998, the films Dark City and The Truman Show offer very different science-fictional responses to the late twentieth century concern of constant surveillance, as CCTV began to proliferate across modern cities. The Truman Show predicts the rise of Big Brother (the TV show), with constant surveillance acting as a form of entertainment for the masses. Dark City is more overtly science-fictional, set in an environment mimicking film noir but run by aliens. It also depicts John Rawls’ “Veil of Ignorance” as an experiment run on an entire city, with the aliens rewriting the inhabitants’ pasts, social status and identities in order to understand how humanity works. This paper looks at how these two films depict the surveillance of the (sub)urban environment as a way of manipulating and shaping its inhabitants, and how these depictions parallel society at the end of the 20th Century.

In 1998, two American films were released that question how identity is partially formed by one’s environment, The Truman Show (Weir 1998) and Dark City (Proyas 1998). The Truman Show is more familiar to non-specialist audiences, a satire about a then-nascent genre of reality television, which, rather than using the format of a house filled with cameras, depicts an entire town filmed for television, inhabited by actors except for the star of the show – Truman Burbank – who is unaware that his entire life has been broadcast. The Truman Show also relies on a comedic version of 1950s melodrama to give the audience an idea of the genre they are watching. Dark City also uses genre and associated temporal cues to give the audience a sense of familiarity, including the trappings of film noir (hard boiled detectives, femmes fatale, night time city locations) plus a stylized world borrowing from a variety of science-fictional cities from Metropolis to Gilliam’s dystopian city state in Brazil.

Dark City shows a decaying, polluted American city, where inhabitants never see light and the protagonist John Murdoch is framed for a brutal murder. The environment of this world presented on screen – old fashioned cars, buses and movie theatres – suggests any period between 1930 and 1950 (Figure 1). However, while the scenario of The Truman Show has a certain plausibility (when compared to actual examples of reality television), Dark City is more overtly science-fictional, set on a planetoid constructed of buildings that can warp in size and shape, where inhabitants can be sent to sleep by the sinister humanoid aliens running the prison that contains them.
In terms of milieu, the films could not be more different. However, as the plots progress, we discover the protagonists of each film live in locations manipulated by god-like figures who control both the landscape and the people within it. These environments have similarities to a science experiment, and the protagonists - by accident (in the case of Dark City) or design (Truman) - are tested to see how they will react to change. This paper will compare the experiences of the protagonists of each film and how their fictional lives allegorically comment on the experience of urban versus suburban living at end of the twentieth century.

**City Life**

Writing on how city life affects inhabitants, late nineteenth century and early twentieth century authors considered the psychological impact of claustrophobic streets and how individuals find their place amongst the multitude. Simmel writes: “The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli... a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual... rural experience.” Dark City shows city life as fast, intense and dangerous, with the seaside represented as a place that people want to escape to. The Truman Show, by contrast, shows suburbia bordered by the countryside (Figure 2), but equally dangerous – where fires and chemical spills may impede traversing the landscape (Figure 3), and where the sea itself has a border, enclosed within an enormous studio.
Simmel also notes: “There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon... so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook ... the value of the distinction between things... experienced as meaningless.” [2]

When examining differences between protagonists of these films, there is a commonality that each is trying to assert their individuality, while the “ordinary” inhabitants of the city/suburban area have accepted their world and are unmoved by it. Residents of Seahaven show passion only when advertising products to the camera – existence dictated by the money economy, which Simmel notes as another aspect of urban malaise – and inhabitants of the unnamed city in Dark City do not
question such uncanny elements as untrustworthy memories and the constant night. Another concept worth using to consider these films is Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, an idealized design for a prison that reduces the “deprivations and discomforts” that prisoners were subjected to and enables greater monitoring of their movements. When used as a template for dystopian fiction, the panopticon is still a prison that allows for invisible monitoring of its inhabitants, even if treated well, as in the representation of comfortable suburban life in *The Truman Show*.

Both films present a scenario where inhabitants are constantly monitored and their actions are manipulated. In this context, individualism becomes the most important part of the “experiment” being performed. Durkheim suggests that: “society makes us individuals... individualism provides a new and powerful way of holding society together,” and applying this notion to these films suggests that the controllers of each environment cherish emerging individuality. The controller of *The Truman Show* locates Truman in a bland environment, but sees his individualism as a great form of entertainment for TV viewers. The strangers who run *Dark City* want a unique individual to emerge from their experiment to see how stimuli might affect the nature of humanity within their prison. One could also argue that Truman’s individualism acts as a form of social cohesion – the other inhabitants have roles specifically to support (but not to liberate) him – and Murdoch’s individualism ultimately will lead him to liberate the others in his jail, saving society from unwanted experimentation.

We learn the nature of Truman’s predicament quickly: the movie cuts to how television is presenting his existence in a montage of his life, including statistics about viewership. *The Truman Show* was released before broadcast of the first series of *Big Brother*, but there were American shows that had preceded it such as *The Real World* on MTV (1992-present). While the genre it satirizes was starting to become familiar, the size of the world Truman inhabits would require an infrastructure that has not been attempted in the real world, but it is not an inconceivable scenario if a multi-million budget was made available to such a TV show. Within this science-fictional twist on reality TV, the show emphasizes American ideas of homely nostalgia (i.e. Truman’s town is modelled on 1950s/1960s suburbia) rather than the more “dangerous” modern city.

Lynn Spigel comments on how suburban homes are sites of traditional, white, heterosexual privileged inhabitants which “demonize women or men who strayed from their rightful place,” and Truman can be seen as a disruptive element in that world, an environment he wants to escape from. He sees behind (Figure 4) the walls of his cage (at one point the opening of doors to an elevator reveals the artificial set behind) and wants to explore the outside world, while rejecting the homogenous, bland suburbia where he spent his life.
This conflict is at the heart of the film: audiences who watch his life on screen (Figure 5) want him to act strangely for their entertainment, but the director does not want his actions to lead him off-set as this will end the program.

It is entirely appropriate that his world looks like a pastel post-war pastiche due to the nostalgia for “a white, middle-class image of suburban families that comes to us largely through reruns of 1950s sitcoms.” The Truman Show was made at the end of the 20th century, when many aspects of American life such as gay rights, women’s reproductive rights, acceptance of people from different ethnicities and cultures were increasingly different to the world from half a century earlier, threatening white heterosexual privilege. The previous year saw the release of Pleasantville (Ross 1998), a fantasy comedy that illustrates this difference even more, presenting a narrative where modern Americans are transported inside an old monochrome sitcom. As their modern values “infect” the inhabitants of this world, it changes from black and white to color, with racial prejudice against people of color reflecting similar concerns in the real world.

Revisiting the Past

The first scene after the opening credits of Dark City presents us with a film noir scenario, as a man wakes in a 1940s apartment next to the body of a murdered woman. Startled, he flees the scene – not before rescuing a goldfish he accidentally knocks out of its bowl – and the movie cuts to a jazz singer performing a number appropriate for the milieu of the film. The unexpected actions of a killer rescuing a gasping goldfish alerts the audience to not take everything we see for granted; there is also the notion that sensitivity indicates a degree of heroism, particularly within the urban environment. Berman notes “excessive civilization have made.. modern man with his acute and vibrant senses... a hero,” and both Murdoch and Truman display these qualities; surrounded by the stimuli of modernity, they notice small discrepancies in their environments, which will ultimately allow them to escape. Baudelaire saw modernity as a driving force for the improvement of man, but both of these films’ environments have an anachronistic quality. As such, by revisiting an older period, this is perhaps designed to stop each protagonist from fully becoming a hero, as the environment is not genuinely modern. However, the jailers in each case have technology from a period further in the future than the era that is evoked within the diegesis, i.e. truly modern rather than “retro.”
Flisfeder argues that the retro environment is a form of pastiche; it references various periods from history, but does not link to any specific one. It is an evocation rather than specific: “recreations of films that never existed,” So it should perhaps be no surprise that pastiche unsettles the protagonist and audience – a collage of fragments from different eras, attached to the modern and post-modern, are never homely enough as a simulation of a specific time or place. In exploring their environments, Truman (Figure 6) and Murdoch (Figure 7) notice details that do not add up – messages on the radio from the people in control, buses that never reach the destination advertised – that suggest their landscapes are artificial. Therefore, as well as the implication that their home is some kind of trap, they are also living in locations that are created for the benefit of observers.

Figure 6. Truman finds an exit through the artificial horizon in *The Truman Show*.

Figure 7. Murdoch finds his path blocked at the edge of the river in *Dark City*.
Truman’s world is the set of a TV show; in Murdoch’s world, the sun never comes up, giving the impression of a genre such as film noir, where darkness suits the typical narrative, so daytime is never shown. This illustrates some of Clarke’s notions on “The Cinematic City”: “a shift in the field of human perception, one that worked to sensitize people to aspects of the world that had previously gone unnoticed,” [5] [12] [N12] cinema can show characters on screen being more acutely aware of the world around them, and enables the audience to be more attuned to such perspicacity.

The Cinematic Environment

Truman and Murdoch are both audience (seeing the artifice) and protagonist (being able to explore it), with techniques of cinema enabling and commenting on their extra sensory perception. These protagonists (Figure 8), and sometimes the antagonists (Figure 9), also inhabit the role of the flâneur, wandering through their urban and suburban environment looking for clues to the meaning of life. Towards the end of their respective narratives Truman and Murdoch act with purpose, believing (correctly) the exit to their prisons is within their grasp. But earlier in each story, their path is more random, as they are unable to find a route that could facilitate their escape. Baudelaire and Benjamin explored the idea of the flâneur as a person who could navigate the complexities of the modern city through wandering, and the idea is still relevant as this type of character still exists in narratives about the modern city in various media. Benjamin sees the flâneur as having delight in modernity, but who reacts with shock when coming into contact with the metropolitan masses. [13] [N13] In the case of each protagonist in these two films, the hero is either actively stymied by the actions of fellow inhabitants or slowed by their lack of interest in their environment.

Figure 8. John Murdoch explores Dark City.
Dark City follows other examples such as Alphaville (1965) and Blade Runner (1982), which take tropes from film noir such as “the femme fatale, the alienated and doomed antihero, and their... feeling of disorientation, pessimism, and the rejection of traditional feelings of morality” [14] and mixes these with science-fictional ingredients. Conard also notes that voice-over is a noir convention, and similar to Blade Runner, the original release of Dark City begins with narration, as the voice of actor Kiefer Sutherland explains the scenario of the film: “First, there was darkness. Then came the Strangers. They were a race as old as time itself. They had mastered the ultimate technology - the ability to alter physical reality by will alone. They called this ability ‘Tuning.’” As we hear this, the film shows a crowded city at night with the camera panning down from the sky across a bridge between buildings, recalling a similar scene from Metropolis. Then, at a couple of seconds to midnight, all of the people of the city simultaneously fall asleep.

It turns out that all the people of the city are being controlled by the “Strangers,” and only a few collaborators, such as Daniel Poe Schreber (Figure 10), know about the presence of those who control the inhabitants. With such an unusual name, it’s possible that Kiefer Sutherland’s character is named after another Daniel Schreber, a 19th-century German judge, whose book Memoirs of My Nervous Illness was investigated as a case study in psychoanalytic interpretation by Freud after Schreber’s death. As Dalzell explains: “Schreber himself had stated that... an increasing number of deceased souls... were drawn to him when he was experiencing increased nervousness.” [15] The strangers in Dark City are described as being incorporeal aliens who inhabit the bodies of the dead, so as much as they move humans from one environment to another, they are beings who can move from one body to another.
Figure 10. Daniel Poe Schreber reports to the Strangers in *Dark City*.

**Historical Connections**

As their human go-between in the film, Sutherland’s character is aptly named after an early documented case of body dysmorphia haunted by the dead, exemplifying the film’s theme of unreliable identity. The strangers look human but are not; the inhabitants of the film act and dress in a certain way, but this can change while they are unconscious. Schreber is given the middle name of Poe, and one might speculate he is named after Edgar Allan Poe, an observer of cities in his fiction. In his story “The Man of the Crowd” (1845), Poe explores the idea of the manifestation of a city, and the idea of a *flâneur* who observes but does not interact with his surroundings, much like his namesake in *Dark City*. Markku Salmela cites this story as a “paradigmatic urban text... a conspicuously negative statement on the possibility of American cosmopolitan experience.”[16]

This description could also apply to *Dark City*, where inhabitants seem unaffected by the alien mechanisms of the city, which prevent coherent travel, and make a person a pauper one day and a prince the next. *The Truman Show* takes this satirical potential one step further, suggesting the only inhabitant of the suburbs with any agency is the star of a TV show, and all of the other inhabitants are actors, selling products to their audience.

Truman’s full name is worth considering for the associations that both his first name and surname – Burbank – have regarding 20th Century American history. Harry S. Truman occupied the White House following the Second World War and oversaw his country enjoy a rise in prosperity and engage with civil rights in line with UN treaties. It was also a time of communist witch-hunts and fears of one’s neighbors being secret communists. The film speaks to these notions: Truman enjoys prosperity and freedom, but there is a sinister aspect to the fixed smiles of his friends and neighbors. The performances of his neighbors as normal, upright citizens enacting a sit-com lead them to take on traditional roles such as the dutiful wife and his best friend with a blue-collar job. Harry S. Truman’s second term in office coincided with two classic American sitcoms on television: *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966). As Spigel notes, these shows “marked the transition to a more naturalistic type of comedy where good, clean family normality was the reigning aesthetic.”[17][18][19]

As Truman’s world evokes 1950s nostalgia, it’s worth noting that Spigel sees “the theatricality of performance” (which Truman himself invokes to assert his individuality) at odds with “portraits of everyday life in the white middle-class suburbs.”[19][20][21][22]

While his first name might suggest American stability, Truman’s surname perhaps reflects the theatrical nature of his character. Burbank is a city
Northeast of Hollywood where various successful movie studios have had their head offices and production facilities since the 1920s. So, as a center of media production, the name and location might be considered shorthand for cinematic artifice and entertainment, which Truman finds himself embodying and coming up against.

Many films have a protagonist who drives the story forward, and it is perhaps one’s interest in that character’s fate that keeps the audience watching until the end of the film, to find out if the lead character reaches their goal. They act as a focalizer, “a means of opening an imaginary ‘window’ onto the narrative world... to transpose fictional points of view and enter into a state of immersion.” These “immersions” allow audiences to experience the dreams and visual illusions a character is experiencing, as well as being guided through the film world by a character they follow (as protagonist) and potentially identify with (via empathy or intrigue). In “pulp” science-fiction like Dark City, it is the “human character through whom the action is focalized” in order to have a normalized perspective. By using a human narrator, or human focalizer: “the science fictional universe seem(s) much more like a narrative unfolding in the real world.” Even when a film such as Dark City subverts this idea with a lead character gaining superpowers, their previous normalcy is our first encounter with them.

**Science-Fiction Environments**

In both films, the lead character is trapped by a physical limit: Truman steals a boat, which hits a solid wall at the edge of the TV studio; Murdoch finds the city is located on a satellite floating in space rather than on Earth (Figure 11).

*Figure 11. Breaking through the wall at the edge of Dark City with space beyond.*

*Dark City* also shows a plasticity to the buildings where tower blocks become squat tenements that stretch and expand their current boundaries. This plasticity locates the film within the virtual reality genre that became popular on screen in the 1990s, including such films as *The Lawnmower Man* (Leonard 1992), *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers 1999) and *The Thirteenth Floor* (Rusnak 1999), with the latter also using *noir* to inform its environment. Like Murdoch in *Dark City* who becomes superhuman, protagonist Neo in *The Matrix* also develops abilities to fly, move objects with his mind,
and also manipulate his surroundings. As with mid twentieth century escapism offered by films such as *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*, dark virtual reality narratives offer a different kind of escapism. While barely a “cycle,” the earliest film mentioned – *The Lawnmower Man* – arrived in cinemas only a couple of years after VR machines had a short-lived appearance in arcades, coinciding with public awareness. The idea of the ‘holodeck’, which did not require the user to don a special headset, had appeared in many episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), including the pilot, and a *noir* scenario in the holodeck was included in three episodes broadcast in 1988, 1989 and 1991. With films such as *Blade Runner* and *Dark City* combining many of the tropes of *noir* with science-fiction, this allowed narratives to combine the unease and threat present in the genre with a vision of the near future or alien location.

While a city is full of anonymous people, there are still those identified as different, considered a threat to the norm in some respect, particularly when the city is controlled by alien intelligence (where considerations of humanity would be even more regimented than if controlled by a human or committee). This is something Godard also identified: “Probing further into *Alphaville*’s way of life, Lemmy ponders the way Alpha 60 eliminates ‘foreigners’ who cannot be ‘assimilated’ into the city’s stifling homogeneous life.” If a person is identified as subversive, it makes more sense for that character to be anonymous; identity assembled through other encounters with other people based on a tabula rasa. Awareness of a different status to others in the urban environment “assures the individual of a type and degree of personal freedom.” Here we see a contrast between Murdoch’s and Truman’s experiences: in the city Murdoch can enjoy anonymity because of the number of other inhabitants of the metropolitan area. This allows him to go on the run when framed for murder, not encounter the policeman on his trail for some time, and pursue his own investigation into the mysteries of the city. Truman’s suburban environment seems small enough that he knows a greater number of people (and they all know him due to the conceit of the film) which means individuality becomes more of a performance or act of rebellion. To behave how one likes when known by the community is different to behaving oddly in a city where one is unknown. When known by the community, the individual is rebelling against possible type, when unknown, they are perhaps attempting to be noticed, or prove they have some uniqueness in the crowd.

### The Audience On Screen

Simmel notes the “reserve” of people trying to assimilate, compared to the risk of upsetting social cohesion due to “the peculiarities of inner and external development of the individual.” A point arrives in the narrative when Truman is performing the role expected of him – such as drawing a smiley face on the bathroom mirror in the morning – in order to make people that he is aware are monitoring him think he is going about his daily routine.

The film presents a satirical take on the TV audience: the same characters are shown more than once watching Truman on television, in bars, homes and even in a bath, living their lives vicariously through him. In his forward to *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman notes that “Huxley remarked... rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny ‘failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions’... what we love will ruin us.” In contrast, Orwell’s Ministry of Truth allows inhabitants of the state their distractions in *1984*, but only carefully monitored and curated ones, should too much stimulation lead to individuality. We know little about the world outside Truman’s cage, but the enormous success of the fictional TV show suggests a population looking for a distraction to escape other concerns. Ironically, it is the state of Truman’s captivity that captivates the audience; when he escapes, they lose interest.

Ray Pratt sees this desire for projected emotion as a side effect of globalized consumption: “(In) the world capitalist economy everyone watches American movies and eats American fast food. Such encroaching standardization of human experience paradoxically also diminishes emotional returns... media culture and mass consumption in general may be used by people to ‘re-enchant’ their lives.” The gap between consumption and emotion narrows with Truman experiencing his “friends”
enacting adverts in his home and garden, which seems like aberrant behavior to him, and likely to further his insecurity of what normality is (and therefore normalizes his eccentric mannerisms). Truman’s jailer also projects emotions onto his ward; we see Christof in his panoptical TV studio stroking a giant image of Truman sleeping (Figure 12), and he seems perplexed that his subject would want to leave (even after trying to kill him with an artificial storm rather than let him escape).

Figure 12: Christof strokes an image of Truman’s sleeping face in The Truman Show.

Christof nudges Truman into a paranoid state of not wanting to escape, but this allows Truman to start believing he is in some sort of prison. For Murdoch in Dark City, the jailers can remove warmth, food and a pleasant environment for their prisoners at a whim to see how it affects them.

Conspiracy and Paranoia

Rewritten to suit the experiment, Murdoch’s sense of self in unstable in this manipulated city as his role and memory have been imposed on him to observe the effect. Lack of sunlight recalls James Thomson’s poem The City of Dreadful Night (1857), which Williams sees as having a connotation of “Struggle, indifference, loss of purpose, loss of meaning,” as the city articulates modern consciousness and “general despair in the isolated observer.” If one imagines a city where light does not penetrate (London slums of the late nineteenth century, and the deadly smog of the mid twentieth century), then oppressive atmospheres have a deleterious effect on the inhabitants.

Truman eventually realizes the world is conspiring against him and that he is constantly observed; so he continues to act the way he used to while secretly constructing an escape plan, taking on the behavior of any prison-break movie, behaving normally in front of the jailers while digging a tunnel at night. Research published in the journal Surveillance & Society notes the proliferation of closed-circuit television in British cities in response to such tragedies as the Conservative Conference Party bombing in 1984 and the death of Jamie Bulger in 1993. However, proliferation of surveillance also makes the constantly surveilled feel paranoid. Pratt notes: “(T)he twenty-first century... feeds off the paranoia and fear the total surveillance society now makes possible,” with this surveillance society informing such films as The Net (Winkler 1995), The Game (Fincher 1997) and Enemy of the
state (Scott 1998). This shows a trend for surveillance narratives on screen, which may fuel fears of paranoia in the audience, when they are presented with scenarios confirming their worst fears.

For Truman it is the surveillance that is Orwellian, while Dark City presents us with a scenario where entire lives of people are manipulated for an experiment. Titles given to The Strangers – Mr. Hand, Mr. Book, Mr. Wall etc. – plus their interest in manipulating people’s lives, personalities, social status and relationships recall the activities of the Ministry of Truth and the Thought Police in 1984. Orwell has the state rewriting history – by altering documents and photographs – and giving people electroshock therapy to change their behavior. By controlling what books people can read (as well as redacting their contents), and by allowing them to watch only curated content on screens, the state modifies behavior. When people accept the reality around them as “truth,” there is the expectation that they might change their behavior – so if an increase in the price of chocolate is “revealed” to be a discount, for example, the people will be pleased rather than disappointed. The difference between sleep and wakefulness is thin in Dark City; when people go to sleep in one version of reality and wake in a different one, they accept the new reality the same way a dreamer might accept the change in narrative in a dream.

Further to the revision of history and reality, the manipulation of the population of Dark City is an extrapolation of a thought experiment postulated by John Rawls in A Theory of Justice. Rawls suggested that if everyone in a society had their notions of social status, of hierarchy compared to others, of difference of race or gender removed, then this might eliminate crime, criminal behavior and injustice, because artificially perceived differences – imposed on our sense of self by society – cause aberrant behavior. “(M)en born into different positions have different expectations of life determined, in part, by the political system as well as by economic and social circumstances.”

Perhaps this is part of the expected behavior of people living in cities, as noted by Simmel, but for inhabitants of Dark City it goes one stage further, collective amnesia due to their constant mind-wipes limits their overall knowledge. Suffice to say this enforced amnesia adds to the sense of characters’ ambiguity, status and unreliability.

Unreliable Memories

Murdoch has hazy memories of his childhood holiday destination Shell Beach, but whenever he asks other residents of the city about it, their memory is even vaguer than his. The place has become a collective dream, but the lack of a consensus of the location by the city folk, leads to no surprise that when Murdoch finally reaches the point on the map where he expects it to be, it is just a poster on a wall. The actuality of a beach in a nocturnal city of cars, commuters and crowded tenements would be too incongruous amongst the topology of what we’ve seen so far. Also, printed documents do not necessarily convey truth; as mentioned earlier, the state in 1984 changes information in reprints, to make people doubt their own memories. In Blade Runner, the replicants wonder if photographs are of their own remembered experiences, or someone else’s, as a method of convincing them of the truth. As in Dark City when a local cannot recall the location that the poster is advertising, in Blade Runner: the “photograph, it seems, has proved nothing.”

In her writing on “prosthetic memory,” Landsberg discusses the connections between memory and identity, and how speculative fiction offers characters memories that are not their own, but still this informs characters’ behavior and actions: “memories are less about validating or authenticating the past than they are about organizing the present and constructing strategies with which one might imagine a liveable future.”

We can see this at work in Dark City: while Murdoch finds it difficult to reconcile his lack of memory of seemingly killing a prostitute, other characters are ambivalent about not being able to recall, for example, the location of a popular sea resort. Their actions are orientated to the eternal present; their past is always in flux, at least as far as it might reside in their memories, so they “just get on with it” rather than worrying about memories that might offer a past that is at odds with their present. This also sets Murdoch apart from his peers: he actively resists the present he finds himself in, as it makes no sense based on his distorted memories of the past, and amnesia of recent times.

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To encapsulate the unusual manipulation that informs the films I am examining, they can be summarized each in a sentence. *Dark City* shows that people in a (cinematic) city can be shifted around regarding their way of life and social status for experimental purposes. *The Truman Show* treats suburbia as a stage for entertainment of the masses, where one’s family can be ejected from society, and friends are actually employed to sell products in the narrative. These films feature protagonists with lives disrupted by forces beyond their control, which leads to destabilizations of their identity and sense of self. As Lebow notes: “science fiction has come to mirror debates in society... often with the goal of exploring what it means to be human.” As such, these films hold a mirror up to various concerns present in society at the time of their making, plus concerns about the future, and notions of repeating the past, including fears of surveillance and simulations. Concerns about mental illnesses or people transgressing societal roles and agreed locations are also present, and many of these concerns are amplified by the city location. These films show that city and suburbia allow for anonymity or fame, but this is compromised when one is famous either for being a TV star, or for being pursued by the forces of law and order. One’s sense of self is also compromised by leaving one’s supposed routine, so that enough experience can manifest a heroic alter-ego. A human identity becomes unreliable when a character embraces the superhero within in, or fame (either locally or through surveillance) itself can be abandoned by escaping that environment.

Whether TV show star or framed murderer, their characters display an unusual mental outlook and our experience of them is through the lens of their being damaged individuals, through the stresses of their urban/suburban lives. Truman displays signs of mania, dissociative disorder and paranoia, Murdoch has amnesia when we first encounter him and again, doggedly pursues “the truth” in an obsessive way. Berger notes that: “Urban residents, especially those in large cities, do appear to be admitted to mental institutions at a higher rate that do residents of small cities or rural areas... In fact there is a tendency for manic-depressive patients to reside in urban areas of high economic status.” The urban environment has a number of qualities that might damage the psyche of inhabitants – pollution, over-crowding, claustrophobia – and *Dark City* exaggerates these qualities, through lack of daylight and the decay of the infrastructure, walls that actually enclose you as you sleep.

In *Dark City* and *The Truman Show*, the lead character is unreliable as they have been lied to for as long as they can remember, so any truth they tell is based on fallacies. Both environments that they live in have been created with an ulterior motive. They have been told lies in order to shape their identities – Truman has been told that actors are blood relatives, Murdoch’s neighbors have been given a multitude of different lives and identities as the history of their environment has been shaped. Pratt’s comments on how “standardized... human experience... diminishes emotional returns” which *The Truman Show* reflects on, suggests a belittling of identity in the face of homogeneity – especially in the kitsch every-town Truman lives in. Also, the world *Dark City* presents is a mass remembered fiction (of *film noir*) turned into a real environment, but living in a city one step removed from fiction means the details are not filled in – no-one knows where Shell Beach is – and this is unsettling to the residents.

Is it worth attempting to modify the... homogeneous patterns of urban development in order to obtain diversity? ... Diversity is the best assurance a community has that it will be able to minimize crises... In contrast, overspecialized cities controlled by dominant groups are subject to periodic crises owing to their unbalanced concentration of power.

Lozano questions the status of both a bland city and a stylized one, and in the case of these two films a bland conurbation and a stylized city are places one has to escape in order to find the reality of one’s identity, no longer controlled by homogeneity or the designs of others. The environment of *Dark City* is smoggy, smoky, and perennially dark. This is a dehumanizing environment where one struggles to make human connections and not suffer from vitamin D deficiency. In contrast in Truman’s suburban environment, the tropes of neighbor familiarity becomes stifling and one is expected to assume the role
society has given. In both cases, the protagonists want to escape this cage, and the dehumanizing of one’s character that this has entailed.

**Escape**

In these films, there is at least a happy ending, albeit unresolved. Murdoch gets to witness a sunny day (Figure 13) – still trapped on the asteroid, but now master of his own fate. Truman escapes the TV studio to the world outside (Figure 14), and to the possibility of a genuine relationship.

Figure 13. Murdoch explores a new landscape beyond the outside wall of *Dark City*. 

Figure 14. Truman escapes the TV studio to the world outside of *The Truman Show*. 

https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/13761232.0043.203?view=text;rgn=main
Figure 14. Truman takes his final bow before leaving the set of *The Truman Show.*

Other examples of the trope (of characters with a messianic purpose trapped in a science-fictional environment) might lead to madness and death – *1984, Brazil, Twelve Monkeys* – or sequels that reduce the message of the initial instalments – such as the second and third *Matrix* films and multiple *Terminator* sequels. There are reflections of multiple worlds on offer: Truman is observed by both a control center (whose occupants manipulate his world) and a TV audience (who through scale of numbers, ensure his continued incarceration). Truman’s environment is a fiction in a film, so the film’s audience watch the fictional TV show’s audience watching Truman – we make judgments on them, when we ourselves are enjoying the fictionalized world presented to us.

The idea that there is a truth behind the world is a common denouement in science fiction and fantasy – Murdoch discovers his city is floating in space, Truman finds he is in a TV studio, Murdoch discovers his life is controlled by aliens, Truman finds his is controlled by a TV director. This recalls the ending of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) where the wizard is revealed to be a huckster, creating artificial “sturm und drang,” and the protagonist can leave the (dream) world through simple ritual. Truman also leaves a fantasy for “the real world,” but Murdoch choses to create a new fantasy that is more to his liking than the one created by others. While this seems like a rejection of reality, it is at least a happy ending. Presented with monochrome Kansas, and the Great Depression, Dorothy might have been happier in Oz (and indeed the book serial depicts such returns).

Both *The Truman Show* and *Dark City* come from a decade of CCTV proliferation and the rise of reality television. They comment on how, in a world of constant observation and manipulation, changing your status according to the whims of society, or being subjected to subliminal advertising, might shape the personalities of individuals, and whether this might cause certain members of society to flee or react against this environment. The films also combine concerns about city life and incarceration that have occupied writers for generations. They update fears about life under surveillance, made bearable by facile entertainment as predicted by Orwell and Huxley, and utilize ideas of urban wandering and incarceration as explored by Baudelaire and Bentham. They are useful examples of *fin-de-siècle* science fiction, which follow tropes and genres that developed in the 1980s and 1990s and, viewed 20 years on, contain ideas and provocations that are a worthwhile consideration of the human state in cities and suburbs under surveillance.

**Author Biography**

Alex Fitch is pursuing a PhD in Comics and Architecture at the University of Brighton. He presents a a pair of monthly radio shows - one ("Panel Borders") on the subject of comics, and another on "Architecture Culture" - on Resonance FM, the Arts Council Radio Station in London. He has written on the topic of film in anthologies published by University of Chicago Press, University Press of Mississippi, Intellect Books, and Strange Attractor Press.

**Notes**


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https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/13761232.0043.203?view=text;rgn=main
7. Ibid. [N7-ptr1]
9. Ibid, 133. [N9-ptr1]
11. Ibid. [N11-ptr1]
15. Tom Dalzell, *Freud's Schreber Between Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis: On Subjective Disposition to Psychosis.* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2018), 269. [N15-ptr1]
18. Ibid. [N18-ptr1]
19. Ibid, 178. [N19-ptr1]
23. Ibid, 84. [N23-ptr1]
27. Ibid. [N27-ptr1]
31. Ibid, 240. [N31-ptr1]


