

GOOD AFTERNOON, GOOD EVENING, AND GOOD NIGHT

Twenty Years Later, Everything Is *The Truman Show*



By Melinda Sue Gordon/©Paramount Pictures.

Jim Carrey as Truman Burbank in *The Truman Show*, 1998.

Jim Carrey, Peter Weir, Andrew Niccol, Laura Linney, and Sherry Lansing thought their paranoid dramedy seemed absurd—until life began to imitate art.

by JULIE MILLER

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Two decades ago, *The Truman Show* seemed preposterous. “We would laugh about how unrealistic some of it seemed,” said co-star **Laura Linney**, remembering conversations the cast and crew would have on the film’s Seaside, Florida set. “We couldn’t quite believe that someone would want to tape themselves, so that people could tune in and watch what was considered at the time to be mundane, and see that as entertainment.”

“By no means did I think that this movie was going to be prescient,” agreed **Sherry Lansing**, who oversaw the production of over 200 films—including *The Truman Show*—during her tenure as C.E.O. of Paramount. “That suddenly, we were going to have all these reality shows—the Kardashians, *The Real Housewives*. When I watch reality television and people who live in front of the camera—there are many now who do—I wonder how much of this is real, how much of it is just because they’re in front of the camera. Do they really know themselves? But every time I watch one, I think of Truman.” Screenwriter **Andrew Niccol** echoed her: “When you know there is a camera, there is no reality,” he said. In that respect, Truman Burbank “is the only genuine reality star.”

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The intricate fable, brought to life by Oscar-nominated filmmaker **Peter Weir**, centers on Truman—an upbeat man, played by **Jim Carrey**, who gradually realizes that his entire life is

an elaborately constructed ruse. His friends and family members are actually actors; his every move is captured by 5,000 hidden cameras and broadcast to the world. Even his actions are manipulated by a power-crazed director named Christof (**Ed Harris**). In addition to forecasting the reality-TV craze, the film predicted the scope of modern product placement (as presented by Linney's impeccably named character, Meryl Burbank), privacy invasion, and the existential quandary of whether to live for yourself or an audience—be it television or social media. Truman must ultimately decide between accepting the artificial world he knows, or venturing into the unknown in pursuit of truth.

Twenty years after Truman heroically exited the soul-deadening reality series that was his life . . . well, to quote co-star **Holland Taylor**, “Here we are.” In 2015 alone, there were **roughly 750 reality series** on television. Those of us without official series are essentially starring in and producing our own reality shows, via constant Twitter updates, Instagram Stories, Snapchats, Facebook videos, and YouTube videos. As an audience, we didn't just blow past *The Truman Show*'s cautionary subtext; we've elected a reality star as our president. Added Linney, “*The Truman Show* is a very foreboding, dark movie—and, unfortunately, our world had gone even way beyond that.”

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Carrey with director Peter Weir on set.

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It wasn't an easy production. One of the leads was fired and re-cast; Carrey suffered a traumatic incident while shooting that caused the studio to re-evaluate its safety standards. When producer **Scott Rudin** showed Lansing an early cut of the film, he joked that he should have an ambulance waiting outside the screening room—in case she had a heart attack after realizing an \$80 million budget had been burned on what was, in its first cut, an art film. (“It’s not unusual to have a bad first cut [of a film]. It was unusual to have that bad [of] a first cut, I have to say,” said Lansing.) But 20 years after it premiered, the movie remains one of the modern age’s most hauntingly prophetic films. [Subscribe](#)

“I have a very hazy crystal ball,” joked Niccol. “I certainly didn’t foresee the onslaught of so-called reality television. I doubt the film had much to do with it. If it did, I apologize.”



When Carrey read the script for *The Truman Show* in the mid-90s, he was living a surreal experience that in some ways mirrored that of the movie’s



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films in three years, Carrey also related to Truman in another way: he wasn’t sure whether he should continue on his trajectory, or begin leading a life that felt more authentic. *The Truman Show* would be Carrey’s first dramatic role, marking the beginning of what he seems to consider a more fulfilling stage of his career.

As Carrey was dodging photographers and contemplating his strange new life, Niccol, a New Zealand-born screenwriter working in London, was grappling with a concept that had been nagging at him since childhood: that everything around him was nothing more than a charade. The concept of “round-the-clock recording and the counterfeit world” came first, before Niccol figured out that a TV show could serve as a framework to rationalize those elements. “At the time of writing, there was no reality television,” Niccol pointed out. “*The Real World* started just after I finished the script.”

“Andrew is the king of paranoia,” said **Lynn Pleshette**, Niccol’s former literary agent, who took the screenwriter around town to pitch the project. “We once had a meeting at MGM. The valet took our car, and Andrew said, ‘Well, he’s wearing the valet uniform. But we don’t know if he’ll bring the car back, do we?’”

Niccol’s initial script was darker in tone and set in a parallel dimension in New York City, rather than an idyllic seaside town. Per the screenwriter, “Truman had a drinking problem. He was cheating on his wife with a prostitute—of course, he didn’t know that it was the worst-kept secret in the world, since the affair was being televised. In one scene, he fails to intervene in an assault on the subway.”

The details were malleable—but the concept was undeniably strong. Said Lansing, “I remember thinking that the basic idea was simply extraordinary—that as you think you’re going about your life, you realize it’s all fake . . . And the idea that it could be a television show. . . I was involved with the movie *Network* as an executive. This script kind of reminded me of the idea that the media in some way could control your life, and that you didn’t have free will and that everything in your life was fake. It so resonated with me, that tragic nature of it.”



Top, from ©Paramount Pictures; bottom, by Melinda Sue Gordon/Paramount/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock.

Carrey on the re-imagined set.



Top, from ©Paramount Pictures; bottom, by Melinda Sue Gordon/Paramount/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock.

Carrey and Laura Linney.

The day after he read the screenplay, Rudin summoned Niccol and Pleshette to his office—and offered them whatever they wanted. Another producer had already offered Pleshette his own Rolls-Royce. With Rudin on board to produce, Paramount ultimately paid \$1.5 million for the script, gave Pleshette an executive producer credit, and offered Niccol, who had never directed a feature film, the chance to direct a scene. If Paramount chose a different director after seeing the footage, Niccol would receive a penalty fee. (Because the film had an \$80 million budget, Lansing did not feel comfortable putting it in the hands of a first-time director. When Niccol wrote his next feature, he took Lansing's advice and wrote a \$20 million movie, *Gattaca*, that he could direct himself.)

According to Pleshette, Rudin also called in a favor to **Gary Oldman**, who filmed a sequence in which Truman—suspecting that he is being watched by actors posing as strangers—takes a baby from a stranger's carriage, and threatens to drop the baby unless the woman admits that she knows his name. The woman grows hysterical, Truman hands the baby back, and the

woman tells him, “Thank you, Truman.” Pleshette said that there was never any discussion of Oldman starring in the full feature, though; even the actor understood that *The Truman Show*’s high-concept idea had top billing. “He said, ‘Look, nobody cares about me in this. The star is the script.’”

Brian De Palma was at one point attached to direct—but he wanted to remove the dramatic reveal that made *The Truman Show* so clever. Rather than having both audiences and Truman realize at the same time his life is a TV show, De Palma’s version would have been more voyeuristic, with audiences peeking behind the curtain from minute one. Then De Palma left the project to direct *Mission: Impossible*, and Rudin sent the script to Weir (*Witness*, *Dead Poets Society*)—with a note that Carrey was interested in starring.

Weir was on board with both the concept and Carrey, but he had some concerns about the script.

“While I admired Andrew Niccol’s screenplay, I felt its dark tone and New York setting undercut its credibility,” said Weir. “Why build a New York set? Too costly. And why would millions tune in 24/7 to something grim and depressing? Scott encouraged me to reimagine the piece. I contacted Andrew, and he was willing to work with me on a fresh approach.” The story was revamped to be more lighthearted; Truman became a man who had dreamed, charmingly, of being an explorer, until an actress playing a teacher swatted down his ambition, telling him, “Oh, you’re too late. There’s really nothing left to explore.” The first time Weir met with Carrey, he brought a carefully curated lookbook of images that exemplified the character. It so moved Carrey that he has held on to it for the past 20 years, and pulled it out of storage before our conversation to revisit the contents.

Weir started out in sketch comedy, and drew on that background as he and Carrey began brainstorming ideas for Truman. They imagined that Truman probably had a hidden camera in his bathroom: “I had been drawing character costumes with soap on the mirror that you could fit yourself into—like a pirate and a spaceman,” said Carrey. Weir ended up recycling the bit for the film.

Carrey so embodied Truman that both Weir and Paramount agreed to wait a year, until Carrey was free, to film the movie—a very rare decision in Hollywood.

While they waited, Weir worked with Niccol on recalibrating the script and carefully crafted character backstories for his actors. Weir’s wife, **Wendy**, scouted the new setting for the film—the master-planned community of Seaside in the Florida panhandle, which was re-christened on-screen as Seahaven. For the cast, the experience of making the movie matched its idyllic setting.

“*The Truman Show* was made before video came out—when movies were still made on film,” explained Linney. “Now you can do a million takes and, because it doesn’t cost as much and isn’t as precious, there’s a casualness now on sets, which isn’t bad . . . just different. During that period of time, film was very valuable. So, when the camera was rolling, everybody became very quiet and everybody leaned in. Everybody, the crew, nobody could move, nobody could speak, nobody could whisper, no one could look at a phone—because we didn’t have them. It was a very different atmosphere on a set, and it’s one that I miss, actually, because people really had to listen. I look back on it as pure filmmaking, in a way, that just doesn’t happen anymore.”



Ed Harris as Christof.

From Moviestore/REX/Shutterstock.

The primary cast members lived inside Seaside’s actual picture-perfect homes; Linney invited Taylor, who plays Truman’s mother, to bunk with her. “That was how we became very good friends,” said Taylor. She and Linney spent their time trying to figure out the “mental tightrope” of playing an actor maintaining a character in someone else’s fake reality. “It’s not unlike playing a character in a dream. It’s like sleight of hand, but sleight of mind . . . being in *The Truman Show* was a sleight-of-mind trick.”

“As magnificent as Jim Carrey is in that movie, without Peter, no one would’ve cared,” said Linney. “He was five steps ahead of everybody all the time. So, a lot of it was just trying to

keep up with Peter. And it was very good for Jim to have to try and keep up with Peter, because Jim was on such a wave of success, and it was good for him to be with someone who knew more than he did.”

For inspiration, Linney watched **Carol Merrill** on *Let's Make a Deal*, and pored over images Weir had pulled from Sears, Roebuck catalogues of the 40s, building Meryl into a perfectly uncanny Stepford Wife. “She played it beautifully, like some joyful animatron,” said Carrey. “This wonderful fakery that, obviously, she’s known people in her life that were this—that were, on the surface, really happy, and yet coming apart inside.”

In addition to drawing on his real-life similarities with Truman, Carrey also drew character inspiration from his father. “My father’s demeanor was Truman. He used to lean in when he would say, ‘Hello, how are ya?’ He’d start laughing even before you told him how things were. He was just a very affable, beautiful soul. I wanted it to be a tribute to him, so there are little moments throughout the movie that are so my dad that my family would go, ‘Oh, you were doing Dad.’”

Carrey also coined his character’s signature line—“In case I don’t see ya . . . good afternoon, good evening, and good night”—in tribute to his father, the “type of spirit who wanted people to feel covered,” even if he only saw them once that day.

There were several snags in production, however—the first being that **Dennis Hopper**, who was initially cast as Svengali-like director Christof, could not remember his lines. Even though he filmed several scenes, Rudin knew production needed to re-cast the role, and fast. According to **Stephen Galloway’s** Lansing biography *Leading Lady*, Weir suggested that he step in to play the God-like character himself, in what would have been an additionally meta flourish—but Rudin threatened to shut down production rather than allow it. Eventually, both Rudin and Weir rallied around **Alan Arkin** as a substitute. But Lansing held firm for a bigger star, eventually settling on Ed Harris—who earned an Oscar nomination for his performance.

Another dramatic obstacle came while Carrey was filming one of the climactic final scenes—in which his character manages to escape cameras, overcome his fear of water, and jump into a boat. To stop him from trying to leave Seahaven, Christof creates a massive storm; Truman falls into the water and nearly drowns. Afraid that Truman might actually die, a network exec pleads with Christof: “The whole world is watching. We can’t let him die in front of a live audience.”

Despite multiple safety precautions, Carrey said that he did, in fact, almost drown while filming the scene in a tank. “I was wearing wool clothing—a big wool sweater, wool pants, and shoes—and they had jet engines blowing on me, and they had these giant wave machines that were creating gale-force waves. I don’t know if you can see it in the film, but they’ve got divers under the water, and I’m actually giving the signal of like, ‘I’m in trouble,’ which was a

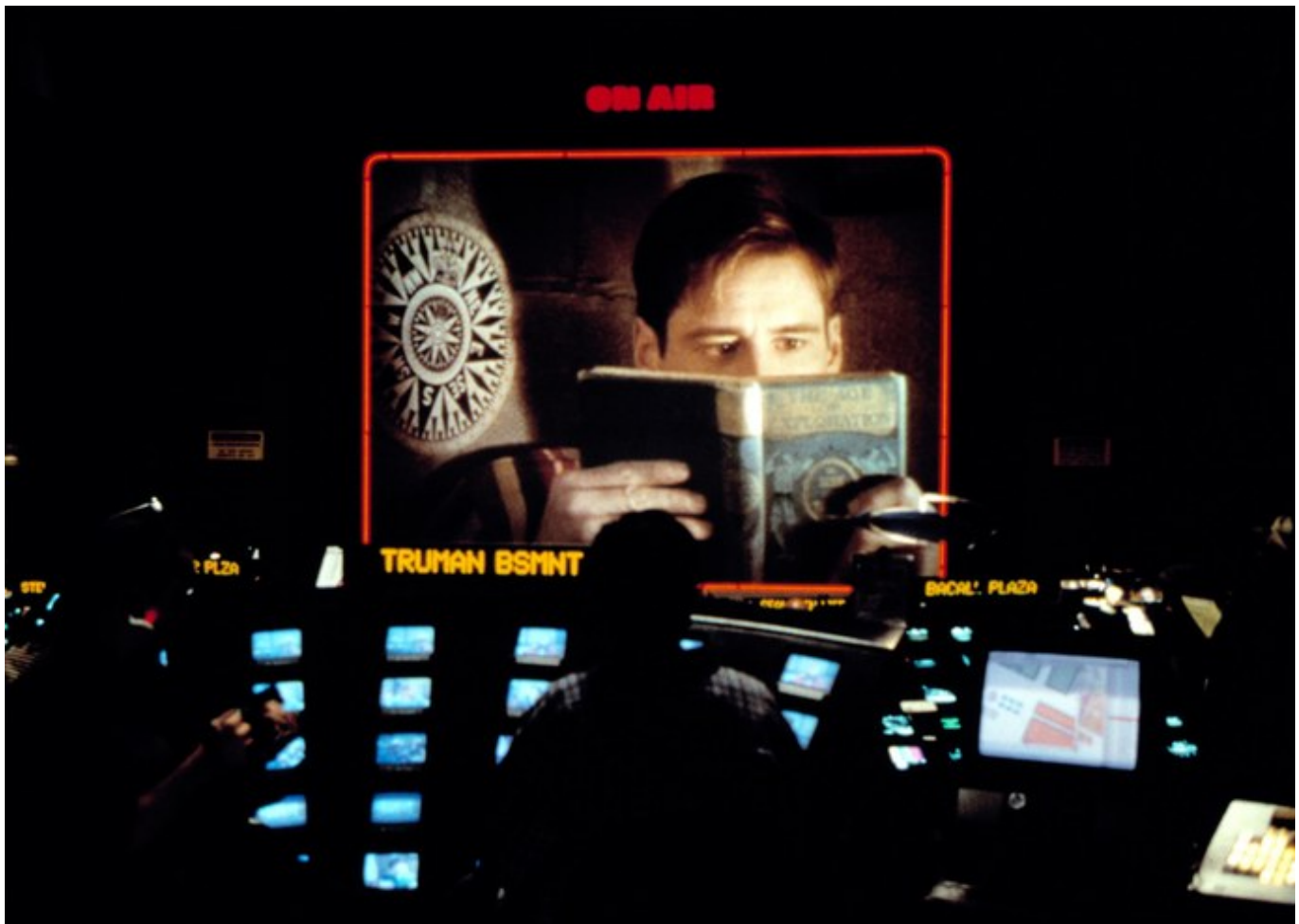
clenched fist. They just saw it as acting. I went under, I had no breath left, and I was drowning. I was under the water at the bottom of the pool, and with the last breath, with the last hint of consciousness, I just spun and made a couple of gigantic strokes toward the back of the storm and came up outside the storm gasping for air and exhausted. I just barely made it to the edge of the wall where the sky is, and hung on the edge of the wall gasping for air, looking back at the storm that was raging still, and it went on for another minute and then slowly shut down. They didn't know where I was, and then they finally saw me and came over. I almost died. That was the real deal."

Said Weir, "The incident in the tank at Universal [that] Jim refers to happened the way he said. Despite all our safety protocols, divers in the water, etc., we were filming a man drowning, and it had to look real. From memory, Jim had a way of signaling us if he was in distress . . . We only learned this after I called cut—sobering, to say the least. Needless to say, we made changes to our safety procedures following this near accident and, despite what had happened, Jim was up for more takes."

"I was very angry," said Carrey. "There were a couple of times on the film where I got pretty angry, and Peter is just such a gentle soul, and I am most of the time—unless I think people are endangering people. But Peter would say, 'Boy, there's a monster inside you that is very powerful, you have to be careful how you use it.'"

Carrey fully cooperated for the rest of filming, gave Weir notes on the movie after seeing an early edit, and had a celebratory dinner with Weir and Niccol before it premiered. But nearly drowning for an audience's entertainment, while playing a character who was himself drowning in front of viewers, was the final meta straw of Carrey's movie-star trajectory. In the next scene, before walking out the studio door—painted like the sky—Truman turns to the camera and delivers his final words to the audience: "In case I don't see ya . . . good afternoon, good evening, and good night." Sometime after filming, Carrey realized it wasn't just his character who was saying goodbye.

"Did I just sign off to this whole thing . . . this whole idea of being the crowd-pleasing guy? Did I just sign out? I think I did, to a certain extent," he said. Since that moment, "I still have done really interesting stuff and made choices I thought were provocative. But I do it on my own terms . . . It turned into an, 'I love you, but I can't be what you want me to be, and I'm going through the door . . . I'm bitter that you used me . . . that I was everybody's show but my own, and I was the only one that was left out of the joke. But I'm going to live my life now.'"



A still of Truman "On Air."

From ©Paramount Pictures/Everett Collection.

Both Carrey and Harris went on to win Golden Globes for their performances, as did composers **Burkhard von Dallwitz** and **Philip Glass**. The film also earned three Oscar nominations, for Weir, Niccol, and Harris—perhaps a surprising outcome for a movie that so baldly attacks the superficiality of its own industry. “I think Hollywood knows it’s full of shit, in a lot of ways, and just wants someone to say it artfully,” said Carrey.

Now, of course, the tables have turned a bit. The film wouldn’t work if it were set in 2018: “I think it’s ironic that Truman was running from cameras, and our society is running toward them. No need to secretly broadcast a life when we broadcast it ourselves,” said Niccol. Carrey agrees, though he also isn’t immune to the allure of social media.

“When I sit in a car or in a van or a room, and I see 90 percent of the people with their faces glowing and their eyes in the palm of their hand, I go, ‘This is Orwellian.’ Their consciousness has been reduced to what other people think, period,” the actor said. “I do enough of it myself. I’m not innocent of it, but I’m cognizant . . . I see what’s happened to the world because of this easy access, social media, and the contraptions we drag along with us like a

ball and chain, this new appendage we've been saddled with. And I think of Steve Jobs in hell being pursued relentlessly, for eternity, by demons who want a selfie." He's mystified by the notion of social-media influencers; though he says the Kardashians he's met are not bad people, "The phenomenon of the Kardashians is, I don't think, a healthy one. There's so much onus on just being famous at any cost. Sell it all. If there's nothing left to sell, bend over and open your butt cheeks, because they haven't seen that yet—and how do we commoditize that?"

Perhaps being brought unwittingly into a Truman-like existence—and gradually learning the truth—is the only antidote. "Once you've been Truman—the true man—there's no looking back. There's no putting the mask back on," reflected Carrey. "The closest I ever came to putting the mask back on and reacting to what the audience thought they wanted was *Dumb and Dumber To*, and I think we did great stuff in *Dumb and Dumber To*. It was super fun being with **Jeff [Daniels]** again. But it proved to me that the collective ego doesn't know what it really wants . . . They're saying for years, 'Dude, *Dumb and Dumber 2*—where's *Dumb and Dumber 2*?' And then you did it, and it was good, and they go, 'Oh, O.K. Well, all we really wanted was for you to do it,' to show that we had the power to do that."

"I haven't let creativity go," he continued. "I couldn't stop creating if I wanted to. That's why now it's manifested into **political cartoons**. I'm doing a Showtime show I'm producing and starring in"—*Kidding*, a comedy which will reunite Carrey with *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* filmmaker **Michel Gondry**. "I've got some movies developing, so that hasn't ended, but I don't have any illusions that there's this person called Jim Carrey that is an avatar that plays on the game grid. He's a cool avatar, but that's not who I am. That's what I see as the ultimate lesson of *The Truman Show*—when that false life is given up, when what everybody else wants from you and of you is given up, then you walk into the everything. You become the everything. There's no limitations anymore."

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