

Film on Film: Movies that Address the Medium

Casey Dahlin

While early films didn't typically concern themselves with immersion, the medium of film, through much of its history, grew less and less noticeable to the audience member as narrative grew in importance. Films from the so-called "cinema of attractions," which were meant more to glorify the technology of film than to convey any story, let alone a reality, gradually gave way to films which provided immersive worlds around rich narrative, subjugating the apparatus of film itself to a wholly transparent medium of which the viewer ceased to be aware moments after the first frame.

However, recently (say the past 30 years or so) film has become increasingly preoccupied with its own nature. As modernity and post modernity took hold, distorted reality, distorted perceptions, and by extension distorted mediums became more and more dominant in artistic works. Directors have begun to draw attention directly to the medium of film itself, not as a technical wonder this time, but as a centerpiece for comment on the nature of perception itself.

One such film is Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*. Weir directly confronts the illusory nature of film with the story of the life of a man who has been trapped inside of it his whole life. Truman is the unwitting star of a television show (TV is ultimately a form of film, but it is important to note that Weir parts from standard cinema) who lives inside a giant studio. A narrative "fiction" that the outside world has been following for his entire life is forced upon Truman as a substitute for reality. In this way Weir remarks on an audience's willingness to sacrifice truth by allowing themselves to become invested in the narratives created by film.

As another example, Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* uses editing and other basic film techniques to distort the viewer's perception. Time is altered and places seem to flow together due to the strange alterations to the film. Through these devices Bergman largely abandons traditional narrative and instead attempts to wring a purer form of meaning from the film. The story is subordinate to, and often overridden by, Bergman's commentary on emotional struggle. On some occasions, the actions on screen seem to affect the apparatus of the film itself, such as when a fallout between the main characters causes the film to catch and burn in the projector.

The first obvious difference between these examples is the layer in which they occur. The contrived nature of Truman's world is outwardly proclaimed from the beginning. In fact the film opens with a monologue from the director of Truman's television-show world. The Truman Show as a film still continues to present an unbroken illusion. It is the film within the film, the fictional TV show created by a fictional director, which is dissected. *Persona*, by contrast, operates directly on itself. The physical substance of the actual film being watched, not another film portrayed therein, is brought to the forefront.

As an example, consider the opening of *Persona*: a dizzying montage of watermarks, old cartoons being projected, projectors powering up, etc. These strange machinations eventually give rise to the opening scene. The audience, however, has nothing to take from these events in terms of a plot. They are being presented directly with the birth of the film which they are about to view; its literal elements. Interesting, the portrayal is not meant to be objective or stoic, but is shrouded in deliberate confusion and anxiety. The elements themselves are shaped to some extent by their

portrayal into the terrifying genesis of the disturbing things to come. So though the film calls attention to the medium, it does not break the emotional tone. There's no man-behind-the-curtain moment caused by the exposition; no sigh of relief or anger at the exposed dupe.

To contrast, take the light plummeting from the sky in the early minutes of *The Truman Show*. While certainly confusing for Truman, the audience knows immediately what has happened. The effects of this sudden revealing of the nature of the medium can be immediately predicted. It is Truman's film, not ours, that seems to be coming apart at the seams. We are at length invited to question the nature of film and television by the film's premise, but nothing puts the normal narrative structure into disarray. In fact in many ways *The Truman Show* itself is about film which takes a very opposite approach to *Persona* to the medium. There is a constant string of cover-ups and repairs being done to gloss over the abnormalities in Truman's world. The falling lamp becomes an airplane part. The missing back panel in the elevator becomes a tragic accident. *Persona* doesn't make such excuses. It revels in its opportunities to bare its nature to the viewers.

The Truman Show gains one particular advantage from placing a film inside of a film, and that is that it can continue to present a "reality" with which the audience relates. This gives it a unique footing for self-commentary. Because Truman's TV show is contained within the film, it can be juxtaposed against another "real." Weir is better able to imply that there is something morally wrong with Truman's captivity. Weir thus puts himself in a unique position to inject an ideology into the film. This ideology is reflected in the interactions between the TV show world of Truman and the reality of the film. Christof's condescending patriarchal attitude toward Truman, Truman's love affair

with Sylvia, all these things serve to highlight an injustice in Truman's situation. The message appeals directly to American sentiments about freedom, and also hints at the exploitive nature of television. This forms the ideological payload to Weir's piece.

By contrast, part of *Persona*'s goal in bearing its mechanical elements so forcefully is to strip itself of ideology. The emphasis on the film media itself serves in some part to make the film more credible, or “real.” Of course this too is the work of the director, and Bergman believing he has cleansed his film of bias does not mean he has (assuming he even does believe such), but it is assumed that by dissecting film, and exposing its organs as he does, he is able to communicate some higher form of truth. It is in part for this reason that Bergman keeps us so persistently disoriented throughout. The message of the film is allowed to take control. Time and space are rearranged to accommodate it (such as the speech Alma gives to Elisabeth over the photo of her child, which is shown twice in succession from two different angles). The sequence of events in the film isn't just augmented by Bergman's occasional glimpses into the nature of the medium, but in fact are inseparably connected with the physical medium, with the “reality” of film itself (we see a sign of this in the confrontation between Alma and Elisabeth which seemingly breaks the projector). Even in this, however, there is a sort of ideology. The very idea that truth can be obtained objectively through art is quite contentious (and has been declared outright absurd in decades since *Persona* was made). Bergman is putting forth his film with the opinion that he has objectively analyzed a subject within it.

There lies the disparity between these two films. On one hand we have the Truman show, which analyzes the concept of film as a medium without calling attention to its own personal physical

properties, and thus is able to attack the medium rhetorically from both an internal and an external perspective. On the other we have persona, which attempts objective analysis of a subject matter, and thus subjugates all structure and form to this analysis and lays the medium bare so that its workings can be better understood. One, like a good politician, defines its opponent, then attacks it. The other, like a good scientist writing a journal article, carefully lists his tools and describes the experiment in detail in an order and manner that is relative to the thesis, not as a narrative of his experience during the process. Both are interested in the raw physical aspects of film, but for fundamentally different reasons. Persona seeks to bring reality to film through its physical components, The Truman Show seeks to expose its illusory qualities. Yet Persona often paints even the reality of film in a purpose-fitting light, and The Truman Show retains an internal “false reality” where the events just outside of Truman's world occur. It seems that in dealing with their own medium these films are doomed to contradict themselves.

Bibliography

Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early film and the (In)Credulous Spectator" Film Theory and Criticism Bruady, Leo and Cohen, Marshall: 868-872. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.