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Life lessons from *The Truman Show*: parenting, adolescence and the therapeutic process

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, the 1998 film *The Truman Show* is considered as a parable about parenting, adolescence, and patients' struggle to break free of defensive structures. The central conceit of the film is that Truman lives in a world entirely created by, and under the control of the show's director, Christof, with all the other characters in his life being actors playing semi-scripted parts. The paper explores how this resonates with the problems faced by all parents when it comes to allowing their children freedom to develop independently and to face the realities of life; the difficulties faced by all adolescents leaving latency behind to encounter themselves more fully; and the therapeutic task with all patients of relinquishing the relative safety created by symptoms and projective mechanisms.

KEYWORDS
Parenting; adolescence; defensive structures; film; false self

The Truman Show (directed by Peter Weir in 1998) is a film that is generally understood as a satire about reality television. But in this paper I argue that it can also be seen as a parable about concerns of wider relevance. The paper can be read as part of a wider genre in which, rather than using psychoanalysis to analyse films, films are used to illustrate and illuminate topics of psychoanalytic interest (e.g., Rustin & Rustin, 2012), or to explore psychoanalytic theory (Kegerreis, 2013). This approach can be useful in teaching, as it provides a lively way of shedding light on clinically relevant topics, without being primarily or exclusively based in the clinical encounter, as also explored by Edwards (2010). Using film in this way sits alongside similar consideration of literature (e.g., Waddell, 2003), as these cultural artefacts provide accessible and emotionally meaningful insights into people and their lives, which complement what can be learned through examples from clinical practice.

Indick (2004) has written about the usefulness of studying film as a way of exploring psychoanalytic ideas: 'Like myth, film is a delivery system for the timeless archetypes, collective symbols and elemental images that communicate to audiences because they represent the universal psychological issues of personal growth and existential meaning' (p. 4). Films have great communicative power and they can therefore be particularly helpful in highlighting aspects of the human condition, which are the focus of our psychoanalytic formulations.

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When *The Truman Show* came out in 1998, it was considered a play on and a reaction to the (then relatively recent) emergence of reality television. The idea of people's real life being played out for entertainment was still at the time a novel idea, and this film took this phenomenon to the extreme. In the film, Truman is the only genuine person in his own life, with all the rest being actors, playing a semi-scripted part in a constantly televised reality show, under the eye of the director, Christof. The whole of Truman's environment, including the weather, the sun rising and setting, his schooling, employment, leisure, family and love life are all under the control of Christof. The show was conceived of and is run by Christof, and is funded by the marketing of every aspect of what Truman and the cast use, from food, to clothes, to homes. The satire on the commodification of our lives and the malign influence of everything being marketable is acute and interesting, but beyond the scope of this particular paper.

It is a masterly conceit, and has become so even more as time has passed; in these days of ever more intrusive and exploitative reality shows, this movie still packs a punch. Some of this is because the film's central idea is both appalling and seductive in terms of what we would want for entertainment; there is an appeal in being able to spy on someone in this way, observing them in their reality in a way that we never can in ordinary life. Our intense curiosity about the 'real' lives of others is, of course, nowadays catered for and pandered to in the ubiquity of video streams, the availability of curated Instagram 'stories', the constant posting of photos and videos on other social media sites and, in a different way, the burgeoning numbers of surveillance cameras whose products are often presented for entertainment rather than for security reasons. We can turn on our computers and spy on many people caught in moments of their actual lives, and we can thus live vicariously through others, as so many are willing to give us access to their intimate personal experiences. Similarly, we now have parents who regularly present their children's development online for public consumption. Parents have of course always loved to show their children off through sharing photographs. However, in recent years a large proportion of children's growing up can be curated, recorded and publicly displayed, giving rise at times to concerns about how these images can be misused and exploited.

Back in 1998, when *The Truman Show* emerged, it represented a gross exaggeration; but with regard to the level of intrusiveness and exposure, it now appears much less far-fetched. The artificiality of our curated online lives is these days frequently commented on, and is the subject of much concern, regarding its effects on mental health and well-being, particularly but not exclusively when it comes to the young (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019), with Instagram and Facebook in the media spotlight around concerns for their detrimental impact on adolescents (Wall Street Journal, 2021). Unlike Truman, we do not actually live in fabricated and artificial worlds, but the growth of social media brings some aspects of the environment created in the film much closer to the lived reality for many.

While a wider consideration of this theme is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note how acute these concerns are in current society. The appeal to our narcissism of always having available a potentially unlimited online audience is powerful, insidious and deeply problematic. The imperative felt by many to present an idealised version of their lives on social media is creating a relationship with our

own lives dominated by the desire to engage and entertain others in the pursuit of likes and followers. The inbuilt measuring of ourselves against others creates a frighteningly accessible type of externalised calibration of self-esteem. This was chillingly taken to the limit in the Black Mirror episode *Nosedive* (Booker & Wright, 2016), in which the main character's status and success is wholly dictated by their social media profile. In this environment, the projection of envious feelings into others can become a full-time and essential preoccupation, with resultant difficulties around envy and a sense of exclusion becoming a powerful experience for many of our adolescent patients. When *The Truman Show* was released, these developments were very much in their infancy, but by pushing what were then the boundaries of how 'reality' could be offered to the public simply for entertainment, it continues to have real bite.

I would contend, however, that the film's appeal is not just due to the way it satirised and prefigured real developments in the media and society, but also due to the way it touches on deeper themes, which are common to all of us in any era. Specifically, *The Truman Show* brings into focus powerful dynamics, which are of relevance to us as individuals, as therapists, and as parents. We can take *The Truman Show* to be a parable on three key areas of experience: parenting, adolescence, and the universal challenge of breaking free from defences.

Parenting

Christof is the originator of the show, and Truman himself is very much his baby. Selected as an infant, he is placed in his artificial environment by Christof, who then attempts to create for him the perfect world within which to grow up, free of the messiness and contingency that characterise real life. In this sense, Christof is an exaggerated version of every parent. As Winnicott (1960a) pointed out, all parents try to regulate the impingements on their babies, fiercely at first with an attempt to keep everything simple and safe, and then, as gently as possible, with a gradual letting in of measured amounts of more complex reality. We want to protect our offspring from exposure to the vagaries of the real world, to preserve for as long as possible a benign view of what is in store for them. While we struggle within the immediate domestic environment to help the newborn manage the impact of being out in the world, meeting their physical and emotional needs as well we can, we also at first tend to keep our lives relatively constrained, trying to keep any adverse experiences at bay, as far as we can control them. Then, as the infant develops and we venture further out into the world, we gradually have to come to terms with the reality that there is a great deal we cannot regulate; both physical and psychological shocks are inevitable, as the baby's life expands and they are subject to the actions of others.

As an example from my own life, I vividly remember the first time someone was mean to my eldest child, when he was laughed at and rejected by an adolescent relative. My outrage was not just for the immediate hurt – in my mind's eye, I can still see my son's crestfallen face and confusion at the rebuff; it was also a reaction to the forceful realisation that I could not protect him any more from being exposed to other people's unkindness and the pain that it would bring. He was growing up, and I could not control what happened to him.

For Christof, this moment does not need to arise, as he is able to actually be in charge of Truman's experiences. He is literally able to orchestrate Truman's growing up in every detail. No sane parent would want this, of course, but we can all identify to an extent with Christof's wish to create the perfect world for Truman. Christof reinforces his control by giving Truman the traumatic experience of an accident at sea, creating in him a fear of crossing water. We can see that Christof doesn't simply want Truman to stay where he is, but wants to prevent him from *ever wanting* to go anywhere else. Again, this might be an extreme version of any more normal, sensible parental impulse, but we might wish for our children to choose to live nearby and maintain close contact with us. If not literally, we might long for our children to choose lives connected to our own more metaphorically, through their choices in profession or interests, rather than simply by geography. In every family, there are areas of expansion into the world that are made easily available, but there are also boundaries set, regarding what can be desired or imagined, what we can wish for. There are thus attempts, in all families, to create – both consciously and unconsciously – a set of hopes and fears, which might keep our children close.

Moving into his adolescence and early adulthood, Truman's spontaneous attraction to Sylvia, a girl he meets in the university library, cuts across the established plans made by Christof for his romantic life and future as a husband and parent, and therefore has to be brutally curtailed. Truman, however, holds onto his fantasies about her, and in this way escapes the control of his ‘parent’. Here we have familiar themes about our secret or not so secret wishes to influence our children's choice of partner and to keep them close to home. In Western societies, we do not usually arrange our children's marriages; but it is not that long since this practice was common: how many Victorian novels contain a plot in which an unsuitable suitor has to be removed from the situation, or is seen as threatening the future of the heroine? How often is he sent away on a long voyage or into a war to make the heroine forget him?

Even today, we come across clients in our practices who are brought up in a culture where immense pressure exists to choose a partner under the direction of parents, in a way which might (or might not) create tension and conflict. Even if this reality does not come our way in our professional life, we are all in touch with the potential for tension between the choice made by parents for a young person, and their own romantic yearnings, infatuations and loves. Disapproval and condemnation of a young person's choice of partner remain part of many families’ dynamics, whether this be based on cultural and class differences, sexual preferences, or a range of other lifestyle contrasts. In *The Truman Show*, the prohibition of the partnership is made powerfully real, with Sylvia banished from the programme, so no longer in Truman's world, except for the fantasy of Fiji being the location of his lost love.

While of course taken to absurd extremes, we can also consider the desire to repress Truman's real feelings and the effort to channel him into a pre-ordained course in a less literal way, far beyond the important but narrow issue of his love life. The pressures which this brings into focus are not confined to this artificial world: they encapsulate the wish to mould one's child, which all parents have to relinquish, in order to allow the child to develop a real rather than false self (Winnicott, 1960b), and to develop as individuals capable of creativity, spontaneity and genuineness. We all know how important these qualities are, but letting our child make their own experiments in life

and love is never easy, and the impulse and longing to control are experiences that some parents can struggle with throughout their lives.

Mariam, a fifteen year old patient of mine, was in constant conflict with her controlling Syrian parents, while struggling also to find her place in UK society. Her parents cared deeply for her, but were terrified of what it would mean if she joined her westernised schoolfriends in their much freer behaviour. It is easy to see these dynamics at work in such a culturally charged example, but naturally in British families the over-controlling parent is not always a fantasy or simply a young person's caricature or projection of their own anxiety. The balance between control and licence for the children to make their own mistakes is one that every parent struggles to strike.

As the plot of *The Truman Show* progresses, we witness the gradual crumbling of Christof's power. Following the falling of a stage light from 'Canis Major' and some glitches with the car radio, Truman becomes increasingly suspicious of what he sees around him, and starts to realise that his world may not be what he had taken it to be. Christof becomes terrified that Truman will grasp the reality of his situation, and tries increasingly frantically to shore up the fantasy he has created. He and the team in production, as well as the cast, go to fantastic lengths to restrict Truman's movements and to stop him from escaping, both physically and psychologically. This is a representation of truly pathological parenting, based on a phantasy of omnipotence, which is again both repellent and seductive. The impact of this is enhanced by the awareness we are given that Christof does have a tender and powerful love for Truman. While Truman sleeps, he caresses his image on the screen, and in his final speeches, he appeals, very much like a fond parent, to shared memories of Truman's growing up. His desire to control is governed by a twisted love, rather than by hate, however profoundly hateful the consequences.

First, Christof tries to literally cut off Truman's escape routes, with blockages and disasters on every possible road out of the 'town'. But all this does is to increase Truman's determination to get away. There is even a ridiculous and desperate plot twist engineered in order to arrange the return of Truman's father. This could be thought of as a version of the way in which an abusive parent undergoes a temporary period of reform. The 'good' parent is restored, and Truman can for a while cease to be ruled by fear and by the guilt of having played a part in his father's death. Christof is trying to buy him off, to seduce him into wanting to stay, much as parents often do.

I have worked with parents who are so frightened that their alienated teenager might leave home, that they go into overdrive, providing them either with excessive material goods or other gratifications. They end up allowing things (like boyfriends staying overnight or the use of drugs in the home) that they would not otherwise allow, or they refrain from expressing unease or having ordinary expectations of civility, in order to avoid any confrontation. They may try hard to create an environment that the adolescent will not want to leave. In one case which comes to mind, this stance on the part of the parents had the opposite effect. The teenager's contempt for her parents increased, as she could see their neediness. She was thus encouraged further in her splitting activities, becoming more omnipotent and less anxious about the world, as her parents did all the worrying for her. Instead of having her need for more freedom accommodated, alongside firm and helpful boundaries, accompanied by painful but necessary clashes, and instead of having the reassurance that her aggression could be

addressed and modified by objects strong enough to survive it, she was left feeling less held, more lost and more split, as a result of the parents' capitulation. As her own anxiety was not being contained, her defensiveness increased, and the rift between her and her parents widened and deepened.

In *The Truman Show*, Christof has a different arsenal of controls at his disposal than the ordinary parent, and he puts it all to work in trying to prevent Truman from getting away. A key climactic moment is when Christof says 'Cue the sun' in the middle of the night, in a vain attempt to find the lost Truman. He is explicitly in that instant 'playing God', grabbing all of 'reality' in his hands, in a desperate attempt to reassert his power and control. This is then taken even further, to murderous levels, when Christof creates the storm that nearly kills Truman. In this part of the film, the fury at omnipotence resisted overwhelms all the kinder feelings, and it is clear that Christof would rather Truman die than attain freedom.

Here, we are in the depths of a coercive control kind of relationship, where gaslighting[1] reigns, and power over the object is all that matters. The way in which the evidence presented by Truman's own senses and perception is denied is chillingly familiar from deeply dysfunctional couples or families where awareness of serious abuse is negated, and the victim is made to feel that it is they who are misperceiving reality. When we work with victims of abuse, who have had their perceptions denied, or with spouses in coercive control relationships where they are made to feel that they are going mad or being unreasonable, we can see the damage this experience has done to their capacity to trust their own minds.

We also at times hear of, or read about, parents who do, like Christof, actually keep their children prisoners in a strictly regulated and limited environment, teaching them about the dangers of the outside world – remember the poster in the travel agent's, in which lightning is striking the plane – 'IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU!' This reinforces in every way the demand for the children to stay close and to relate solely within the family/cult. We are aware that at times, children are in fact killed rather than allowed to engage in a forbidden relationship, or to live with an estranged parent. These are of course extremes, on a spectrum which stretches all the way to the equally damaging opposite – those who neglect their children and fail to protect them from danger, who fail to sufficiently control what they need to for their children's well-being. In the large area in the middle lies every other family, including all the ordinary, good enough families who struggle to find a balance between the need to control and the need to allow children freedom. In *The Truman Show*, we are offered a biting satire on how hard it is for a parent, even a loving one, to let their child be free.

Adolescence – emerging from the latency state of mind

Using a related but different lens, we can see the film being about adolescence itself. Truman, even though he is depicted clearly as an adult, can be seen to exemplify the adolescent struggle. Truman has grown up in a safe environment, in this case totally artificial, but this nonetheless has some metaphorical relationship with the experience of a latency child who lives within a reasonably well-functioning family and society. The child in this part of his life can be thought of as living in a somewhat regulated world – massive overgeneralisation, I know – in which what is known is known, and what is not

known can be learned about, but still at a distance, in theory. We know that 'Fiji' exists, but we cannot go there, and do not want to as yet. In latency, we may be dimly aware of anxiety-provoking possibilities, but manage this with a defensive tendency to keep things ordered and predictable.

As Waddell (1998, p. 74) puts it – '[These anxieties] may inhibit the child from exploring and taking initiatives and limit the more imaginative side of the self, resulting in the repetitive and monotonous activities so characteristic of these years'. Indeed, we are shown in the film how repetitive Truman's life has become, with its familiar moments in each day, the same faces and routines played out over and over again. The moment when Truman suddenly does something spontaneous and unpredictable is when the plot begins to develop.

In latency, the capacity to strike out on one's own is still in the future, and as small children, like Truman, we accept our reality as all that there is. How often have we heard from our clients that some rather dysfunctional or even bizarre family dynamics were just what was accepted as the way the world works, and only later, often after exposure to different families who have their own distinctive ways, have they gradually become more aware of and thoughtful about how their own family does things. So, in this sense, Truman's gradual awakening of awareness, his growing capacity to see through the crafted nature of his environment, is a parallel process to that of the adolescent, slowly becoming aware of the way in which his world – for so long the only one of which he was properly aware – is only one version of how the world can be.

The adolescent eventually needs to break free from his parents' regulation of his environment. Obviously, ordinary parents are not trying to control the adolescent in the way that Christof is trying to control Truman; but it is commonplace for the adolescent to feel as if they are. The young person has to forge their own identity, achieve autonomy, develop the capacity to regulate their own emotions and to become able to make their own choices, however scary these ventures might be. He has to gradually move out of the safety of latency, and face what Waddell (1998, p. 83) describes as 'dangerous internal situations, terrors of something unmanageable or uncontrollable, anxieties' which hitherto in latency he had been able to keep 'at bay'.

As adolescents, we all have to face up to the traumas of the past – though for most of us these aren't necessarily as dramatically awful as Truman's particular version – the boating tragedy in which his 'father' 'drowns'. We have to resolve or push past them, in order to live our lives to the full, and to relinquish our childhood longings for safety and predictability. I personally remember a stressed moment well into my own adulthood, when the only way to express how I had felt was to think 'I want to go home'. Home, however, no longer existed, my mother was no longer alive, and there was no reality to match the fantasy: but this experience summed up a great yearning for my latency home of safety, even if it was illusory safety, rather than having to be a grown-up at a time when that seemed impossible.

So in that sense, Truman is an every-teenager, seeking to find a way to become himself and to strike out. As Phillips (2011, p. 190) puts it – 'and that is precisely what the adolescent, developmentally, is having to work out: what he or she can realistically be.' Adolescence brings with it both passionate idealism (Kristeva has called it 'a malady of the ideal', translated here by Phillips, 2011), alongside the first full encounters with 'the beginnings of people's adult struggles with the real difficulties of living' (Phillips,

2011, p. 190). The battle between reality and fantasy is intense, both exciting and terrifying.

Furthermore, it is also interesting to note how often adolescents reject the world of their parents and families as ‘phoney’ or ‘fake’. In Salinger's (1951) *Catcher in the Rye* Holden Caulfield can be seen as the epitome of this, which is just as true today as it was when the book was first published. Adolescents often yearn for authenticity, sometimes feeling as if any kind of social consideration and anything short of brutal honesty are to be *fake*. As they struggle to find their authentic voice and individual place in the world, they can confuse kindness and tact with falsehood and phoniness. They may thus accuse the adults around them of being fake, when they are not as fully or as intensely expressing their feelings as the adolescent wants them to, but perhaps also does not want them to. They are, at the same time, afraid of how much they love and lust, and how much they hate and want to harm, yet also very much want to find a way to accommodate these fiercer feelings, without losing that sense of being real and alive. They desperately want someone to accept them with all their passionate feelings, and often push their parents hard, sometimes to prove that they can take on their hate as well as their love.

At times, this challenge to the older generation, this demand for them to stop being so false, can be highly valuable. Adolescents can teach us salutary lessons about the compromises we have all had to make in adapting to the real world, and can reawaken us to the need to feel passionately and take action about, say, the environment, or social justice. Not yet made more cynical by trying and failing to make a difference, adolescents can believe more fully, as we did ourselves at that age, in their power to make the world a better place, and this can be inspiring and a call to arms. But adolescents can also be dismissive and contemptuous of their parents, unable or unwilling to see them as real human beings. They may be acutely aware of how their parents have sold out or have betrayed core principles, and they may strive for a more genuine way of being, at times becoming highly rejecting of the ‘phoney’ and ‘fake’ ways of their families.

In Truman's case, his family is *actually* fake; his mother, girlfriend/wife and best friend are all playing their parts as actors, the latter excruciatingly, as he genuinely cares for Truman, having to shore up the fiction when it gets a bit rickety. For ordinary adolescents, the parents/family/friends are not, of course, actually counterfeit, but it can still feel as if the only way to be genuine is to leave the ‘fakeness’ of the family, rejecting their compromises to forge a new authentic identity in opposition to their ways. The fear of being sucked back into the seductive safety of childhood itself stokes the need to break away; the force needed to make such a monumental move is fuelled by a yearning for authenticity.

Authenticity as an idea can of course be idealised and misused as well. One young man I worked with defended himself against any need to take responsibility for the impact of his words and actions, by using phrases such as – ‘I can't not be myself’ or ‘I have to say what I think – I can't be fake’. To him, it felt as if any compromise in or tempering of how he expressed himself, that would take into account the way he might hurt others, was tantamount to betrayal of his real self.

The need to be oneself at all times, (itself an illusion as we all have multiple ‘selves’), even if this includes treating parents and others badly, usually lessens in intensity as the

young person matures. Later, there can often be a rapprochement and reappraisal of the parents, once the need to separate has been managed somewhat. Then the family can be seen as 'real' again, neither idealised nor denigrated, but with the beginnings of adult understanding.

In *The Truman Show*, we have an extreme and concrete (literally!) representation of the family's constraints. To realise his own identity, Truman has to break out physically from his Seahaven Island world, and his struggles to do so are not only the literal battles with Christof, but represent the metaphorical battles we all face, as we grapple with the universal fears of growing up and the regressive longings for safety.

Breaking free from defences and projective dynamics

Going one step further into our internal worlds, we can take Truman's predicament as symbolising the struggle all of us face in managing living in the real world, inhabited by real other people who have real lives of their own. We can look at Seahaven Island as a representation of what life is like if we are still stifled by our own projective manoeuvres. In our own way, we act like our own Christofs, projecting into others the parts we want them to play, and experiencing them as extensions of our own psyche. Many of us find it tremendously difficult to allow our significant others to be fully separate individuals who are beyond our control, and the capacity to do so is a hard-won element of maturity, for most of us a life-long task or the focus of many therapies.

We may badly need to hold onto our grievances as they have become woven into our cherished ideas about ourselves. For example, one woman I worked with had deep-seated resentments against her 'disappointing' husband. What became clear was that she could not easily help him become a better partner, as him being so disappointing directly connected to her sense of having been a disappointment to her parents. She needed someone else to be the one who was failing, to bear the pain of being in that position, and for a long while resisted creating room for something more rewarding to happen in her marriage. In a scenario like this, very common in work with one of a troubled couple, the patient is creating/hanging onto a fictionalised version of their life partner, subtly or not so subtly ensuring that he continues to fail her, in order to project pain and to maintain a set of fictions about themselves. In *The Truman Show*, of course, the conceit is that people are actually fictionalised and playing a part. In order to grow, Truman literally has to escape. With our patients, our job is to help them set themselves free from these dynamics, to stop being their own Christofs with their objects, and to create relational space in which they can be more fully themselves, in more rewarding relationships.

On a different note, Winnicott (1960b) highlights how we are all in danger of developing a false self to varying degrees, if under excessive pressure to adapt to the needs of our primary caregivers. Some degree of adaptation is a necessary part of getting on with others, but for some, what happens is a major distortion and crippling denial of the real needs of the true self. As Mitchell (1993) puts it, in words which highlight the link with the world of the film, the false self is 'the organisation of experience around compliance and adaptation to externality, what is presented or suggested from the outside, rather than from genuine internal desire or need'

(p. 137). But this is not just a freeing oneself of external shackles – it means getting to know and manage elements in the self which are troubling and feel dangerous, leaving behind defences that have given us security.

Truman needs to build up sufficient strength to discover who he is from within and to become free from needing to fulfil Christof's fantasies, without in turn becoming ruthless and unable to be thoughtfully connected to others. But for all of us and our patients, this is difficult and very frightening, as it can feel as if it may lead to the inevitable loss of love. This can be seen as a major part of what therapy is about. As Mitchell says, 'what is central to the analytic process is precisely the overcoming of the sense that one has to choose between being oneself in the 'use of' others or betraying oneself in adaptation to others … psychoanalysis becomes a struggle to find and be oneself in the process of atonement and reconciliation in relation to others, both actual others and others as internal presences' (Mitchell, 1993, p. 137). We can therefore see Truman's struggle as a parable about finding a way to relinquish our false selves and begin to find a more authentic way of being.

In addition, we all build up defences against reality and against the vulnerability that comes with the recognition of separateness. We may not have witnessed the drowning of our father, like Truman, but we have all had our natural curiosity and adventurousness curtailed by fear and anxiety-inducing moments. We have all limited our worlds, even if not geographically, and have had to manage ourselves to varying extents, by excluding elements of our potential experience from our awareness. We limit our exposure to vulnerability by sticking to old patterns of behaviour and perception, finding it difficult to allow new experiences in, or to allow the differentness of experience to be felt. We choose partners or friends who fit with our existing pattern of defences, or we react to them, as well as to colleagues and bosses, as if they are figures from our past. We may attempt to keep ourselves safe in our own artificial worlds, a Seahaven Island of our own making, limiting our spontaneity in order to reduce anxiety, but thereby restricting our universe and preventing our own growth.

When Truman begins to break out, we are intensely rooting for him. He has to battle against enormous odds, including the dramatic and life-threatening storm at sea, in order to be granted the chance to live his own life. I think that the emotional impact of these scenes is in part created by our own longing to escape the limits we have set on ourselves, to relinquish the defences which, while once may have been necessary for psychic survival, have encroached on our freedom and have stifled our creative individuality.

When Truman's boat bumps up against the outer boundary of his world, he suddenly encounters the final evidence that he has been living falsely all this time. It is an immensely powerful moment, at first one of utter dismay at this proof that the world he lives in is fake and that he is not heading out into the open sea to freedom, but then the growing, dazzling awareness that he can in fact step out of all this and live more authentically. In this way, Truman's journey is like our own, and like that of our patients if we are able to help them. They too need to find ways of relinquishing the defences which diminish their freedom and hold them in unsatisfactory patterns. They need to reduce their use of projection and projective identification, which keep their objects from having their own liveliness and freedom, and to find ways to allow the

people around them to have their own independent reality, with all the vulnerability this brings. Freud (1937, p. 237) wrote: ‘Recovery leads to danger’.

The world Truman is going out into is unpredictable, unregulated and scary. The door is open, but as viewers we are not at first certain that he is going to be able to step through it. There is the last debate – here with Christof, but in our patients and ourselves, an internal debate – whether to remain in the illusory safety of our defensive structures,[2] or to take the enormous risks of being more spontaneous and open. Truman is letting go of his defensive carapace, in order to become his true self, even though this means being exposed to frightening and uncontrolled others, vulnerable in a totally new way. This is what we all have to do in our own and our clients’ therapeutic journeys, working towards being able to leave behind what kept us safe, but also kept us confined.

An adolescent patient of mine illustrated this powerfully. We had worked hard on the meaning of her main somatic symptoms, which had rapidly diminished in intensity. We understood the feelings that tended to precipitate her crises and she thus gradually became much more in touch with what had hitherto been for her forbidden emotions. However, when we began to discuss finishing our work, she suddenly developed a whole new area of panic and paralysis. We had another few months of work to do, to understand these developments. There were many layers of meaning to this, but the one most relevant here was how frightened she was of being ‘better’ (see, Kegerreis, 1985). If she were to be symptom-free, there was nothing to stop her spreading her wings and embracing the excitement and danger of her late adolescence. She wanted this very badly, but was also extremely scared of what it would mean.

We get a similar dynamic with some patients with eating disorders. They can be profoundly trapped inside a world dominated by a persecutory obsession with food, whether the thoughts are about eating it or avoiding eating it, and the shape and size of their bodies. Their mental and emotional bandwidth are fully dedicated to their primary symptom, crowding out almost everything else. This cripples them, but also protects them in a perverse way from the turmoil of growing up. Breaking free of an eating disorder is painful and immensely difficult for many reasons, but one reason is that the disorder keeps out of mind other less controllable longings, lusts, and needs, which expose the self to intolerable anxiety and vulnerability. Of course, the anorexic is not happy in her prison, and the prison is not comfortable and pretty like Truman's artificial world, but while keeping her confined, it also keeps a great deal out (Lawrence, 2008). The anorexia can become like their own home-grown Christof, using what can indeed be a murderous force to fend off development and growth.

At the end of the film, Truman stands at the open door. We cannot see out – it is just a rectangle of black. It is not, as it could easily have been in a more clichéd film, the portal to sunshine and to obvious, visible happiness. But it is the way out into something freer, more authentic and spontaneous. It is what we want for all our patients, and it is our job as therapists to help them reach it, and to represent to them the truth that it is better to be free and ourselves, however scary that is, than to be kept within the limitations of our self-sustained, even if not self-created, world of neurotic defences.

For Truman, this is the way out to becoming himself.

The most fortunate adolescents can fight their way through and 'find the door' without specialist help, but it is important to remember that this is never an easy journey. For those of any age with whom we work therapeutically, it is immensely important that we understand how much we are asking of them as we encourage them to shake off their defensive carapace and to face whatever lies ahead, outside the safety of both the family and their internal protective structures.

Concluding thoughts

Films and literature, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, can provide us with invaluable resources in exploring and illuminating psychodynamic ideas. They can help us engage students and trainees in a very different way from the study of psychoanalytic texts, encouraging them to bring their growing understanding of the complexity of the human condition into useful inter-connections with popular culture. Even films which primarily provide light-touch entertainment can carry themes of deep relevance, and using them in teaching can make powerful ideas more accessible and stimulate lively discussion. In this paper, I have explored how *The Truman Show* can bring to life, hopefully in a way students can readily understand, issues around three major themes: parenting (particularly the over-controlling variety), adolescence, and the struggle to be free from defensive structures.

Notes

1. Gaslighting is defined by the APA dictionary of psychology as the 'manipulation of another person into doubting his or her perceptions, experiences, or understanding of events'.
2. Useful sources on pathological defensive structures are Rosenfeld (1971) and Steiner (1982).

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