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The Demiurge, the Cave, the Dome, and the Monochrome: Psychology of Awakening in The Truman Show and Pleasantville

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Abstract. This paper investigates the cognitive and psychological explanations for the acceptance of false realities and the process of awakening in the films Pleasantville and The Truman Show. Through a literature review of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Gnosticism, media theory, and psychology, along with a comparative case analysis of the two films, this study explores why individuals remain committed to constructed worlds even in the presence of contradictions. The findings indicate that awakening is more than the acquisition of knowledge. Psychological mechanisms, including confirmation bias, biased assimilation, cognitive dissonance, and fear conditioning, contribute to the maintenance of false realities by influencing responses to anomalous information. Specifically, these cognitive processes can delay, resist, or reinterpret new information. This paper's interdisciplinary approach of connecting theology, philosophy, film analysis, and cognitive psychology can contribute to a deeper understanding of belief formation, perception, and the dismantling of established worldviews.

Keywords: closed information environment, confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance, fear conditioning

1. Introduction

Imagine human beings imprisoned inside a cave. They go through life watching shadows cast on the wall, believing that to be reality [1]. This is the premise of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, and only when the prisoner is forcibly dragged out of the cave does he become liberated and realise the deception under which he had been living. A similar narrative appears in the Gnostic religion, derived from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. Its doctrine is dualistic: Human beings are trapped in the material world, an evil prison created by a malevolent false god, while the spiritual realm, inhabited by the transcendent true god, is the only true reality. Salvation is achieved through awakening to this secret knowledge (gnosis), which allows the soul to ascend to the spiritual realm [2]. Centuries later, Gnostic concepts of illusion and awakening are resurrected in popular culture: In *The Truman Show* [3] and *Pleasantville* [4], characters live in an illusory reality, undergo an awakening, and awaken to the true world. The prisoners in the cave, the Gnostics, Truman Burbank, and the residents of Pleasantville all transition from ignorance to enlightenment, a shift catalysed by

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the acquisition of new knowledge. However, the mechanisms that drive one's commitment to accepting a false reality are often overlooked by philosophical and theological teachings. Thus, cognitive psychology helps explain the processes that stimulate the characters' acceptance of fabrications of the truth.

Psychological research suggests that individuals do not interpret information objectively; cognition determines how people understand the outside world [5]. This subjective perception of the environment contributes to ignorance. Psychologist and author Raymond Nickerson describes confirmation bias as a tendency to seek and interpret evidence in ways that support existing beliefs [6]. Lord, Ross, and Lepper's study demonstrates a process called biased assimilation, in which participants with ingrained beliefs on controversial issues evaluate empirical evidence selectively: They are more likely to accept evidence at face value when it supports their view, and to subject disconfirming evidence to critical evaluation [7]. From a media-studies perspective, Wise examines soft control in *The Truman Show* through systems of surveillance and social control that shape Truman's worldview [8]. Thus, external forces and internal cognition collaborate to sustain the illusion.

This paper compares *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* as two films that explore how a controlled environment can shape the perception of individuals and blind them to its limits. Both films illustrate how closed information environments operate: social routines, emotional cues, and institutional controls limit a character's knowledge and influence how they interpret deviations. This paper employs qualitative close reading and comparative case analysis to examine how cognitive biases and psychological phenomena contribute to one's entrapment in a false world. The two films are (fictional) case studies through which mechanisms such as confirmation bias, biased assimilation, cognitive dissonance, and fear conditioning can be observed and analysed. While psychological research has identified such mechanisms through experimental methods, films provide a unique perspective for observing these tendencies as they interact in rich social environments and reinforce each other.

2. Literature review

The gap between perception and reality is most fundamentally preserved by a limit in knowledge: ignorance. In Plato's *Republic*, the allegory of the cave proposes that an incomplete world can pass for a complete one whenever it is the only world available [1]. The prisoners' awareness of the world is bounded by the walls of the cave and bound to the shadows cast on it. They have no basis for doubting what they see because "how could they see anything else if they were forced to keep their heads still for their whole life?" So it is only logical that they accept the shadows as the whole of reality. A similar philosophy appears in Gnostic thought. In *The Gnostic Religion*, Jonas argues that humans exist in a state of ignorance regarding their true condition and that the familiar world can appear complete until a different form of knowledge reveals its limitations [2]. This awakening occurs through *gnosis*, a transformative knowledge that exposes the evil material world and allows Gnostics to recognise a higher reality. Both Plato and the Gnostics present the acquisition of knowledge as a liberation and awakening. However, the origins and concept of Gnosticism remain contested, and this study does not claim that the films are directly derived from Gnostic tradition. Williams, in *Rethinking Gnosticism*, argues that Gnosticism is a category encompassing diverse movements and ideas drawn from multiple religious and philosophical sources [9]. Because of this scholarly debate, this paper treats the syncretic tradition of Gnosticism as a framework of ignorance, knowledge, and liberation.

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Media theory provides a rationale for why false worlds feel so convincing. Hyper-reality occurs when signs and simulations go beyond representation to replace reality. Baudrillard argues that through mass media, consumer culture, and technology, modern society increasingly operates within a state of hyper-reality [10]. People interact with images and symbols that become more influential than any original reality they supposedly reflect; thereby, the boundary between reality and representation grows increasingly difficult to distinguish. Hyper-reality can be applied to understanding fake realities because they conceal their artificiality behind familiar images, routines, and expectations. Muzzio and Halper extend this discussion through their analysis of American suburbia: they argue that the televised fantasy of 1950s America, in which Pleasantville is set, gives the town a sense of comfort [11]. This comfort of what appears to be a perfect small-town life easily obscures exclusion and control.

False worlds persist because individuals possess cognitive tendencies that render familiar explanations difficult to abandon. Confirmation bias leads people to favour evidence that fits what they already believe [6]. Extending this idea, Lord, Ross, and Lepper's study on attitudes towards capital punishment establishes the term biased assimilation [7]: individuals evaluate supporting evidence as more credible while subjecting evidence that challenges their views to critical scrutiny. In their experiment, a group of people exposed to the same mixed body of evidence often become more polarised. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that people are inclined to maintain consistency among their thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. When new evidence clashes with an established belief, individuals experience psychological discomfort (dissonance) that is then eased by reinterpreting the evidence rather than changing the belief [12]. Fear-conditioning research further suggests that avoidance can become deeply embedded through learned associations between environmental cues and perceived threats. Fear conditioning induces lasting synaptic changes in the amygdala that physically store the association; therefore, fear memories can persist long after their initial formation unless they are actively unlearned [13]. These cognitive habits subconsciously influence individuals to defend their interpretation of the world and to reject alternative ones.

Ultimately, false worlds do not last forever, and people undergo awakening. Accepted paradigms can accommodate scattered anomalies over time, but they enter a crisis when these anomalies accumulate beyond what the existing paradigm can explain [14]. Although Kuhn's theory describes scientific revolutions, the same logic can be applied to individual belief systems.

3. Case study

3.1. Pleasantville

Every road leads back to the same place in the closed information system known as Pleasantville. Every aspect of this idyllic small town is orderly, routine, and predictable. Every day is sunny and 72 degrees, the basketball team never misses a shot, nobody gets sick or hurt, and the fire department rescues cats because no fires ever occur. As Muzzio and Halper state, suburban environments like Pleasantville present conformity, stability, and social order–family life appears stable, gender roles are fixed, and conflict is almost absent [11]. This harmony, however, stems from the residents' limited knowledge, which is confined to only what happens inside the town. Everyone is unaware that anything exists outside of Pleasantville: all the books in the library are blank, the topics of geography lessons are limited to "Main Street" and "Elm Street", and the palette of Pleasantville is monochrome. This setup resembles Plato's prisoners, whose knowledge is confined to the shadows on the wall inside the cave. Both the prisoners of the cave [1] and the residents of

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Pleasantville possess no alternative perspective to evaluate their world. Pleasantville takes hyper-reality described by Baudrillard [10] to a literal extent: simulation, or more specifically, a television sitcom, has replaced reality.

A sexual encounter, never seen before in the little town, at Lovers Lane, produces the first pop of colour: a single red rose blooming in a gray garden. Colour spreads gradually when moments of genuine emotion, self-discovery, or stepping outside prescribed roles occur. Betty Parker turns colour after experiencing sexual pleasure for the first time; David turns colour when he stands up for his mother; Jennifer turns colour when she discovers the joy of reading. These are all experiences outside of what Pleasantville's social order can explain. The spring of colour catalyses a change in the residents' perception of their old order and system. This transformation is analogous to gnosis, the transformative knowledge that Gnostics gain about the true reality. The gradual increase in colour within the town also mirrors Kuhn's theory regarding anomalies [14]. Initially, nobody bats an eye at the red rose or the pink bubblegum, but as the entire basketball team roster misses shots and a real fire occurs, these incidents become increasingly difficult to reconcile with Pleasantville's framework. Colour becomes disruptive only when residents begin to see it as evidence that life can be different. Life there becomes unpredictable for the first time.

Although the audience understands that this "gnosis" represents liberation for the residents, the residents themselves view colour as a threat to their social order. Betty covers her colourful complexion with black and white makeup, succumbing to conformity with social standards. This fear of change fuels widespread public discrimination, as Muzzio and Halper's idea of suburbia as an exclusionary space manifests in Pleasantville [11]. Signs in public spaces read "No Coloureds," while town leaders write rules for the "coloured residents", and a mob destroys Bill's vibrant mural. The townspeople's reaction is rife with confirmation bias, as they interpret new developments through beliefs they already hold (that their monochrome world is complete and natural) [6]. Biased assimilation explains the difference in views within the townspeople in response to the same colourisation. Those who embrace colour see it as liberation and self-discovery, while those who are still black and white interpret it as moral decline and social disorder. Confronted with the same evidence, each group becomes more convinced of its prior position [7]. The destruction of books, paintings, and other symbols of change is driven by cognitive dissonance [12]. To ease the discomfort created by the appearance of colour that challenges their beliefs, the residents simply eliminate the source of contradiction rather than change the way they think.

3.2. The Truman Show

In his closed information dome, every detail of Truman Burbank's life has been engineered and maintained by everyone but him. All his relationships, conversations, and experiences were crafted by Christof, the director of the TV show, to keep Truman in Seahaven and keep the show running. His wife, Meryl, advertises sponsored products with hidden cameras, and his best friend Marlon delivers reassurance on cue whenever Truman begins to question his surroundings. The soundstage, Seahaven and Plato's cave all confine their inhabitants to a limited space where only manufactured images are visible [1]. The cameras and actors in Truman's life are comparable to the puppeteers casting shadows in the cave. Truman cannot see beyond Seahaven's borders because his world has been physically constructed to end at the water's edge, just as the prisoners' world is enclosed within the cave walls. Seahaven therefore functions as a hyper-real environment in Baudrillard's sense. It is a simulation so complete and convincing that it becomes indistinguishable from reality to Truman [10].

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Fear and trauma are the most effective methods of control. As a child, Truman witnesses the staged drowning of his father during a boating trip. Maren's research on fear conditioning explains that neutral environmental cues can become associated with threatening experiences and continue to evoke avoidance long after the original event has passed [13]. Truman is intentionally conditioned by Christof to associate open water with danger and death. This fear discourages his innate curiosity and suppresses his yearning for adventure. The actors on set work equally hard to keep him settled in Seahaven. From a young age, his teacher dismisses his ambitions and tells him that there is nothing left to explore. His wife Meryl repeatedly emphasises marriage, family, and financial responsibilities to pull Truman back into domestic routine and keep him in Seahaven. Even as he tries to pursue adventure, the travel agency is filled with disaster imagery that discourages travelling, further instilling fear in Truman about leaving Seahaven.

A series of unusual coincidences disrupts Truman's otherwise ordinary life. Yet he does not immediately arrive at the conclusion of a fabricated world. Confirmation bias predisposes Truman to justify aberrations with coincidences and accidents [6]. The abnormalities remain manageable so long as they are considered separately. When these coincidences form a cohesive pattern, Truman begins to investigate them. As Kuhn argues, established frameworks collapse when contradictions accumulate beyond what the framework can explain [14]. Hence, Truman is actively seeking out proof of what his framework cannot explain. He finally grasps the full extent of his constructed world when he encounters the dome's walls. He says goodbye to the camera and to his constructed life with his famous catchphrase, "And in case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night!" Then, just like a prisoner leaving Plato's cave, Truman steps out of the dome of Seahaven. With his newfound "gnosis", he rejects the comfortable illusion and journeys towards the true reality.

3.3. Film comparison

Pleasantville presents a collective awakening, while *The Truman Show* presents an individual awakening. In *Pleasantville*, as more residents experience personal forms of desire, curiosity, creativity, and self-expression, the town's monochrome beliefs gradually lose their authority. Awakening here is a social process where the community adapts their social norms to account for the increased realism and colour in its artificial world. On the other hand, the fight for awakening takes place almost entirely within Truman himself because Seahaven is constructed around his existence. A social movement is impossible due to the fact that the social element of Seahaven is wholly scripted. The social component of Seahaven is working against Truman's awakening, as its job is to convince him that his world is natural. There is a dichotomy in the role society plays in each film: it can either collectively fight for liberation or it can employ all its strength to prevent one from reaching beyond their fabricated world. Pleasantville's control stems from social conformity as residents are taught what to think, how to behave, and even what emotions are acceptable; uniformity is rewarded, and difference is punished and treated as a threat. *The Truman Show* relies on calculated and meticulous feats of manipulation: fear conditioning, surveillance, scripted relationships, and media used to discourage exploration. The *Pleasantville* community enjoys a shared victory in their awakening and steps into a richer, more complex existence, whilst Truman realises that he was utterly alone his entire life and experiences a certain existential dread.

Looking at the bigger picture, both films follow the same underlying structure. The characters begin in a state of ignorance. This ignorance is fuelled by several mental habits and then broken by accumulating encounters that reveal the inadequacy of their existing worldview. Then the characters make an escape from their false reality: colour emerges in Pleasantville and Truman leaves

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Seahaven. The awakening mirrors the pattern found in Plato's Allegory of the Cave and in Gnostic thought. Christof is equivalent to the Demiurge in Gnostic theology, the false malevolent god, while Pleasantville's Demiurge is a more abstract concept of social uniformity. Both worlds are guarded by Archons, demonic forces that enforce the prison's rules and prevent escape: Seahaven's actors who reassure Truman back into submission, and Pleasantville's leaders and mob who punish difference. Liberation is aided by Sophia figures, Gnostic figures of wisdom that bring gnosis. David and Jennifer in Pleasantville are the initiators of change and colour, while Sylvia in *The Truman Show* is an actress who breaks character to tell Truman the truth about the show, before being promptly removed from set. Just as Plato's prisoners refuse to believe the freed man, and the Gnostics are resisted by the Archons, both films depict a world that fights to preserve its illusions.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how cognitive psychology helps explain the acceptance of false realities and the process of awakening depicted in *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*. The findings indicate that ignorance is sustained by deception, limited access to reality, and a variety of psychological mechanisms that influence how information is interpreted: confirmation bias, biased assimilation, cognitive dissonance, and fear conditioning. The analysis revealed that a single revelation is insufficient for awakening, which is only achieved through the gradual accumulation of anomalies.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by advancing Gnostic and Platonic models of awakening through psychological explanations. Traditionally, knowledge is emphasised as the path to liberation. The findings suggest that awakening is mediated by cognitive processes that, in addition to acquiring knowledge, can delay, resist, or reinterpret new information. This paper integrates philosophy, theology, psychology, and film studies to provide a more comprehensive explanation of an individual's relationship with a constructed reality.

This study has practical significance in its contribution to understanding why individuals may remain committed to limited or misleading interpretations of reality. The films and psychological mechanisms explored in this paper offer insight into how people respond to uncertainty, change, and conflicting information in everyday life. However, this study is limited by its reliance on fictional portrayals. The narratives created by films are intended for entertainment and not psychological review. They can vividly illustrate psychological mechanisms for narrative purposes, but they do not provide empirical evidence. Another limitation is the focus on two films, which cannot speak for the entire genre. Thus, the findings are interpretive and do not represent all films that explore similar themes. Future research could expand the scope of analysis to other awakening narratives such as *The Matrix or Dark City*, or examine how audiences respond to stories about illusion, belief, and liberation. Research could also extend to encompass more recent topics such as misinformation, algorithmic filtering, and online echo chambers. Ultimately, the prisoner left the cave, Truman left his soundstage, and Pleasantville left its black-and-white order. Each chose the uncertainty of truth over an illusory comfort.

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