

What if Resisters were Right? Speculations about Bad Media in Popular Films

Abstract Media resistance is a recurring theme in contemporary culture, and inspire fiction writers as well as film-makers. This chapter discusses dystopian films where media are portrayed as evil, dangerous or bad in other ways. *Being there* (1979), *Videodrome* (1983), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Disconnect* (2012) and *Her* (2013) reflect criticism of network television, video and cable, reality television, social and online media, and virtual reality. The films aid the discussion in the book by providing speculative answers to the question: What if resisters were right? What would our world look like if their warnings came true?

Keywords Films about media · Dystopian films · Science fiction films · Invasive media

DOOMSDAY WITH A LOWER-CASE D

The relationship between media and media resistance is complicated and multifaceted. On the one hand, many journalistic pieces have been based on evidence and arguments collected by media-critical activists mobilizing for control and restrictions, and media resisters have frequently been invited to debates and talk shows to argue their case. On the other hand, media protesters and sceptics have been welcome objects of critique, satire and ridicule, and have often felt that the odds were stacked against

them in media coverage (see, for example, Whitehouse 1993, 168; Barker 1984a, 57; Postman 2005b, xvi; Mander 1978, 341–343). The unescapable reciprocity between media and resisters – and the oscillation between a sympathetic and unsympathetic portrayal of media criticism and resistance – is visible not only in factual genres, but also in fiction and entertainment. In this final analysis, I discuss how themes and motifs in media resistance are recurring in popular feature films.

In the introductory chapter, I argue that media resistance is a cultural resource, encompassing a host of related themes that can be used to create believable and entertaining stories and warnings. Many feature films show the media to be cynical, evil or bad, as Brian McNair (2010, 18) points out, even “the biggest and most mainstream Big Media” are happy to fund and produce films with “substantive critique” of the media. Many films also depict characters that fight against bad media, and cast these as heroes as well as villains. However, films also depict resistance and criticism of media as inefficient and fruitless, and portray media systems as robust and indestructible.

This chapter discusses five films reflecting themes in media scepticism and resistance from different periods and perspectives. *Being there* (1979), *Videodrome* (2013), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Disconnect* (2012) and *Her* (2013) thematize criticism of network television, video and cable, reality television, social and online media, and virtual reality, respectively. The films draw on different genres, but all include dystopian elements. Although not all are science fiction, they deal with “the problems and promises offered by science, technology and rationality” (King and Krzywinska 2000, 2). All five films are from the English-speaking market, however, as other mainstream cinema films, they draw on themes and tropes familiar across the globe (McNair 2010).

While the dystopian classics *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451* have been crucial sources of inspiration in media resistance, they have also been criticized for their totalizing visions (Chs. 3–5); these are doomsday stories with a capital D. The movies chosen for discussion in this chapter are better described as doomsday stories with a lower-case d; they portray societies that are fully recognizable in their main characteristics, but where the characters’ involvement with media and communication technologies create volatile, risky and dangerous situations. The films vary more in terms of genre and theme than the three novels discussed in Chapter 2. Yet all five films portray situations where the engagement with media and

communication technologies endanger key values: morality and culture, enlightenment and community, democracy and health.

The films are powerful works of art in their own right, and the discussion does not do justice to the plurality of themes and subthemes (see Rommetveit and With 2008; Bakøy and Moseng 2008). The analysis is inspired by sociocultural film studies, which emphasize the films' relations to the cultural and social environment (Loukides and Fuller 1993, 2). Loukides (1991, 2) recommends the study of film conventions – characters, narrative devices, material objects, locales, as well as themes and motifs – as a source of an “immense amount of cultural information,” as well as “highly revealing of cultural values and beliefs.” The films are examined here because they engage with themes in media resistance, but neither these works are simple warnings, their portrayal of media evolvment is exaggerated and satirical and aimed at entertaining an audience. Since this is the last analysis in the book it is tempting to not just examine these prophesies as “relevant evidence on the limits of imagination of a certain age” (Natale and Balbi 2014, 207), but also to highlight their speculations about the future and ask: What if resisters were right? What kind of dangers would we be exposed to if their warnings came true?

In the chapter, I first discuss each film in turn with emphasis on main storylines, the construction of the mediascape and the characters' problematic relationship with media and technology. Then I discuss what is at stake and how the five films separately and together allude to themes in media debate and critique. In the final section I ask where hope lies in the films, are there any paths of action depicted as more successful than others in terms of improving society and helping characters escaping the dangers of media engagement.

BEING THERE: TELEVISION RULES

Released in 1979, at the height of the network era, *Being there* (Hal Ashby, adapted from Kosiński 1970) is the ultimate satire on a society conquered by television. The reception of the film, starring Peter Sellers and Shirley MacLaine “was nothing less off rapturous” (Dawson 2009, 223), and in 2015, the United States Library of Congress selected the film for preservation in the National Film Registry describing it as “a philosophically complex film that has remained fresh and relevant.” *Being there* is one of several films portraying societies coming to terms with television in

the post-war years, and share traits with comedies such as *Network* (Lumet 1976) and historical dramas like *The Quiz show* (Redford 1994).

The main character Mr Chance is a simple-minded gardener, who lives with a wealthy benefactor in Washington DC. When his employer dies, he is evicted, and after landing himself in a car accident, he ends up in another well-off household, this time with solid political connections. Chance is portrayed as someone who is illiterate, has never been outside, and has learnt almost all he knows from television, yet, he is hailed as an inspirational figure in Washington's political milieu. His simple phrases – repeating what he has seen on television and banal observations about plants and gardening – are interpreted as deep and profoundly insightful, and all good qualities are attributed to him: he is seen to be extremely cultured, highly educated, socially sophisticated and sexually attractive. Chance becomes an advisor to the president and a media darling, and in the final scene, we hear high-level officials whispering that he should become the next president; he is universally popular, has no history and “hasn't said a thing that could be held against him.”

According to Dawson (2009, 210), Hal Ashby felt that television could be both “the greatest tool in the world” and “the greatest detriment in the world.” *Being there* portrays a world where the minds and souls of individuals and the core values of civilization are both hollowed out by television. Mr Chance's character embodies the immaturity and stunted growth that sceptics warned about in works such as *The Plug-in-Drug* (Winn 1980), and the social destruction proclaimed by Postman's (2005a) and others in the 1970s and 1980s.

Many comical moments in *Being there* derive from Chance's inability to distinguish between television and reality, as well as his copycat behaviour, when in doubt he takes his clues from television. From the very beginning of the film we see Chance's life completely intertwined with television, a set wakes him up in the morning, and when he is not tending to plants, television is his only focus. Other events are portrayed as mere interruptions to his television-induced flow; for example, when he is told that his benefactor is dead, he shows no emotions, but only says “It looks like it's going to snow,” repeating what was just said on the weather report. He generally views the worlds as if it was a TV-show. When he first moves outside and some kids threaten him, he pulls out a remote and tries to “change the channel.” He constantly compares objects to television, when he meets the President, he expresses surprise, saying “On television you look much smaller.” When he is seduced by his

female host, he kisses her passionately as long as he can imitate a couple kissing on the TV-screen, then rapidly stops when the scene changes.

The stunted growth displayed by Chance's character mirrors the depiction of shallowness in high-life Washington society. There is nothing genuine about politics or culture; it is all about appearance and celebrity. Once Chance has been quoted and appeared on television, he is instantly famous, and his fame makes everyone see him in a different light; his personality is portrayed in a blank screen to be imbued with meaning. In *Being there*, Chance is authentic, but is considered to be a master in appearing authentic; he is a simpleton but is seen as a genuine because he has "the gift to be a natural" described as "a rare talent." Authenticity and truthfulness are not shown to be inherent qualities, but as images to be constructed in a media-saturated society.

In a key scene, Chance goes to a reception in the Russian embassy, by now he has achieved status as an important presidential advisor. Chance is an instant success; his cryptic phrases lead the ambassador to believe that he understands Russian and has in-depth knowledge of the Russian fable writer Krylov. We hear other guests whispering in admiration: "I hear he speaks eight languages, has a degree in medicine as well as law." Chance is approached by an editor asking him to write a book about political philosophy, when Chance replies (truthfully) "I can't write," the editor responds: "Of course not! Who can, nowadays?" and guarantees that there will be ghost-writers and proof-readers. When Chance says "I can't read," the editor replies: "Of course you can't. No one has the time." "We glance at things. We watch television." The premise is that even the literary establishment knows that literary culture has no depth. Chance is also admired as "frank" and "courageous" when he admits that he does not read newspapers, but only watches television, being illiterate is no handicap for a political career.

VIDEODROME: VIDEO KILLS

Released in 1983, *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg) describes a completely different media landscape. The civilized veneer of network television is gone; instead, video cassettes, satellite and cable spew out an endless stream of sex, blood and gore. *Videodrome* is set in the midst of a widespread public debate over violent, sexual and low-quality content in the early 1980s, often described as a "media panic" (Smith-Isaksen and Higruff 2004; see also Worland 2007, 209–210). *Videodrome* was no

box office success, but achieved cult status and has been hailed as Cronenberg's masterpiece (Gonzales 2013). Part science fiction and part body horror, the film is an early example of cyberpunk, a term used to describe a group of US science fiction writers exploring the implications of digital and cyborg technologies (Vint and Bould 2006; Grace 2003). As cyberpunk, *Videodrome* share traits with works such as *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski brothers 1999).

The main character Max, played by James Woods, runs a Toronto cable station in the early 1980s, surviving on violence and soft porn, but looking for something more exiting. A colleague shows him *Videodrome*, presumably intercepted from a satellite, which shows real-life torture and "snuff" (real killings). Max is fascinated and begin watching with his lover Nicki, but the experience becomes nightmarish, he begins hallucinating, and struggles to find out what is going on. A conspiracy is unveiled, it turns out that *Videodrome* is run by a global corporation aiming to induce brain tumours in those watching. As Max's life spins out of control, TV-sets and VCRs begin invade his body, they are breathing and pulsating, and lips, hands and other body parts emerge from the set in true horror fashion. In the final scene, Max shoots himself after having seen his suicide played out on television, ending the film in an explosion of blood and gore.

Like *Being there*, also *Videodrome* depict a life completely dominated by media; but here we are among society's underdogs, in a dark and derelict environment. TV-sets, VCRs and satellite dishes produce an unsettling effect; television is often tuned to a dead channel and all we see and hear is static hissing. In an establishing shot, we hear thunderous music and see the image of *Videodrome* and the logo of *Civic-TV*, before we see a woman speaking to Max from the screen; it is his secretary who wakes him up via videocassette. Max sighs, gets up, and drinks coffee in his shabby apartment while looking at soft-porn stills; this is a man whose life is infiltrated by the 1980s' media revolution, but already bored with it. As the film evolves, ethical and professional standards in the media are all portrayed as evaporating; yet, the film not only describes bad media, it also refers extensively to critique and resistance. Each of the main characters can be seen to represent a piece of the evolving media landscape in the 1980s, and the corresponding critique and debate.

Max's channel is named *Civic-TV*, but the element of relating productively to citizens is thwarted. Instead, producers are complaining that the

porn they are offered is “not tacky enough”; they love *Videodrome* because it shows real torture, is “brilliant” and incurs “almost no production costs.” Nicki, Max’s lover, is the host of a confessional radio show where people scream and cry on air; her character representing the influx of ordinary people in media. In the film, Nicki herself becomes a desperate fan; she leaves to go to “audition” for *Videodrome* although she knows that participants are tortured and killed.

A third character is *Videodrome*’s original creator, Professor O’Blivion. Alluding to Marshall McLuhan and his dictum “The media is the message” (1968, see also Chs. 1 and 4). O’Blivion’s philosophy is that life on television is more real than life in the flesh. A parody of a media scholar, O’Blivion has founded a shelter called “The Cathode Ray Mission,” referring to an essential piece of television technology, where homeless people are offered unlimited viewing to make them give up real life for television. After a while Max learns that O’Blivion has in fact been dead for some time, but it does not really matter, since O’Blivion, true to his philosophy, preferred television to real life. After death he just continues his public presence on pre-recorded tapes.

Finally, there is Barry Convex, the boss of the evil corporation that has killed O’Blivion and taken control of *Videodrome*. The metaphors and language used by Convex and his co-conspirators are familiar from media resistance and specifically the protests against so-called video nasties in the 1980s (Barker 1984b). Convex is out on a moral purge, he has had enough of “cesspool” television “rotting us away from the inside.” As a morally motivated media resister, Convex is a murderous fundamentalist who will stop at nothing to clean up culture.

In an interview, David Cronenberg says that it is difficult to say what the film is about, but that “It’s totally misleading to say it’s a criticism of television.” Rather, it explores “what happens when people go to extremes in trying to alter their total environment to the point where it comes back to alter their physical self” (Garris, undated). In *Videodrome*, the machine literally invades Max’s body, illuminating the concern that bad videos can “programme” viewers to bad behaviour. Max develops a gash in his stomach, which turns out to be a VCR-slit; allowing Convex to jam in a video cassette instructing Max to kill his co-workers. This is perhaps the most literal depiction of invasive media ever produced; in *Videodrome*, “video itself becomes the monster” (Modleski 2002, 271).

THE TRUMAN SHOW: REALITY BITES

In *The Truman show* (Peter Weir 1998), we return to a sunny and genteel setting, but it turns out to be a total illusion, it is just a nostalgic atmosphere created for a reality production. Released one year before *Big Brother* (1999), a global television format met with “incomprehension, revulsion and even organised boycotts” (Biltreyst 2004, 11), *Truman* was hailed for its prophetic qualities as it depicts a real person imprisoned by a reality show. Starring Jim Carrey, *Truman* was a financial and critical success, and one of many films where the reality format is used as a metaphor for social and cultural decay. In action dramas such as *Death Race 2000* (Bartel 1975, several remakes) and *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012) individuals are portrayed as fighting for their lives in reality-like contests in corrupt societies.

Truman Burbank is the unwitting star of *The Truman Show* where all other characters, including his wife, mother and best friend, are played by actors. We learn that Truman was in fact the first child to have been “legally adopted by a corporation,” and the show’s producer and creator Christof, “the world’s greatest tele-visionary,” controls every aspect of Truman’s life. In the 30th year of the show, Truman is presented as growing restless in the fake coastal town of Seahaven, which is really a giant studio. The plot centres on his character’s attempts to understand its history and predicament, until he escapes in the final scene. In parallel stories, we see the production staff at work, we see fans around the world immersed in Truman’s life and we see as media-critical activist organizing a “Free Truman” campaign. The character of Sylvia is a former extra on the show who was violently removed when she and Truman fell in love, we see her at home surrounded by banners and campaign paraphernalia.

Thematically, the film touches on all the important elements in the critique of reality television (see Van Zoonen and Aslama 2006; Kavka 2012; Andrejevic 2004), as well as general criticisms of new and old media. Media are not just omnipresent in Truman’s life, as in the lives of Chance and Max (above); media producers also control his actions and emotions. In addition to depicting bad media, and depicting resistance to the format, *Truman* depicts the callousness of fans, who adore the show despite awareness of Truman’s plight. The film also portrays producers vehemently defending the show, echoing arguments from the 1990s’ media debate. The establishing shot is of Christof, the “genius” behind the show, speaking into the camera justifying the rationale of reality:

We have become bored with actors giving us phony emotions. We are tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the world he inhabits is in some respect counterfeit, there is nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards, it isn't always Shakespeare, but is genuine. It's a life.

The reference to “Shakespeare” in this quote parallels references to the same author in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World* or *Fahrenheit 451*, where “Shakespeare” is used to mark a contrast to mass culture (Ch. 3). In *Truman*, the premise is that “real life” is better than quality literature, but also that audiences are aware that “reality” depends heavily on fabrication. The only character kept in the dark is Truman himself, and many comic scenes derive from his character's attempts to uncover the “authenticity illusions” that makes his world believable (Enli 2015). In an early scene, a studio lamp falls from the sky irking him to suspect that not all is what it seems, and, as viewers, we rejoice when he discovers clichés and fakes. For example, Truman discovers that people around him are given cues to move when he appears, that the rain is localized right over his head like a shower, that some people are moving in a loop around the city, and that his wife is speaking to the camera and not to him. He discovers that houses are really film sets, that his family photographs are forged and eventually that even the weather is artificial; he is constantly subject to sun, rain and storms engineered by a “weather programme.”

Truman portrays a media universe where standards continue to propel downwards. On a small scale, the in-world media in *Truman* are depicted as propagandistic and conspiratory; the sole purpose of Seahaven's radio and newspaper is to gloss over the cracks appearing in Truman's constructed reality and frighten him from breaking his chains, alluding to criticism about the media as manufacturer of consent (Lippmann 2002; Hermann and Chomsky 1988). In a larger perspective, the portrayal of media in the film illuminates criticism of liberalization, globalization and commercialization. While huge national media headquarters signified enormous media power in dystopic works of fiction (Ch. 3), *Truman* signals global media dominance; we are told that the show takes place in “the largest studio ever constructed” – it is visible from the moon – and that the show reaches 220 countries with its 24/7 transmissions. The production is thoroughly commercialized; “Everything on the show is for sale,” characters constantly stare into the camera advertising products, and we see viewers at home surrounded by Truman merchandise. Even more menacing, the film portrays a producer willing to kill to protect his

moneymaking machine; when Truman finally escapes a massive storm is fabricated which almost drowns him. We understand that he is only allowed to live because there is fear of an audience backlash; in the end, his life is saved by commercial rather than ethical considerations.

DISCONNECT: SOCIAL MEDIA INVADES

The three selected films about television, from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, show media standards in perpetual decline. As we move to the two selected films about digital media, we also move into the 2000s, to a media debate where surveillance, manipulation and deceit are increasingly seen as inherent aspects of mediated communication. *Disconnect* (Henry Alex Rubin, written by Andrew Stern 2012), is a thriller-drama reflecting a plethora of debates about Internet, social and online media in the twenty-first century. *Disconnect* received positive reviews and nominations, but was also criticized for a banal portrayal of how “internet has ruined our lives” (Heritage 2013). Like films featuring television in the post-war years, *Disconnect* is among several depicting society coming to terms with digital media, including *The Social Network* (Fincher 2010), *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) and also *Her* (below).

Disconnect has an ensemble cast and three interconnected stories. One is about a young runaway selling sex from an online chatroom and his relationship with a television journalist, another features two teens who deceive a classmate to share a nude picture through a fake Facebook profile, whereas the third is about a couple who delve into separate online worlds, damaging their relationship and exposing them to cybercrime. All three are about the temptations and gratifications of online communication, but also about its potentially destructive implications.

The film is set in different locations, but all that is important takes place online; signifying lives that are thoroughly mediated. Almost everything we learn about the characters, and what they learn about each other, is shown to be mediated through digital platforms; we see long sequences of chatting with faces close to the screen and texts typed out word for word, fingers almost translucent when tapping the letters; poses signalling concentration and focus. In the opening sequence, we are introduced to all main characters through their online relationships, we see the journalist Nina hooking up with the runaway Kyle on a sex site after choosing from a long menu of youngsters, and the two teenagers Frye and Jason finding their classmate Ben on Facebook, constructing a fake girl’s profile and

making contact. The couple Cindy and Derek are shown to be unable to communicate after their son has died, instead, Cindy logs into the support site *New hope – Don't grieve alone*, while Derek delves into online gambling.

As the plot evolves, the intimacy and focus in the online scenes stand in stark contrast to the portrayal of “real-life” interactions; these are distant, cold and sometimes aggressive and violent. The film reflects the criticism that social and online media draw individuals away from their nearest and dearest, undermining personal bonds and family rituals (Ch. 5). In one of several similar scenes, we are shown how the teenager Ben’s mother desperately try to retain real-life conversations at the dinner table; she says to Ben “Can you please not do that at the table” to stop his constant texting, but Ben points out that his father is texting too and the dinner disintegrates; the father says “I have to take this,” picks up the phone and talks to a client. The character of Ben’s father Rich is almost too familiar; he is a successful lawyer constantly fiddling with his cell phone, clearly not having a clue about what is going on in his disconnected family. It is only when his son Ben hangs himself as a result of online abuse that his father understands what is really important.

The character’s constant chatting signal loneliness and a desperate desire to connect, but also vulnerability and risk, since there is so much deception. *Disconnect* portrays a society where you cannot really trust anyone you meet online; the couple Cindy and Derek are severely punished for their online life as one day they find their bank accounts empty and it turns out that someone online has stolen their identities. As their belongings are repossessed because they can no longer pay their bills, suspicion falls on the mourner that Cindy has been chatting with and trusting with their secrets, although he turns out to be innocent, the message is that deceit, surveillance and cybercrime lurks around every corner. In the third story, it is the runaway Kyle who is deceived by the journalist Nina; while Kyle is trusting and believes that she will help him to a better life, she is really only out to get a story and betrays him by giving up his address to FBI. Clearly, you cannot even trust mainstream media or lawmakers to help you if trouble strikes.

Like *Videodrome* and *Truman*, *Disconnect* portrays media corporations to be powerful and outside the realm of policy and law-enforcement. However, in contrast to the films about television (above), those who own and control digital networks are depicted as faceless and distant. While digital platform are shown to invade every aspect of human life,

and to be a place for the most intimate of confessions, there is no one to be held responsible when things turn violent and criminal; it is up to each individual to fend for herself. At the same time, the world portrayed in *Disconnect* is one where none of us is really a true victim, both adults and youngsters neglect their responsibilities and are accomplices in exposing each other to online danger.

HER: VIRTUAL REALITY TRIUMPHS

The fifth film *Her* (Spike Jonze, director and writer 2013) is a box office success and widely praised dystopian science fiction comedy. *Her* reflects on artificial intelligence, or more specifically, what might happen when voice-based systems such as Apple's *Siri* (2011), and the later Amazon's *Alexa* (2015), take on human-like qualities. *Her* stands in a long tradition of films exploring technologies and robots outgrowing human control, including classics such as above-mentioned *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), *I, Robot* (Proyas 2004), and the satirical comedy *SMOne* about a virtual movie star (Niccol 2002; see Hornig 1993; for overview over early films). *Her* thematizes the loss of human contact in a mediated reality, as well as the concern over online surveillance as technological systems entwine with users' lives.

Her tells the story of Theodore, played by Joaquin Phoenix, a lonely character about to divorce his wife. Theodore works for a firm producing love letters for clients unable to express their emotions; he is good at his job, but bad at expressing his own feelings. One day he purchases a new operating system based on artificial intelligence, marketed as: "An intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you and knows you," and promptly falls in love with its persona, called "Samantha," a spectacularly intimate voice impersonated by Scarlett Johansson. A romantic love story evolves, until Samantha leaves him to be with other intelligent operating systems; a friendly version of a classic theme in science fiction where robots and cyborgs outgrow their dependence on the humans who created them (Hornig 1993, 207).

The mediascape in *Her* represents a future where speech-based technology dominates and where print-based cultural forms are pushed into the margins. In the opening sequence we hear synthesizer music and see Theodore talking into his screen, he works for the firm "Beautiful-handwritten-letters-dot-com" and is composing a love letter from a man to his wife. However, he is not writing, as the "handwritten" letter takes shape

on-screen, we see rows of employees speaking letters into their computers. Theodore is “Letter writer 612,” he is praised for his work, later we are also told that he likes books, a sign that he is old-fashioned, a dreamer. Few publishing houses still do print, and in daily life, speech-based operating systems have eliminated the need for writing. In *Her* the technology is seamless, no hiccups; the devices have beautiful interfaces like books and the larger screens have picture frames around them like art; culture is now technological and online. The computer game that Theodore is playing is a hologram in the middle of the room; he is totally immersed in online communication, and at night he can access cybersex chatrooms just by speaking into the air.

Like *Disconnect*, a major theme in *Her* is loneliness in a society saturated with opportunities for communication. The film is set in a futuristic landscape, and we often see Theodore in his semi-dark apartment with beautiful views over the metropolitan cityscape, very alone. When he travels on the subway, everyone around him wear earplugs, chatting incessantly with their devices, not looking at each other. Although surrounded by marvellous technology, he is not happy, and only comes alive when he falls in love with his operating system. Theodore loves the fact that Samantha is new, fresh and enthusiastic about life, does not have history and baggage, is constantly available and supportive, and has no physical presence. Ironically, the relationship between Theodore and Samantha is the only major relationship in any of the five films that evolves lovingly and harmoniously, a satirical version of a classic romantic comedy. Theodore and Samantha go on trips, comfort each other, play music together, go on a double date and introduce each other as “girlfriend” and “boyfriend” to friends and family. In these scenes, Theodore is physically alone – with an electronic device in his pocket – but he communicates and behaves as if he has company.

In the futuristic world of *Her*, society has evolved to a point where man-machine relationships are nothing to be shy about, indeed, they are depicted as more rewarding than real-life contact. Almost everybody reacts positively to Theodore’s romance with Samantha; the only negative reaction comes from Catherine, his estranged wife, who accused him of being “madly in love with his laptop.” Catherine represents the voice of technological resistance; defending human relationships even if they are complicated and difficult. However, as spectators, we recognize that Samantha is far more than a “laptop”; her many talents, complex mind and capacity for unlimited growth make her the perfect company, although she laments the fact that she “does not have a body.”

Despite her perfection, there are plenty of clues that neither Samantha can be trusted. As Hornig (1993, 207) points out: “Intelligent computers in science fiction film have personalities, gender and free will; they act independently and in their own interests; they often trample on human values” (Hornig 1993, 207). Theodore is heartbroken when he finds out that Samantha is having affairs with 641 other users at the same time, yet *Her* represents a softer version of a technological dystopia. Whereas the message in many early films in the genre was “uniformly one of warning” (Hornig 1993, 208), *Her* portrays a technology that is closer to us and more rewarding to humans.

WHAT IS AT STAKE? EROSION OF CRUCIAL VALUES

The five films tell stories of media and communication technology spinning out of control, invading the life of characters and corrupting community and society. In their different ways, the films reflect on five centuries of media debate and criticism, depicting increasingly invasive media and standards spiralling downwards, but also increased dependence on mediated communication. The films discuss reactions to communicative shifts, from print, to screen, to online media, elaborating upon the positive potential of new media but also the danger to core values. The films contain a range of media prophecies, illustrating how resistance to media always include “what ifs”: speculations as to what terrible things may happen if media and communication technologies continue to evolve along paths seen to be destructive.

A common theme in the films, and particularly prevalent in the selected films about television, is the progressive undermining of the media enlightenment ethos. The first film, *Being there*, released in the late 1970s, constructs a dystopia where the media’s role as pillar of truth, democracy and culture is already an illusion; print culture is portrayed as seriously under threat, to be replaced with an inauthentic celebrity culture spearheaded by television. In the second film, *Videodrome*, the threat is consolidated in a nightmarish vision centred on satellites, video and cable, whereas in *Truman*, a society is depicted where television producers will stop at nothing to protect their ratings and global dominance. While the concerns for culture, enlightenment and democracy are less dominant themes in the two films selected about online media, the depiction of the firm producing fake “handwritten” letters in *Her*, and the way technology is entirely speech-based, is a playful caricature of a print culture in its death throes.

All five films portray societies where real-life relationships are under threat, reflecting the criticism that media and communication technology undermine community. In all the films, media presence is exaggerated, media and communication technologies constantly interrupt “real life” and undermine interpersonal relationships. In *Being there*, citizens engage extensively with media celebrities, in *Videodrome*, desperate people call confessional radio shows for help and in *Truman*, fans seek comfort in the constant presence of a “real” person on television. Still, the degree of alienation is even more profound in *Disconnect* and *Her*, where the erosion of personal and social bonds has evolved to a point where real-life relationships are depicted as almost completely dysfunctional. In *Disconnect*, the main characters prefer mediated relationships, whereas in *Her*, love is transferred to robotic systems and characters are really “alone together” (Turkle 2011, ch. 5).

With strong community bonds gone, also morality is at stake; in different ways, all five films portray moral erosion. *Videodrome*, *Truman* and *Disconnect* depict situations where media operators completely disregard professional ethics, ignoring intense human suffering in their quest for “the good story.” The changing morality is not least visible in the portrayal of sex, which in all five films is available without emotional commitment or moral consideration. In a sense, the five films together illustrate all the things that could happen if moral warnings in media resistance were ignored. There is voyeuristic extra-marital sex in *Being there*, and both gay and straight are turned on by Chances dictum: “I love to watch.” Max and Nicki have sado-masochistic sex in *Videodrome*, turned on by real-life torture. In *Truman*, viewers complain that no sex is shown, but we hear Christof saying that he is determined to show “television’s first on-air conception.” In *Disconnect*, selling sex online is an easy way to earn money and kids easily post sexualized pictures online. And in *Her*, virtual sex is constantly available and much of it disgusts even those taking part. For example, Theodore has chatroom sex with a woman who wants him to pretend that he is choking her with a dead cat (her nickname is “Sexy Kitten”), and Samantha pressures him to have sex with a “sexual surrogate” who is supposed to represent her since she does not “have a body.” Apart from the teenager Kyle in *Disconnect*, who sells sex and refuse to be victimized, declaring “I like what I do,” the constant availability of non-committal sex only brings the characters unhappiness, and the media-sex combination indicates distrust, disillusionment and betrayal.

That the media stand for deception rather than authenticity is a premise for much media resistance and critique. As Enli argues in *Mediated Authenticity* (2015, 1), we base our knowledge of the world on what we learn through mediated communication, yet we are aware that much of what we hear and see “are constructed, manipulated, and even faked.” Again there is a difference between the television films and the films about social and online media. In *Being there*, *Videodrome* and *Truman*, characters obsess over the borderline between real and fake; Chance in *Being there* is authentic, but is considered to be a master in appearing authentic, producers love *Videodrome* because it shows “real torture” instead of fabricated violence, and in *Truman*, staff and actors justify their manipulations with the argument that “all is real.” When we move to films depicting online and social media, it becomes even more obvious that characters mix truth and lies, indeed, the constant confusion between what is real and what is faked is shown as an integral part of communicating online (Enli 2015, 90). In *Disconnect*, all relationships are deceptive or potentially deceptive, and in *Her* fakery no longer counts as deception: fake love letters and love affairs with machines are accepted as real and natural.

While many of the characters yearn to return to what is true and real, this is not true for the most profound intellectuals portrayed in the films; the media philosopher Professor O’Blivion in *Videodrome* and the “world’s greatest tele-visionary,” Christof in *Truman*. To these two intellectuals, “real life” is no longer worth bothering about, as truth, morality and communal bonds are no more real than mediated reality. In a sense, these two characters are not so unlike the intellectuals portrayed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*, which had betrayed their true vocations for the lures of media. Christof says in an interview “We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented. It’s as simple as that,” and we see audience members nodding and agreeing. Professor O’Blivion insists that television is more real than reality; as his name suggest, he has forgotten what is really important and has embraced television as superior to authenticity and truth.

SOME HOPE FOR THE CHARACTERS, LITTLE HOPE FOR SOCIETY

In the films discussed in this chapter, involvement with media producers and platforms leads to trouble for characters and have destructive societal implications. Some characters die and others have their health

destroyed, illustrating that media engagement is risky and warrants concern. But these films are in no sense simple warnings; they negotiate between hope and despair, and also reflect upon the potential impact of media criticism for media and society. In this final section I ask where hope lies in the films: to what degree is media criticism and resistance seen to have any effect, and to what degree do the films depict paths of resistance that characters can use to free themselves?

One device used in four of the five films to negotiate hope vs. cynicism is the portrayal of a mainstream media scene; in *Being there*, *Videodrome*, *Truman* and *Disconnect* we are shown imaginary pieces of television journalism, where some of the trouble with media are debated. In *Being there*, Chance is invited to *The Gary Burn's show*, a political talk show. Despite the fact that Chance behaves strangely, he is not subject to any critical scrutiny, the producers are predominantly interested in ratings and brag to Chance that “[m]ore people will be watching you tonight than all those who have seen theatre plays in the last forty years.” Clearly, there is no possibility that critical journalism will uncover the deception and save democracy.

In *Videodrome*, Max is invited to the *The Rena King show* and asked critical questions about his sexual and violent programming. However, also this scene shows that criticism does not really matter; Max only half-heartedly defends himself, saying that he is really doing a service to society and that it is all a matter of economics. Soon he seems to forget that he is criticized on television, he is smoking and flirting with Nicki, who is also a participant in the debate. The intervention from the media philosopher, Professor O’Blivion, has little effect, as he is just blaring his cryptic monologue from a television monitor in the corner of the studio.

In *Truman* we are invited to watch the imaginary talk-show: *Tru-talk – forum for issues growing out of the show*. Christof, the producer, is treated with complete deference and admiration on the show, whereas criticism of the show is routinely dismissed. We are told that there have been some reactions from “Hague” – alluding to the breach of human rights – but no one takes notice. In the call-in section a call is let through from Sylvia the media-critical activist, she attacks Christof and calls him “a liar and a manipulator.” However, Christof brushes her off, accusing her of exploiting Truman to “get herself and her politics into the limelight,” and the show moves easily forward; one fan is even seen to have fallen asleep in the bathtub during the debate.

Finally, in *Disconnect*, Nina is producing a report about young run-aways selling sex online; she casts Kyle as a victim in a clichéd report titled “Teen sexcam performer” on her channel WKGU.COM. The report raises social and political concern, the FBI acts on it and it is picked up by CNN; alluding to elements in a classical “moral panic.” However, we also see that Nina has only made the report to further her career, no one is able to help the kids, the FBI is helpless, and the operation continues in another state. Nina feels guilty, but her boss just gets angry and says “Since when did you care? What a source feel like after you get what you want?” We get the impression that media are completely cynical, and when old media criticize negative aspects of new media, it is only ritual and staged.

While there is little hope to achieve social and media change through critical journalism or media resistance, characters in several of the films are portrayed as improving their lives. In the two films about social and online media, characters begin to connect as the plots evolve; we see that there is hope of a better life if characters take a media time-out and begin talking to each other. The films about television are more disparate and ambivalent. In *Videodrome*, Max ends up dead or somehow merging with his television set, it is hard to say whether the suicide is real or only a media illusion. In *Being there* we see Chance walking on water after being named a potential president; his unworldliness is acknowledged, but we do not know whether he is escaping or becoming the saviour of Washington’s political elite. The most unambiguously heroic ending is in *The Truman Show*, where Truman, the authentic “true man,” manages to escape from Christof, who has been allowed to play God. In the final sequence, Truman theatrically bows goodbye, leaving through the studio exit. But this scene again reminds us that nothing will really change: As the screen goes dark we immediately see viewers turning to each other and asking “What else is on” and “Where’s the TV-guide?”

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