

PRAXIS: Editorial Statement

By Kent Neely

The essays and reviews which comprise this issue of PRAXIS arouse a number of ideas that collide. New work by Laurie Anderson is analyzed and we are reacquainted with her unusual social (and self) commentary that is bedded in irony and mediated representation. The medieval theatrical practice of the *platea* is compared with the virtual world available via computer games. Gluck's classic tale of Iphigénia is retold as a commentary on the prevalence of barbarism and a revised *Les Enfants Terribles* remains a poignant view about engaging the world. Similarities appear among these pieces regarding the acceptance of simulation over reality or the intercession of media to define a world that seems increasingly vapid.

These similarities become apparent partly due to the film in current release, *The Truman Show* (Paramount Pictures, 1998). It is a particularly fresh motion picture that addresses the predominance of media and commercialism in our lives; to the exclusion of real experience and meaning. It is a morality play, and if the title were abbreviated to the middle word only, the allusion of *Everyman* would be completely evident. *The Truman Show* makes the uninterrupted broadcast of an unassuming man's life the prime-time obsession of audiences world wide. Slyly framed and presented to suggest that those viewing *The Truman Show* are not separated from those audiences who are represented in the film, a wry coincidence of relevance occurs; one watches *The Truman Show* only partially aware (and only partially willing to be aware) that it is him or herself that the film is about. Truman's world is pristine, clean, idealistic yet replete with ample evidence that it is *real* life—the gossipy office mate, the palsy friend always available for a heartfelt talk over a beer—yet it is all controlled in Disneyesque mastery that has removed all unpredictability, coincidence and chance. The only constant is the insertion of product names and descriptions which serve to “sponsor” Truman's world and, by implication, life itself. Perched above this extraordinary performance is the director/creator, Christof, who juggles and juggles Truman's world and his life for the pleasure of million's of viewers unaware of the ironic manifestation of Baudrillard's simulacrum. And when this poor wretch finally pulls aside the curtain to reveal the Great Oz as nothing but a man pushing buttons, moving dials and shouting commands, the audience (in and outside the film) cheers his courage, his individualism, his assertion of self. But the jubilation ends with a quick cut to the closing scene of two parking garage attendants regaining their composure after Truman's rebellion. They look at one

another and say "So what else is on?" One thinks of Madame Irma's closing lines from *The Balcony* asserting that nothing seen on stage is as bizarre as the world the audience returns to afterward; Truman's chilling relevance is that once out of the film the live audience may be likely to return home and unthinkingly pick up the television remote, oblivious to the personal reflection the film provides.

The Truman Show's poignancy is understood if we sense the blur between reality and simulation in our own lives. The film gives the viewer a circumstance in which an individual's sense of reality, of meaning and of understanding is controlled and manipulated by another. Truman Burbank is the dupe in a masterful deception done by a faceless and, seemingly careless, corporate persona. How difficult it seems, while watching the film, to consider the situation reversed: the individual who becomes performer in a delicate manipulation of simulated reality presented to the world.

But just such a manipulation occurred with Dorothy Tipton, nee Billy Tipton. In Diane Wood Middlebrook's *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998), the reader becomes acquainted with a most remarkable life story, that of transvestite Dorothy/Billy Tipton. Born female in 1914 and raised in a traditional gender specific manner, Dorothy changed her persona when her desires for a musical career were thwarted by the male dominated music business. At first, she did not take the greatest caution to shield her cross-dressed identity to musical peers. Later she grew increasingly careful to maintain the male performance, moving from her native Oklahoma to nearby Missouri and, finally, to the Northwest where she could gain regular employment and avoid detection. Billy had a moderately successful career as a jazz and swing pianist ultimately making recordings and developing the Billy Tipton Trio. His performance was extraordinary, truly lifelike, as his advice to a young magician in 1986 indicated: "Remember, you are doing the act all the time, on stage and off. You've got to live the part, you've got to wear it."

And Billy had mastered this virtual identity to the point that he maintained relationships with five women, each known as his wife. Biographer Middlebrook interviewed three, none of whom entered their relationships with Billy knowing his true sexuality. So complete was the performance, that Billy and his last wife, Kitty, adopted three boys. Ironically, it was his youngest son, William, who finally discovered Billy's secret; when an emergency medical worker, trying to revive Billy after he collapsed in death, turned to him and asked, "Son, did your father have a sex change?"(3). Only then was the simulated identity revealed. As Middlebrook sums Tipton's life revealed in death: "Until death arrived, Billy swung as easily as ever in the hammock s/he had strung between those double pillars of identity, those pronouns that sort the world into opposites and complements." (281)

The story of Billy Tipton is exceptional when compared with *The Truman Show*. Unlike the film representing life as simulation, Billy Tipton was simulation as life. It is his/her story that raises the real question of pertinence, both to *The Truman Show* and to the pieces in this section: where is meaning?

Mark C. Taylor's work, *Hiding* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), addresses the question. Taylor's position is that all is appearance and that delving below it to find meaning results in uncovering only more appearance:

If depth is but another surface, nothing is profound . . . *nothing is profound*. This does not mean that everything is simply superficial; to the contrary, in the absence of depth, everything becomes endlessly complex. In the city of glass, where (the) all has become impossibly thin, nothing is ever what it seems. (p. 18)

Taylor's critique has turned semiotics onto itself by asking to find the significance in signifiers that shift, elide and meld in a world that has become too transparent and, simultaneously, too puzzling: "We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this." (18)

Neither Truman Burbank's victimization nor Billy Tipton's manipulation of identity can be peeled further to reveal "meaning"—their superficiality and depth are coincidentally "meaning" in a postmodern world. It is the viewers and readers of these odd stories that may stumble in theorizing what the "meaning" is. For Truman Burbank it is discovered when he (literally) breaks out from the simulation into reality. For Billy Tipton it was every day as s/he bound her breasts and wore a jock strap contrived as male genitalia. They made their meaning within that complex intersection of lies and truths that they understood as their lives. Taylor sees this phenomenon in how we, in the postmodern world, live between a virtual and lived world that is increasingly mediated and seemingly devoid of clarity—of meaning:

When reality becomes virtual, the body disappears. This does not mean, of course, that materiality completely vanishes—at least not yet. But as the webs in which we are caught become ether nets, the realities with which we deal become more and more ethereal. For some people, the growing detachment from the body holds the promise of realizing the ancient dream of immortality; for others, the apparent loss of the body and eclipse of materiality are further symptoms of alienation. (127)

Reading the pieces in PRAXIS then provides opportunity to reflect on the mediation that occurs more frequently and pervasively in life and the swirl of signs that both belie and pronounce meaning. “The Reason I’ve Been Talking About All of These Dead People: Cultural Resistance in Laurie Anderson’s *Nerve Bible*” by Woodrow Hood opens the section with a detailed examination of Anderson’s creation that is informed by television. “Saints and Cyborgs: Mystical Performance Spaces (Re)Visioned” by August W. Staub and Michael J. Hussey argues for the similarity between the platea and sede of medieval theatrical productions and contemporary computer games (notably *Doom*). Robert Gross and Stephen Earnest provide reviews of two tales retold. Gross looks at a newly staged *Iphigénie en Tauride* and Earnest reviews a new music/dance version of *Les Enfants Terribles* created by Phillip Glass and Susan Marshall.