

**An insecure base: mothers in cults**  
**" Mothers in cults are like matryoshkas (Russian dolls)"**  
**(A cult is a Truman Show)**

Luigi Corvaglia

Lauren/Sylvia: *Look at what you've done to him!*

Christof: *I have given Truman the chance to lead a normal life. The world, the place you live in, is the sick place.*

**This could happen to you**

Christof: *He could leave at any time. If his was more than just a vague ambition, if he was absolutely determined to discover the truth, there's no way we could prevent him. I think what distresses you really, caller, is that ultimately Truman prefers his cell, as you call it.*

The phrase; "This could happen to you", which stands out on a poster depicting a jetliner hit by lightning, is not exactly the kind of warning we expect to see in a travel agency. In the movie; *The Truman Show*, this is what the protagonist can see when he goes in to buy a ticket to leave the quiet town where he lives, always controlled, monitored and broadcast 24 hours a day.

The intent of Christof, the director and the demiurge of the show, is to prevent Truman from abandoning the stage-set which he believes to be a town inhabited by sincere and joyful people. To do this Christof is committed to creating within the unwitting protagonist, a fear of the outside world, by describing it as full of dangers.

Security is inside the group; danger outside; a manichean vision that recalls life in a cult. Even there, one or more demiurges; charismatic builders of new worlds; instill in the followers a fear of that which is located beyond the confines of the group. What is outside, if not dangerous is irrelevant. In one scene we can see the little Truman at school expressing the desire to become an explorer, and the teacher who responds promptly, "Oh, you're too late! There's nothing left to explore ... " There is no world outside the cult.

To prevent Truman from discovering his fake reality, the director has delicately invented ways to dissuade exploration and broadcasts fake channels with news reports on the dangers of traveling and television shows on how good it is to stay at home. So it might seem that the director, as the cult leader, if not guaranting positive freedom; that is the ability to choose, at least allows a kind of negative freedom; ie, the lack of impediments to the choice, but this is not actually true, because fear is an impediment. This is what Steven Hassan refers to when he writes:

*When cult leaders tell the public, "Members are free to leave any time they want; the door is open," they give the impression that members have free will and are simply choosing to stay. Actually, members may not have a real choice, because they have been indoctrinated to have a phobia of the outside world. Induced phobias eliminate the psychological possibility of a person choosing to leave the group merely because he is*

*unhappy or wants to do something else*<sup>1</sup>.

But there is another impediment that eliminates that possibility of a “free” choice and demonstrates that the lack of overt violence and explicit threats are not a guarantee of freedom. George Orwell points out the issue well when he writes:

*(...) public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals, is less tolerant than any system of law. When human beings are governed by “thou shalt not,” the individual can practice a certain amount of eccentricity: when supposedly governed by “love” or “reason,” he is under continuous pressure to make him behave exactly the same way as everyone else.*<sup>2</sup>

Truman “feels trapped into a familial and social world to which he tries to conform whilst being unable to entirely identify with it, believing that he has no other choice”, some psychoanalysts noted<sup>3</sup>.

## **2. Seahaven. An insecure base.**

Christof: *Seahaven is the way the World should be*

Everything we have said so far about the movie *Truman Show*, in addition to being an excellent metaphor for the management of a cult, is also the perfect description of how good parents should not behave with their children. The British psychologist John Bowlby told us clearly:

*All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organised as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures.*<sup>4</sup>

That means that children should develop trust in their attachment figures in order to explore and enjoy the world, safe in the knowledge that they can return to their secure base for help if needed. In other words, a secure base is provided by care-giving figures who are sensitive and responsive and support exploration, because they know that their children are sure of their care and can turn to them as a safe haven when upset or anxious.

Though the tiny town where Truman used to live was called *Seahaven* (ie, Sea Haven), its function is absolutely different from what Bowlby attaches to the safe haven provided by good parents. Seahaven is the only safe place for Truman. A “safe haven”, as Bowlby intended it, is the harbor where we can take refuge when the storm comes and a starting point for new excursions to the open sea. In other words, a secure base. Exactly what a cult is not. A cult, like the director of the *Truman Show*, discourages exploration. So what is lost, is the ability to look at the outside world with confidence. The sea is always stormy.

A manichean system in which every security is placed within the limits of the cult implies general insecurity and a strengthening of the attachment to the only perceived centre of certainty: the cult, its leaders, its teachings and its dogmas. That is what we call *insecure*

---

<sup>1</sup> Hassan, S., *Combating Mind Control*, Park Street Press, Rochester, 1990, p. 65

<sup>2</sup> Orwell, G., *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, 1950, pp. 71–72

<sup>3</sup> Brearley, Michael; Sabbadini, Andrea (2008). "The Truman Show : How's it going to end?". *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 89 (2): 433–40.

<sup>4</sup> Bowlby, J, *A secure Base*. Basic Books , New York, p. 62

*attachment*, whereas the condition of trust in caregivers and confidence about the wider world provides a *secure attachment*. Some studies suggest that insecure attachment is a risk factor for the development of a psychopathology in childhood and in later life. It seems that these first life experiences of attachment affect self-esteem, self-regulation of emotions and behavior and the quality of relationships throughout life<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Mothers in cults are like matryoshkas (Russian dolls)

Christof: *I know you better than you know yourself.*

Truman: *You never had a camera in my head!*

Some of the followers of a cult are mothers. Mothers should be a secure base for their children. Therein lies a problem. They cannot be a source of security and confidence because of their own lack of security and confidence. In fact, the imbalance of power between the cult leader and the follower is analogous to that between parent and child. The leader is supposed to be the caregiver. The follower is infantilized. It is a set, a fake island where the leader is wise, powerful, devoted and trustworthy in the opinion of the disciples and the world outside is dangerous and misleading. The mother is wise, powerful, devoted and trustworthy in the opinion of her child but inept, impotent and incapable without the leader's guidance with respect to her own opinions. So there is a bigger mother, the cult, which contains a smaller one, the disciplined mother. It is like a matryoshka. The child asks his/her mother for guidance and the mother asks the leader. How can an insecure mother give security to her child? What we know is that this insecurity in the mother is further fed, precisely by leveraging on the condition of maternity. In fact cults direct the mother's child rearing to increase the perception of non-control by these women, whose power is not recognized, even in the most natural context of care giving and taking of responsibility.

The ways to do this are:

1. Control of conception and pregnancy
2. Discouraging the mother-child bond
3. Control of time spent with the child
4. Actual or threatened removal of the child from the mother
5. Monitoring and judging the relationship between the mother and the child

The conflict between their own sense of what is right and the cult's control could lead mothers to three different solutions:

- a. The mother may continue to consciously disagree with the cult practices, but will give in externally to resolve the pressure being applied on her. These mothers are often characterized as bad group members.
- b. Some mothers may repress their sense of right, fully embracing the group's ideology, yet maintain an unconscious feeling that something is wrong. These may often be the "good" cult members.

---

<sup>5</sup> Lorenzini R., Sassaroli S., "Attaccamento, conoscenza e disturbi di personalità", Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 1995

c. Some mothers may resolve the conflict by a total submission to the group and its deceptions, perhaps in exchange for a degree of power. These are the mothers who get permanently trapped<sup>6</sup>.

Mothers of group b., are like Truman who, according to the above mentioned psychoanalysts, lives "in a familial and social world to which he tries to conform while being unable to entirely identify with it". That's why he was able to get a boat and leave Seahaven.

#### 4. Addiction and cults

*Truman: Lauren, right? It's on your book.*

*Lauren: Lauren. Right. Right.*

*Truman: Well, I'm Truman.*

*Lauren: Yeah. I know. Look, Truman, I'm not allowed to talk to you. You know.*

*Truman: Yeah, well, I can understand, I'm a pretty dangerous character.*

Intervening in the mother-child relationship means interfering with the deepest bonds provided by nature and disturbing what for many women is the basis of much of their identity. Why is this so important? Because the relational condition plays an important role among the factors that help to maintain a condition of dependence. To understand this, let's try to respond to this question: What causes drug addiction? Probably most of the people will respond "drugs with their chemical hooks". But if you break a leg, for weeks you'll be given an opiate more powerful than heroin but you will not become an addict.

According to a study by Canadian psychologist Bruce Alexander, there is another variable that explains the addiction to drugs<sup>7</sup>. The experiment is called *Rat Park*. In his experiment Alexander created two environments: the first is the classic 'rat in a cage' to which morphine was administered and a daily amount of the drug left for it in a vial. The second, however, is a "paradise for rats," the Rat Park, complete with games, cans, running wheels, food and other forms of entertainment where rats could entertain social and sexual relationships. Even in Rat Park there was a bottle of morphine, this was also administered to the rats. The result was eloquent: the rat in the single cage stuck to the bottle and in no time it developed an addiction to drugs, losing interest in any other activity. The rats of Rat Park, after an initial enthusiasm, dropped the bottle. Some would return every so often to consume small amounts; others not even that. In a "social environment" that is broader and more interesting, the rat feels no need to "take drugs," the study concludes. We can suppose that, if it remains locked in a cage alone, the drug is an effective way of escape for the rat. It is, in fact, an adaptation to the circumstances.

This probably also occurs in the "cult addiction". In fact, the effectiveness of undue persuasion increases in specific relational conditions. So if we ask, "What causes enslavement to a charismatic leader?" The right response is not, "The leader with his or her psychological

---

<sup>6</sup> Stein, B., *Mothers in Cults: The Influence of Cults on the Relationship of Mothers to Their Children*, 1997

<sup>7</sup>Alexander, B.K., Beyerstein, B.L., Hadaway, P.F. & Coombs, R.B. (1981). The effects of early and later colony housing on oral ingestion of morphine in rats. *Pharmacology, Biochemistry, & Behavior*, 15, 571-576.

hooks". The process is very similar to that which we have just seen. In a cult we replace a substance with new relationships and new theories. In other words, some people might surrender to persuasion because they live like the rat in the cage. What is offered to them is an artificial, good integration in a warm and safe environment. It's a kind of rat park. That could be a good world for a rat, but what about humans? It is an artificial reality. It's like Seahaven in the Truman Show, as we said. Another cage with the initial one inside. The cage of loneliness and dissatisfaction contained within the park rat; a painted cage, with no apparent bars and a blue sky drawn on the background. Larger forms with smaller ones inside. It sounds like matryoshkas again ... So, back to the disciplined mothers. It is clear that this condition poses a risk to the loyalty to the group and its leader. A good mother-child relationship could reveal itself as a viable escape route from absolute cult ownership. The power of love and the importance of the child in her psychic life could distract the mother from the cult.

A religious allegory that one could read into the movie we are using as a metaphor relates to the Garden of Eden, from which Adam (Truman) having eaten from the tree of knowledge, wants to leave. In every "heaven" (heaven) inevitably appears a snake. This is also the case in Truman's ersatz paradise. There is the woman who reveals to him that he is on TV, before she is removed from the set. His dream of finding her is also the dream which; at first he doesn't know he has; of finding the truth of the outside world. Well, the mother-child bond risks to be a tree of knowledge. A child could be the opening that reveals the light of the outside world and awakens the inner one. A fissure that a cult must necessarily seal, as Chrisof does trying to prevent contact between the star of his show and the girl he loves.

Truman Burbank: *In case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening and goodnight.*