

We Are Living in a Screenworld -- Reality Isn't in the Real World

By Michael Ventura **Posted May 28, 2010 at www.alternet.org/story/147002**

Not so long ago, I taught a graduate writing seminar in which I got caught in an argument about virtual vs. "real" experience. Two students - among the brightest in the class -insisted that they could go to Rome via a computer program through which they could view every street, turn this corner and that as they pleased, look at every ruin and work of art, and their experience would be as real, as engaged, as if they'd actually been there. "But," said I, "a pigeon couldn't shit on your head."

Granting that any experience can be called "real," in that it *is* an experience, I argued that there are differences in the *nature* of virtual and actual reality. For one thing, on your walk through a virtual Rome, you aren't even walking: you're sitting. And what's Rome without the wonderful smells of food? Even if your virtual Rome is accompanied by recorded sounds of Rome, that's nothing like the sounds of racket, traffic, music, and *language*, the melodious cacophony of Italian, spoken all around you. A flat screen gives you no sense of Rome *behind* you, and *to the side of* you. The rain won't rain on you, and you won't have to dodge crazy drivers.

You're having a one-dimensional experience, literally and figuratively. And no matter what's inputted into the program, there's no chance of running into the girl who sat next to you in high school chemistry—or anyone else. What R. D. Laing once called "the freshness and forgivingness of creation" couldn't reach out to you, nor you to it.

Your computer program couldn't include the unprogrammed, yet the unprogrammed is generally what happens during the engagement of human beings with each other, and with the world. James Baldwin's truth that "any human touch can change you" isn't available on your computer.

I said what I thought obvious: the computerized Rome couldn't give you what a Laing or a Baldwin would most value about Rome: the city as a medium for engaging life beyond personal, private acts and perceptions. They didn't get it. My argument left them utterly unconvinced, and they looked at me bemusedly, as though I was mildly to be pitied because *I* didn't get it. What separated us? Between my sense of the real and theirs gaped a chasm that I didn't understand. What would a psychotherapist make of it? If, in your consulting room, one of these students told you that the Rome on his computer is more real than the real Rome, is that a symptom? if so, of what? Would it be a syndrome to be addressed in therapy? or just a piece of data, a reference-point for this particular client? At around the same time, I saw related behavior that no one would connect to psychological difficulty, at least in any conventional sense.

I was driving the Southwest with a companion who'd never been there. In Arizona, on the edge of the Painted Desert, we stopped at the Petrified Forest, a vast, barren expanse of chaparral and mesas, on which lie the trunks of ancient trees turned to stone. On these trees, every detail of bark is present and vivid, yet somehow a forest has become rock. We parked at the first viewing point. My companion, without saying a word, made her way down a slope and sat. I figured she'd be there a while, absorbing this place out of sight of the road and of me, watching the Petrified Forest's stones, birds, critters, and clouds, and maybe getting bit by a bug or two—a contemplative engagement with a present terrain.

Waiting for her, maybe an hour, I had a very different experience. Cars and vans would pull up; couples and families and friends would get out and take pictures of the landscape, and of each other, with video and still cameras. As I stood there, leaning on my car, at least a couple of dozen vehicles, maybe more, came and went. After a few minutes of disbelief, I began timing them. With three exceptions, they stayed no longer than five minutes. Many stayed barely two or three. They piled out of their vehicles, took their pictures, piled back in, and left, presumably headed for the next viewing point, presumably to do the same. Some came from as far as Europe and Asia. All had paid a bunch of money and expended great effort to get to the Petrified Forest, yet they could, in no way that I understood, be said to have *been* there. When they returned home, would they spend more time watching the Petrified Forest on their screens than they'd spent actually *at* the Petrified Forest? Was I crazy to think that their compulsion (not too strong a word if you'd seen them) to squeeze the Petrified Forest into their little screens was a means *not* to engage this wondrous and disturbing place? To me, they were locking these mysterious vistas into a controlled and unthreatening space. What was *their* connection to what I'd define as "reality"? They were treating the real, physical thing as if it were a TV show, and they were flipping channels.

All through that journey—at Monument Valley, Canyon de Chelly, the Grand Canyon—I saw the same behavior. Not everyone engaged the landscape that way, but most did—families, couples, busloads of tourists. This behavior was their version of "normal." Of course, cameras of all sorts have their place on a vacation, but *only* to take photos and videos.

Again, is it a psychological symptom? If so, of what, especially when considered as a mode of behavior on a fairly massive scale?

From Tactile to Virtual

All this began to happen just as Google was getting off the ground, four or five years before YouTube, and before cell phones could take pictures. Since then, what seemed to me aberrant behavior has become the world we live in.

I'm not a therapist: I'm a writer; but psychotherapy has always been key to how I make sense of the world, and I tend to look at behavior as symptomatic, in whatever sphere—intimate, political, commercial. Novelists and therapists share the fundamental assumption that behavior means more than itself, stems from deeper roots than what can be seen on the surface, and has wider implications than its supposed conscious purpose and assumptions. So it *meant* something when technologies that I view as disengaging became common in my own work. Something, but what? I used to begin work with a tactile, blank page, making keystrokes on a typewriter whose mechanics I understood. Now I begin with a blank screen on a machine whose technology I can barely comprehend. I don't believe that's changed me as a writer, but I miss the typewriter's clickety-clack, the ding of the margin-bell, the movement of the carriage back and forth, the shudder of my desk under pounded keys. (I blew my first computer keyboard in a matter of weeks, before I learned to type more gently.) The computer, which once seemed alien, is now embedded in the dailiness of my life; but after 12 years, I'm no closer to understanding it. I believe more than ever that a virtual Rome isn't Rome, and is, in fact, nothing like Rome, and I'd rather gaze at the Petrified Forest than photograph it—because, unless one is a photographer of the first rank, there's no way to trap that grandeur in a box. Still, it must mean something that when I look about me, I see screens, screens, screens—everywhere, screens, including right here, in front of me, right now.

At arm's reach are three: the trio of computers accessible from this chair (often I work on two computers at once). Another screen glares across the room—the television. My cell phone, also at arm's reach, has a screen, even though I bought the simplest device possible: it cost 10 bucks, but it can take and transmit photos and movies, and features menus I don't bother to understand.

Now you see screens at checkout counters and laundromats, in restaurants and waiting rooms, and on the dashboards of cars and in their back seats. Millions of regular folks preen for screens on YouTube and Facebook, marketing their image like politicians or starlets. What with Blackberrys, iPhones, and a 10-buck cell, few Americans go anywhere anymore without a screen that connects to every other screen in some way or other, linking to any event or broadcast or data source anywhere, including satellite photos of every address you know, and most you don't.

These screens disconnect us, too. I work where I live, so, theoretically, I need never leave my apartment: I can order shoes, pet food, people food, parts for my car, and lingerie for my girlfriend right here on this screen, and anything purchasable can be delivered right to my door. Now that I think of it, it seems like half the people I know met their present significant others via the screen, and they aren't kids: they're middle-aged and aging. The power of these interconnected screens has grown enough that a virtually unknown woman can step before the media on a Friday and by the following Wednesday be a superstar, nominated for the vice presidency of the United States. A man touted not so long ago as a promising candidate for president uses the obscure racial slur *macaca*, and it takes just one person with a cell phone to make an audiovisual recording of the event. Presto! Within hours, the whole world knows, and the viability of a presidential hopeful evaporates into cyberspace.

In 1949, George Orwell published *1984*, a vision of the worst possible society, in which screens were everywhere, inescapable. History has turned out to be not nearly so gloomy but far more surreal. If in 1980, say, after directing *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Steven Spielberg had made a sci-fi adventure-comedy called *Screenworld*, well, he might have envisioned something very like our world, which, in 1980, would have seemed dizzying, funny, ridiculous, scary, technologically promiscuous, 24/7 exhausting, and appallingly lacking in privacy (privacy as a fact and as a value). Above all, in 1980, *Screenworld* would have seemed impossible, or, at the least, an uncertain, unmanageable future that lay thankfully in some alternate universe, far, far away.

Yet today, here we are, you and me, often engaging the world more through screens than face-to-face. Without planning to, and without especially wanting to, willy-nilly, we've become citizens of Screenworld.

A Collective Delusion of Reality

Something enormous has happened: the scale on which our society judges a human event has changed—which, in itself, is a human event of the first magnitude, and is, to my knowledge, something psychotherapy has barely begun to gauge.

In Screenworld, images of reality supersede reality itself, editing it, transforming it, playing with it in any fashion, until the *source* of the image ceases to matter while the image itself becomes all that matters. It began a century ago, with motion pictures, when one had to seek out the screen but couldn't control it. Sixty years ago, television brought the screen into our homes. However great their influence, one left the TV and the movie theater to go out into *the world*. Now, cyber-powered Screenworld is ever-present, making reality seem infinitely malleable, and all of us may

add our own twists at a whim. In Screenworld, *the* world has become a place in which, as a band called Living Color put it, "everything is possible, but nothing is real."

When a Blackberry brings the workplace with you wherever you go, *where* you are becomes less itself, less important *as* itself: the sense of a *place* loses its specificity, its particularity, its own complete reality. When you shop online, your community becomes less real; you don't need it as you once did: you don't need the bookstore; you don't need the music store. Losing their reality, such places disappear—literally. You walk down the street talking on your cell, and the observable world becomes a mere backdrop—unless you see something to video on your phone, when the world becomes your movie-set, gauged for its value as entertainment, not engagement. With an iPhone on your belt and an iPod in your ear, solitude is no longer solitary, while you hear not the sounds of the world, but your programmed soundtrack. The very idea of privacy is close to becoming alien, especially to the young, for whom to be "out of touch" is unthinkable, while calling and texting are seemingly constant. A place inaccessible to Screenworld is called a "dead zone"—which kind of says it all about Screenworld.

Isn't there something peculiarly disembodied about it? Human beings evolved to take in an enormous amount of information through our bodies. That's what "body language" is all about, not only gestures and postures, but physical inflections so subtle we aren't aware of making them in. Consider something as uncomfortably intimate as standing with strangers in an elevator: there are strict rules of elevator etiquette—never stare at anyone, keep your eyes front and slightly downward—precisely to protect ourselves from how forcefully bodies speak to one another, even unintentionally. Or consider the subtle signals that pass through a simple handshake. That entire realm of reality is absent from Screenworld, where one need never deal with the bodily strangeness of strangers—for even face-to-face on a web-cam, one responds to the image of a body, not a body, and that image rarely conveys skin-tone, not to mention scent. Is this bad? Is it good? I'm not making those judgments. I'm simply pointing out that Screenworld is another order of reality, one that has overwhelmingly instituted itself amid what we used to call reality, changing the givens, the rules, the environment. As animals, we're built to live in a physical world; in Screenworld, we're living in something else. In our overlay of cyberspace and physical space, bodily reality is devalued, while the adage that "the unexamined life is not worth living" gets distorted into "what the screen does not record or project is not *really* happening."

Without anyone's intending it, the Über-reality of Screenworld tends to frame as inferior or minor that which is beyond its concern or reach, for that's the fundamental and unstated assumption that it enforces, and it's Screenworld's most dangerous illusion—or, more accurately, its delusion, a delusion that should interest the entire field of psychotherapy, a delusion that what's untranslatable through Screenworld, or of no interest to it, has no urgency, no vitality.

That very delusion bestows upon Screenworld its power—the notion, especially in the young, that *not* to pay close attention to all these screens is to be less than fully engaged.

The dilemma is: how does one find or grow a sense of centeredness amid this continually shifting screenscape?

That isn't a question Screenworld encourages or entertains, and isn't a question I'll attempt to answer here, but it's an issue that psychotherapy must investigate—because, for many, Screenworld is the only world.