

WELCOME TO THE DREAMTIME – ZG, 1988

By Michael Ventura

[Note, 2008: In 1988 Rosetta Brooks, then editor of ZG magazine, asked me to write on this subject. The piece was later reprinted under various titles in Whole Earth Review, LA Weekly, “Letters at 3AM: Reports on Endarkenment” (where it’s wrongly dated), and “We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and The World Is Getting Worse.” I consider it my most significant essay. My thanks to Rosetta for her inspiration.-MV]

Part I: An Inventory of Timelessness

We’ve dispensed with time, so we’re lost in space.

Item: Wells Fargo has introduced a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week telephone service. You can now pick up the phone at any hour, from anywhere, and talk to someone who can answer any conceivable question about your banking needs. This stretches the term “banking needs” beyond all previous definitions of the 600-odd-year history of Western banking. Why do my bankers anticipate that I’ll need them at three o’clock of a Sunday morning? Partly because there’s no telling where I’ll be—Tokyo, Barcelona, Moscow, desperate to know what my balance is before the market opens in Berlin or Hong Kong. Yet a hefty percentage of the calls are from Wells-Fargo’s home time-zone, and involve personal, not business accounts. Which means that ‘round midnight, in these United States, a number of demographically ordinary people feel the pressing need to question their banker.

And it’s not just that you’re thinking about your bank in the wee hours. Your bank is thinking about you. It has decided that there should be less of a boundary between its needs and yours. So the bank, a traditionally conservative institution, has redefined a fragment of time and space.

This is about boundaries. The boundaries between intimate time and business time; between home and work; between night and day; between individual and corporate; between environment and psyche. Fuzzed boundaries. Areas once distinct that now blend into each other. Dislocated time. Timeless space.

Twenty-four hour call-ins and automatic tellers are in themselves insignificant details of contemporary life. But as parts of a pattern, they speak of a people increasingly coaxed to live without pattern. And increasingly *demanding* to live without pattern *in terms of services*, while they bemoan the loss of pattern in their morality, their love-life, their thought. If one individual demanded to do his/her banking at three in the morning, it would appear to be behavior that had gone over a risky edge. Some would begin to question other aspects of that individual’s life. When a corporation provides the service,

and it meets the demands of thousands . . . in spite of what even the most conservative people might prefer morally or politically, their pattern-less consumerism disrupts the sense of time and space that made their old morality possible.

Item: Life in Clarendon, a town of about 1,400 in the Texas Panhandle, revolves around its several fundamentalist churches. Like many towns in that part of the country, it's still "dry" – you can't buy alcohol within the city limits. But not too long ago an AM/PM convenience store opened. It never closes. And such stores exist now in almost every small town in the country. Why do they need such a thing, in such a town?

Until recently, in that area, you could tune in two, sometimes three television stations, depending on the weather. The stations signed off around midnight, often earlier. Now, with satellite and cable, you can tune in a couple of dozen stations, and they never sign off. Some of those stations show porn in the wee hours. And MTV all the time. Constant news. And movies that no one in this area would have ever heard of otherwise. So a place that had depended for its way of life upon its isolation, upon its strict regulation of what it allowed into its boundaries, upon its rooted connection to what it imagines to be the morality of the nineteenth century – has been penetrated by what it views as a service. It is no longer separate in space, it no longer has a farmer's sense of time.

Or Utah. A place owned by the Mormon church, a place with no separation of church and state. With satellite and cable, late-night porn shows have become very, very popular in Utah. Which means: Utah is no longer Utah at three in the morning. Night now turns Utah inside out. At that time, the space can no longer be depended upon to be the space it had intended to be.

Time and space, in such places, have become tentative, arbitrary. And this in the most concrete, personal sense. There are instruments in each home eating away at the time and space of people who have become addicted to those instruments. Consciously, these are people who see themselves as righteous and conservative, and they emphatically don't want this to happen to them. Yet something else is operative in them, some hunger that they follow without thought or plan, in which they indulge in activities that subtly but thoroughly undermine their most cherished assumptions. They want more and more boundaries, yet live less and less within those boundaries. It's fair, then, to assume that something else, something deeper within them, is doing this subversive wanting.

Item: The electric lightbulb. An invention barely a hundred years old. In general use for roughly seventy years now. The technological beginning of the end of linear time. Before the lightbulb, darkness constricted human space. Outside the cities especially, night shrank the entire landscape into the space within arm's reach. (The Moon figures so greatly in our iconography because it was all that allowed one to go far out into the night. But it was rarely bright enough, and often obscured by weather.) Now – there are few places in America or Europe truly dark at night. And the glow of even a small town can be seen for many miles. Light gives us all the space we want, anytime we want it. Psycho-active events of monstrous proportions can take place. Hitler's Nuremberg rallies, all those thousands with stiffly raised arms in the night, are impossible without

spotlights. Light creates the necessary space, pushing back the boundaries of times. Dreamtime becomes a time for acting out the nightmare.

Item: The car is a private space that can go in any direction at any time. The motel room cinched that: *Anywhere* you go, there will be a space for you. A fact unique to contemporary life, and alien to every previous society. But the fact that there's a room for you anywhere, makes the place where you *are* less substantial. Thus you are a transient, without having chosen to be one. Human transience used to be defined almost solely by death. Now the fact of so much choice makes everyone a transient *all* the time. And, for most now, makes any single choice almost unbearably tentative. Why be where you are, who you are, when you can just as easily be somewhere else, behaving perhaps differently?

Again, this is a question that most demographically average people ask themselves often in our society. How can it not make them more and more uncertain? Hence they crave certainty in all the wrong places. In politics – which has *always* been uncertain. In metaphysics – which by its nature is uncertain. In love and sex – where certainty breeds boredom and diminishes lovers in each other's eyes. Many of these people blame the uncertainty, the tentative quality of their lives on “liberalism,” “humanism,” “relativism,” and all the behavior they can cram into those words – when what is really going on is that once they were prisoners of time and space, and they will never be prisoners of them again, and they miss those prisons desperately. How long will it take them to be come accustomed to timelessness? This has become a crucial historical question. For until they acclimate themselves, they will continue to want reactionary solutions that can only increase the chaos.

Part II: The Roots of Timelessness

It began with Jesus. Boris Pasternak, in *Doctor Zhivago*, saw this clearly:

“In the first (Western) miracle, you have a popular leader, the patriarch Moses, dividing the waters by a magic gesture, allowing a whole nation – countless numbers, hundred of thousands – to go through . . . In the second miracle you have a girl – an everyday figure who would have gone unnoticed in the ancient world – quietly, secretly, bringing forth a child . . . What an enormously significant change! How did it come about that an individual human event, insignificant by ancient standards, was regarded as equal in significance to the migration of a whole people? . . . Individual human life became the life story of God, and its contents filled the past expanses of the universe.”

We don't know how it came about, but we know the enormity of the result. In Judaism, God redeemed a race. In Christianity, God redeemed *you*. An absolute reversal of metaphysics as it was practiced *everywhere else in the world*. Everywhere else, with the exception of the most highly sophisticated Buddhism, worship was *always* tribal: a

people propitiating existence for comparatively small favors. But now, in the West, the *individual* was entitled to the full and undivided attention of the Universe. A staggering change in individual space and eternal time.

It was a far smaller, slower, rigidly stratified world – a world in which most owned nothing and could go nowhere – so it took the better part of 1,500 years for this change to truly take root. First came the creation of perspective in painting – individual sense of space leapt past previous boundaries into an infinitely receding background. Foreground had been all. Now, foreground was arbitrary, made small by background.

But the great catalyst of change was Columbus' voyage to the Americas in 1492. The dream inherent in artistic perspective was made reality. The alluring, and to all intents and purposes infinite, background was now being mapped. Europe, and the rest of the world, now had somewhere to go. *Nothing need be permanent anymore.* Some Europeans went by choice, some were driven; Africans were dragged off their ancestral land by force; Amerindians were pushed off theirs. The social glue of every culture in human history, the relation of a people to a land, a particular space, disintegrated. With that sense of space destroyed, it was only a matter of momentum before time would be destroyed as well.

The Christianist sense of the individual being the center of the universe now had the space to become daily reality. Later, the technological invention of timelessness – of not being important to human activity what segment of day it was – would, in the context of such space, create spacelessness as well. The individual, the center of the universe, no longer had a definite ground to stand on. Neil Armstrong on the Moon *is* the new image of what it means to be human – infinite space on all ends, living in several time zones at once, desperately carrying one's own power pack, one's own air supply, saying trivial things, to comfort oneself, to others hundreds of thousands of miles away who may or may not be listening.

It is no wonder that the United States all but abandoned the exploration of other planets for the next two decades. Intellectuals fastened on the image of the whole Earth hanging above the moon-man; but on other levels the society was more inwardly shaken than outwardly exhilarated by the precariousness of that human being in a space/time that brought on the fear of falling and the fear of suffocation, fears imprinted in our genes.

But since the moon landing we've traveled farther in time and space than the astronauts. Now, with such electronic instantaneousness at our fingertips all night and day, tiny towns in Texas and Utah might as well be the Moon for all the temporal stability one can find in them.

Be careful of what you want, because you just might get it. The West has gotten what it's prayed for since the birth of Christ: every individual is being addressed directly, at all times, by an infinite universe.

In Biblical mythology, this state of being is followed by Apocalypse.

Part III: Welcome To The Apocalypse

But what is the Apocalypse? In Revelations it is described as the coming of the Beast:

“Then I saw a beast coming up from the sea with ten horns and seven heads, and upon his horns ten diadems, and upon his heads the names of blasphemy. The beast I saw was like a leopard, and his feet as those of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and his great authority . . . Then the whole earth went in wonder after the beast . . . Who is like the beast, and who can fight with him?”

From antiquity to Freud to Jung, the sea is the great symbol of the human psyche. So the beast is the manifestation, in the waking world, of what's deepest in the psyche. It's a multilayered, multi-headed image, an image of simultaneity, which in itself is seen as great power. “And upon his heads the names of blasphemy” – the expectation is that when this psychic beast appeared it would challenge all the laws.

These fearful writers of Christianity sensed what had been started: the new Christianist focus on the individual would sooner or later bring forth the secrets of the psyche – but in ways which would contradict their conscious morality. They saw this as, literally, the end of the world.

But perhaps they were being a mite too concrete. It is the end of *a* world, certainly – the world in which waking and dreaming are rigidly separate. When the “beast” rises from the “sea,” the surrealities of our dreamlife become the daily facts of waking life.

For we in the late twentieth century live in the time-space of the dream. The dream's instantaneous changes, its unpredictable metamorphoses, random violence, archetypal sex; its constant cascade of super-charged imagery; its threatening sense of multiple meaning – for a quarter of a million years this environment enveloped us only in our sleep, or in arts experienced by the very few, or in very carefully orchestrated religious rituals. Now, in our electronic environment, the dreamworld greets us when we open our eyes. It is the “something deeper” within us that creates all this subversive wanting, wanting, wanting: the long-suppressed psyche, as outrageous in conservatives as in bohemians, in capitalists as in Marxists, in evangelicals as in atheists, that is finally freed to feed on the outer world and so to grow.

In every other century there was an obvious separation between what's called the “subconscious” and the “conscious.” Individual daily life was more or less ordered, however unjust or distasteful, and cacophonous cross-purposes were left to be slept through in dreams. But now we live in a technologically hallucinogenic culture that behaves with the sudden dynamics of the dream. *That duplicates the conditions of dreaming.* Technology projects the subconscious into countless *things*. What

distinguishes the twentieth century is that each individual life is a daily progression through a concrete but fluctuating landscape of the psyche's projections. The surreality, simultaneity, sexuality, and instantaneous changes that occur in our dreams also occur all around us. So the condition of our subconscious is now also the condition of this physical environment we've built for ourselves. And, as Freud was the first to point out, "In the subconscious, there is no time." Without time, there can be no space. Without time and space, the traditional filters and channels of human consciousness dissolve.

We reel between dream and dream, between the dreams of our sleep that speak to us alone and the dream-scape of this waking world in which we make our way through millions of dream-fragments that collide around us, each with its fleeting moment of dominance.

It was easy, or so it seems now, to love the world of rigid time and space. The world *was* a world, it held still long enough to *be* a world, and gave us time to learn to love it. But loving this utter state of flux, where time has been shattered and space has been both elongated and compressed beyond dimensions – we want to love it, we have love in us to give it, but we do not know how, nobody does. Yet daily life hinges on what we are and are not able to love. So these changes in our time and space and have cut through the foundations of what made daily life livable and what we found loveable in one another.

And yet – we made this world. We gobble up its instantaneousness and breathlessly want more. Could it be that our collective purpose is to revivify the psyche by making it deal with its labyrinthine *physical* image at every turn? Have we created this multifarious, timeless, spaceless world in order finally to learn to live within and use our own immense and cacophonous psyches?

Is this the collective thrust of our history? A genetic demand? Individually, the contemporary environment seems to have been thrust upon us. But collectively, we've *made* this world. And, both individually and collectively, we've eagerly welcomed each separate manifestation that's created this collective change. Radio, television, telephones, lightbulbs, flight – all the building blocks of contemporary life have been seized upon everywhere in the world. It is not enough to blame this on capitalism or consumerism. The very eagerness of the world's embrace of this hallucinogenic technology by the most different sorts of people is evidence of the deepest of longings.

For the human psyche is one of the great forces of nature, and what is most frightening about this space/time technology is that it *exposes us to this force within us* as nothing else ever has. We are standing in the storm of our own being. Spacelessness and timelessness are not objective realities out there somewhere. They are creations of our psyches. So we must face the fact that this may be our natural habitat. We have willy-nilly broken through all the old rigidities, all the limits we thought were Nature itself, and we can never go back. This is a new Nature. Dream has become reality. And through that fact echoes what may yet be the great line of our culture: "In dreams begins responsibility."

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