SCREENWORLD

By Michael Ventura
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Screens, screens, screens – everywhere, screens. Right in front of me, in arm's reach, are three: the three computers accessible from this chair (often I work on two at once). Another screen's across the room – the TV. My cell phone, also in 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. You see screens at checkout counters, restaurants, laundromats, waiting rooms, and on the dashboards of cars. Millions preen for screens on YouTube and Facebook, marketing their images like politicians or starlets. What with Blackberrys, iPhones, and my 10-buck cell, few Americans go anywhere anymore without a handy screen that connects to every other screen in some way or other, linking to any event, broadcast, or data source anywhere, including satellite photos of every address you know. The screens disconnect, as well: 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, to be delivered right to my door. Now that I think of it, it seems half the people I know met their present significant others via the screen.

The power of these interconnected screens is such 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. Conversely, a man touted as a promising presidential candidate uses the obscure racial slur "macaca," someone videos the event with a cell phone, within hours every news outlet replays the video, and the viability of a presidential hopeful evaporates into Cyberspace.

In 1949 George Orwell published *1984,* his vision of the worst possible society – a society in which screens are everywhere, inescapable. History's 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,* Stephen Speilberg 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). But in 1980, *Screenworld* would have seemed impossible, or, at the least, an uncertain and unmanageable future that lay thankfully in some alternate universe far, far away. Yet today here we are, you and me, often engaging the world far more through screens than we engage face-to-face. Without planning to, and without especially wanting to, willy-nilly we've become citizens of Screenworld.

In Screenworld the rules of engagement – and the rules of perception -- seem to have altered. I realized this most vividly when I taught a graduate seminar at an institution prestigious in the arts. During a discussion two bright young men argued 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 if they actually went to Rome, Italy.

"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're not walking; you're sitting. And there's no chance you'll run into the girl you used to sit next to in chemistry class – nor anyone else. Your program could not include the unprogrammed, which is generally what happens during the engagement of human beings one with another, for, as James Baldwin wrote, "Any human touch can change you." I said what I thought obvious. The computer program of Rome could not offer what's most valuable about Rome (or anywhere): Rome as a medium for engaging life beyond one's personal, private perception – beyond, that is, one's control.

They looked at me with the bemused pity that the young reserve for fogies who, as they said, "didn't get it."

In Screenworld face-to-face engagement is devalued yet one is never alone. Screenworld places less and less emphasis on privacy and more and more on accessibility. On your Blackberry or iPhone, the office is always with you. With YouTube and Facebook, you are accessible to whomever. Especially for many young adults, the idea of being "out of touch" is alien -- while calling and texting are constant. A place inaccessible to Screenworld is called a "dead zone."

Which kind of says it all about Screenworld.

Screenworld develops and reinforces the ability to disconnect quickly from your present circumstance and connect to something or someone somewhere else, with no commitment or intention of remaining connected to anything for long. How does one find or grow a sense of centeredness amidst this continually shifting screenscape? Not a question Screenworld encourages or entertains. In Screenworld one shifts constantly between being a spectator and a performer – the passivity of being a spectator and the artificiality of being a performer become engrained life behaviors. In Screenworld, everybody's a screen star, and everybody's watching a screen.

Screenworld has become our prime frame of reference politically, commercially, culturally, and socially. Americans born since 1985 are likely to take Screenworld completely for granted as *the* world.

Without anyone intending it, the uberreality of Screenworld tends to frame as inferior or minor that which is beyond Screenworld's concern or reach. This is Screenworld's most dangerous illusion – or, more accurately, its delusion: that what is untranslatable through Screenworld, or of no interest to Screenworld, is thereby somehow drained of its urgency and vitality. In fact, that very delusion bestows upon Screenworld its extraordinary power – the notion, especially in the young, that not to pay close attention to all these screens is not to be fully engaged, fully a participant of today. It's such a constant, ever-present message, blazing from all the screens of Screenworld, that perhaps it's what we've all come to believe or assume -- at least when gauging our relationship to the general zeitgeist. There's one's own world and there's *the* world, and the present societal consensus seems to be that *the* world is Screenworld.

Here at the *Chronicle,* when I write "Moon" or "Sun," proofreaders change them to "moon" and "sun." But if I write "cyberspace," they change it to "Cyberspace." The star that sustains us and the orb that accompanies us don't rate capital letters. Cyberspace does. Screenworld rules.

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. Importance, or lack thereof, is judged by impact on Screenworld. This began a century ago with

motion pictures, when one had to seek out the screen but could not control it. Sixty years ago, television brought the screen into our homes. Yet, however great their influence, one left the TV and the movie theater to go out into *the world.* Now Screenworld is ever-present, making reality seem infinitely malleable. Screenworld is another order of reality that has overwhelmingly instituted itself amidst 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, something other. In our overlay of Cyberspace and physical space, is bodily, face-to-face reality idevalued? Heightened? Changed? Altered a little or a lot? It's all too new to say.

We create something; it recreates us – but we can't predict how. We never know how we've been changed until we've absorbed the change. That's the way it's always been, and that is all that has not changed.

A version of this column, focusing on psychotherapy, appeared in the January issue of Psychotherapy Networker.