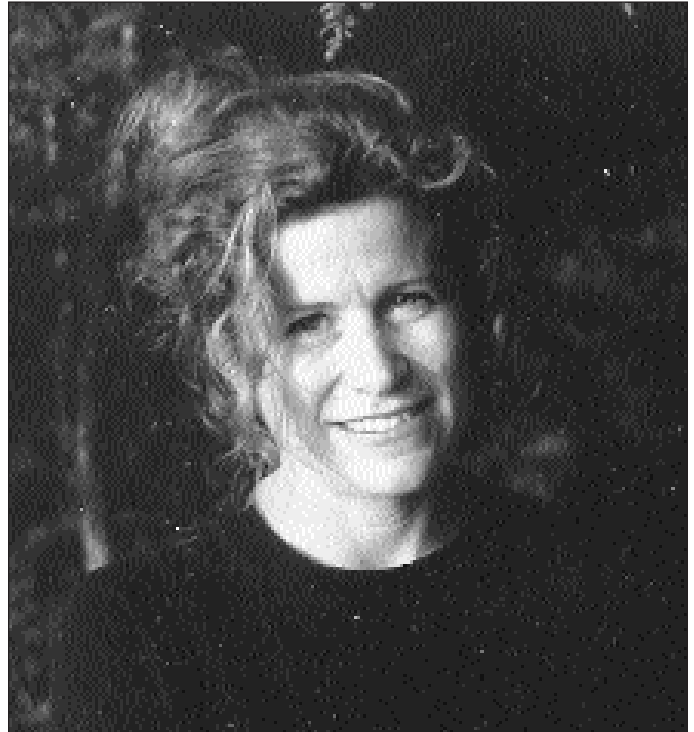


No Surprises: Manufactured Reality & The Extinction of Experience

Growing up in California, I spent many summers backpacking and rock climbing in the Sierra Nevada. Like most hikers, I kept a stainless steel cup hooked to my belt by its crooked handle so I could dip into a stream whenever I was thirsty. That mountain water, running black and deep or white and frothy, was icy, sweet, and delicious. It never occurred to me then to wonder if the water were safe to drink, but today I would have to wonder. Grazing and erosion have polluted most Sierra streams with giardia, an intestinal parasite. Drinking from these streams will surely make you sick. But it's not the pollution I'm interested in, it's the loss of freedom to experience a world we can call natural, a world in which our deepest instincts and individual lives still count.

Living in or near cities, as most people do, we dwell in increasingly self-referential environments. Streets, buildings, cars, billboards, airplanes, and helicopters—nearly everything around us has been made by humans, and we forget with astonishing ease that the world is, or ever was, otherwise. For several weeks in April, 1997, the Hale Bopp comet was a bright smudge in the western night sky. I was captivated—it appealed to a wordless and primordial place within me—as I crossed the Golden Gate Bridge on my way home. Knowing its visit brief, I felt sharply present. Like a mariner using the constellations, I located myself by it. I also felt related to the ancients who had been awed by it and to those yet to come, who would, if they could, witness its next visit. The comet stood out in a sky that was otherwise opaque, devoid of stars, the depth of dark space replaced by the smear of bright city lights. To look at a sky filled with stars is to be reminded that humans did not create most things—that there are other forces at work—a humbling and inspiring perspective, and one easily lost. As people migrate to cities, and cities engulf wilderness, the experience of looking up into the night sky and seeing stars is becoming extinct.

My grandparents lived in Mexico when I was growing up, and I spent part of every summer with them at the beaches of Guaymas, Mazatlan, and Acapulco. I loved to sit on the warm sand, lean against a palm tree, and sip coconut milk from a coconut plucked from the shadow of the fronds high above. Today 29 percent of the palms in the world are endangered. But a plant doesn't disappear without wider ramifications—the whole web of relationship within which it exists is affected. That same grandmother loved roses, from the big, blood red, and lustily overripe cabbage roses to the small, fragile, pale pink dog roses on climbing vines. When I went to Russia as a teenager, the only thing she wanted me to bring back was an attar of rose that could only be found there. Since that trip, 14 percent of rose



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species, with their unique fragrances, have joined the endangered species list. Right now one out of every eight plants on the planet is imperiled—nearly 34,000 plant species at last count—including 14 percent of the cherries, 32 percent of the lilies, and 32 percent of the irises. The experiences that shaped my grandmother's life and character (and through her my own life and character) may be unknown to her great-grandchildren.

These experiences—drinking Sierra stream water, seeing



the multitude of stars in the sky, smelling the fragrance of a wild rose—let me know with a cellular certainty that I am part of something greater than myself. Some may say that my attachment to these experiences is vestigial, that we are evolving away from the need for such unmediated experiences in nature. But my interest in these extinct and disappearing experiences is not nostalgia. It is rooted in my concern about how the choices we make as individuals and as a global society are reshaping the world—the actual sensual and conceptual context—in which we live. Perhaps more importantly, I am concerned about who we are, what we are becoming, and what it means to live a human life.

As the global natural environment becomes ever less diverse, global culture becomes ever more homogenized; the diverse, dynamically feral world is being replaced with a samer, tamer, humanly-constructed world. These changes are not simply ones of values and rights that can be adjudicated in courts of law. We must recognize we are redirecting evolution away from a predominantly wild process to one that is predominantly artificial. And, that this redirection carries profound consequences for any developing human consciousness, now and in the future. What will happen to an individual human life and to the human species as a whole without exposure to and participation with a world larger than ourselves?

We have good reason to feel viscerally repulsed by the kinds of experiences rapidly being made for “global villagers.” The global economy systematically reduces the function of human beings to one of spending money via commercial enterprise to support a transnational economic superstructure. This superstructure constricts the boundaries of our experience to serve its own economic purpose. Requiring a constant infusion of capital to survive, it effectively channels all experience into an economic one. Our money is its lifeblood, and we are being programmed to spend. As this happens, human behavior globally becomes more uniform, more predictable, and more marketable. This, of course, is the basis of “branding,” the golden goal of global business. A Starbucks or McDonald’s or Holiday Inn offers the comfort of familiarity, providing essentially the same experience whether we are in Los Angeles, Beijing, Milan, or Hong Kong. When we walk into a Target, a Burger King, or a Banana Republic—no matter where we are in the world—we are in the “same place,” and we know why we are there, what we expect of others who are there, and what is expected of us. The Holiday Inn Hotel chain understood this early on; their motto was “No Surprises.” Although

many people clearly take comfort in this predictability of experience, these manufactured experiences condition an ever deepening acceptance of environments designed to do two things: encourage spending and provide entertainment.

Architect John Jerde specializes in creating environments that generate these programmed and packaged experiences. In assessing his work in the *New York Times*, Las Vegas developer and impresario Steve Wynn boldly asserts that Jerde “is the Bernini of our time. . . . These are the cathedrals of our time.” The “cathedrals” he refers to are Disneyland, the Mall of America, and the Bellagio Hotel Casino in Las Vegas, a total environment developed by Mr. Wynn according to Jerde’s design. Clearly Mr. Wynn is suffering from confusion between two very distinct categories: the spiritual and the commercial. How might we reasonably

compare, for example, our experiences of the cathedral and the casino? One arises out of an intention to create a spiritual experience and a monument to God; the other out of an intention to create an entertainment experience within which people will be parted from their money as quickly, mindlessly and in as many ways as possible. Bellagio boasts of its \$1.6 billion budget, \$3 million art collection, 1,800-seat theatre, expensive restaurants, and long list of luxury businesses. In these “cathedrals,” only money is on the altar.

Cathedrals have served as places of respite, succor, and inspiration for believers and non-believers alike. The architecture of a cathedral creates space and opportunity to encounter the unknown; it allows the unpredictable to occur. Every element of a cathedral connects us to those who have come before: the stone tiles underfoot worn smooth by thousands of feet over time, the wood pews with their mellowed patina of age, the myriad candles flickering with the prayers of thousands of people over hundreds of years. Every visitor participates in and contributes to the deepening quality of that experience.

Disneyland, the Mall of America and Bellagio, on the other hand, do not co-evolve with their visitors. Bellagio’s environment will not deepen over time as a result of the people who pass through; indeed, it is expressly designed not to age. Rather than providing an experience of relationship, it reinforces the myth of discrete individuals dwelling in a world made just for them—in large measure that is its appeal. Bellagio’s hotel rooms make visitors feel as if they were the first and only people to inhabit that space. Its newness is carefully controlled and so is the experience it engenders. Bellagio is “just this moment” frozen in time. It doesn’t change—and thus doesn’t allow us to change. For

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that reason alone, it is particularly pernicious and misleading.

Jerde and Wynn build on another confusion between two distinct categories: the authentic and the artificial. Mr. Jerde asserts that his projects “capture the essence of their environments.” Precisely what environments does he imagine he is capturing? There is a real Bellagio—a small town nestled in the Italian Alps beside Lake Como. Its character arises from a combination of many things: its human-scale buildings and cobblestone streets, its lush gardens, a feeling of its existence over time, and perhaps most importantly the natural beauty and setting of its Mediterranean environment. Bellagio, Italy, arose as an environmentally appropriate and culturally authentic expression directly related to place. Bellagio, Las Vegas, Mr. Jerde’s bogus replication, is completely artificial. Jerde has (in part) captured the form of Bellagio, Italy, but not its essence.

Only vast wealth and modern technology allow the Bellagio Hotel Casino to exist in its real environment, the eastern Mojave Desert where Las Vegas is located. The Bellagio Hotel Casino exists in spite of its natural context, it does not arise out of it. Like Bellagio, Italy, Bellagio, Las Vegas, is also “nestled” next to a lake. But this one came into existence at the expense of 11 acres of sand and plants and myriad creatures in a place where water is scarce and lakes are ecologically antithetical. In its indoor botanical “experience,” Bellagio, Las Vegas, replicates the seasons with four different scenes—summer, fall, winter, and spring. “Every 90 days we change for the season and then in each of the four seasons the blooms last for 30 days. . . .We can make a season change in 18 hours—three nights, six hours a night. . . .In the spring, we’ve got full size cherry trees-like in Washington.” But not like in Nevada—cherry trees do not typically grow in Nevada. And not like in the natural world, where things do not spring into being fully grown, but are born and grow and wither and die. There is

no birth in Bellagio, Las Vegas, and no death. At the Bellagio Hotel Casino everything exists always and only in its fullest, most beautiful moment, sustaining the illusion, the insidious delusion, that such an existence is real.

Jerde comprehends the power of the natural environment. His goal is “to imbue commercial, modern environments with a sense of the organic, of having accreted over time.” Nature as design element. Bellagio reflects this understanding, which Wynn shares. An article in *Vanity Fair* reports the following exchange between Wynn and his associate, Sandy Gallin:

“Steve, am I right in saying that the difference between this hotel and the other hotels in Las Vegas,” asks Gallin, “is that everything here is real?”

“Everything,” says Wynn.

“Real plants,” says Gallin.

“Yes, and real limestone,” says Wynn.

“Real tile,” says Gallin.

“Not the look of,” concludes Wynn. “Now what’s not real is this rock wall on the side of the driveway . . .that’s FGRC. Fiberglass-reinforced concrete.”

But it looks real.

Wynn’s reality is all illusion, and because he can differentiate between fiberglass-reinforced concrete and real rock, he believes he still knows the difference. Like a movie set, everything about the Bellagio Hotel Casino is real except the place itself. As architectural historian Ada Louise Huxtable notes in her book *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion*: “What concerns me. . . is the American state of mind, in which illusion is preferred over reality to the point where the replica is accepted as genuine and the simulacrum replaces the source. Surrogate experience and surrogate environments have become the American way of life. Distinctions are no longer made, or deemed necessary, between the real and the false; the edge usually goes to the latter, as an improved version with defects corrected—accessible and user-friendly—although the resonance of history and art in the authentic artifact is conspicuously lacking.” Like Huxtable, I agree that these manufactured contexts are “impoverished versions of the real thing” and that as they proliferate, our powers of discernment and discrimination atrophy.

Bellagio is the architectural equivalent of transgenic technology. The gardens, the architecture, the lake—everything about the Bellagio Hotel Casino is invasive of the indigenous natural environment. The lake and the botanical garden exist as discrete, unrelated objects; they do not function as ecosystems. They are robbed of meaningful purpose beyond providing observers with amusement and gratification. Reconstructing the environment to serve



these ends reinforces the view that the natural world exists solely for our entertainment. Manufactured contexts like Bellagio sever people from direct experience of the natural world where they actually live and are thus slyly dislocating and confusing. As systems become objects in the service of consumerism and commerce, we, too, are affected. No longer participants in an evolving process, we are merely observers, watching the movie. Having lost our bearings, we succumb to the mediated, manipulated experience leading us where the designer wants us to go.

Mr. Jerde's self-described "experiential" architecture transforms experience from a verb into a noun. In turning Bellagio into what Wynn calls "a sort of universal symbol for the good life, of a place to get away," (*Vanity Fair*), he robs Bellagio, Italy, of its particularity. It becomes fungible; place becomes brand. Before Bellagio, Jerde redesigned Fremont Street, Las Vegas's downtown main street, into the "Fremont Street Experience," a covered "destination." The Fremont Street Experience is a thing, not a place. The Fremont Street Experience is something that you are definitely going to have if you go there; everybody who goes there is going to have it—you can count on it. It can be described before you have it and you can describe it to someone after we had it in precisely the same way. The experience and our behavior within it are completely predictable. Experience becomes quantitative, rather than qualitative—a thing to collect. And the collection, of course, costs money. When it is over we will buy the T-shirt or the mouse ears.

In giving it a name, the unfolding mystery of any experience is diminished. But mystery is something for which Jerde and his peers have little regard. They reinforce the deep and disturbing belief held by many Americans that we live suspended between the poles of boredom and stimulation and that a context of entertainment must be manufactured to give us something to do. This assumption supports Jerde's motivating concept that "the consumption addiction is what will bring people out and together." As in Bellagio and The Fremont Street Experience, the value of experience is reduced to distraction, *divertissement*, rather than the opportunity to discover what it means to be human in a particular and unique place at a particular and unique time.

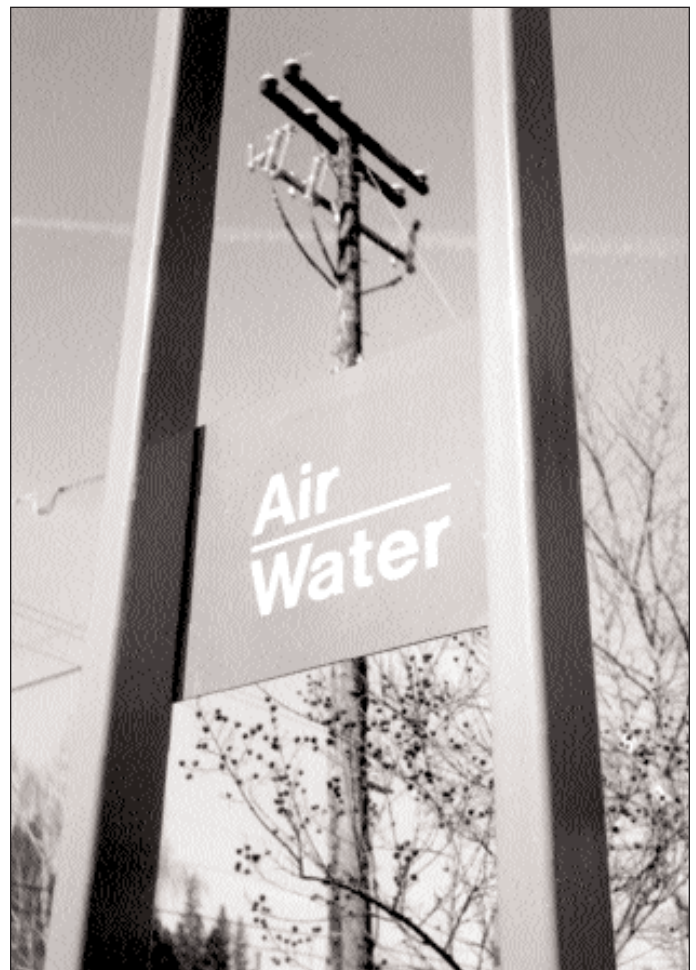
I recognize that Bellagio, the Fremont Street Experience, and Disneyland are vacation spots, places where we go to escape. And I confess that I, too, like to buy beautiful objects. I like to be entertained. I love to gamble. But I know that these diversions are not the purpose of my life. I know that "essence" is unlikely to be revealed to me at the Bellagio Hotel. If Bellagio were an isolated example, maybe it wouldn't matter. The problem is that Bellagio and its variations are fast becoming the dominant context—for some the primary world they know. And if Jerde has his way, such places could be the only world we know: As it turns out, Jerde's Las Vegas projects are "small-fry compared to his Big Idea: the remaking of cities with entertainment as the core." Mr. Jerde has projects underway in Kansas City, Missouri, and Salt Lake City,

real "lulus," necessary in these cities, Mr. Jerde believes, "because they are the ones with the least to do."

These manufactured environments are invading our homes as well. "Americans are Being Branded Where They Sit." headlines a *New York Times* article (10/8/98) describing the trend in home furnishings toward "branding. . . attaching a name or trademark to a product to give it an aura of value and a sales hook." The Cole Porter Memories collection offers reproductions of zebra cloth chairs from Porter's Paris apartment at \$1900 a chair and a \$142,000 replica of the Steinway he played at the Waldorf Astoria. There is also an Ernest Hemingway brand. Brands under review include Marilyn Monroe, Amelia Earhart, and Greta Garbo. The F. Scott Fitzgerald branding would offer "a line that would be a mix-from Art Deco to Ivy League. . . *The Great Gatsby* is America's favorite novel—and there's going to be a made-for-television movie next year." In a world of increasing corporate concentration, it is likely that the company that manufactures the furniture also owns the network that broadcasts the movie (which becomes a 90-minute advertisement for the furniture) as well as the corporation that publishes the book. As the natural environment gives way to the manufactured one, our reality is increasingly based on a self-referential feedback loop from which there is no escape.

If our environment shapes us, who do we become when

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we purchase the living room context of someone else? What is it that we are buying? The ethos and aura of a person other than who we are? A context other than our own? Are we to accept that by partially and imperfectly inhabiting a xeroxed copy of a room, by sitting in the counterfeit furniture of a celebrity, the experience of that celebrity (which itself is an artificial narrative manufactured by the media) will become our own? That our own original “inferior self” will morph into another and that we will be redefined into something better? The implication is that our individual lives, the ones that we are actually leading, are empty of value—just not good enough. But we are led to

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believe that we can remedy this void if we fill our lives with the flotsam and jetsam of lives of established value by buying things, by joining a brand club.

Although blurring the boundaries between oneself and Ernest Hemingway by purchasing replicas of his living room furniture may seem trivial, the implications of this kind of boundary confusion and violation are profound. At every turn we are being conditioned to accept this. Genetic engineering of plants and animals falls into the same category. Such

boundary violations threaten the very conditions necessary for a thing to be itself: a strawberry, a flounder, a pig, a functioning ecosystem. A human. The permeable boundaries that define a thing—whether a gene or an ecosystem, are violated under the delusion that the consequences of our actions can be completely known and are completely predictable. No Surprises. But nature rarely works that way; it surprises us all the time.

“Symbols like brands have become a part of reality, a halo,” says Dr. Richard Shweder, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Chicago, in the same *New York Times* article on branding. “In India, where I work,” Dr. Shweder continues, “people believe water from the Ganges has a potent positive power.” But this is hardly an apt analogy. The Ganges is not a generic brand—it is unique and its power is connected to the experience it evokes. To experience the Ganges in Varanasi or to hold a vial of its water is not to flatten life into a counterfeit reproduction of the experience of another; the experience of the Ganges is the experience of all life. The Ganges and its water are embedded in the natural environment—the Ganges derives its cultural significance from that fact. Ganges water comes from the mountains and flows to the sea: a drop of that

water connects and contains them both. Its source in the Himalayas is part of its power and mythos. It is not about creating artificial, one-step-removed experience; it induces a wholly different kind of experience—the kind that expands rather than reduces what it means to be human.

Dr. Shweder’s analogy minimizes the significance of the Ganges just as a John Jerde “Ganges Experience” would. The evolving experience of real life and real death would be replaced with a sanitized tableau of a pristine river. Fragrant flowers would replace the mingling smells of smoke and incense and the stench of rotting cow and dog carcasses floating by. Beautiful women in bright saris would obliterate the men and boys squatting as their hair is shorn to prepare them to tend to their fathers’ cremation. Visitors would float in brand new boats with comfortable seats and hot chai rather than rickety wooden vessels rowed by toothless old men. We would emerge from the experience entertained but not more keenly aware of the brevity of our own lives and inevitability of death, or any more connected to the world in which we live, or with any deeper understanding of our kinship with people who live in another place on the other side of the earth. We would not be challenged to consider the meaning and purpose of our short, precious existence.

But the designers of our future are looking to shield us from such challenging and distasteful matters through an even deeper invasion of our boundaries. Michael Saylor, CEO of the multibillion-dollar company MicroStrategy, is one of these designers, and he is counting on nanotechnology to make possible the implantation of devices that can predict our every experience and control our every move. He was profiled by Larissa MacFarquhar in *The New Yorker* (April 3, 2000): In the long term, Saylor envisions a world in which everyone will have a tiny device implanted in his [sic.] ear that will whisper advice to him as he needs it. If a crime is taking place near him (the device will know where he is), the voice in his ear will warn him. If he is on the way to the hospital, the voice will inform him of the success rate of each of its doctors. Saylor imagines that his customer of the future will travel through a world in which guesswork—and the inefficiencies and risk that accompany it—has been eliminated. He will save himself time and money and thus, as Saylor likes to think of it, life. No surprises.

Saylor’s is a risk-free, solipsistic world, a world without relationship. A completely controlled and managed environment. It is a world without the unpleasantness of the unexpected, but also missing the delight of serendipity. In Saylor’s world the unpredictable path of curiosity, the path of our own personal development and evolution, surrenders to the stagnant, but more comfortable path of undeviating certainty.

The article continues, “Saylor sees his services as insurance against unpleasant surprises. ‘What are you afraid of? I’m afraid of missing my plane. I’m afraid I’ll be outside when there’s a crime in my neighborhood.’” In Saylor’s fear-based life, he doesn’t concern himself with helping the victim or discovering who is committing the crime or why. He just wants to make sure that he is not in that unpre-



dictable “outside” place when it happens. And he wants to make sure that those of us who have not yet cultivated these fears do so: “Even if you’re not afraid of these things, the beauty is, with proper marketing, we can make you afraid.”

If Jerde, Wynn and Saylor prevail, we will soon find ourselves with a cacophony of voices in our head telling us what to do as we sit in our living rooms pretending to be someone else, like Jay Gatsby, who never existed in the first place. Or, we will be roaming the seasonally perfect gardens of Bellagio smelling cherry blossoms in the eastern Mojave. Or, we will be living in a world defined by anxiety and the tools manufactured for its relief. It is not an appealing world to me. This insulation from suffering and unpleasant experience comes at too high a price. I need-as I believe all humans do-to risk and cope with the particulars of all that is unknown. If we cannot take in the shock of icy Sierra water, an infinity of stars, or the fragrance of a wild rose, and if we cannot lose and find ourselves in the face of terror, how can any of us claim to be living our own brief life?



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