

Alice in Videoland: Looking Through a Rectangular TV Window into an Alternative Universe

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“The fantasy of the faraway place, the fantasy of the skin, the fantasy of being somebody else” — John Berger, ‘Ways of Seeing’

Sometimes, and not often enough, insights, understandings and new ideas just pop into your mind, unbidden. How? I have no idea but as the brain apparently operates somewhere on the quantum level, figuring out how it happens I suspect is and always will be impossible. Somehow, watching television interferes with this process, specifically the bit (or is it bits?) of the brain that can distinguish between fantasy and reality.

So anyway I’m watching TV, flicking through the channels and come across yet another ‘reality’ show (if ever there’s case for misleading labeling this is it). This time it’s yet another refreeze of the courageous ‘entrepreneur’ genre called ‘High Street Dreams’ (BBC1, 10 May, 2010). Two families fight it out to launch their ‘brand’ on the High Street, that is to say in two giant shopping centers. One family is trying to launch a prepackaged burger called I think Muddy Feet or maybe that was the ‘brand’. The other, the name escapes me, chili sauces. So much for the power of branding.

Both families go through a process somewhat akin to ‘Dragon’s Den’ though more genteel, but replete with cliffhanging suspense (that ubiquitous TV ‘pause’, the music ominous and low key as the camera cuts from one fearful yet eager face to the other). Then come the tears, hugs and ‘high fives’ as they complete stage one of the process of ‘making’ it. All made possible by the army of talent buried away somewhere in Television Centre. A fearful talent, doing the ‘Devil’s work’ as they used to say, who really have no idea what havoc they’re wreaking on the public’s collective cerebellum.

Guided by a marketing expert and other specialists they have to pitch their product to two supermarket chains. Will they, won’t they, succeed? Silly me, of course they do!

Is this reality with the camera (director) peering intensely and provocatively into a made up world composed of ‘real’ people, struggling to succeed in our dog-eat-dog world? Worse still, what are the odds that the Beeb will invite you into their digital Alice in Videoland? Not unless you come across well in the weirdly distorting aspect ratio of Videoland, where the ugly look great and beautiful look, well weird.

As I’m watching this fusion of multiple ‘realities’ I realize that TV operates as an alternate universe to ours and we look in through a small, rectangular window, glued voyeuristically to images of ourselves as either, who we would really like to be or conversely, damn glad that we’re not. The thing is, it looks just like our world, how can it be anything other than

real? There's a real supermarket with real shoppers eating real samples of burger on cocktail sticks and tossing back little cups of chili sauce.

An alternate reality that has the surface appearance of the world we really live in, that is to say, the contestants are not 'actors', well at least they're not members of Actors Equity and they have real products to sell. Above all, they're hungry. They're just like 'us' or so it would seem, with their dreams, desires and fears hanging out like a dog's tongue on a hot day for all to see.

I find the entire process humiliating and embarrassing but hey, I was born in 1945. But so enticing is this alternate reality that it's impossible to resist. People you don't know will come up to you on the street and ask, 'Don't I know you from somewhere?' I know because I got caught out in the South African version of 'Candid Camera' one Sunday morning as I tried to have my breakfast and read the Sunday's in Rosebank Mall. I saw the end-product once and my words were mostly bleeps as I figured out what was going on. It was hilarious, well in hindsight it was.

Either way we get sucked into this alternate universe that epitomizes the nature of capital, a world where 'success' is possible, for a few anyway. Operating in a closed loop, television reality and the physical reality are intertwined. So complete is this illusion that our reality 'outside' the studio is totally transformed by the medium and this is never more apparent than with the presentation of the 'news', never mind 'High Street Dreams'.

In every sense this past election was played out on television, with the print media doing 'backup'. Whether the 'debates' affected the outcome is neither here nor there, as the script had already been written, on television, through the way the 'news' presents the issues and critically what issues to push to the 'consumers', sorry electors.

The major bone of contention between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives as they spar for position, has been electoral reform, conveniently abbreviated by the media to AV or Alternate Voting system (obviously it's just too complicated to explain in a soundbite to an uninformed viewer). The Tories want yet another 'inquiry' whereas the Lib-Dems want a 'Referendum'. (It seems finally, that were a deal done between the two parties, then the public will be presented with only one kind of 'reform' via a referendum to vote for or against.)

"Labour say if the Lib Dems back them they will put the Alternative Vote system into law and then hold a referendum asking voters if they want a proportional representation voting system - a key issue for the Lib Dems." — 'Hung parliament: Lib Dems and Tories locked in talks', BBC News Website, 11 May, 2010

The possibility of electoral reform poses a real threat to the privileges the political/intellectual class' enjoy, thus it's a subject never examined in the 'news' in any depth and when it is, the only system we're allowed to consider is one designed by the political class! Well that takes care of that. Phew! Breathe a sigh of relief. It's back to business as usual.

So too with the economics of capitalism. The meaning of 'national interest' is a given when used in the 'news', namely it's what the business class want and it's spokes people for the

business class who get to talk about the 'national interest'. There is no alternative presented let alone debated. Any other view—than preserving the status quo—that lives out in the real world, has no 'Access All Areas' badge to Videoland.

It's outrageous when you break it down; the banks go bust, the public pays; then the government goes bust borrowing from the banks the public has just paid to stop from going bust and the public pays again! It explains why there is a paucity of 'news' coverage of events in Greece (unless there's a handy body or two, murdered preferably by 'Anarchists'). Instead, we get Greece the 'basket case', a country living beyond its means, a country threatening to bring down the European Union.

Thus the 'economic news' and the electoral 'news' are in lockstep, the 'news' casters are joined at the hip to politicians and pundits in a circular 'dance' choreographed very professionally by the intellectual 'class'. Now this is 'reality television' as it's meant to be!

Depressingly, there seems to be no way out of this situation unless our public media are completely transformed, the Internet notwithstanding, which while contributing an outlet for independent news and analysis, is no match for the corporate/state stranglehold on the media. Don't forget they're online as well, another universe where technology and corporate control are in the same hands and utilizing similar skills and resources to those they use to construct Videoland.

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