

Abandoning the Real

Interview with Heather Menzies

ELIZABETH SHAFFER



Heather Menzies is an award-winning author, academic, and peace and social activist, and has made substantial contributions to debates on gender, technology, health, and social issues. She's also a mother, a friend to many, and an avid gardener. Menzies is the author of eight books, including the 1996 bestseller *Whose Brave New World?* Her most recent book, *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*, won the 2006 Ottawa Book Prize

and investigates, among other things, the crisis of accountability and meaning between abstract, on-screen realities and the often messier flesh-and-blood stuff on the ground. Menzies' new book (forthcoming from Key Porter in 2009) is *Enter Mourning*, a memoir about death, dementia, and coming home.

Heather Menzies doesn't just speak; she listens and invites you to listen, to engage in thought and dialogue. Our conversation was wide-ranging, touching upon virtual spaces past and present, the price for women of belonging to an often male-defined collective, and the necessity of having a sense of balance in both our personal relationships and our public institutions.

ROOM: *Is invisibility the cost of participating in today's fast-paced society? Do women in particular pay more heavily given their multi-tasking role in both the family and the work force?*

HM: Women have always been expected to disappear in order to fit into the collective, because the public collective at least has so often been largely male-defined. So we put on male clothing, male posture, and we learn to speak in male-defined language, be it that of positivist science or business and politics. We've used alternative or virtual realities as a way of sustaining a collective sense of our own realities, and to enunciate and test new possibilities.

Everyone thinks of virtual reality as something new, but really, Virginia Woolf was talking about this when she recommended that every woman needed "a room of one's own," and also when she wrote in *Mrs. Dalloway*, that marvellous meditation on inner and outer reality, "like a nun withdrawing, Mrs Dalloway went upstairs." My worry these days is that women aren't getting a chance to withdraw enough, either into themselves or into the company of other women defined and mediated by women. As you say, women are paying a heavy price for the multi-tasking out-performance roles they've taken on as on-line technology permeates all the spaces women used to call their own—even their purses and the pockets of their coats, to say nothing of their kitchens!

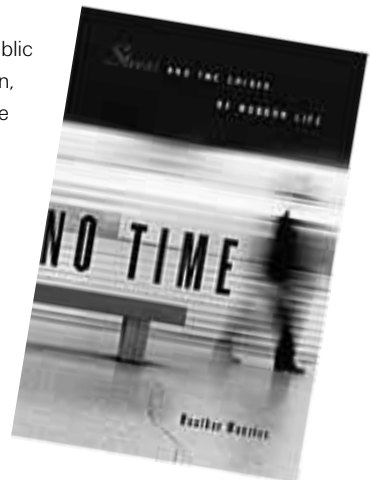
ROOM: *On your website (www.heathermenzies.ca) you share your conversation with Robert Gougeon on the University of Ottawa's radio program The Writer's Café, in which you say the virtual reality of the on-line world not only distracts us with often meaningless content, but that this leads to a general dissociation or disconnection from ourselves and others. Do these earlier versions of virtual reality, created by women, hint at an alternative reaction?*

HM: I think the key question to ask is: who's creating, who's controlling the virtual reality under consideration. In the on-line world I was talking about in that interview, corporations are defining it, and pacing it, and also regulating the pattern of personal involvement—for example, if you can only react to the terms provided, and can't co-create and co-manage the reality. Some of these corporations are our bosses, and they inundate us with new performance requirements, expected outcomes, with eleventh-hour demands for updates and revisions, that can keep us scrambling 24/7. Some of the corporations are selling us some form of self-improvement, from on-line executive MBAs to more personal things like how to better manage our time, have quality time with our kids, etc. What's being sold is always different, but the message is always the same: gotta keep upgrading to stay on top of the game. There's little time left in the day, and little space left in the social environment, to just be ourselves as we are.

Yet women's historical versions of alternative realities do remind us of alternatives—even some of the early “web-spinning” experiments by women on the Internet remind us of those possibilities. Think too of how quilting bees, sewing circles, and book clubs served as safe collective spaces in which women could speak their own truth and articulate what was real to them. It's well known that book clubs were a popular cover for the suffragette movement. They were sites where women could speak their minds on issues of the day and, as they did so, reinforce their sense that of course women should have the vote.

ROOM: *Did the social power of the collective, created through these virtual spaces, historically lead to concrete change?*

HM: Yes, it did. As far as I know, the original impetus for public health care emerged from gatherings of Prairie farm women, possibly through quilting bees but certainly also through the annual meetings of farm women's organizations, for which women saved the egg money to cover travel expenses. For women, so much of the economy they lived and worked in was built on love and need, not money: the need to feed and clothe a family, to educate the children and keep them healthy. For them, having to pay a doctor before necessary health care would be provided was a contradiction. When that contradiction was driven dramatically home during the Depression of the 1930s, I can imagine the women's sense of what's real and what's right driving them to frame the resolutions that subsequently went



forward to the larger farm organizations of the day, such as the grain pools, calling for health care “within reach of everyone.”

ROOM: *You pose the questions “Who’s controlling the virtual reality now?” and “Where are women able to create?” What conclusions have you come to with respect to these related queries?*

HM: It’s tempting to say, oh, the good old days, but that would be totally delusional and pathologically romantic. Still, I love to look back to get perspective. Even to look back in mythic time. I think of what Margaret Atwood has done in retrieving and reconsidering Penelope’s story in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Here’s a woman abandoned for years as her husband goes off to fight in the Trojan War and then gets hopelessly lost trying to get home. Meanwhile, Penelope is left to run the kingdom of Ithaca, bring up her son, and feed and lodge over 100 suitors pressing their attentions on the would-be, might-be widow Penelope. And the only thing she has to work with, to keep their “advances” at bay, is a piece of virtual reality. As the story goes, she will have to take a new husband when she has finished weaving a funeral shroud for Odysseus. So she spends her days weaving his shroud, and her nights un-weaving it, delaying its completion.

Clearly, Penelope was in control. She used her virtual reality to remain at least minimally in control of the reality around her. And that’s the key. And it is not necessary to control everything, just enough; and one key to that is understanding some of the crucial levers of control. Marshall McLuhan named a few when he explained “the medium is the message,” by saying that “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” Women have traditionally kept the scale low, the pace set by the rhythms of conversation or manual labour, and the pattern informed by dialogue and reciprocity in relationships. Women today might benefit from using these concepts as ways to monitor the various environments, on-line and off, in which their lives are immersed, and to ask whether these environments allow them to be in touch with themselves and others, or not.

ROOM: *You have spoken about the disappearance of the real, and there’s McLuhan’s notion of “auto-amputation,” and Baudrillard’s phrase, made famous in the movie *The Matrix*, “the desert of the real” or “the desertification of the real.” You seem equally concerned about this.*

HM: Absolutely, and that’s the other half of what I was just talking about. As people are drawn, and more aspects of their daily lives are drawn, into the on-line world, with its fragmented bit-stream reality and its quick-click pace that gets under the skin and into the blood, they can lose touch with realities off-screen. It is often much more complex and intractable than the simplified on-screen realities (performance measures, expected outcomes, etc..) would suggest. There’s little time to interpret the expected actions against that messy reality to figure out what would be most effective, and to genuinely test for the effectiveness of whatever task-action was prescribed. It’s on to the next thing. Then too, so many people are so sleep deprived and almost brain-dead with fatigue that they welcome moving on to the next thing; anything can distract them. You’ve heard of the expression “presenteeism,” right? It’s the new scourge of the workplace, chalking up

billions of dollars in lost productivity because so many people—so tired, so readily distracted and unable to focus and pay full attention to the realities in front of them—simply go through the motions. They might as well be *absent*, because they're certainly not fully *present*.

In my book *No Time*, I chronicled some of the tragic consequences. The worst was probably the death by starvation of a baby born to a teenage runaway living in a shelter in Toronto, with both herself and her baby supposedly under the care of social workers. The trouble is, social workers at the time were not only way overworked—with huge, ridiculous caseloads, their work had been totally computerized, and they were spending as much as 80 per cent of their time filling on-line reports, filling in computerized forms, logging phone calls made, messages received... The reality of a baby slowly starving to death happened virtually under the very eyes of the official caregivers, and they didn't notice.

ROOM: *I think that you've also talked about people abandoning the real, not just it disappearing. As though we are responsible.*

HM: It's tempting to get deterministic here, as though the technology made us do it. Now, I don't want to go the other way and suggest that technology should only be seen as a hand-held tool. Once it's designed, manufactured, installed, and run as a large, even global-networked system, there are systemic biases at work that can override our best efforts to "determine" it differently. Think back to what I said about scale, pace, and pattern, and the question I posed about who's in control of determining and managing these. If it's not democratic, but autocratically controlled from the top through systems, it's hard to turn things around. But we don't have to abandon the exercise, and the necessary struggle. We don't need to abandon ourselves and our own capacity to know what's real and what matters. Yet this is what's happening, and this is where we all have a responsibility.

One of the reasons so many people can't slow down but keep driving themselves, working evenings and weekends, and multi-tasking their so-called leisure hours away too, and eventually get sick, have heart attacks, strokes, and chronic fatigue syndrome, is that they've abandoned what's real. By this I mean, they've lost touch with their bodies and the limits to the scale-up, speed-up, and disembodied fragmentation they can healthily take on without losing integrity, being centred in themselves, their own thoughts, and feelings. They've lost touch with others too, because they lose the capacity for the kind of presence and engagement that's required to listen and really hear another person.

But Virginia Woolf is here to remind us: we can withdraw. In the moving present moment that is our real life, albeit lived on the multiple levels that Woolf evoked so well in her fiction, we can seize the moment, saying no if necessary to start with, scaling back, pacing down, simplifying, creating electronic-free zones, or electronic blackout zones in time and space in our living and working environments so we can regain balance and equilibrium. As I said earlier, we don't need to control everything, just enough. Life tends to be precarious at the best of times, so the equilibrium we seek likely will be as well.

ROOM: *In a recent speech you said stress was the social equivalent of global warming.*

HM: Yes, and I think we can interpret this on several levels. First, the environment in which we live—the daily experience of on-line globalization—is stressed and overheated, and has become toxic to our health. We can readily see the parallels to greenhouse gas build-ups and atmospheric pollution from all the truck and plane exhaust, plus round-the-clock industrial facilities. But now consider the disconnect, how long it's taken for the reality of climate change and global warming to hit home, to be felt as real enough to be actionable. Until then, too, it was scientists debating other scientists, in a reality rendered authoritative by virtue of being objectively rendered in numbers, not stories. But that disconnect, that abstract disembodiment made it hard for people to get it. Similarly, with the public discussion of stress and overwork. It's all stats and more stats, and very few stories. So the disconnect is repeated. The environment under discussion is still out there, not in here. Inside the bio-chemical stew that we are—either in equilibrium and healthy balance, or not. Change starts when we realize this, and make that shift in perspective, and it's starting. Barely.

ROOM: *Parting thoughts?*

HM: Of course, the question is irresistible. I guess I'd close by suggesting that we need to see ourselves as the litmus test of health and equilibrium generally. We need to ritualize the boundaries between different realms of reality, the on-line and the off-line, weaving and un-weaving like Penelope. We need to do this to stay at least nominally in control of what's real and what matters to us as individuals, as professionals and employees, as friends and lovers, as mothers, daughters, sisters, and citizens in our community, our society, and our planet. And we do this well when we weave the fabric of dialogue and shared social time between and among us, and men too of course, They are our brothers, our fathers, our lovers sometimes, and our friends. All our relations. We're all our relations as the First Nations people say. And all our relations matter.