

How Modern Media Destroys Our Minds

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1 — Self-knowledge

A lot of the reason why we get mentally ill and unhappy is that there is so much about our lives that we fail to investigate and understand with honesty and courage. There's something wrong in our relationship, but we can't pin down what exactly and so go in for sarcasm and bitterness; we are beset by anxiety but we can't trace the pain back to any specific factors; we are irritable but we don't know what has made us furious deep down. We are in no doubt that there's something we should be doing to improve our career and make better use of our talents, but we never succeed in reaching a clear sense of our priorities or in charting a more plausible course.

We dwell instead in a miasma of self-ignorance, full of vague forebodings, unformed regrets and undiagnosed alarms. There is a fog between our conscious minds and our true selves. The vital truths dwell like pine trees in a heavy mist, as in Hasegawa Tohaku's screen (overleaf), struggling to break loose from an enveloping fog that envelops and conceals, teasing with their presence without ever becoming distinct.

We fail to investigate ourselves properly largely because doing so threatens to hurt a lot. We are, in the short term, profoundly invested in looking away; we are built so that whenever we come near to important realisations, we are visited by waves of anxiety and discomfort; we're inherently squeamish about working



Hasegawa Tohaku, *Pine Trees*
(Left-hand screen), 16th century.

out what is really going on inside. Knowledge threatens to upset the comfortable status quo: perhaps—after we reflect—we'll realise that we really have no option but to leave our present partner. We might have to confront just how unsatisfying our current career is; we might be furious with someone we are meant to love.

To ensure that we will never come face to face with ourselves, we develop addictions. We are used to categorising addictions chiefly in reference to drugs or alcohol. But this lets many of us off too lightly. Addiction isn't limited to a dependence on a chemical. An addiction is simply anything that guarantees that we will never have to come to terms with ourselves, that promises to ward off uncomfortable or dreadful inner realisations. Conceived of like this, a host of other types of addiction come into view: we might get addicted to doing exercise, reading football scores, worrying about insurance or going to work. An addiction can't be spotted by what it makes us do, simply by what it prevents us from feeling.

In this context, the media presents itself as the most tempting of all contemporary addictions. It is omnipresent, it understands our minds perfectly, it knows just how to tease and beguile us; above all, it is prestigious. It sounds so reasonable to say that we have been following the news; we couldn't possibly be declared mentally unwell merely for taking a profound interest in developments in the South China Sea or in the European Parliament.

But the ongoing swirl of news is the ideal instrument for destroying our strength to follow information from inside our minds. We deploy our curiosity about strangers to stifle any danger of decoding ourselves. It isn't that the news is inherently invaluable; someone should know about the exploding oil rig, the dissent in government, the affair in Malibu and the drop in the currency—but this shouldn't, right now, be us. We have priorities that aren't those set by the global media. The headlines to which we should be paying attention have to do with our emotional education and maturation. There are—strangely but truly—far more important stories to pay attention to than the most significant stories in the world.

2 — The view from the window

Spending a few quiet hours staring out of the window isn't an activity with high prestige. Our busy, media-saturated age wants us to take action; there is always something new we should be reading, acquiring, fearing or longing for. It would be embarrassing to have to admit that, today, we did little other than stand close to the glass and take in the traffic, the wind in the trees, the muffled murmurs of pedestrians, the honking of cars and the flashing of advertising signs. We might not have checked the news since early morning.

Henri Matisse saw things differently. Throughout his career, he painted dozens of people staring out of windows—and tried to endow the pastime with new significance. In Nice in the early 1920s, he completed a series of works that featured a pensive, thoughtful-looking dancer and musician, Henriette Darricarrère. In one example, she looks out towards the Promenade des Anglais and the Baie des Anges, but the interest of the picture stems not so much from what she is seeing as from what we intimate she is feeling as she does so: there might be the slow unpacking of thoughts about an argument she had or about a difficult message she needed to impart. It's the inner view that is being foregrounded and that calls out for our attention.

The point of window-gazing isn't to see outside, it's to give ourselves a better chance of perceiving what dwells in the unconscious beneath the daily chatter; it's our chance to make up for all the emotions we've been so careful not to entertain for too long and that have made us anxious and sad through inattention. The view is a tool to encourage some of our most salient and necessary ideas to make themselves known to us at last. We might learn more from a stretch of day-dreaming than from all the headlines in the world.



Henri Matisse, *Girl by a Window*, 1921.



Debris in the aftermath of
Hurricane Michael in Mexico
Beach, Florida, 2018.

3 — Memento mori

All our lives, under the influence of the media, we employ fears from without to distract us from fears from within. We worry about lightning storms, inflation, flying insects, contaminated spinach and UFOs—because it is, ultimately, easier to do so.

We have legitimate cause to worry a lot, but not about the president or the legislation, the asteroid or the arriving aliens. We have to worry that we have so little time left in order to sort out our relationships, that we still haven't determined how to love another human, that we don't properly know what fulfils us and that we aren't leading the authentic courageous lives we are capable of.

This is the true horror; this is the spectre we need to see blinking on our phones on an hourly, even a minute-by-minute basis. It shouldn't matter to us that there was a typhoon off a distant coast last night. Those poor fishermen will have to take care of themselves and our sentimental concern won't appease their families for an instant. It isn't our business that a little girl has gone missing in a neighbouring country, that a movie star may now be seeing their personal trainer and that next year's watermelon crop may have been obliterated by a new kind of worm.

Our responsibility lies elsewhere entirely, with our own neglected genius, our perpetually stymied relationships and our unexamined childhood sorrows. We should be very scared—just seldom of what we're being actively told to worry about.