

# Beauty helps us find our way out of the storm

“The entire internet is in a sense pornographic,” said the British writer Alain de Botton last year. The reason why is because “it is a deliverer of constant excitement which we have no innate capacity to resist, a system which leads us down paths many of which have nothing to do with our real needs.”

How long can you stay away from your smartphone? Or your tablet? Or your laptop? How well are you able to resist being online? Or to abstain from watching movies or television?

Do you feel like you are in control? Doesn't our new



technological environment make you feel like you are caught in the middle of a vast storm?

Decades ago, the Canadian media analyst Marshall McLuhan thought about the ascent of modern media technology. He liked to use the story by Edgar Allan Poe, “A Descent into the Maelström,” to illustrate the condition that we are in.

“Poe imagines the situation in which a sailor, who has gone out on a fishing

expedition, finds himself caught in a huge maelstrom or whirlpool. He sees that his boat will be sucked down into this thing,” recounted McLuhan, paraphrasing Poe's story.

In order to survive, the sailor looks around and studies the action of the storm. He observes patterns and recognizes them for what they are. Sometimes things disappear. By carefully noting the reality of certain recurring patterns, he is able to infer what is needed for his survival.

He grabs hold of what does not disappear. He hangs on to what he reasonably

thinks can carry him out of the storm. He trusts a proven pattern of salvation that he was able to observe. And eventually he is saved.



**The role of the artist in regard to man and the media is simply survival.**

— Marshall McLuhan

“Pattern recognition in the midst of a huge, overwhelming, destructive force is the way out of the maelstrom,” said McLuhan. “The huge vortices of energy cre-

ated by our media present us with similar possibilities of evasion or consequences of destruction. By studying the patterns of the effects of

this huge vortex of energy in which we are involved, it may be possible to program a strategy of evasion and survival.”

Are you able to observe undeniable patterns in your interaction with technology? Perhaps it is easier to observe recurrent patterns in the behavior of those around you. In particular, are there common patterns to be observed in the emerging behavior of young people? When you walk into a coffee shop, for example, what do you see?

The next step we need to take with this knowledge, said McLuhan, was to acquire a deeper sensitivity to the meaning of the patterns we find in the technological reality of our transformed environment.

The most sensitive observers of these patterns will be artists. “The artist's insights or perceptions seem to have been given to mankind as a providential means of bridging the gap between evolution and technology,” said McLuhan.

He saw a definite vocation for artists in our world: “The artist is able to program, or reprogram, the sensory life in a manner which gives a navigational chart to get out of the maelstrom created by our own ingenuity.”

Far from our current misconception of artists as celebrities to be envied, McLuhan argued that artists have a much more serious role to play in society: “The role of the artist in regard to man and the media is simply survival.”

In other words, the fate of human society depends on the ability of artists themselves to perceive beauty, and then to help us train our eyes to see beauty. As Roger Scruton, the great British

philosopher who recently visited Vancouver, puts it: “Culture counts.”

A renewed culture could allow us to escape the maelstrom, if artists could show us patterns of beauty that we hadn't noticed before.

This is the reason why Scruton says that “culture is important”: “Without it we remain emotionally uneducated. There are consequences of fake culture that are comparable to the consequences of corruption in politics. In a world of fakes, the public interest is constantly sacrificed to private fantasy, and the truths on which we depend for our rescue are left unexamined and unknown.”

Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, put it this way in a famous speech of his own on beauty: “The encounter with beauty can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the soul and thus makes it see clearly, so that henceforth it has criteria, based on what it has experienced, and can now weigh the arguments correctly.”

In other words, a profound encounter with what is truly beautiful will not be a source of distraction or constant excitement. It will not look like today's average internet use. Instead, beauty will educate us in truth.

The role of beauty is to educate our perceptions in order that we may proceed to grasp truth. As Benedict explained it, beauty “brings us into contact with the power of truth.”

“I have often said that I am convinced that the true apologetics for the Christian message, the most persuasive proof of its truth, offsetting everything that may appear negative, are the saints, on the one hand, and the beauty that the faith has generated, on the other,” said Benedict. “For faith to grow today, we must lead ourselves and the persons we meet to encounter the saints and to come in contact with the beautiful.”

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