

Driven from Distraction

by Michael Schutz



“He Looks into a River. What He Sees Next Will Amaze You!!!” If the Greek myth of Narcissus were written today, chances are that would be the headline. You know the phenomenon, right? A big, inviting headline that’s just daring you to click on it to find out more. There’s a word for it: clickbait. It’s the desperate attempt to pry your attention away from whatever you’re doing and turn it towards something that might make the media company in question a few cents.

Perhaps you’re familiar with the story of Narcissus, in which a handsome young man sees his reflection in a completely still river. He becomes so enamoured with the reflection that he will not tear his attention away from it for anything, even for food or sleep, until finally he dies. It’s where we get the term *narcissism*, by which we generally mean “selfishness.”

Most who know the story see it primarily as a warning against selfishness. But a man named Marshall McLuhan, writing in the 1960s, pointed out that there’s a small but critical piece of that story which unlocks its full meaning: though the reflection was indeed of his own face, Narcissus didn’t realize he was looking at himself. He thought it was some kind of beautiful water-spirit. So, McLuhan says, it wasn’t selfishness but “numbness” that caused Narcissus’ death. He was numb to the fact that the river was acting as a mirror. He failed to understand the true nature of the image he saw, and he died because of it.

McLuhan sees this not as a failure of a message, but as a failure to understand the medium, which is the way in which the message is delivered. Properly understanding the effects of how messages are portrayed is the central point of McLuhan’s most famous work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, where he

coins the phrase, “The medium is the message.” McLuhan argues that media (the plural of medium) are nothing more than extensions and amplifications of our selves. So electric light extends and amplifies daylight, which has dramatically reshaped our culture; the telephone extends your ear and voice beyond your physical location, allowing you to communicate over great distances; the wheel (and thus the car) extends and amplifies your foot’s ability to travel (you’re picturing Fred Flintstone right now, aren’t you?).

Now, consider this idea in relation to today’s technology. The Internet extends anything we want to communicate with someone else. Blogs instantly amplify the written word across the world. Twitter extends not just pithy sayings and extremely short conversations, but news reporting. Facebook amplifies the simple birthday greeting across your network of friends, along with people you met once at a conference and old classmates who would barely remember you exist if not for the Internet.

McLuhan argues that while these extensions and amplifications can be useful, they are not neutral; they affect both the social and physical realities of individuals and groups. His warning is that a person “becomes what he beholds,” and that if we aren’t aware of these effects, we are in danger of becoming like Narcissus in his folly.

We who live in 21st century Canada have much to learn from the myth of Narcissus and McLuhan’s interpretation. Our world—especially the online world—is full of “still rivers” trying to draw our gaze. Apple wants their iPhone to be your constant companion for every task. Google wants you to turn to them every time you look something up online. Facebook wants to be the first ‘place’ you visit in the morning and the last before you sleep. Television, particularly in the

face of so much competition, is literally screaming at you in its programs and advertising to try to keep your attention.

One of the best present-day examples of McLuhan's warning about Narcissus' true lesson is the selfie—a picture taken of oneself, maybe with others, maybe at a famous landmark. No matter how interesting the rest of the content, the focus is primarily on the self. We might shake our heads and mutter, "What a self-obsessed generation." But Narcissus' true fault wasn't so much *self*-obsession as it was being obsessed with something he didn't realize was simply an extension of himself.

McLuhan bids us understand well that last point, which will prevent us from succumbing to Narcissus' fate. Selfies aren't so much about our own images as they are our projections into the world of what we want ourselves to be. The man who takes a selfie in front of the pyramids of Egypt isn't so much promoting his actual face to friends, family, and the world as he is promoting his adventurous nature and travel habits.

How about one more example? Chances are you've seen those now-ubiquitous "toe pics," usually framed on a beach chair in some beautiful tropical location. McLuhan would tell us that those pictures aren't truly about toes. The message isn't, "Don't my toes look nice?" but rather, "I took this picture on a smartphone from an exotic location, posting it online so all my followers can know how *#blessed* I am."

And, as it happens with so many trends, those toe pics are so popular now that they're becoming objects of satire and scorn (McLuhan would call this "reversing"). When these kinds of obsessions build up, they inevitably implode because they're simply not sustainable. Understanding this well leads us to see that one of our present dangers is that we actually are in danger of becoming what we might call "reverse narcissists." It's not so much that our attention is firmly fixed on one thing that will lead to our death; it's that our attention is given to everything but the One who leads to everlasting life. And if we fail to realize that technology, which facilitates so much attention seeking, profoundly shapes not only *what* we pay attention to but *how* we are giving our attention, then we can end up starving ourselves not of earthly bread but of the Bread of Life.

God is the One who truly had the first word on this whole idea. McLuhan took his concept of "becoming what we behold" straight from Psalm 115, even quoting it in his famous book. The Psalmist writes: "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do

not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them" (Psalm 115:2–8).

The Psalmist then redirects his audience's attention back to God: "O Israel, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield" (115:9). Likewise, St. Paul encourages us to set our minds on things above in view of the mercy we have in Christ (Colossians 3:1–4), and to focus by faith on whatever is good, right, true, noble, excellent, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8). The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to fix our eyes not on ourselves or the extensions of ourselves, but on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:1–2).

We all need to have our attention redirected sometimes. Consider the story of Luke 10:38–42, where Jesus visits Mary and Martha's home. Martha is busy doing all the good work of hosting a guest, and she becomes upset when she sees that Mary just sits at the feet of Jesus, listening to His teaching. In this story, Martha is called a word we see nowhere else in the New Testament: "distracted." She wasn't "narcissistic" in the popular selfish sense. But Martha did fail to recognize that she was focusing on the wrong things at that moment. She was doing good works, but in the presence of Jesus,

the "good portion" is that which Mary chose by faith: to receive the word of Christ before anything else.

Martha was not distracted by something evil—she was serving Jesus! But faith comes through the Word of Christ, and only after the kindling

and strengthening of faith come good works. Martha's actions reflected the opposite understanding, leading her to frustration with Mary and distraction from Jesus.

By contrast, Mary was worshipping in spirit and truth. By faith her attention was firmly fixed on the Word of her Lord and Saviour. So we too, as disciples of Jesus, receive the Gospel as of first importance. As we behold the lifegiving Word of the Gospel through faith, we are driven from distraction. And after we behold that Gospel, we can turn our attention outwards once again to the needs of our neighbours.

In this age where so many things are clamouring for our attention, where we are tempted by so much media to fix our eyes anywhere but on Christ, the good portion is to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's life-giving Word. Immersed in God's Word, we become less numb to the traps of the "still rivers" around us. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes and focuses them not on reflections of ourselves, but on Christ who has brought us from death to life.

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