

Bleak and Desolate Environments often Promote Deep and Complex Thinking

Shôn Ellerton, November 19, 2023

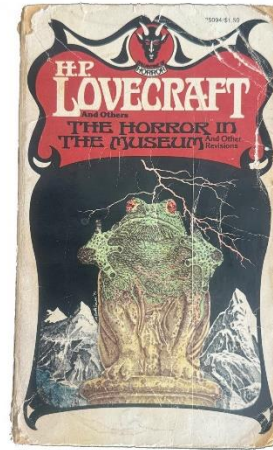
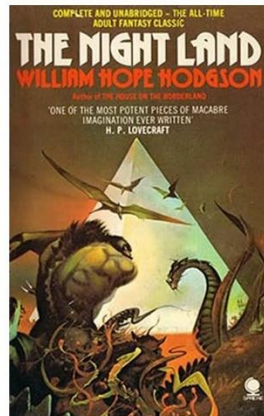
Low-stimulus environments can accentuate the senses and promote higher planes of thought and abstraction. But why?



The dried bed of Lake Torrens, South Australia

I've always had this strange and curious fascination with the bleak and the desolate. Perhaps it stemmed from my childhood, around the age of ten or so. During the summer holidays, I stumbled upon my father's array of novels and, not being much else to do, being confined on a boat in the middle of estuarine Essex, started to read them. Besides all the war and crime novels which my father adored, there were a few curious ones.

Such books included *The Night Land* by William Hope Hodgson, a horror fantasy novel set in the far future during which, the Sun's light became so weak, the Earth was shrouded in near-darkness amongst horrible creatures with strange names like The Watcher of the East, The Thing That Nods and other perplexing titles. In this book, the last of the human race was protected in living in this enormous pyramid called the Great Redoubt but somewhere out there was a smaller one called the Lesser Redoubt and a band of people traversed over the hostile terrain to get to it. Another book lying there was *The Horror of the Museum*, which was a collection of short stories written by H.P. Lovecraft and other authors of a similar vein, presumably all inspired by one of my all-time favourite of authors, Edgar Allan Poe. Not only in content, but also the style of writing, often using flowery, obscure and arcane words hardly anyone uses these days. Certainly challenging for any ten-year-old, especially when no dictionary was to hand.



Many of these stories depicted bleak, desolate, and inhospitable places. From Tolkien's Dead Marshes dotted with stagnant pools in which heroes of the fallen and dead kings lie gazing up to the water's surface to Lovecraft's hideous, cold and windswept Plateau of Leng, the middle of which, lies a squat temple inhabited by the ominous yellow-draped High Priest Not to be Described. Clearly, these authors had been influenced by other works depicting such desolation and bleakness or by travelling to such places.



Artist's depiction of The Plateau of Leng

Indeed, there are many strange places on this planet. Places I would prefer to go to visit rather than luxuriating at a hotel sipping a cocktail on the beach. As far as strangeness goes, desolation is one of them. I've been to such places including Svalbard, an island way up in the north beyond the tip of Norway; the vast outback of Australia; and the Rannoch Plain in Scotland, which although not

terribly far from civilisation in terms of distance, it felt oddly desolate, bleak and menacing. Such places are often steeped in mysticism and superstition, perhaps because many often require an expedition or a kind of pilgrimage to get there, although with today's transportation, politics aside, they are much easier to access.



The isolated town of Longyearbyen in Svalbard

To take an interesting example of a place with both heavy spiritual connotations and being remote, there are two very interesting lakes near to the holy mountain of Kailash in southern Tibet. These remote, crystal clear deep blue lakes are separated by a channel which takes the overflow from the larger roundish looking freshwater lake (Lake Manasarovar) to the smaller crescent-shaped saline one (Rakshastal Lake). Like Yin and Yang, they complement each other as near opposites. One taking the glacier melt-off from Kailash making it freshwater, the other being endorheic, meaning that the water has nowhere to go making it highly saline. One lake being considered holy and light, the other considered evil and dark. The superstitious who live in the area won't go near the shore of the so-called 'evil' lake. Not surprisingly, the locals have given this lake a bit of a bad name calling it La'nga Co, or 'the dark lake of poison'.



The dark and light twin lakes near Mt Kailash, Tibet

However, besides the fact that many of these bleak and desolate places have fascinating and often sinister traits connected with them, they are also excellent environments to induce deep and thoughtful thinking. From frigid arctic tundras to sun-stricken deserts like the Rub' Al Khali in southern Saudi Arabia, otherwise known as the Empty Quarter, a vast area comprising of a quarter million square miles of ever-shifting sand dunes, such places evoke highly-focussed inward thinking, a great way to embark into the abstract and the esoteric. External influences or, more accurately, distractions are at a bare minimum. Coupled with that is the situation of being utterly exposed in vastness. The mind can run rampant with imaginary thoughts trying its utmost to anchor itself to something tangible and unique in the surroundings.



The Empty Quarter, Saudi Arabia

Imagine being positioned in the middle of vast salt-pan lake with no edge in sight and you were given sun-protection, a compass, food, and water provisions to last you for a few days. You were to make your way to the edge choosing a direction of your choice. I suppose if you had no idea which direction would be the best one, the best one would be the one to minimise sun glare, in other words going north, if in the northern hemisphere. Without a compass and no reference point, keeping to a straight line would be challenging unless one has the skill of dead-reckoning using the position of the Sun and the stars. The unknown of being able to reach the edge at all presents a psychological challenge. There are two ways on thinking how to achieve this existential challenge of reaching sanctuary. One could picture the outcome of getting to the edge, looking for any visual clues that the destination is not far off. Much like being in a ship looking for any signs of land. The mind, no doubt, will play tricks on you, fooling your senses by giving some false hope in the form of an optical illusion or a feeling that the edge is near. Time is stretched as you endure a seemingly never-ending task as you try to reach the edge at an unknown distance. It is this way of thinking that can drive one to delusion and madness.



Salt pan in Death Valley, California

The other way of thinking about setting about this task is to be part of the journey and completely grounded in the present without thinking about the past or the future. It is a tactic that I have used to reach the base of a mountain peak accessible via a long trek just to get there. The ascent of the mountain peak is, of course, an exhilarating one, but the long twenty-mile trek to get there is, at best, arduous,

especially in snow. The way to achieve this is by keeping to a steady rhythm in terms of movement and breathing. When looking down on the ground while walking, I don't think of myself moving over the ground. I picture myself being motionless in the cosmos while each step pushes the globe a little, as if rotating it a little along its axis. Kind of like walking on top of an enormously giant beach ball. This technique can nearly put one in a trancelike state, reducing the effects of fatigue and, amazingly, boredom, making the passage of time run faster. Sure, forest trees are lovely but twenty miles of it along a snow-covered path can get a bit tedious. A friend of mine once took the Trans-Siberian Express and I asked how was it. He answered that apart from a few spots, there wasn't much exciting to see except being cooped up on a train for days on end watching one endless corridor of unchanging Taiga forest.

Being in an environment without much in the way of stimuli increases an awareness of features that would, in a normal environment, be often overlooked. In walking across the salt-pan, one would become acutely aware of the intricate patterns created by the evaporated salt. The little ridgelines in the salt forming geometrical patterns. In the tundra, or even some of the lonely landscapes featured on the most northerly shores of Scotland, the presence of a small flower may draw much attention and focus. Whereas, in the jungle, that very same flower would, most likely, be overlooked amidst all the stimuli being felt through all five senses. That little flower can generate so much interest in such a sparse and bleak environment. We become drawn to its shape, its hue, and the interwoven textures running on the surface of its petals. We get to know much more about this one object with less in the way of other distractions. Much like common life with all our mod-cons.

As our five senses are far more sensitive to changes or anomalies in a bleak or desolate environment rather than a busy one, we have the heightened ability to think in terms of the abstract where imagination and reality tend to merge. New dimensions of thought outside of the obvious lead to outside-of-the-box thinking. In a way, such environments are highly conducive in formulating off-kilter, sometimes esoteric, works of art, literature and science to the point of becoming unnatural or other-worldly.

Look no further than the world of music, particularly that of the non-vocal variety of classical, jazz and electronica genres. Although, in the case of choral music, Ligeti's *Lux Aeterna*, as used in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is enough to put anyone on edge. Without a shadow of a doubt, much of the world's strangest,

most ethereal, and tonally complex music comes from those who live or have travelled in bleak, desolate, or challenging environments. Such environments are, in general, not considered happy or joyful ones. Exceptions aside, much of the music created in those environments which are full of life in terms of both fauna and flora, with comfortable living conditions in terms of climate and access to food, is that kind of music which evokes happiness and joy. It is usually heavily rhythmic, simple in terms of melody making it predictable, easy to dance and sing along to. Whereas music that originates from the bleak and the desolate often carries a haunting quality to it. Lesser-known [modes](#) of music, a subject that warrants an entire piece of its own, are often explored. Rhythm is unpredictable, if one is used at all. Dissonance is often employed combining tones which are challenging to the human ear. Some interesting examples of such complex music, taking various genres of music, include music from [Björk](#) in the world of Icelandic pop, Shostakovich in the world of Soviet Russia classical, [Geir Aule Jenssen](#) (aka Biosphere) in the world of Norwegian electronica, and much of the jazz and world contemporary music produced by [ECM records](#).



Bleak record covers from works of Electronica

The world of art from the desolate and the bleak is also often complex by way of abstraction and [simulacra](#). Unlike music, where we can explore dissonance, odd modes of music, and tones which don't align properly on our western heptatonic or eastern pentatonic keyboards, art shares an infinite palette of colours to all simply by mixing base colours together to achieve the desired result. Ridiculed by many for being childish and simplistic, modern art can be highly complex in terms of its abstraction of what it is meant to portray. Granted, there are some works of modern art which a 5-year-old can put together, but many great pieces are highly textured, layered, and deeply subtle in terms of colour and shading. Just like that little purple flower standing alone in a bleak arctic environment, there may be an anomaly, a symbol, or some form of pattern, standing starkly alone in that piece of art. Hidden shapes may materialise in such works but they

are sometimes not easy to come by with a cursory examination of the piece. It is often easy to dismiss such art as being easy to re-create, but like music in the ambient electronica genre, some of which sounds like it could be made by just about anyone, there is much more going on behind the scenes. I had this conversation with a friend, both of us sharing our love of contemporary music, that trying to create a good, seemingly-simple piece of ambient music is not an easy achievement despite all the wonderful advances of accessible technology at our disposal to create any practically any sound we like.

The world of the motion picture is also influenced by the bleak and the desolate and, again, often finds its niche in abstraction and symbolism. Soviet Russia and Scandinavia are prime examples of being producers in this art. [Nordic Noir](#) has become quite popular in the world of streaming video. This often bleak and minimalistic form of crime drama is both simple in form and complex in storyline. The characters portrayed in these dramas often, quite accurately, reflect the introspective and ruminative behaviour of those living in very high latitudes where the light is of a crepuscular or twilight-like nature. The Russian sci-fi 1979 movie, [Stalker](#), is a classic example of a work of art based on the bleak and the austere. This highly philosophical film centred around an odd group of men seeking their individual desires in a dangerous place called 'The Zone', is set in a drab and dreary near-apocalyptic landscape of ruined and neglected factory buildings surrounded by an overgrown landscape.



Overgrown but bleak landscape in The Stalker

To conclude, there is an interesting paradox here insofar that many of the arts, sciences, and works of music originating from bleak and desolate places tend to be on a higher plane of thinking than those which are not. However, if there is too little in the way of stimuli or when one is restrained or imprisoned in close

quarters within such an environment, the human mind can run foul possibly resulting in delusion, madness, severe discomfort, or even trauma. Certain forms of torture use such methods, the most common one known being the so-called [white room torture](#) in which subjects are imprisoned in a room with absolutely no colour except white. However, [sensory deprivation or isolation tanks](#) in which subjects are floating in a tank of saline water in darkness for a short period of time are sometimes used to decrease levels of stress, anxiety, and pain. Other side benefits of isolation tanks claim to include improving concentration and focus again proving the point that reducing the amount of stimulus around us leads to deeper thinking.

In general, if we are bombarded with stimuli, we cannot delve deeper into our own minds to discover those subtleties and hidden meanings which are so important for us to develop and advance our own knowledge. In fact, if overly stimulated, our minds have the tendency to block out receiving information through overload. The world of the bleak and desolate is a better environment for our minds to open out and probe deeper into our surroundings enabling us to explore ourselves through introspection. Thus, it is no surprise that much of the world's greatest and complex art originates from the bleak and the desolate.