Limestone College

From the SelectedWorks of Mary Willis

Fall 2012

Friedrich Nietzsche: The Abyss and Technology

Mary Willis, Limestone College

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mary_henderson_willis/2/
Friedrich Nietzsche: The Abyss and Technology

Mary H. Willis

University of Alabama

Graduate Student
Abstract

Friedrich Nietzsche, while being an extremely interesting man, shall only be a part of the focus of this thesis. Nietzsche was famous for an often misquoted quote which goes like this: “He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.” I would like to take this quote and borrow from Nietzsche’s philosophical ideas about life to compare modern technology to the abyss. Nietzsche claims that the principle of “life” is a more pressing and higher concern than that of “knowledge,” and that the quest for knowledge should serve the interests of life. If this is true, how does emerging technology serve the interests of life and is it for the betterment of society as a whole? I shall also contrast the technological abyss to the works of Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock* and Kyoshi Kurosawa, writer of the Japanese film *Pulse*.
Friedrich Nietzsche is probably best known by the general public as the fellow who said, “He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you”. (Moncur, 1994-2012) Of course, it is not clear to which abyss he is referring. He could mean the mind, existentialism, philosophy, religion or any number of things. For my purposes, I shall suppose that abyss to be technology.

Nietzsche purported to believe in “life-affirmation, which involves an honest questioning of all doctrines that drain life’s expansive energies, however socially prevalent those views might be”. (Wicks, 2011) It could be argued that keeping up with ever emerging new technology is a drain to life’s expansive energies and financial resources. Alvin Toffler wrote a book called Future Shock, in which he expounded upon the effect of technology on a society that is already over-saturated and unable to cope with the constant change.

“Writing during the late 1960s Toffler summarized this thesis thus: in three short decades between now and the turn of the next millennium, millions of psychologically normal people will experience an abrupt collision with the future. Affluent, educated citizens of the world’s richest and most technically advanced nations, they will fall victim to tomorrow’s most menacing malady: the disease of change. Unable to keep up with the supercharged pace of change, brought to the edge of breakdown by incessant demands to adapt to novelty, many will plunge into future shock. For them the future will have arrived too soon.” (Slaughter, 2002)

This begs the question: Do we need all the technology that keeps pouring out and changing on a daily basis, nearly? Could we do just as well to slow down the emergence of new technology to
enable us to learn the technology that now exists? How can we develop a dynamic rhetoric for a technology that changes so often? Do we buy the newest gadget because we need it or because everyone has it and we don’t want to be different? I believe this could be paralleled with what Nietzsche was trying to say about the need to question doctrines no matter how socially prevalent they are. Of course, he was questioning religion and other philosophical doctrines, but I am not sure that, if he were alive today, he would not question the doctrine of the commercialization of technological needs.

Nietzsche claims that the principle of “life” is a more pressing and higher concern than that of “knowledge,” and that the quest for knowledge should serve the interests of life. He was interested in the enhancement of individual and cultural health, and believed in life, creativity, power, and the realities of the world we live in. We could argue that too much technology, particularly in the realm of communication technology, does not lend itself to preserving either individual or cultural health. Though it is a work of fiction, there is a Japanese film called *Pulse* that speaks to the dangers of too much communication technology. Its story premise is of a succession of suicides by young internet users which becomes a treatise on contemporary solitude, isolation, and dis-communication. The following line is from a review of the film: “The horror lies not in the threat of an almighty, autonomous technology that might take over or destroy our lives, but in the effects that the presence of technology, and in particular communications technology like the internet and mobile phones, has on our lives and our ways of communicating as human beings in society.” (Pulse, 2012) Is “life” more than “knowledge” as Nietzsche ascribes? If this is true, then we must rein in our obsession with newer and faster and mix it with human contact in the form of touch, smell, sight and sound. We must arm our children with coping skills that will allow for absorption of the constant roll-outs of new
platforms, better operating systems, cleaner communication lines, etc. The knowledge we seek to implant into our students minds must be tempered with the acquisition of a coping mechanism for the barrage of information which will, undoubtedly, come their way. Toffler spoke regarding technology and education in the following:

“Possibly the best section in the book is that on education. Here he advanced a powerful critique: ‘what passes for education today, even in our ‘best’ schools and colleges, is a hopeless anachronism.’ He then added: for all this rhetoric about the future, our schools face backwards towards a dying system, rather than forwards to an emerging new society. Their vast energies are applied to cranking out Industrial Men - people tooled for survival in a system that will be dead before they are. The thesis was then advanced that the prime objective of education should be to ‘increase the individual’s ‘cope-ability’ - the speed and economy with which he can adapt to continual change.’ Central to this was ‘the habit of anticipation’. Assumptions, projections, images of futures would need to become part and parcel of every individual’s school experience. Learning contracts would be needed, along with mentors from the adult population. The student’s ‘future-focused role image’ (ie his or her view of their future self) would be nourished along with these capabilities. A democratic ‘council for the future’ was needed in every school. Science fiction was an appropriate form of literature to encourage these capacities.” (Slaughter, 2002)

We do not have any long-term research findings from which to learn the true effect of texting, emailing or any other electronic forms of communication on our society. We can see
certain effects on grammar, spelling and sentence structure as a result of the new “electronic communication language”. Without a proper rhetoric and without some sort of control on emerging technology, we face an uncertain future. Toffler addressed many of his concerns and yet many were left unanswered.

“Three decades later the underpinnings of many of the ideas advanced in Future Shock remain problematic. There is no doubt, however, that the thesis focused many peoples’ attention on futures-related concerns. These included: the difficulties of understanding and complex processes of change; issues of human and environmental adaptation to unprecedented rates of change; the problem of subjecting ever more powerful technologies to some form of effective social control; and, overall, the problem of how to come to terms with the wide range of futures clearly implied by the all above.”

(Slaughter, 2002)

So, could this abyss to which Nietzsche refers, actually be technology. If it is, is technology staring back into us? We know that there are many ways our computer can track us. Our emails can be monitored by the government without our permission. Our thoughts can be subjected to criminal charges if they dare to stray too far from the “norm”. Our internet searches can be used against us in a court of law as proof of a crime commission. Our texts, voicemails and emails can be retrieved and shared with anyone who needs them. Our phones will tell people our location. In an effort to track the “monsters” have we become the “monster”? Is the quest for technology fueled by a desire to enhance man’s life or by a desire to acquire the newest invention? Is it really necessary to update a small part of the capabilities of a product, give it a
new name and market it as the “can’t live without” electronic gadget of the decade?

Technology for the sake of enterprise and profit is a monstrous waste of man’s time, energies and financial resources. Technology for the sake of real strides in combatting disease, simplifying processes or manufacturing and enhancing education is the benchmark to which we should strive to attain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Pts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A References indicate extensive reading on the part of the student, appropriate to graduate work.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Writing style consistent with expectations for graduate work.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Concepts associated with topic are accurately presented.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Paper represents a comprehensive summary of the topic, indicative of sufficient understanding of topic.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>10 pts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>