Nihilism and Defiant Grass

By Arthur Tanny

How does one begin to look for truth, meaning or authenticity in the modern world? One might say that the answer is obscured by our dependency on technology. This dependency is a product of an addiction to progress. I believe our relation to technology is more of the symptom than the disease. We are living in a day and age where the machine not only controls us but permeates our mode of existence. Modern life is utterly and rigidly departmental. Everyone and everything has a function and routine. We use to have responsibilities governed by morality. We now have tasks delegated to us by some informed group. In this sense, technology is an extension of our “self.” Our gadgets aid us in our tasks. With them we become multifunctional, faster and able to handle more tasks. Essentially we become more like the efficient, technological environment than like the irrational, sporadic mortals that we are. We alienate our humanity, our meaning, and our authenticity by functionalizing and consuming mass produced products and information.

Consider this. I go to work five out of seven days of the week at about 3:00 p.m. I clock out of work promptly at 11:00 p.m. I trade eight hours of my life for $50.00. I do this five days a week that is 40 hours of my life for 250.00 a week. Let’s say I pay half of that for food, electric ect, ect. I still have 125.00. But after a hard week of work, I am unhappy partly because by Monday the process starts all over again. More importantly, I spent 40 hours being some one that I am not. I had to be a happy XYZ employee as well as an efficient, functional member of the team. Does this routine give my life any meaning? No. I am nothing more than an interchangeable part, replaceable at any moment, rather than a unique individual. Because I lack meaning and control over my “self,” I fill the rest of my time and money on insignificant things like Popcorn poppers, VCRs, and Palm Pilots. I attempt to translate the money, the residue of my lost time on objects. The meaning of my life is translated into information on my possessions. I have x amount of cars, I have cable with the deluxe plan, I have x amount of property. The commodities that I earn from my daily routine mystify me or separate me from my humanity. In this situation truth is purely information much like how a computer gauges truth or importance.

The easy diagnosis is that my despair is brought on by seeing myself as the sum of my accumulated property. The remedy is for me to simply stop working. However, this is not practical because at some point I will have to eat. The problem is not really the gadgets and gizmos I fill my life with it is the routine, and necessity for functionality. The “everydayness” of life is filled with a banality that drains the meaning and authenticity out of my life. Society does not cultivate meaning or authenticity. It creates a nihilist structure opposed to meaning and individuality. Function and the maximization of production are paramount. The question still stands. How do we begin to search for
truth, meaning or authenticity in the modern world? I will admit
our routines and the social
forces around us are strong and
indifferent to our struggles but
they do not control us fully.
Consider a paved sidewalk.
When it is first laid down it is
even and flat but in time the
roots of nearby trees break it up.
Grass always finds a way to
erupt to the surface. Our
routines are those paved
sidewalks. To subvert our
alienation we must oppose it by
existing in sporadic moments of
irrationality. Is irrationality the
essence of human? Who knows?
But it is certainly in opposition
to the banality that the modern
world thrusts upon us.

“This crown of the laughter, the rose-
wreath crown: to you my brothers, I
throw this crown. Laughter I have
pronounced holy: you higher men,
learn –to laugh!”
—Nietzsche
Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Part IV.

From Technopoly by Neil
Postman

Indeed one way of defining a
Technopoly is to say that its
information immune system is
inoperable. Technopoly is a form
of cultural AIDS, which I here use
as an acronym for Anti-Information
Deficiency Syndrome....More
important, it is why in a
Technopoly there can be no
transcendent sense of purpose or
meaning, no cultural coherence.
Information is dangerous when it
has no place to go, when there is no
theory to which it applies, no

pattern in which it fits, when there
is no higher purpose it serves.
Information has become a form
of garbage, not only incapable of
answering the most fundamental
human questions but barely useful
in providing coherent direction to
the solution of even mundane
problems. To say it still another
way: The milieu in which
Technopoly flourishes is one in
which the tie between information
and human purpose has been
severed, i.e., information appears
indiscriminately, directed at no one
in particular in enormous volume
and at high speeds, and
disconnected from theory,
meaning, or purpose.

All of this has called into being a
new world. I have referred to it
elsewhere as a peek-a-boo world,
where now this event, now that,
pops into view for a moment, then
vanishes again. It is an improbable
world. It is a world in which the
idea of human progress, as Bacon
expressed it, has been replaced by
the idea of technological progress.
The aim is not to reduce ignorance,
superstition, and suffering by to
accommodate ourselves to the
requirements of new technologies.
We tell ourselves, or course, that
such accommodations will lead to a
better life, but that is only the
rhetorical residue of a vanishing
technocracy. We are a culture
consuming itself with information,
and many of us do not even wonder
how to control the process. We
proceed under the assumption that
information is our friend, believing
that cultures may suffer grievously
from a lack of information, which,
of course, they do. It is only now
beginning to be understood that
cultures may also suffer grievously
from information glut, information
without meaning, information
without control mechanisms.

Technopoly is a state of culture.
It is also a state of mind. It consists
in the deification of technology,
which means that the culture seeks
its authorization in technology,
finds its satisfactions in technology,
and takes its orders from
technology. This requires the
development of a new kind of
social order, and of necessity leads
to the rapid dissolution of much
that is associated with traditional
beliefs. Those who feel most
comfortable in Technopoly are
those who are convinced that
technical progress is humanity’s
supreme achievement and the
instrument by which our most
profound dilemmas may be solved.

If you have any questions,
criticisms, or comments, please
contact either Chris Dunn or
Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone
interested in writing a brief
article for The Philosopher’s
Stone, please contact either of
us (it doesn't have to be good,
however it does have to be
thoughtful).

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