Netflix and Nil

James Poulos

A cyborg pensively smokes a cigarette on the cover of Nolen Gertz's learned polemic against the online tools that have come to mean almost everything in our lives—and the lives that under their sway have come to mean next to nothing. The image sums up Gertz's warning that tech has tempted us in newly powerful ways to abdicate our humanity. Rather than a human being simply enslaved to a machine, Gertz's cyborg is a being whose humanity is a problem, a problem the human is replacing with machinery in an effort to expunge it completely. Yet the cyborg broods, arms clenched, shoulders hunched: Its human effort to escape its humanity becomes itself an all-too-human prison.

Nihilism and Technology
By Nolen Gertz
Rowman & Littlefield
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Gertz, a philosophy professor at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, is directing genuine philosophical inquiry to the questions of online technology now permeating our lives. He is remarkably adept at translating Nietzsche's analysis of nihilistic living—which looks at how we develop strategies for coping with a way of life that undermines our very humanity—into instantly recognizable terms stretching from "Netflix and chill" to smugshrugs and emoji to the gamification of health and well beyond.

> Thanks to tech companies, we can zone out, we can be more efficient, we can help strangers, we can make friends, and we can attack enemies. And while we may indeed find these activities meaningful, and may even find they make us happy, that does not mean that these activities are not nihilistic. For nihilism does not mean that life is meaningless but rather that our search for a transcendent source of meaning, for a source of meaning external to us, external to our lives, results in our lives not being lived.

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Although Gertz dutifully excludes moral categories like evil from his own judgments, he excavates the moral rot at the heart of our endlessly evasive online movements. Here,

> users can feel like they are not wasting time but are engaging in human interaction.... [U]sers can feel like they are not hurting anyone's feelings but just having a good time. And because we can experience both perspectives simultaneously, we can be brutal and evil without feeling brutal and evil.

Condemning the pretense that our bodily lives are separate from our digital lives, he warns that "there is no 'real world' different from the 'cyber world' but only the world of experience." Tinder is another example of a larger online dysfunction. "Maintaining the illusion of these dualisms is central to Tinder's success, for if we were forced to confront what we are actually doing to ourselves and to each other, we would be forced to recognize that what we find so *fun* about Tinder is...what Nietzsche describes as *the pleasure of cruelty*":

> ...it may seem as though Tinder does not belong with the likes of Airbnb, Uber, and Kickstarter, since users of Tinder are not trying to connect in order to exchange goods and services but simply in order to meet each other. However,...the behavior of users of Tinder appears to suggest that the aim of users is not necessarily to meet others, nor even to hook up with others, but rather to swipe others, to judge others as acceptable or rejectable. Hence what Tinder shares with Airbnb, Uber, and Kickstarter is that it provides users with an opportunity to exercise the power of judging and the pleasure of cruelty.

With special clarity, Gertz lays bare the animating wickedness that lurks at the dark center of the ostensibly merely "addictive" properties of online (a nonplace so distinct its denizens now use the word as a noun). "For while swiping can provide quite a power rush," he notes, "it must be recognized that it can also be quite tedious," and the great mystery of online is how something so boring can also be so compulsive. The "pleasure economics" of social media, says Gertz, is selfless—"not selfless in the sense of altruism but in the sense of the self-destruction of the morality of pity, of reducing others and oneself to nothing while at the same time feeling guilty about it." Online life offers a vicious cycle that sustains itself *because* it is not just a power trip but a boring one—a point Gertz might well have extended, yet conspicuously does not, to Internet pornography.

With his unsparing catalog of these casual but darkly deliberate crimes against our own humanity, Gertz leaves the reader with little room to

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disagree with his thesis. But there is indeed room.

Gertz does not flinch from the difficulty of breaking out of the nihilistic loop of our technological habits. If we merely shaped our tools, they would be easier to put down. Instead, citing the philosopher of technology Shannon Vallor, Gertz recognizes that "we allow and have always allowed the things we make to reshape us." But, Gertz says, we can only understand how this mutual reshaping has wound up being described as progress by turning to Nietzsche, who showed that progress is driven by the self-denial at the core of nihilism. We *want* something—something decidedly not human—to come *into* our lives and take *out* our human character.

Nietzsche famously leveled this critique against ascetic Christianity—which in saying "no" to this world, to ourselves, and to humanity as it is, ends up being destructive of ourselves. But Gertz is concerned to show how Nietzsche's critique of Christianity maps with profound force onto today's online sickness, which also involves a rejection of the "real world," a means of escape from the world, and a denial of our physical being and limitations. "We are indeed using technologies to shape ourselves into the beings we want to be. But from a Nietzschean perspective we can see that this *aim* is nihilistic, that the answer to the *why?* of our technological progress is that we do not want the reality in which we find ourselves."

A certain sort of philosophically-minded culture critic might pause here to ask why Heidegger isn't a better guide than Nietzsche. Heidegger's pessimistic critique of modern technology—that it makes us subservient to its logic of instrumentality, so that everything begins to appear to us as nothing but a resource to be used—may seem like a better fit for Gertz's project. To this Gertz has an answer. Following Don Ihde, a philosopher at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Gertz says we can and should accept Heidegger's critique of technology, but without accepting his response. Heidegger does not believe we humans make life meaningful through action; rather, he believes that we recover meaning through thinking. But this answer is intolerably passive: "Heidegger ends up blaming the external influence of technology for humanity not achieving its destiny," and so he fails to provide an affirmative agenda for recovering our humanity from the ravages of techno-nihilism.

Gertz therefore turns to Nietzsche to argue, against Heidegger, that only human action consistent with the inescapable reality of our human being can bring our existence to make sense in a fruitful way. So it is Nietzsche, says Gertz, who really shows why technology has become nihilistic: because it so effectively

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removes us from our own role in the relationship between machinery and nothingness. We can see "our attempts to avoid the burdens of consciousness" in the "hypnotic appeal of such technologies as television, streaming entertainment services, and augmented reality and virtual reality devices."

In a pitiless tour of our online habitus—the nearly automatic behaviors that structure the social world of the web—Gertz observes the reduction of our human presence to a state of meaninglessness. "Techno-hypnosis," the familiar act of zoning out while half-consuming online content, gives us a welcome escape from both wakefulness and sleep. "Data-driven activity" centers on strangely impersonal performance aggregates—steps climbed, calories burned. "Pleasure economics" revolves around the pathos of passing professional or erotic judgment on an endless stack of profiles. "Herd networking" turns us into brands servicing followers at the expense of our personhood—gratefully paid. Our longing to evade the burdens of consciousness and responsibility that still press down upon us powerless individuals devolves into "orgies of clicking."

If technology is nihilistic today because we are using it as never before to progressively rid ourselves of our humanity, and if Nietzsche is the best guide to understanding how and why we persist in that dark project of self-denial, then his assault on Christianity as the strongest form of nihilism yet devised must be taken seriously, even if ultimately in stride.

Nietzsche argued that the Christian ascetic priests "sought to soothe rather than cure our suffering, prescribing to us ways to avoid ourselves, ways to rechannel our instincts, ways such as self-hypnosis, mechanical activity, petty pleasures, herd instinct, and orgies of feeling," writes Gertz. But in doing so, ascetic Christianity "strengthened rather than weakened our nihilism, so much so that our nihilism became strong enough to destroy our faith in the ascetic priests, in God, and in the Christian moral world."

Who is the "our" here, asks today's Christian? Gertz wants to treat the Christian life as a form of asceticism that we, in our progress, obsolesced—and replaced with the improved ascetic technology of online life. "What happens when technologies take up the role of ascetic priests?" he asks. Technology isn't God today, he cleverly notes, but better than God: It lets us escape our humanity without having to believe in anything.

Yet Gertz won't face up to the prospect that today's ascetic technology is far more effectively nihilistic than is Christianity. Gertz does stress, wisely, that dualism—the notion of consciousness as an unlimited good in opposition to our bad and limited

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bodies—is found at the root of nihilism. But Gertz, following Nietzsche, tars all of Christianity with its heretical strains of gnostic dualism.

It seems plausible to say that much of modern Christianity took up dualistic philosophy as a tool to help emancipate God's human creatures from the hurtful limits of the natural world, and came increasingly to see its theological mission as overcoming Christianity itself—think of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who shared so much with Nietzsche, the Protestant minister's son. But powerful strains of Christianity have long avoided self-negating dualism. Gertz must simply ignore this, but we should pay attention.

The unspoken premise of *secular* pity is that people can be reduced to nothing—that in the absence of what we give them, they could be pieces of shit, as Nazi guards called their extermination-camp victims. By contrast, Christian pity, well understood, is premised on the Aristotelian sort of notion that humans cannot be reduced to nothing, owing to how and why they were caused. For Aristotle, soul and body are fundamentally continuous, not separate and at odds; our aliveness is an effect of our being ensouled beings. And Aristotle further blurs the line between this world and another world that Gertz is hellbent on maintaining. Aristotle insists that the soul is the living body's formal cause—a sort of organizing principle of the body, to use a too-modern description. For Gertz, the immateriality of the acting soul must betoken an immaterial realm, another world. But for Aristotle, the soul is a feature of nature itself.

The presence of the soul in nature is an important clue to how Christianity offers a different response to the puzzle of the meaning of suffering than mere self-denial in ascetic longing for unreality. Aquinas, following Aristotle, treats the soul, as Eric McLuhan puts it, as a "medium" structured to "accept" or "house" the "*logos* of faith." The soul, in this Christian Aristotelian sense, is the natural context for the content of our created existence. On Earth, as befits the *one* Creation, the material and immaterial comprise *one* world. Gertz, within his analytical framework, cannot recognize the unity of the Christian cosmos.

Gertz and Nietzsche alike might have remembered that ascetic priesthood in fact predated Christianity, in Egypt, and finds its deepest roots in the funerary cult's worship of the dead, rather than in the Gospel's central message of the salvation or healing of our lived life. Gertz brilliantly grasps that "if social networks operate like a religion, they are a religion whose holiest texts are blank. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit are... empty spaces, voids waiting to be filled by the content created not by them, not by the priests, but by users, by the herd itself." But Gertz shies away from the

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deeper insight. The ultimate threat posed by the rise of online life is the worship not of nothingness but of death. What Gertz describes as the fruitless investiture of our mortal lives in machine-made illusions is best understood as the flesh-and-blood sacrifice of our ensouled, living bodies to unsouled technology that acts but is *not* alive. We the living are offered up to the inanimate; death triumphs over life.

This would be a transcendent kind of asceticism indeed—one that escapes both the natural world of living creatures and the supernatural world of eternal life. And it is one that starkly reminds us that the Christian life, however ascetic, is fundamentally about participating in God's triumph over death.

In the closing of the book, Gertz outlines his vision of a cultural movement from "passive nihilism" to "active nihilism"—that is, toward a heightened critical engagement with technology. From this stance, we will better recognize "when we use technologies to try to *make* people be happier in particular environments rather than questioning *why* people are not happy in those environments," and when we unthinkingly identify human progress with technological progress. It is a vision that leads us toward

> being able to question if we know what "better" means; to question if we know what purpose such betterment is meant to serve; to question whether we are trying to become better only for the sake of being better, for the sake of being different, for the sake of not being who we are; to question whether our pursuit of the posthuman is leading us to risk becoming inhuman because of our nihilistic desire to be anything other than merely human.

Despite the crippling way online technology bores us with power and empowers us with boredom, it likely marks more an end of an era than a beginning. Rather than inventing a new character type definitive of the digital age, online technology has perfected the terminal character type of the electric age of television, movies, advertisements, and appliances. Beyond that already obsolescing world, strangely, an older one waits to return.

It is a sort of world where the immaterial is once again more real than the merely fantastic. Digital technology inexorably spreads the old awareness that there is nothing new under the sun and all, in a practical sense, is vanity. The laborious and life-consuming make-believe peddled by advertisement, entertainment, and the news and opinion media is already swiftly losing its enchanting authority over hearts and minds. This system has tried to survive by moving online, but its initial burst of success is beginning to look

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like a last gasp. Digital technology is working pitilessly to render trivial fact and trivial fantasy not worth knowing—or doing. And the hypnosis, gamification, and sadomasochism of online life is failing to sustain the gnostic conceit that what we do online can be separated from who we are.

Thrown back in this dis-illusioned way onto the reality of our relational, incarnate, ensouled human lives, we might find it is not a heightened critical stance but Biblical faith that delivers what Gertz, in his closing, yearns for.

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