The Fallacy of Advancement: Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" and "Bright Phoenix"

Sonal

Abstract:

The article attempts to delve into the functions of media in shaping human relationships in the age of technological advancement. It aims to examine the technical factors that contribute to the degradation in the social and personal growth of people by analysing the speculative literary imaginations of Ray Bradbury in his short stories "The Pedestrian" (1951) and "Bright Phoenix" (1963). The narratives carefully examine the way media influences the social and cultural fabrics in a digital dystopia. Bradbury's works portray the possible effects of mass media, particularly cable television, upon the lifestyle and intellectual growth of mid-twentieth century Americans and predict the level of its influence on upcoming generations. The article explicates that overconsumption of media leads to its routinisation, which leaves no time for contemplation or reflection, thus reinforcing the passive reception of its contents and diminishing the intellectual volition of the viewers. By focusing on the themes of media overconsumption, consumer culture, surveillance, and intellectual freedom in these narratives, I seek to portray how an overdependence on technology leads to the degradation of human sensibility and society. The article further touches upon the problematic portrayal of advancement and progress with the advent of technology in Bradbury's short prose. They highlight the involvement of authorities in shaping a majoritarian lifestyle and how any divergent tendencies will be termed as 'regressive.' In this context, I aim to expound on how these narratives present themselves as a resistance to the apparent threat to liberal thought and expose the numerous ways the selected corporate interest groups manipulate society.

Keywords: Dystopian fiction, technology, media addiction, consumerism, hyperreality, Totalitarianism.

Introduction:

Technology has been a recurring theme in dystopian fiction, which portrays how an overdependence on technology leads to the degradation of human sensibility. Several well-known works of dystopian fiction, such as Jack London's *The Iron Heels* (1908), E.M. Forster's 'Machine Stops' (1909), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), etc. depict the multi-faceted impacts of technology on humans. Darko Suvin suggests that through a nuanced engagement with science fiction, the readers experience what he calls 'cognitive estrangement'[1] whereby they may delve into imaginary worlds that provide a new and revolutionary perspective on their actual conditions. These narratives provide us with a space to rethink our present socio-political situations and gain fresh insights into the consequences of our present actions. Bradbury, in his short stories "The Pedestrian" (1951) and "Bright Phoenix" (1963), expatiates two distinct effects of technology and media in society. The former deals with media addiction, whereas the latter depicts the erosion of democracy and intellectual freedom.

A Night Walker

Technological advances, especially cable television, have prompted the creation of electronic media, where everyone privately owns his/her device for entertainment and knowledge. Influential cultural theorist Raymond Williams highlights the ability of television to shape and reflect social values which regulate the masses. In his celebrated work, *Communications*[2] (1926), he stresses the social functions of electronic devices and their content that contributes to the formation of public consciousness and identity.

"The Pedestrian" displays a society in which media consumption has reached its zenith. The media, with all its detrimental effects, as asserted by Sean McCorry, has permeated the culture of the people[3]. The story foregrounds the dystopian image of a society in which the masses are bound to their home, preoccupied with watching television. The narrative follows the protagonist, Leonard Mead, a nightwalker who relishes strolling on the streets. His night walk is juxtaposed against the rest of society, foregrounding the absence of human interaction and feelings of alienation in media-oriented societies. Later in the story, Mead's innocuous habitual activity is put to serious interrogation by the authorities, represented by a strange robot car, which interprets it as a deviant act. His eventual arrest by the police signifies the

suppression of individuality and individual autonomy in a conformist society. The theme of surveillance in the narrative speaks of the extent of control exerted on the masses whose lifestyle is getting moulded in a way that benefits those in power. The unwritten norm of staying indoors and consuming media hinders any social interaction or discussion, which would become a voice of dissent against the capitalist commandments.

Real or Authentic Fake?

In the postmodern era, the advent of new modes of entertainment results in a large influx of information. The modern man finds himself standing at the vortex of this huge wave of information channelized from all directions. The superfluidity of this excess affects our perception of the world and alters the way we interact with it. Jean Baudrillard perceives this information as a hollowed vessel deprived of any meaning or signification. In his 1981 philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulations*[4], he conceptualises our experience of an implosion of meaning in media. In one of his hypotheses, Baudrillard observes how the information, instead of conveying any meaning, has a tendency of 'staging meaning'[5]. By using several methods and techniques like narrative structure, framing, and visual and auditory cues, it mutates the representation of reality and helps in the production of simulacra. The formation of simulacra and the resulting space of hyperreality disrupt the social space by fracturing the basic forms of communication processes. The unlimited content and its facile access, accompanied by the 'pressure of information, pursue a destructuration of the social'[6], hence breaking down social structures.

Medium at Play

The argument put forward by Marshall McLuhan in his media theory uncovers the often-ignored presence of the medium in the meaning-making process. His claim that 'the medium is the message'[7] enforces the assertion that apart from the content, the medium also contributes to shaping social perception. Being an 'extension of ourselves'[8] the medium 'alters sense ratios and patterns of perception.'[9] Media has ceased to be the mediator of two faces of the real; instead it made possible for one to devour the other. The manufactured content stands in for the real and gets transformed with the aid of medium as form.[10] Bradbury formulates the

effect of media on society on two levels. First, as a tool for corporate and special interest groups to spread their ideology through their products, and second, a means to distract people from relevant issues by sanctioning deleterious volume of media, thus forming an addiction.

Making of a Consumer Creed

The idea of consumerism completely immerses the viewers in what Baudrillard calls a hyperreality. This state fundamentally blurs the difference between the real and its representations by presenting images which appear more real than the reality itself[11]. The viewers enjoy the presence of this simulated space, which temporarily lulls them to break free from social reality. Baudrillard, in his book *The Consumer Society* (1970), finds that images on the screen distance the viewers from 'the cruel exteriority of the world'[12] and provide momentary comfort. Consumers readily invest their senses in the visual world, intending to escape from overwhelming social responsibilities and expectations. The virtual world demands no participation from the viewers and makes itself available at just the click of a button. This tendency in consumers can be attributed to the social and cultural atmosphere in post-war Western society where the fragmentary nature of people's existence desired an image of a constituted whole which would provide them what Baudrillard calls 'maximum index of security.'[13]

Do not look here!

Baudrillard conceives of television as a means of 'social control.' It prompts the dearth of harmony, unity, and public discourse ——values essential for a democratic society. The synthesization of this new medium in culture acts as a distraction[14]. It takes the attention away from the vital issues and keeps people entertained. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer extend the argument on the impact of media on the minds of viewers of what they call a 'cultural industry.' They insist on the effects of media in stimulating viewers' senses instead of providing a space for intellectual creation. This stimulation causes a surge in viewers' need for more, leading to an addiction. The narrator in "The Pedestrian" hears laughter from one of the houses, which is an indication of the comfort a virtual world provides at the cost of reality. The pseudo-happiness eliminates any sense of real achievement or satisfaction from the

viewers. The nonsensical laughing creates sham happiness, having no real consequence or requiring no effort. Horkheimer and Adorno's assertion that 'there is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about'[15] encapsulates the absurd character of these kinds of reactions to the new media. These tendencies are evident in the story where people are granted numerous options from 'displaying the exploits of United States cavalry' to 'a comedian falling off the stage.'[16] Hence, the public chooses to be in a constant state of denial where reality is superseded by a virtual one.

Click. Stream. Repeat.

The term addiction has been understood as an unhealthy level of consumption of any substance. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes addiction as 'immoderate or compulsive consumption of drug or other substance' (OED, Addiction), which points out its association with things like alcohol or illegal drugs such as nicotine. However, Bradbury writes of an unusual addiction to television where people have compulsively situated themselves in front of the screen, spending countless hours of their day. Television has become their sole means of receiving information about the world, placing them at the receiving end of communication. The content is contained in the medium without a response. Hence, the model of communication is inherently incomplete and requires minimum input from viewers. We live in the 'era of non-response—of irresponsibility.'[17]

Bradbury, through his narratives, formulates the idea of addiction to entertainment as one of confining people to their couches, leaving the streets empty. He uses the metaphor of a graveyard for the city, pointing to the sheer bleakness encompassing it. The people appear as 'grey phantoms' sitting still in the rooms with flickering lights on their faces, whereas the tomb-like buildings contain bodies deficient of any substance or life. The level of media consumption by people ascribes to its inclusion in the culture, which forces itself upon people to the extent that they willingly immerse themselves in their addiction to media. This demonstrates the height of power exercised by the authorities over all aspects of life, collapsing boundaries between public and private.

Demise of Democracy

Harstad notes the continuously expanding reach of media while it concurrently becomes less democratised. He emphasises the contribution of authorities to the addictive nature of media and insists on orders like press merging during the 1950s in America behind Bradbury's concerns regarding the detrimental effects of mass media depicted in his works. The influence of corporations on individuals has been fueled by the advertisements in media industries, allowing great control over the individual psyche. These trends in media directly harm democratic culture by turning the masses into passive recipients of dominant ideologies, suppressing criticism and critical thinking. The process of making uniform culture and suppressing individuality harms the foundations of democracy and of what Jürgen Habermas calls a 'public sphere', which functions with the great participation of public opinions and discourses and makes possible a rational public debate.[18]

Burning Alphabets: Censor the Sense

The suppression of public opinion is highlighted by Bradbury in his short story "Bright Phoenix", where he demonstrates the limits of administrative control over the intellectual freedom of the citizens. It portrays a society where the authorities are banning and burning certain 'questionable' books to restrict public thought. The protagonist of the story, the librarian, is a part of an underground group which strives to protect the books by memorising their contents. He engages in a dialogue with Jonathan Barnes, a chief sensor who has come to collect the books, which transforms into a non-violent indirect protest against the regime. Barnes' statement that 'books are dangerous' sums up the revolutionary power of books and their presence as a perceived threat to the regime. The story is interspersed with well-known lines from canonical literature which display the immortality of knowledge, the human spirit, and the resilience of its preservers. "Bright Phoenix", by dealing with themes such as censorship, freedom of thought and expression, and the quest for knowledge, works as a resistance to the apparent threat to intellectual autonomy and public opinion.

George Orwell, in his influential essay "The Prevention of Literature", delineates the effect of censorship and self-censorship on creative expression. He meditates upon the underlying dangers of the regime in restricting intellectual creations and states:

> A society becomes totalitarian when its structure becomes flagrantly artificial: that is when its ruling class has lost its function but succeeds in clinging to power by force or fraud. Such a society, no matter how long it persists, can never afford to become either tolerant or

intellectually stable. It can never permit either the truthful recording of facts or the emotional sincerity that literary creation demands.[19]

Orwell's ideas expose myriad ways in which a society is manipulated and enfolded by a preformed narrative of the state, which works as a binding force in making a suppressed whole that is unable to question the regime. These narratives are aligned with the interests of specific capitalist groups and the state, disregarding the welfare of the masses. Technology like cable TV works to circulate propaganda, bending their opinions as well as procuring widespread support in the guise of public welfare. In his acclaimed work *Fahrenheit 451*[20] (1953), Bradbury shows how the authorities seek to brainwash the public by presenting less important news in quick succession in an attempt to limit thought. The books in the library embody the knowledge contained in them, which is being destroyed at the hands of the state because they are considered dangerous, claiming that they ignite protest and unrest among people, threatening social harmony. Destruction of the books leads to totalitarianism, where everyone is supposed to align his/her thoughts and actions with the dominant ideology, repressing individualism and diversity of thoughts. In this way, public opinion gets sidelined by the state, leading to the erosion of democratic culture, which thrives on public participation. The discourse around these narratives allows the space for readers to observe and reflect on the reigning ideologies of their time.

Rise of the Eccentric

Bradbury's protagonists are crucial in our understanding of the concerned short stories and the portrayal of the societies in them. The concept of the eccentric figure proposed by Harstad proves useful in the evaluation of the roles the characters play in the stories. According to him, an eccentric is a figure who is critical to culture in the wake of the complete collapse of the established structure[21]. The character of Leonard Mead can be seen as an eccentric figure who stands outside of the majoritarian impulse and is able to critique the system from a vantage point. He represents nonconformity with the totalitarian regime by refusing to merge with the masses. The simple act of night walking constitutes a resistance to the standardised way of life. The character of the librarian in "Bright Phoenix" holds a similar position. His attempt to save the library from the authorities is an expression of dissent over the banning of books by the government and the desire to re-establish lost humanistic traditions. The conversations between the eccentric and the regime hold centerstage in the narrative. The encounter with the police

car and a similar encounter between the librarian and the sensor chief highlight the acts of negotiation between the two ideologies that attempt to reason with the regime. However, in both instances, the figure of the eccentric ultimately fails to resist the system and is forced to surrender to totalitarianism, highlighting the significance of collective action.

Idea of Advancement

Through an influential and compelling narration of the short stories, Bradbury effectively problematises the idea of advancement by representing it as a mixed blessing. Though on the surface, technological advancements seem favourable; the narratives foreground their potential repercussions if left unchecked. Society in dystopian narratives may have an abundance of comfort and exorbitant lifestyles, but they lack the humanistic values of individuality, human dignity, and compassion. The material advancements in these societies made possible by electronic media encourage a culture of vacuous entertainment and intellectual suppression. The narratives successfully reinforce the need to strike a balance between material and moral advancements.

Conclusion

Analysing the impact of technology on our social and cultural fabrics demands the utmost priority, especially in the age of new technologies. Its imprints are evident on the minds of individuals whose overuse of media is declining their intellectual volition. With the changing medium, new definitions of progress and development are coming forth, dismantling the old ways of life. Hence, it becomes extremely important to analyse the dynamic role of media in dystopian literature, which offers us cautionary tales about the lingering dangers of advanced technology.

Notes:

[1] Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre", *College English* 34, no. 3 (1972): 372–82, https://doi.org/10.2307/375141.

[2] Raymond Williams, *Communications* (Penguin Classics, 1926).

[3] Sean McCorry, "Literacy, Bêtise, and the Production of Species Difference in Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451", *Extrapolation*, vol. 59, no. 1, (2018): 25-46, https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2018.3.

[4] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[5] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations,* 80.

[6] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations,* 81.

[7] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964), 1.

[8] McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* 1.

[9] McLuhan, Understanding Media, 1.

[10] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 82.

[11] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 81.

[12] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 35.

[13] Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 35.

[14] T. Giraud, "An Economy of Distraction: Ray Bradbury's Vision of Technology in the Modern," *The New Ray Bradbury Review* no. 7 (2023): 35-47, https://doi.org/10.18060/27569.

[15] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 112.

[16] Ray Bradbury, "The Pedestrian", in *The Reporter*, (New York: The Fortnightly Publishing Company, 1951), 40.

[17] Ray Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media", in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (The MIT Press, 2003), 281.

[18] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public* Sphere: *An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Trans. Thomas Burger (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991).

[19] George Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature", in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and letters of George Orwell: In Front of Your Nose 1945-1950* vol. 4, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Martin Seeker & Warburg Limited, 1968), 67.

[20] Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*(Ballantine Books, 1953).

[21] Emil Harstad, "The survival of the eccentric in a hyperreal culture" (master's thesis, The Arctic University of Norway, 2023), 4.

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