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Power in Technology: How Looks (And Television Screens) Can be Deceiving

Who benefits from the development of technology? Ray Bradbury was an author of dystopian fiction novels, with his most notable being *Fahrenheit: 451*. In his two short stories, “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” and “The Pedestrian,” Bradbury highlights the dystopian theme of overdeveloped technology leading to an imbalance between humans, nature, and technology. In the former, humans have been wiped out by a destructive bomb (presumably from a War), and all that remains is a technologically advanced house that continues to function after the humans are gone. The latter story paints the picture of a world where humans are too occupied by their fast cars and television screens to experience the natural world around them. Though both “The Pedestrian” and “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” emblematicize the dystopian imbalance between nature and technology, the former does so more effectively since it illuminates the resulting effect technology’s overtaking of nature and the human desire for such technology has on the power relationship between the general population and the ruling class.

While technology has quickly outpaced Nature in “August 2026, There Will Come Soft Rains,” its purpose remains as a tool to aid humans, allowing them to live free lives that are harmonious with nature. The house in the story is depicted as against nature, as “not even a bird much touch the house,” (Bradbury 2) suggesting a dystopian-esque advancement in technology

that is skew to Nature. However, this over-advancement of technology has done nothing but bolster the peoples' ability to spend less time interacting with it. The "rooms ... crawl with the small cleaning animals" and the "breakfast stove [giving] a hissing sigh and [ejecting] ... eight pieces of perfectly browned toast" are examples of technology made simply for efficiency and timesaving (Bradbury 1, 2). The results of such are seen, though grimly, when the human's "images burned on wood in one titanic instant, a small boy ... the image of a thrown ball, and opposite him a girl, hands raised to catch a ball which never came down" (Bradbury 1). Despite all the technological advancement and progress made, such as the "pink electric eyes" of the mechanical mice inside the house, the children play outside in Nature. Though the house has replaced many tasks that were previously done by humans, the value of humanity in its natural state remains true until the bitter end. The people in this society have not lost themselves yet to technology, but rather humans are still the masters of their technology, demonstrating the freedom of mind and body in contrast with "The Pedestrian."

Technology in "The Pedestrian" has been advanced with an intent to consume and distract the general public, suggesting that it was developed by an oppressive ruling class. Unlike the technology in "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," the technology in this dystopian society does nothing to aid or assist the general public, and instead it is solely designed to occupy attention and distract them. Television screens, while entertaining, leave the illusion of choice with "Channel 4, Channel 7, [and] Channel 9" truly making those decisions (Bradbury 5). The difference of such is crucial, since the motives behind each respective advancement in technology can be inferred: The technological advancements in "August 2026" were made to improve the lives of people, while in "The Pedestrian" the technological advancements were made to stop people from advancing as humans. Such a motive is demonstrated to be effective,

as “in a city of three million, there was only one police car left,” meaning the crime rate is extremely low. However, just as the television screens are meant to deceive and distract the people, the low crime rate reveals a sinister cause. In their natural state, humans are emotional and passionate creatures, so with three million people it should be expected that a decent amount of people will encounter situation where their extreme emotions cause them to commit crimes, meaning in a natural society a crime rate close to zero is impossible. Further, freedom of choice will inevitably lead to some people making bad choices or committing crimes, proving a lack of such privilege in this dystopian world. Thus, the society in “The Pedestrian” is either achieving the impossible, or the natural humanity of the society has been stripped. Such a cause for this loss of humanity is not difficult to find, since the television screens and fast cars make it so that Mr. Mead “ha[s] never met another person walking, not once in [ten years]” (Bradbury 5). It is without a doubt that the governing body, no matter how oppressive they may be, are the ones benefiting from this advancement of technology. With such a heavy and constant distraction, the people have become reliant on the constant stream of information coming from their televisions, and consequently have mostly lost their ability to think for themselves, allowing the government to make the decisions for them. Power doesn’t have to be demonstrated by force anymore, but rather the news channels can be changed to whatever the government likes. Ultimately, the technological advancements in “The Pedestrian” lead to government oppression, through the facet of distraction and desensitization.

The symbolism of light associated with Mr. Mead illuminates his position as the last free-thinking mind, hinting that even the best of the citizens have been reduced to weak, impressionable people able to be controlled by the government. While Mr. Mead can be seen as a symbol of hope, Bradbury uses him as a metric to compare the rest of society to, and more

specifically Bradbury uses him to highlight the desolate state the people are in. He is the lighthouse in a foggy sea, “Square and warm in the cool darkness,” (Bradbury 6) but there is infinitely more darkness than light, as seen with the pathetic fallacy of a dark and “misty evening” that encases Mr. Mead (Bradbury 6). Even more, what makes Mr. Mead different isn’t his tenacity or merit. Mr. Mead is undesirable, as “nobody wanted [him]” to marry, so perhaps his lack of validation from his peers has forced him to wander the streets. Crucially, the fate of Mr. Mead uncovers what his true purpose in the story is: Mr. Mead is what little bit of humanity remains after it has been reduced by control levied through technology. Mr. Mead’s fate symbolically represents the last fall of humanity to the grasp of technology, as he is arrested not even by another human, but rather the cold, metallic voice of an automatic police car. The car asks if Mr. Mead “[has] a viewing screen in [his] house to see with,” insinuating the government motive to replace a basic sense (sight) with their technology (Bradbury 6). In all, Bradbury warns of a technological takeover through the use of Mr. Mead as a symbol of false hope.

Technology in “The Pedestrian” and “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” is shown to have developed overwhelmingly, though the former demonstrates more effectively the impact this technology has on the power relationships in the society. Though the population has been completely wiped out in “August 2026,” with the fall of Mr. Mead, the last true human, humanity and everything it stood for, including genuine emotion, freedom of choice, and diversity of mind was wiped out and replaced with the periodic changing of channels. Thus, “The Pedestrian” stands as relevant to today’s society, as it demonstrates how the technology we have today may shatter our freedom in the future.