

R. Bradbury's "The Pedestrian"

Peter's Radical Introduction

Ray Bradbury wrote during the anti-communist witch hunts that endangered the livelihoods of millions of people who were critical of capitalism. To avoid persecution, Ray Bradbury appears to have deliberately focused his writing on technology instead of politics and economics. This did not make his work irrelevant. In fact, technology is central to politics and economics; without guns and wheels we would not have mobile armies and centralized governments, and without the wheel, the plow and grain-based agriculture we would not be able to feed centralized governments and urban centers.

In "The Pedestrian" Ray Bradbury highlights the social, political and economic impact of the high-tech world he inhabits. The protagonist, a writer, has been stripped of his livelihood by television, which provides hypnotic entertainment to the entire nation. Secondly, the automobile has made walking redundant and suspicious. Both read/writing and walking are forms of living that are eliminated by technological developments. Indeed, as the story makes painfully clear, society and community are also eliminated by technology.

Being a remnant of the past, the protagonist becomes a criminal suspect for walking, and his joblessness makes him doubly suspicious. His world has no place for writers and pedestrians, really no room for humans generally.

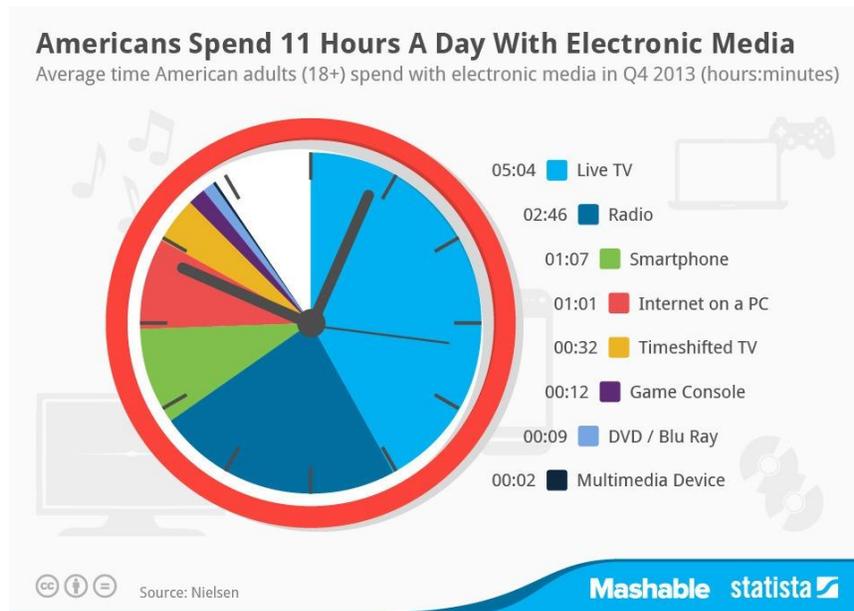
In short, the question asks us, "Are we still human?" Today, the negative answer is more accurate than ever.

"The Pedestrian"

To enter out into that silence that was the city at eight o'clock of a misty evening in November, to put your feet upon that buckling concrete walk, to step over grassy seams and make your way, hands in pockets, through the silences, that was what Mr Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do. He would stand upon the corner of an intersection and peer down long moonlit avenues of pavement in four directions, deciding which way to go, but it really made no difference; he was alone in this world of A.D., 2053 or as good as alone, and with a final decision made, a path selected, he would stride off, sending patterns of frosty air before him like the smoke of a cigar.

Sometimes he would walk for hours and miles and return only at midnight to his house. And on his way he would see the cottages and homes with their dark windows, and it was not unequal to walking through a graveyard where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows. Sudden

grey phantoms seemed to manifest upon inner room walls where a curtain was still undrawn against the night, or there were whisperings and murmurs where a window in a tomb-like building was still open.



Mr Leonard Mead would pause, cock his head, listen, look, and march on, his feet making no noise on the lumpy walk. For long ago he had wisely changed to sneakers when strolling at night, because the dogs in intermittent squads would parallel his journey with barkings if he wore hard heels, and lights might click on and faces appear and an entire street be startled by the passing of a lone figure, himself, in the early November evening.

On this particular evening he began his journey in a westerly direction, towards the hidden sea. There was a good crystal frost in the air; it cut the nose and made the lungs blaze like a Christmas tree inside; you could feel the cold light going on and off, all the branches filled with invisible snow. He listened to the faint push of his soft shoes through autumn leaves with satisfaction, and whistled a cold quiet whistle between his teeth, occasionally picking up a leaf as he passed, examining its skeletal pattern in the infrequent lamplights as he went on, smelling its rusty smell.

'Hello, in there,' he whispered to every house on every side as he moved. 'What's up tonight on Channel 4, Channel 7, Channel 9? Where are the cowboys rushing, and do I see the United States Cavalry over the next hill to the rescue?'

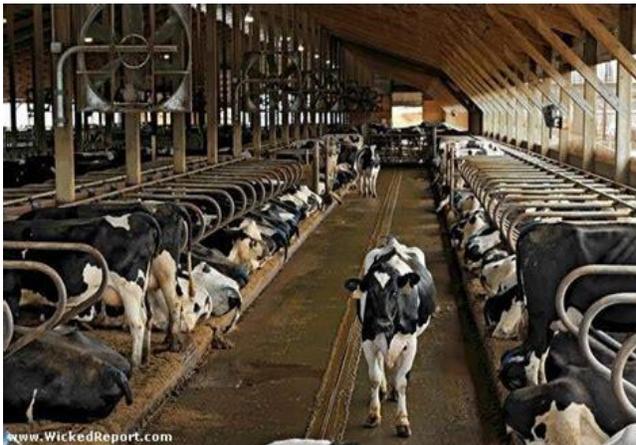
The street was silent and long and empty, with only his shadow moving like the shadow of a hawk in mid-country. If he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the centre of a plain, a wintry, windless Arizona desert with no house in a thousand miles, and only dry river beds, the streets, for

company.

'What is it now?' he asked the houses, noticing his wrist watch. 'Eight-thirty p.m.? Time for a dozen assorted murders? A quiz? A revue? A comedian falling off the stage?'

Was that a murmur of laughter from within a moon-white house? He hesitated, but went on when nothing more happened. He stumbled over a particularly uneven section of pavement. The cement was vanishing under flowers and grass. In ten years of walking by night or day, for thousands of miles, he had never met another person walking, not one in all that time.

He came to a clover-leaf intersection which stood silent where two main highways crossed the town. During the day it was a thunderous surge of cars, the petrol stations open, a great insect rustling and a ceaseless jockeying for position as the scarab-beetles, a faint incense pattering from their exhausts, skimmed homeward to the far directions. But now these highways, too, were like streams in a dry season, all stone and bed and moon radiance.



He turned back on a side street, circling around towards his home. He was within a block of his destination when the lone car turned a corner quite suddenly and flashed a fierce white cone of light upon him. He stood entranced, not unlike a night moth, stunned by the illumination, and then drawn towards it.

A metallic voice called to him:

'Stand still. Stay where you are! Don't move!' He halted.

'Put up your hands!' 'But-' he said.

'Your hands up! Or we'll shoot!'

The police, of course, but what a rare, incredible thing; in a city of three million, there was only *one* police car left, wasn't that correct? Ever since a year ago, 2052, the election year, the force had been cut down from three cars to one. Crime was ebbing; there was no need now for the police, save for this one lone car wandering and wandering the empty streets.

'Your name?' said the police car in a metallic whisper. He couldn't see the men in it for the bright light in his eyes.

'Leonard Mead,' he said.

'Speak up!'

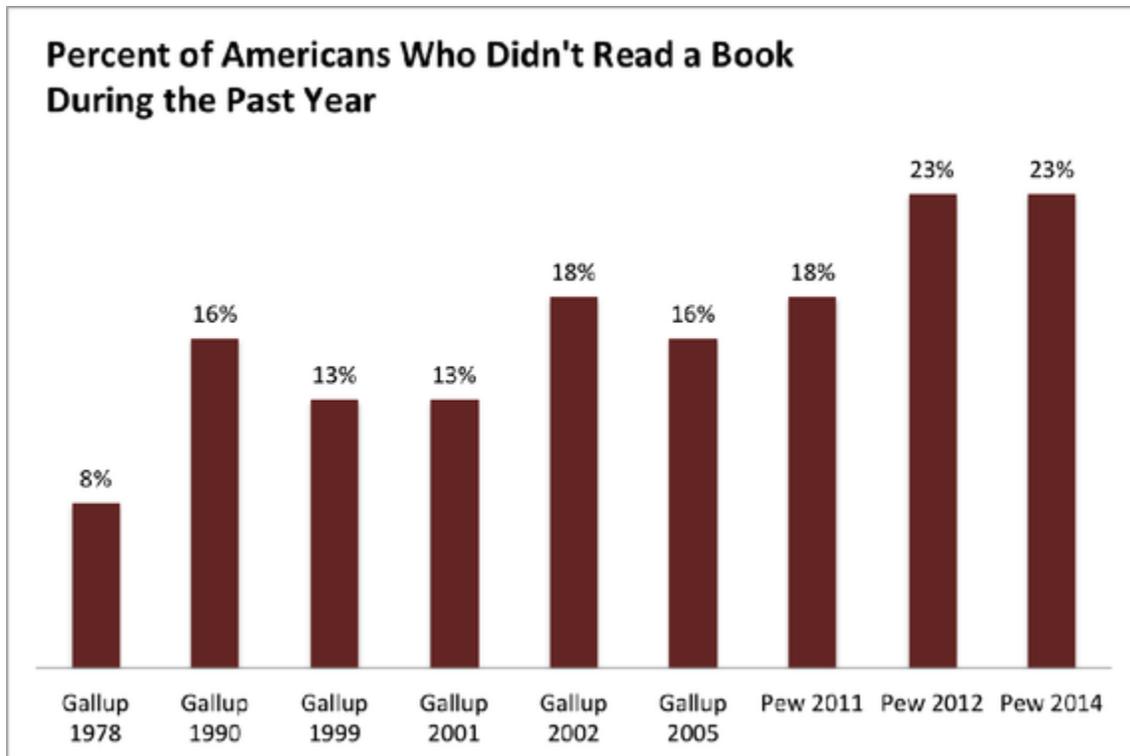
'Leonard Mead!'

'Business or profession?'

'I guess you'd call me a writer.'

'No profession,' said the police car, as if talking to itself. The light held him fixed, like a museum specimen, needle thrust through chest.

'You might say that,' said Mr Mead. He hadn't written in years. Magazines and books didn't sell any more. Everything went on in the tomb-like houses at night now, he thought, continuing his fancy. The tombs, ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead, the grey or multi-coloured lights touching their faces, but never really touching them.



'No profession,' said the phonograph voice, hissing. 'What are you doing out?'

'Walking,' said Leonard Mead.

'Walking!'

'Just walking,' he said simply, but his face felt cold.

'Walking, just walking, walking?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Walking where? For what?'

'Walking for air. Walking to *see*.'

'Your address!'

'Eleven South Saint James Street.'

'And there is air *in* your house, you have an air *conditioner*, Mr Mead?'

'Yes.'

'And you have a viewing screen in your house to see with?'

'No.'

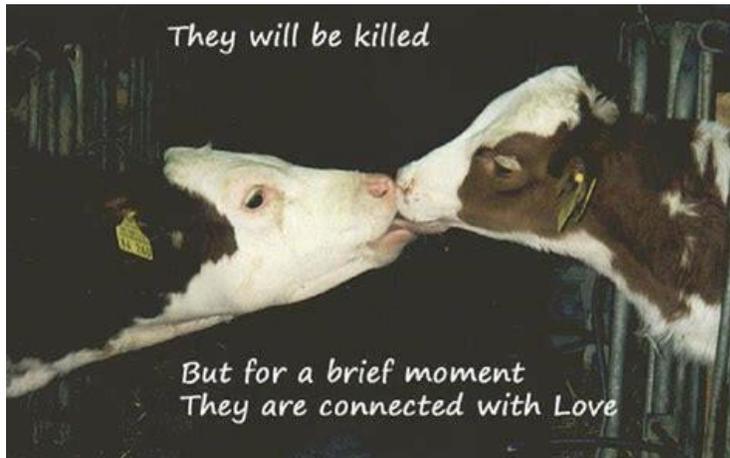
'No?' There was a crackling quiet that in itself was an accusation.

'Are you married, Mr Mead?'

'No.'

'Not married,' said the police voice behind the fiery beam. The moon was high and clear among the stars and the houses were grey and silent.

'Nobody wanted me,' said Leonard Mead with a smile.



'Don't speak unless you're spoken to!'

Leonard Mead waited in the cold night.

"Just walking, Mr Mead?"

'Yes.'

'But you haven't explained for what purpose.'

'I explained; for air, and to see, and just to walk.'

'Have you done this often?'

'Every night for years.'

The police car sat in the centre of the street with its radio throat faintly humming.

'Well, Mr Mead,' it said.

'Is that all?' he asked politely.

'Yes,' said the voice. 'Here.' There was a sigh, a pop. The back door of the police car sprang wide.

'Get in.'

'Wait a minute, I haven't done anything!'

'Get in.'

'I protest!'

'Mr Mead.'

He walked like a man suddenly drunk. As he passed the front window of the car he looked in. As he had expected, there was no-one in the front seat, no-one in the car at all.

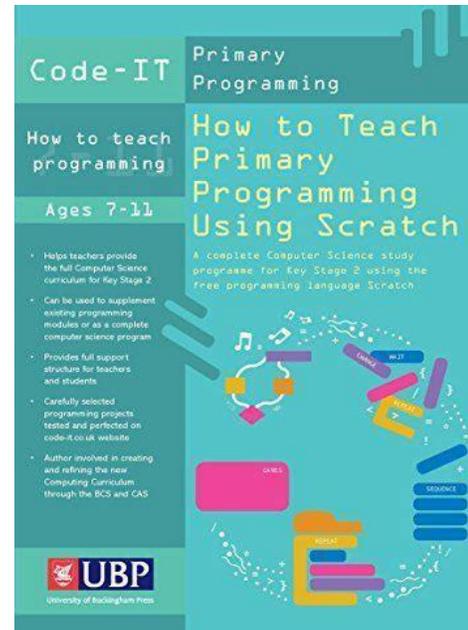
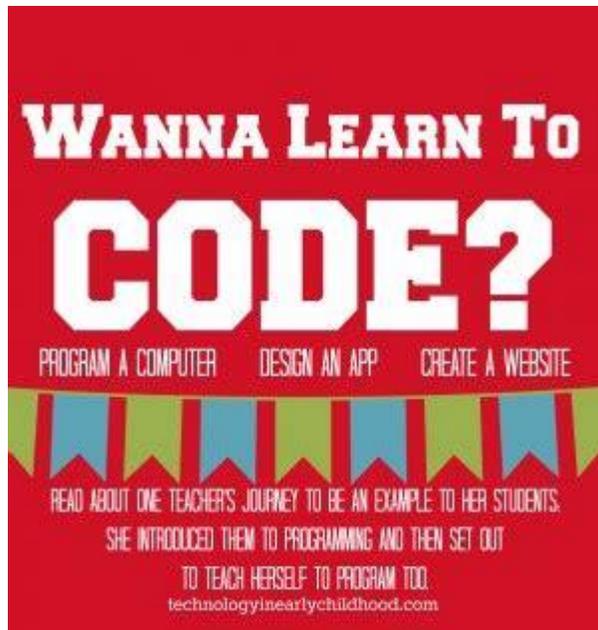
'Get in.'

He put his hand to the door and peered into the back seat, which was a little cell, a little black jail with bars. It smelled of riveted steel. It smelled of harsh antiseptic; it smelled too clean and hard and metallic. There was nothing soft there.

'Now if you had a wife to give you an alibi,' said the iron voice. 'But - '

'Where are you taking me?'

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293 var nDots = 7;
294 var Xpos = 0;
295 var Ypos = 0;
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297 var DELTAT = .01;
298 var SEGLEN = 10;
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The car hesitated, or rather gave a faint whirring click, as if information, somewhere, was dropping card by punch-slotted card under electric eyes. 'To the Psychiatric Centre for Research on Regressive Tendencies. '

He got in. The door shut with a soft thud. The police car rolled through the night avenues, flashing its dim lights ahead.

They passed one house on one street a moment later, one house in an entire city of houses that were dark, but this one particular house had all of its electric lights brightly lit, every window a loud yellow illumination, square and warm in the cool darkness.

'That's *my* house,' said Leonard Mead.

No-one answered him.

The car moved down the empty river- bed streets and off away, leaving the empty streets with the empty pavements, and no sound and no motion all the rest of the chill November night.

The Pedestrian

1. The similes and metaphors in this story are used to compare technology and the city to what kinds of things? What effect does this create?
2. What is the protagonist's job? Why does the police car say he has no job or profession? How is lack of work linked to the fact that everyone is watching televisions?
3. Discuss the many ways in which this story presents the negative consequences of technological progress and uses literary devices to portray technology in a negative 'light.'

The Happiness Machine

1. This story is a satire. Explain and focus on Leo's failure, especially his failure as a husband and father.
2. Leo Auffmann wants to escape from reality, especially the biological world that includes his children, his wife, aging and death. Find evidence of this in the first paragraph and elsewhere.
3. What is the theme of the first paragraph? What event is occurring?
4. Discuss some of the evidence that Leo has more passion for bicycles and other machines than for human beings and that, almost without knowing it, he still enjoys nature instead of machines.
5. Discuss similarities between his Happiness Machine and modern phones, cinemas, computers, iPods, etc.
6. Reflect on the insights provided by Ella after she experiences the 'Happiness' Machine. How are her insights relevant to your life? Remember, the Happiness Machine is very similar to virtual worlds created by our high tech culture of cinemas and smart phones.

Compare and Contrast

1. What do these two stories have in common? Discuss technology, society, and escapism (the use of technology to forget or escape the real world).
2. How are their protagonists opposites?