Liberating Ourselves from Technology’s Cave

“But who has ever torn himself from the claw that encloses you when you drop a seed in a TV parlor? It grows you any shape it wishes! It is an environment as real as the world. It *becomes* and *is* the truth.” (84)

Work it harder, make it better, do it faster: we believe in technology’s power, that it improves our quality of life. The Hadleys invest thirty thousand dollars in a fully mechanized house they expect will bring them happiness in Bradbury’s short story “The Veldt.” In his novel Fahrenheit 451, Guy’s wife Mildred pleads with her husband to consider her happiness and pay to have a fourth TV wall installed. The bedroom in these texts tells another story, as it represents the antithesis of happiness—death. David McClean, the psychologist in “The Veldt,” and Professor Faber of Fahrenheit 451 attempt to awaken the protagonists out of their technology-induced slumber. In both texts, Bradbury cautions us against the temptation of technology and helps us see that when we depend on technology to make us happy, we sacrifice our souls.

In “The Veldt,” Bradbury characterizes the Hadleys as normal parents who want their children to be happy and spare no expense. The children’s bedroom is a masterpiece of technology where thought literally creates reality, and whatever the children imagine comes alive in their room. “The lions were coming. And again George Hadley was filled with admiration for the mechanical genius who had conceived this room. A miracle of efficiency selling for an absurdly low price. Every home should have one.” (2) Bradbury uses language such as “admiration,” “genius,” and “miracle” to suggest that George Hadley is a man who worships technology and its possibilities and cannot imagine life without it, regardless of the fact that wild predators, the lions, are on the way. These four words—“the lions are coming” –have an ominous tone. Perhaps an allusion to the famed words allegedly shouted by Paul Revere during his Midnight Ride (“The British are coming!”), George is oblivious to the imminent danger, despite Lydia’s fear that something is wrong with the nursery. The children’s bedroom is a brilliant manifestation of Wendy and Peter’s imagination. Technology is infallible, as George sees it, so what could possibly go wrong?

In his dystopian novel Fahrenheit 451, Bradbury depicts a society so obsessed with technology that characters cannot imagine their world without it, believing that it is the source of their happiness. Guy’s wife Mildred is a perfect representation of this world, blissfully unaware of everyone, including herself. Guy finds her near-death and calls Emergency, watching as two technicians use their equipment to pump her stomach and resuscitate her. The next morning, she has no idea what took place and asks her husband, “What? Did we have a wild party or something? Feel like I’ve a hangover. God, I’m hungry…sore stomach, but I’m hungry…Hope I didn’t do anything foolish at the party.” (19) The only thing she is aware of is that her head hurts, her stomach feels sore, and without thinking, she assumes that she needs to eat. Of course they had a wild party, she assumes without a second—or a *first*—thought; that is what people do to have fun. It is ironic that she chooses the word foolish to describe her social behavior, since she is the epitome of a fool; she is ignorant of her own ignorance. This, Bradbury demonstrates through his characterization of Mildred the fool, is the danger of developing an over-dependence on technology: we will annihilate our own consciousness.

The bedroom in both texts is not the center of intimacy, where we know ourselves and our hearts; rather, in Bradbury’s future, the bedroom represents death. In “The Veldt,” George laughs with relief while Lydia cries in fear, “and they both stood appalled at the other’s reaction.” George’s rational thought and unwavering belief in technology’s capacity to simulate life dominates the conversation. “Walls, Lydia, remember; crystal walls, that’s all they are. Oh, they look real, I must admit—Africa in your parlor—but it’s all dimensional, superreactionary, supersensitive color film and mental tape film behind glass screens.” (3) He implies that she is overreacting, that her emotional outbursts have no basis in reality. Bradbury allows George three lengthy complex sentences while he only gives Lydia brief exclamations and a few words (“George!” and “They almost got us!” and “I’m afraid.”) However, as it turns out, Lydia is the one who sees and feels what is real and what is taking place; Lydia has reason to be afraid, for the children’s bedroom has transformed into a place where the lions prey on the blind populace.

While it might not be the place of death as the children’s nursery in “The Veldt,” Bradbury characterizes the Montags’ bedroom as an empty, lifeless void. “He opened the bedroom door,” and we see the interior of the room as though we are peering over Guy’s shoulder. (11) It may be a part of his normal daily routine, but this time it is different. Guy has just returned home after his first encounter with Clarisse, the curious seventeen-year-old girl who lives next door. This time he enters the bedroom “like coming into the cold marbled room of a mausoleum after he sun has set.” (11) Guy now perceives his bedroom as a place of death, suggested by the metaphor comparing it to a mausoleum. Surely shutting the bedroom windows is what Guy and Mildred, like most people, usually do; however, he notices they are “tightly shut,” as though they are a barricade against the natural world. Further, he sees what he cannot see, “the silver world outside,” and we feel his anguish, his longing to return to the corner on the sidewalk where he just met Clarisse. His perception of the bedroom as a place of death, reinforced by the metaphor “the chamber of a tomb world,” suggests the death of the life he has known, his contentment to be a fireman, an unthinking, unconscious drone maintaining the status quo. In this dystopian world, “ignorance is bliss,” and it is the firemen’s job to keep it that way. Most people go about their lives without questioning. No one asks why anything. An outsider in this society, Clarisse is the one who asks why; she is innocent, yet she is a dangerous rebel. Meeting her has completely altered Guy’s way of perceiving everything, including his own life. Guy has awakened, he is conscious, and he realizes that he is not happy. He is the prisoner in the cave who has just awakened to the fact that the cave is not as it appears; it is not a wonderful place to be but is, in fact, a prison. As Morpheus says to Neo in “The Matrix,” alluding to the Platonic allusion of the cave, “You are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.” (Irwin 128). For the first time, guy sees his bedroom for what it is—the death of his soul.

Bradbury presents a way of escaping the cave. In “The Veldt,” he characterizes the psychologist David McClean as the conscious one who attempts to liberate George and Lydia from the cave. When George asks McClean to see the nursery, study it, and provide him with a report, he demands “facts, not feelings.” (7) However, McClean explains that feelings are exactly what psychologists examine. “My dear George, a psychologist never saw a fact in his life. He only hears about feelings, vague things. This doesn’t feel good, I tell you. Trust my hunches and my instincts. I have a nose for something bad. This is very bad.” George discounts his wife’s feelings. This time is different, and this time, he listens to McClean because he has no other option. Through the repetition of the word “feelings” and its synonyms, Bradbury emphasizes the value of human instinct. Perhaps an over-emphasis on rational thought could lead to our downfall. McClean then advises George, “My advice to you is to have the whole damn room torn down and your children brought to me every day during the next year for treatment.” (7) Here McClean reaches out in an effort to liberate George and his family from the cave.

Professor Faber is characterized as the conscious one, the one who has the potential to liberate people from the cave. Guy Montag remembers meeting him in a park, where Faber recites two poems. Finally he says to Montag, “I don’t talk *things*, sir…I talk the *meaning* of things. I sit here and *know* I’m alive.” (75) Faber distinguishes between “things,” the stuff of meaningless conversation, and “meaning,” which is the equivalent of consciousness. This is an allusion to Rene Descartes’ ontological proof “I think; therefore, I am.” Faber argues that there is an inextricable connection between thinking, stopping to ask “why,” talking to discover “meaning,” and being alive. In other words, Faber is self-aware. He is the embodiment of what it means to live a conscious life. This is his invitation to Guy Montag to do the same. Here he extends his hand to liberate Montag from the cave of oblivion.

The Hadleys’ house serves as a cave, and it is one where they meet their death because they fail to heed David McClean’s advice. The entire society of Fahrenheit 451 is a cave, with the Montags’ house as a room we can catch a glimpse this prison for the mind. Here we see how easily we might be seduced by technology into believing that it is necessary for our well-being and survival. However, we are not doomed. We do not have to live as fools, ignorant of our own ignorance. Bradbury argues that we need only to wake up out of our technology-induced slumber, and we can escape the cave. The first step is to realize that there is a cave, and we are its prisoners.