

Technology and Human Agency in Kurt Vonnegut's Harrison Bergeron and Player Piano

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the intricate relationship between technology and ideology in the formation of social structures. It highlights the increasing dependence on super-advanced technology and touches upon the potential dangers associated with its manipulative use. Furthermore, this study examines the dehumanizing effects of technology highlighting how it can serve as a tool for not only imposing ideology but also eroding a character's agency. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's theories regarding technology and agency, the profound impact of technology and ideology on human agency is addressed. To illustrate the effects of technology on society and government control, Kurt Vonnegut's short story, "Harrison Bergeron," and the novel *Player Piano* are analyzed. In Vonnegut's dystopian stories, the government uses technological devices to enforce ideology and manipulate characters even leading to job unemployment. Ultimately, the article achieves its three-fold objectives by examining how ideological subjects regard their unfreedom as freedom, examining the dehumanizing effects of technology as a means of ideological enforcement, and analyzing the erosion of agency of ideological subjects in a technologically advanced society governed by an oppressive regime such as the one in *Harrison Bergeron* and the elites in *Player Piano*.

Keywords

Technology, Human Agency, Kurt Vonnegut, Žižek, Dehumanization, Freedom

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Introduction

Technology and ideology are intertwined in shaping the dynamics of power and control within society. The relationship is especially evident in technological advancements, where novel innovations have the potential to take control of one's mind and actions. We have become increasingly dependent on advanced technology in recent years, providing us with convenience and efficiency unlike ever before. It is, however, important to recognize the risks and challenges associated with this growing dependence.

In today's hectic world, technological advancements are widely embraced, without considering their negative impacts on human agency. These downsides encompass a multitude of issues. For instance, technological devices can be used by those in authority as a means of monitoring and controlling people's actions which can lead to their getting robbed of their agency. On the other hand, the rise of super-advanced technology can also make workers redundant, thus causing unemployment on a large scale. In fact, technologies have the capability of replacing human labor.

The emergence of influential figures such as Elon Musk, who heavily invest in projects such as Neuralink that are directly related to artificial intelligence, signals a rapid transition from a humanist to a posthumanist era. Zizek avers that Neuralink is "a company which is focused on creating devices that can be implanted in the human brain, with the eventual purpose of helping human beings to merge with software" (*Like a Thief* 42). The shift in technology and its relation to human beings implies reevaluating the meaning of humanity and agency as we become more dependent on technology.

From a psychoanalytic and philosophical perspective, Slavoj Zizek probes into the profound impact of technology and ideology on human agency. He believes that science and technology go hand in hand to create novel forms of life, altering human nature (*In Defense* 436). Throughout his books, he thoroughly examines how the impact of such developments shapes our self-perception, interpersonal connections, and our societal role. Through an analysis of the interplay between ideology, power structures, and technology, Zizek aims to decipher how authority establishes its dominance in society. Regarding the concept of technology, he takes note of the fact that "The goal is no longer just to dominate nature (the way it is), but to generate something new, greater, stronger than ordinary nature, including ourselves" by which he means the technology can radically change the true essence of human being (ibid).

Kurt Vonnegut, an esteemed American author, personally experienced the growing influence of technology throughout his lifetime. As Farrell asserts, "Vonnegut was a Luddite who

typed his essays and stories on a typewriter rather than a computer" (ix). His debut novel, "*Player Piano*," was inspired by his experiences at General Electric, where he grappled with groundbreaking ideas about advanced technology. According to Harold Bloom, "Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano*, depicts a nightmarish superstate of the future in which the worship of technology has all but extinguished the human spirit" (25). The fictional narrative of Vonnegut attempted to explore the implications of an extremely automated society in which machines increasingly replaced human labor, giving rise to questions about the role of human beings and the erosion of human agency in the face of technological progress.

Both Zizek and Vonnegut offer valuable insights into the complex relationship between technology, ideology, and human agency. They introduce various ideas illuminating the multifaceted challenges of digitalization, urging us to have a critical viewpoint on the effects of these advancements.

Literature Review

The realm of technology studies is characterized by a diverse range of theoretical frameworks. Given that we live in an age where humans are increasingly intertwined with advanced technology, considerable attention is being paid to the issue of how it affects us. A multitude of great philosophers have written influential books on technology and how it affects humans, including Bernard Stiegler, Donna Haraway, Neil Badmington, and Katherine Hale, to name a few. For instance, Stiegler, a French philosopher, has a complex and nuanced view of technology.

Bernard Stiegler, in *Technics and Times*, does not tell us that technology is banishing us to hell. Instead, in examining the effect of technology on human beings, he argues that there are technologies, however, that exist because of us. He believes technology is not inherently good or bad; rather, it is a tool that can be used both positively and negatively.

Moreover, Donna Haraway is widely recognized as one of the radical thinkers in technology. In her famous work, *Cyborg Manifesto*, she argues that technology is more than a tool, but that humans and technology are intertwined. She also associates technology with gender roles, asserting that it has the potential to challenge traditional gender roles, allowing for more diverse forms of embodiment and expression. As a metaphor for hybridity and intersectionality, she uses the idea of the cyborg as a means of breaking down boundaries between nature and culture, human and machine, and male and female. She also argues that gender is socially and culturally constructed rather than driven by biological determinism.

Slavoj Zizek's theorization of the potential dangers of digital control is one of many conceptual frameworks within the field of digitalization, which forms the underlying theoretical framework of the article.

Harrison Bergeron portrays a so-called utopian society where everyone must be equal to each other, which seems incredible at first, but you will realize the purpose behind this equality. Utilizing technological advances and promoting the idea of egalitarianism, government authorities have the power to control people both physically and mentally. The dystopic society of *Harrison Bergeron* has been under thorough analysis in light of different criteria such as equality and freedom (Joodaki and Mahdiyani, 2020), (Latiff and Feisal, 2020), apocalyptic narrative (Samperio, 2007) and dehumanization (Johar, 2014).

Such studies like *Equality versus Freedom in "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut: A Study of Dystopian Setting*, written by Joodaki and Mahdiyani in 2013, and *The Poverty of Equality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Harrison Bergeron*, written by Muhamad Farid Abdul Latiff and Hannah Suraiya Feisal in 2020, attempted to question the forced equality in the so-

called utopian society of *Harrison Bergeron*, contending that equality is just a means for those in authority to strengthen their power through cruel means.

Player Piano also depicts a technocratic society in which machines have replaced human labor, resulting in widespread unemployment and social unrest. Articles such as *The Tyranny of Cybernetics in Kurt Vonnegut's Player Piano*, written by Babaei et al, and *Loss of Self-esteem in Kurt Vonnegut's Player Piano*, penned by Balamurugan and Shanmugam, have tried their best to shed light not only on loss of human agency in a technological society, but also on how technological machines can reduce human beings to mindless bodies.

In a recent article, entitled *Tyrannical Control and the Big Other in Kurt Vonnegut's Harrison Bergeron*, Zarei, Safari Monfared, and Ahmadzadeh Heravi have analyzed Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron* in the light of Žižek's theory of big Other, exploring the role of the tyrannical government, embodied in the figure of Handicapper General, as the Žižekian big Other in the dystopian society of the short story. In this paper, therefore, it has been contended that Handicapper General, as the oppressive agent of fictional community, has taken control of the subjects' "minds and actions", thus stripping them of their agency, subjectivity, and individuality (119).

Method

Even though there have been studies on *Harrison Bergeron's* ideological society, few have examined how ideology is tied to technology and how ideological subjects are stripped of agency and freedom. Therefore, it is necessary to study how the illusion of freedom is presented to ideological subjects, and how their agency is taken away through various technological mechanisms. There appears to be a lack of critical studies analyzing through the lens of theories concerning technology and ideology. To fill this gap in the literature, the current study will apply Žižek's theories regarding the dynamic relationship between technology, ideology, and individual agency.

This paper examines the ideology and its association with technology disseminated throughout society. Specifically, it argues that individuals like George and Hazel perceive their lack of freedom as ultimate freedom in a society where everything is governed by ideology. Moreover, those in positions of authority such as the ones in *Player Piano* use advanced technology to enforce their ideological agenda onto society.

The paper aims to broaden the readers' horizons regarding the potential risks and challenges associated with our growing reliance on advanced technology. Thus, the purpose of this article is threefold: In the first step, in mapping Žižek's theory of freedom, it aims to explain how slavery is sold to ideological subjects. Secondly, by utilizing Žižek's theory of digitalization, it is argued that technology can pave the way for the dehumanization of the ideological subjects as long as those in authority leverage technology to impose their ideology. The paper's final section focuses on how the agency of ideological subjects is undermined in a society where technology is so advanced that the government uses it to rob the ideological subjects of their agency.

Result and Discussion

Unfreedom in the guise of freedom

Kurt Vonnegut in *Harrison Bergeron* portrays a society where strict government laws enforced by Diana Moon Glampers have ensured equality for all citizens. "All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General" (Vonnegut 11). The novel *Player Piano* also examines the struggles the characters have with the system in which they live. For instance, The

protagonist, Paul Proteus, initially accepts the benefits of his social position within the technological society. However, as the novel progresses, his disillusionment grows, and he seeks a sense of purpose and freedom.

In *Harrison Bergeron*, Vonnegut illustrates that the harsh rules imposed by the government agents ensure equality for all citizens which results in constant surveillance of the subjects at the hands of the Handicapper General. Moreover, mentioning the "unceasing vigilance" indicates the extent of control and monitoring in the dystopian society of this story. Therefore, people who are more beautiful, intelligent, and strong or have any ability that classifies them as above average are compelled to wear handicaps to be considered normal. While this normality may bring about freedom and equality, it results in the loss of the characters' agency. In addition, the pervasive monitoring by the Handicapper General prevents analytical thinking and critical questioning of the government.

Rules are at the forefront of *Player Piano*, as they play a significant role in determining not only how the characters live, but also how society functions. The government and large corporations are the primary generators and enforcers of the rules in this society, as they serve to maintain order as well as controlling the population. They are designed to limit people's freedom and impose limits on their lives, emphasizing efficiency and productivity over individuality and fulfillment. Throughout the novel, the characters, especially Dr. Paul Proteus, grapple with the devastating effects of the rules on their lives to the extent that at the end of the novel he decides to overthrow the oppressive system.

As illustrated in the story, George, who is both physically and mentally handicapped, does not have the propensity to change his oppressive living conditions. This becomes evident when Hazel implores him to "take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few", yet George shows no inclination to violate the enforced rules. "Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," (Vonnegut 12).

Furthermore, George, by referring to the Dark Ages, tries to dissuade Hazel from any transgression that goes against the rules in society. By attributing competitions to the Dark Ages, it can be implied that authorities have blocked any sort of progress. "If I tried to get away with it, then other people'd get away with it—and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?" (Vonnegut 12). Precluding people from competing with each other not only does not make everybody equal but also prevents them from improving—an objective that aligns entirely with the desires of the power figures.

Moreover, despite his handicaps, George is depicted as a compliant member of society who unquestioningly accepts his predetermined fate and adheres to the government's rules. He is also afraid of the potential consequences of rebellion and is seemingly content with forced egalitarianism, even at the expense of sacrificing his potential.

In his book *The Zizek Dictionary*, Rex Butler argues that "freedom", according to Zizek, is a false consciousness in which we lack the language to express our unfreedom (205). Moreover, Zizek posits, "The most dangerous threat to freedom does not come from an openly authoritarian power; it takes place when our non-freedom itself is experienced as freedom" (*Hegel* 32). Examining George and Hazel's dialogues reveals how being mentally and physically fettered is regarded as freedom for them. Being less intelligent, Hazel goes so far as to imagine herself in the place of the government agent and does not care about their child who has been taken to prison.

Additionally, in *Player Piano*, Paul gradually becomes mindful of his illusory freedom, which results in his being exposed to the dangerous aspects of a society in which non-freedom is sold as freedom to ideological subjects. Initially, Paul is a highly prosperous engineer who benefits

from the system, thus satisfied with his social position. As time passes by, he becomes the most emblematic example of an individual who experiences his lack of freedom as freedom, regarding himself as a successful person.

On the other hand, in *Harrison Bergeron*, despite George's physical handicap, he does not perceive it as a state of unfreedom. Conversely, Žižek's idea resonates strongly with the situation presented in the story. He posits that ideological subjects can be easily controlled, and that they willingly adhere to the enforced rules as long as they experience a sense of freedom within an ideological society (*Like a Thief* 42).

In other words, individuals in an ideological society may believe they are free to make choices. Therefore, they willingly abide by imposed rules, allowing them to take control of their actions and thoughts. In the story, George, directly influenced by the General's manipulative rules, has internalized both the rules and beliefs of the big Other, which distracts him from thinking critically about the government. This is exactly what Paul experienced in the technocratic society of *Player Piano*. In fact, the novel highlights the potential risks associated with a society that masks the true nature of freedom, thus perpetuating a collective illusory notion of freedom.

That way, the subject is more inclined to consider himself a free entity and believe he is making the right choice by not doing anything against the law. In this regard, George's perception of freedom in *Harrison Bergeron* is completely deceptive. Not only is slavery sold to him as freedom, but also it masks the underlying reality of his exploitation. As a result, George is unable to see the true nature of his situation because he has an illusion of choice and the feeling of freedom.

Another facet of Žižek's theory of freedom is the concept of interpassivity. Žižek defines it as "to participate actively not only in the spectacle itself but more and more in establishing the very rules of the spectacle (*Plague of Fantasies* 144). It means that the ideological subjects do not engage directly in decision-making process; instead, they leave this responsibility to their representative.

Interpassivity is evident in this story through the implementation of strict rules. In the world of "*Harrison Bergeron*," the ideological subjects fail to engage with their true potential actively. Instead, their agency is suppressed by external handicaps, leading them to passively abide by imposed rules. By accepting and following the decisions of the Handicapper General, the characters act according to her policies without critically examining the regulations, which can lead to the perpetuation of existing power structures and ideologies. Thus, individuals may contribute to the reproduction of inequality and injustice inadvertently by relinquishing agency to external agents. Moreover, these handicaps play a major role, preventing individuals from fully recognizing their abilities and passions, thereby hindering them from discovering their true selves.

The same situation exists in the novel *Player Piano*. They have left everything to technological devices. It is also visible through the ubiquity of machines and automation. As machines perform all significant tasks, people become mere observers, passively taking in the world around them. In fact, interpassivity is reflected in this passive acceptance of technological dominance.

In fact, the concept of interpassivity emerges once individuals acquiesce passively to the imposed limitations within an ideological society. In the short story under analysis, no one dares to question the oppressive regime, except for *Harrison Bergeron* at the end of the story. Instead, they would rather internalize the rules to achieve the promised equality, without critically examining its downside. For instance, George blindly abides by his situation, and he always tries to be a model citizen in the eyes of the big Other. As a result, they turn into passive subjects by surrendering themselves to the superimposed restrictions.

On the contrary, for Žižek, the "social control and domination" of those in authority do not seem to encroach upon ideological subjects' freedom in society. He then goes on to aver that "it has to appear as (and be sustained by) the very experience of individuals as being free" (*Like a Thief* 42).

While struggling for promised equality, George remains indifferent to handicaps since his beliefs have been shaped through the big Other. However, there are some parts of the story which reveal George's analytical contemplation of the government's rules. For instance, in the scene where the ballerinas are dancing, George believes that they should not wear handicaps "But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts" (Vonnegut 11). His critical thoughts are interrupted, and he cannot think analytically for more than a few seconds.

Vonnegut's depiction of thought control is in line with Žižek's statement, which posits that "The legal-ideological matrix of freedom-equality is not a mere 'mask' concealing exploitation-domination, but the very form in which the latter is exercised" (*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* 125). On this occasion, he suggests that freedom and equality themselves are the very means through which those in authority can exercise domination and exploitation. By submitting to the rules unconditionally, ideological subjects such as George and Hazel allow the government to dominate them, resulting in their son not even being recognized. In fact, through the fantasy of equality and freedom, they lure George and Hazel into conforming to the strict rules such as wearing heavy handicaps.

We are then given a way forward by Žižek for living in an ideological system that rules everything in society in any possible way: "A compromise is necessary here, a combination of fighting illusory utopian expectations and giving people enough security to accept the system" (*First as Tragedy* 26). In the first place, Žižek argues that one must put unrealistic and overly idealistic expectations aside. People with illusory utopian expectations think that a flawless society is possible where all issues are solved and everyone's needs are met. In the real world, such expectations are not achievable and can cause ideological subjects to be disappointed. Instead, he believes one should acknowledge the limitations and imperfections of their system. This way, people are able to approach the system more realistically and pragmatically.

The first thing that George in *Harrison Bergeron* and other ideological subjects such as Paul have to realize is that there is not going to be any utopian society in which everything is according to their expectation. In these kinds of societies, Žižek avers, "The subject advocates freedom or equality, while being unaware of implicit qualifications which, in their very form, constrain its scope" (*First as Tragedy* 66). For instance, in *Harrison Bergeron*, people blindly adhere to society's rules without considering the constraints imposed by those rules. In fact, they have to first accept the fact that there is not going to be an equal society.

Žižek also contends that there is a multitude of ways to sell unfreedom to ideological subjects as absolute freedom. When we are deprived of universal healthcare, we are told that we are allowed new freedom of choice (to choose our healthcare provider) (*Like a Thief* 29). In the case of Bergeron's family, they are deprived of fundamental freedom such as the ability to make their own choices, but the guarantee of equality encourages them to embrace the circumstance and regard their lack of freedom as absolute freedom. In *Player Piano*, the characters are made to believe that the big Other of the society, a role occupied by the elites, is going to provide them with a prosperous future. In fact, the big Other provides the political subject with a space in which the subject has authentic freedom (*Sublime* 31). According to this statement, the presence of an external "Other" can create an environment in which one can experience true freedom.

In both the short story and the novel, the big "Other" can also be considered as the oppressive government enforcing equality through technology. In *Harrison Bergeron*, for instance, Handicapper General limits individuals by suppressing their natural abilities and talents to maintain a superficial sense of equality. In addition, corporations and governments manipulate rules in order to maintain their dominance and accumulate power. It is in such a suppressive context that the existence of an alternative space, a space of liberation, is possible. This emancipatory space is embodied in the character Harrison Bergeron in the short story and Paul in *Player Piano*. For example, despite his handicaps, Harrison Bergeron commits Act, in the Zizekian sense of the term, and deviates from the so-called norms in society. As Zarei et al. have clarified in *Tyrannical Control and the Big Other in Kurt Vonnegut's Harrison Bergeron*, "act is the only way for the ideological subject to break free from the Public Symbolic Law" (Zizek, as cited in Zarei et al.).

Digitalization and the process of dehumanization

Digitalization is considered a powerful tool for manipulating both minds and actions of the characters in the story. Through utilizing technology, the ruling authority controls the equality-driven society. For instance, as *Harrison Bergeron* begins, the narrator touches upon the fact that "George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times" (Vonnegut 11).

Despite the short story's emphasis on the negative consequences of extreme societal control, it can be argued that there are potential benefits as well. For instance, by using technology to enforce equality, they want to eliminate any kind of discrimination in society, but in practice, they are not much successful. Through the notion of equality, the government also does not let anybody dominate other people, which also encourages collective intelligence. All in all, the ideas are certainly useful theoretically but not practically.

In the said short story, being handicapped influences George's life throughout the narrative. For instance, when he and Hazel are watching television, his train of thought about the beauty of ballerinas is halted. "A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm" (ibid). As a result, he is unable to engage in critical thinking.

The limitation applies not only to George but to all of the above-average intelligent people in society. In this scene, Vonnegut illustrates how authority figures exploit technology to control their subjects. "George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about" (ibid). Due to the buzzers in George's head, he cannot remember what he was thinking about. The devices are technological apparatuses that manipulate and control the characters' actions and minds, which can be regarded as a form of digitalization. In order to maintain the principle of equality, the handicapped must adhere to strict guidelines.

Conversely, in *Player Piano*, the reader faces a society where machines have largely replaced humans, causing a significant gap between elites and a rapidly disappearing working class. In this society, most people are considered useless due to the digital revolution. Tally in his critical works on Vonnegut avers that "At issue in *Player Piano*, as Vonnegut makes clear throughout the novel, is what happens to the soul of man in the world of machines. But Vonnegut frequently blurs the lines between man and machine, showing not just how humans are being replaced by machines or how machines have dehumanized American society" (Tally 21).

In *Player Piano*, the reader comes across the notion of digitalization directly. Bloom also in his critical work on Vonnegut touches upon the fact that "*Player Piano* belongs to the formulaic tradition of the anti-utopian or dystopian novel, that it is concerned with the threatening

replacement of men by machines” (*Critical* 89) Moreover, the danger of machines for future generations and the dehumanization of human beings are the most prevailing themes in this novel.

Besides, even the engineers themselves, who are considered as the members of the elite group, are displaced from their jobs, as in the part where Bud is talking to Proteus about how he lost his job. "What about the gadget you invented for—" "Thet's it," said Bud with an eerie mixture of pride and remorse. "Works. Does a fine job." He smiled sheepishly. "Does it a whole lot better than Ah did it" (*Player Piano* 87).

In this section, it becomes evident that Bud, one of the educated elite, is displaced from his job as a result of his own invention - a machine that surpasses his own abilities in terms of efficiency and performance. Zizek also states in his interview with RT that despite technological surveillance encompassing every aspect of their lives, individuals continue to perceive themselves as autonomous beings within society (Interview).

Regarding the Neuralink project by Musk, Zizek argues that it is "a company which is focused on creating devices that can be implanted in the human brain, with the eventual purpose of helping human beings" (*Like a Thief* 40). It means, at first, they try to introduce their new plans as very helpful. Similarly, in the story, the government pretends to be of great assistance the populace by advocating for equality, but in reality, this is not the true intention.

In the novel, a web of societal manipulation and advanced technology promises illusory results for those at risk of displacement. The elites, those in positions of power and influence, try to lure people into embracing the notion that technology will liberate them from their daily struggles and make their lives easier. However, buried beneath this veneer of innovation lies a devastating truth, that is, advanced technology has ultimately resulted in displacement of workers, especially among the elderly and illiterate. Furthermore, the very technology that society relies upon to improve lives is aggravating the socioeconomic divide. The sinister motive is to get access to people's thoughts in order to physically and psychologically enslave them. "Most of our activities (and passivities) are now registered in some digital cloud that also permanently evaluates us, tracing not only our acts but also our emotional states; when we experience ourselves as free to the utmost" (*Like a Thief* 103).

In *Harrison Bergeron*, Handicapper General has complete influence over the actions and feelings of the characters. A prime example of this happens when Hazel witnesses the death of her son on television, and she cries for a brief moment but after that, she forgets the reason for her grief. Therefore, the ruling authority effectively controls their thoughts, actions, and potential by altering their physical and mental capacities.

Furthermore, as Zizek expresses in his interview with RT News: the more technology makes progress, the more class divisions will appear. He believes that the rapid progress of technology divides society into different socioeconomic groups according to their wealth and intelligence. This observation highlights how technology has become a tool for social control, causing social hierarchy. This class division is not limited only to the people in society (Interview).

In *Hegel in a Wired Brain*, Zizek gives rise to a fundamental question regarding technology, which is "What will happen to society, politics, and daily life when nonconscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?" (*Hegel* 397). In raising this question, he tries to express his concerns regarding the time when machines will be superior to human beings. This issue can be traced in *Player Piano*, in which the members of the elite group are responsible for controlling the whole country after the world war that has gripped the society. Further clarifying the issue, Zizek then goes on to aver that most humans will not be upgraded, and they will consequently become an inferior caste, dominated by both computer algorithms and the new superhumans. (*Hegel* 346).

In this statement, Zizek is trying to underscore the fact that, with the advancement of machines, we will no longer be the decision-makers, and, therefore, we will be wholly dominated by machines. In accordance with what happens in *Player Piano*, Zizek here touches upon the fact that if a group of people, called the elite or anything else, regard themselves superior to the ordinary people in society, they will probably make the most important decisions in that community. For instance, Kroner in *Player Piano* is one of the rulers of the country who leads the engineers in the direction that government wants. He is also a high-ranking official and the manager of the entire Eastern Division. He is an avid fan of technology and automation, regardless of the concomitant side effects that rack other people's lives.

It is of utmost importance to quote the conversation between Kroner and Proteus regarding the power of technology: "If you convert the horsepower of one of the bigger steel-mill motors into terms of manpower, you'll find that the motor does more work than the entire slave population" (*Player Piano* 65). As evident in the above-cited passage, Kroner, as a high ranking official, has a condescending view towards the ordinary people in society. Since he is highly powerful in this technological society, he considers the entire population as slaves, as they have to act according to the elite's decisions.

Likewise, in Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*, the enforcement of equality by virtue of technology creates a clear division between the ruling class, represented by the Handicapper General, and the oppressed characters who have been stripped of their individuality and abilities. By suppressing any signs of superiority and enforcing mediocrity, the ruling class maintains control over the ordinary people.

On the one hand, ordinary people are being handicapped through various technological means such as radio transmitters. On the other hand, there are authorities bearing no handicaps. Therefore, the technology in this story leads merely to the limitation of ordinary people such as George, Hazel, and Harrison. That is why Zizek avers that "it is absolutely imperative to keep it out of the control of private capital and state power and to render it totally accessible to public debate" (*Like a Thief* 39-40).

Due to technological advancements, society can be further divided into different social groups based on their advantages or disadvantages. In the story, it can be implied that the Handicapper General bears no handicaps herself, and the society is divided between those who rule the society and those who are the puppets of the government's decisions. The laws imposed by handicaps give privileged positions to those with advanced technology, such as Diana Moon Glampers, while those without advanced technology are marginalized. The Handicapper General does not wear handicaps herself and her role is to disable the characters with above-average abilities.

In the story, not only power is in the hands of the Handicapper General, but also technology is completely in her control. "From digitalization and digital control in general, we move to the more specific project of the wired brain" (*Hegel in a Wired Brain* 25). This is also what Vonnegut tries to render through the theme of government control. He warns how technology can be used as a means of monitoring and regulating people's behavior. Using radio transmitters, the government reminds citizens about their restrictions, prevents them from getting too involved in certain topics, and discourages them from questioning policies.

Likewise, in *Player Piano*, it is also evident that advanced technology has caused class division in society, as evident in the following quote:

Ilium, New York, is divided into three parts. In the northwest are the managers and engineers and civil servants and a few professional people; in the northeast are the machines; and in the south, across the Iroquois

River, is the area known locally as Homestead, where almost all of the people live. (12).

In the said novel, two major classes exist in society: the managers, the engineers, who control the machines, and the "Reeks and Wrecks," the displaced working class. Those in management and engineering sector are considered as the members of the upper class, enjoying the privileges and benefits that accrue to them due to their high social standing. They live in sophisticated communities called "Garden Cities" and everything is available for them and their families.

On the other hand, the workers, who constitute the large majority of the population, have been rendered obsolete by automation. They constantly deal with finding meaningful work to do, since machines perform their tasks much better. They are largely gripped by dissatisfaction, frustration, and resentment, as they tend to do menial jobs or else are unemployed.

The effects of new technology are not only limited to unemployment. Human minds are becoming increasingly connected with technology as a result of the wired brain. In this process, the human brain is linked to digital networks, or implants are installed that enhance cognitive ability. One can observe the same scenario in the story in which even the minds of characters are controlled through technology. Human capabilities are likely to be revolutionized by this technological advancement, influencing the way we learn, think, and communicate. *Harrison Bergeron* gives rise to questions regarding individuality and freedom, as well as the potential consequences of such societal control.

In the above-mentioned short story, even the essence of humanity is conquered. The technology we all believe will provide benefits to us is being used as a means of punishment for the people in society. "Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer," (Vonnegut 11). A loud noise in George's head interrupts him as he ponders the idea that ballerinas dancing on the television show should not be handicapped, as it takes their beauty away. Therefore, George is nothing more than a living robot in this story. This scene portrays not only a moment of chaos but also how technology which is in grasp of those in authority plays a major role in the dehumanization of the characters. Examining the scene through the lens of Zizek's ideas on digitalization, it can be implied that Vonnegut, by using the metaphor, wanted to warn the reader about the repercussions that the advanced technology has in store for individuals.

Similarly, in *Harrison Bergeron*, the noise of somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball-peen hammer characterizes an abrupt intrusion disrupting the so-called equal society depicted in the story. As Zizek avers, "Today, a new era of slavery is arising" (*Like a Thief* 35). What we witness in the story is also slavery through technological means in a fictionalized world in which equality is taken to an absurd level.

Therefore, based on the foregoing critical discussion, it is imperative to reconsider our relationship with digital devices, since while it is believed that they are going to be helpful, they can result in the loss of our agency, as exemplified in the short story *Harrison Bergeron* and the novel *Player Piano*.

Loss of human agency

Given that recent studies on technology and its effect on human agency have demonstrated that technology can erode individuality, the utilization of technological means such as radio transmitters to reinforce government ideology comes to the fore in the thematic analysis of the short story and the novel.

Human agency in literature refers to how characters make choices and take actions that affect the course of their lives and the plot. Throughout *Sublime*, Zizek defines human agency as

"the subject itself is the abrogated/cleansed substance, a substance reduced to the void of the empty form of self-relating negativity" (xiii). The concluding section of this study illuminates the notion that employing technology to govern and manipulate human behavior undermines the capacity to think independently and make informed decisions rooted in personal beliefs.

To begin with, in *Harrison Bergeron* the reader is immediately introduced to George and Hazel, a couple grappling with constraints enforced by a dystopian society that rigidly upholds absolute equality. When the narrator describes George and Hazel's inability to think about their incarcerated son, who is in jail at the beginning of the story, the reader becomes curious to find out why they react so indifferently. Put differently, it provokes the reader's curiosity, compelling them to unpack the reason behind this weird limitation. "It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard" (Vonnegut 11).

As we delve into the story, it becomes evident that Vonnegut aims to convey the undermining of characters' agency through decentralization. The government employs technological means to impose its ideology on the characters, allowing the high-ranking officials to effortlessly control the thoughts and actions of ordinary people. Technology serves as the primary tool for control. It takes the form of physical handicaps imposed on individuals to suppress their natural abilities. For the sake of example, the story's protagonist, Harrison Bergeron, possesses exceptional intelligence and attractiveness. "Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds" (Vonnegut 11). His disadvantages are offset by heavyweights, distracting earpieces, and glasses that hinder his vision. Such handicaps prevent him from expressing his true potential, forcing him to conform to social norms.

In the novel *Player Piano*, the loss of human agency is a central theme that examines the repercussions of a highly automated society in which most citizens are deprived of having a simple job, since machines have taken over most jobs, thus rendering humans obsolete in the workforce. In this so-called utopian world, machines and computers have become so sophisticated that they can perform every task much more efficiently than humans, leading to a society where people have no job and purpose.

Even the character called Shah, who has come to the US in order to explore new technology and culture, addresses the ordinary people as slaves. "He would like, please, to know who owns these slaves we see all the way up from New York City" (*Player Piano* 32). Shah here illuminates the fact that technology has transformed people in society into slaves. The so-called slaves in this novel have been replaced by machines, in the sense that technological devices can change everything in their lives. Thus, they have no power to express what they want, and even when they rebel against technology, it is not successful, as they, once again, come to rely on the technology they had rebelled against.

One of Zizek's key concerns is the relationship between technology and human agency. In examining the progressive process of technology and government, he explores how technology creates a false postmodern utopia that diminishes subjects of agency (*On Belief* 26). In *Harrison Bergeron*, we encounter a distorted vision of equality in a society where technology and government are interconnected. "Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General" (Vonnegut 11). Specifically, this narrative echoes Slavoj Zizek's concerns regarding the erosion of individual agency as a result of advanced technology. The government has created a society in which no one is better than others in terms of intelligence, beauty, or any other abilities. "THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law (ibid). Zizek also illuminates his perspective on the agency of ideological subjects in his book *Sublime Object of Ideology*.

Throughout *Sublime*, particularly in the first chapter, he subtly argues that individuals living in an ideological society are not more than passive victims of the prevailing ideology. In addition, they actively contribute to its perpetuation by pointing out the consequences of breaking the law or not temporarily disabling their handicaps. For instance, the character George constantly warns Hazel about the repercussions of not abiding by the laws. "If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people'd get away with it—and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else (Vonnegut 12).

In fact, Zizek emphasizes how social structures affect an ideological subject's involvement, ultimately leading to the loss of agency. Even though George and Hazel actively reinforce ideology, their agency is often limited by the ideological framework shaping their beliefs and behaviors. "Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains" (Vonnegut 11).

In *Player Piano*, we face the Ghost Shirt Society who rebel against the engineers and technology itself. They indeed rebelled against the machines since there was a reversal between man and machines, but they were not successful in the end, because they even destroyed the machines, they needed themselves. Therefore, they backed to machines whom they fomented a revolution for.

David Simmons in his book, *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, touches upon the fact that "Paul Proteus and a group of rebels drink, not to success (the smashing of a machine-dominated society), nor even to failure (as the inhabitants start repairing the machines), but simply "to the record", and the final words of the novel are "Forward march" (Simmons 135).

Zizek also avers "Immersion in singularity is just the first option. The second option: if machines win, then "humans are in danger of losing their value, because intelligence is decoupling from consciousness" (*Hegel* 28). Here it is clear that Zizek is directly referring the reader to how human agency is being robbed by the domination of technological machines as exemplified in *Player Piano*.

Likewise, in *Harrison Bergeron*, the narrator asserts that "everybody was finally equal" (Vonnegut 11). However, this force-feeding equality comes at the cost of losing their agency. "Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear" (*ibid*). In the first chapter of *Disparities*, Zizek observes that new technologies have a major impact on the way we interact with ideologies today.

Furthermore, he argues that technology functions as an "ideological supplement," reinforcing existing ideologies and impeding critical thinking. The short story presents a similar scenario where the reader encounters this situation. Due to his above-average intelligence, George is handicapped, unable to engage in critical thought. Consequently, technology has bolstered the ideology of the Handicapper General, stripping individuals of their autonomy and freedom. "The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware handicaps. Nobody had ever borne heavier. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up" (Vonnegut 12). Therefore, technology limits Harrison's agency and prevents him from exercising his talents and abilities by creating new forms of power and domination.

Regarding the concept of digital space and agency, Zizek argues that we are finding ourselves moving closer toward automation, resulting in various forms of digitalization (*Like a Thief* 53-55). In both the short story and the novel, we can trace clear manifestations of dehumanization, particularly through the government's implementation of handicaps to enforce equality among its citizens and the utilization of technological machines instead of human beings to the extent that they get displaced from their jobs.

In *Harrison Bergeron*, the effects of dehumanization are evident not only in Harrison but also in other characters such as ballerinas. The ballerinas in the story serve as a perfect example of how this society's obsession with equality devalues human qualities. Despite being beautiful, graceful, and exceptionally talented in their craft, they are compelled to wear weights and masks that hinder their natural abilities in the pursuit of maintaining equality. By suppressing their advantages over others, these handicaps are meant to eliminate diversity and creativity.

They are also obligated to wear masks to hide their natural beauty. Similarly, musicians find their natural rhythms disrupted by the intrusion of technological devices. As a result, George and Harrison are deprived of their agency, though intended to enforce equality. Žižek also asserts that it is surprising that my body is not mine anymore and the fact that mind control machines are robbing us of our agency. (*Hegel* 41). He then goes on to aver that the body is yours but you are not directing your body and with the advancement of technology mind-controlled machines are not an external force anymore, since they are inside us, directing our actions (*Hegel* 41-42). This is exactly what happens in the story. Due to the handicaps imposed on the characters, they are unable to control their bodies. Furthermore, the government, which seeks absolute equality, limits and restrains them. For instance, George thinks he is directing his own body, but technological devices are controlling him.

What exacerbates the situation in both the story and the novel is the fact that technological machines are controlled by those in power and elites. Technology plays a significant role in reinforcing these oppressive measures. Through using sophisticated devices, Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General in *Harrison Bergeron*, monitors and controls every single action of the characters. This kind of heavy reliance on technological devices not only stifles individuality but also prevents the characters from genuine human connections. Similarly, in *Player Piano*, everything is controlled by machines, with the elites being the government's agents. As a result, the characters' potential is subordinated to the demands of the system. One of the considerable advantages of Kurt Vonnegut's oeuvre, therefore, is that he was totally aware of the changes happening in his era due to the advancement of technology which reveals he was conscious about how the nature of human beings was altered (Hicks 217).

In the context of the society depicted in this story, people believe they are autonomous subjects, making their own choices. "Humans are in danger of losing their value because intelligence is decoupling from consciousness" (*Hegel* 28). As one can observe in the short story, the characters, George and Hazel, lack the autonomy to choose their own thoughts. "If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head" (Vonnegut 12). "But at the same time, we are more and more determined by economic and even military processes that are impenetrable. Agency is taken from us" (interview).

Žižek offers an analysis of how we are controlled by different means such as technology or ideology and how those in power rob us of our agency. He then notes that nobody wants to know how much they are controlled and to what extent they are allowed to make decisions since they have already adapted themselves to the situation. (*ibid*). This is what happens in *Harrison Bergeron*. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me" (Vonnegut 12). As Žižek avers in his interview with *New Internationalists*, by virtue of technology, the government officials strip us of our subjectivity and agency as soon as they dominate our brains (Žižek). Here again, we can refer back to the concept of belief in ideological subjects, shaped through the big Other.

As mentioned before, *Harrison Bergeron* stands as the sole embodiment of agency amidst an ideological society. Through his actions at the end of the story, he defies the established norms to assert his agency. Although his rebellion is tragically short-lived, as Diana Moon Glampers

kills him, it serves as a powerful example of how the human spirit can challenge dominant ideologies.

In *Player Piano*, the reader also faces a rebellion against automation. The rebel, at the end of the novel *Player Piano*, is a character named Paul Proteus. Throughout the novel, Paul is shown as a sophisticated engineer at the Ilium Works. Paul begins to question the role of technology and its impact on human existence as the story progresses, becoming disillusioned with the mechanized society in which he lives. As people lose their purpose and identity in a machine-dominated society, he witnesses the dehumanization of people. Consequently, he joins a secret underground movement called the Ghost Shirt Society, which aims to restore meaning to human life by resisting the oppressive system. The ending of *Player Piano* presents a complicated moral dilemma, as Paul realizes he has not only challenged the machines' authority but has also caused suffering and displacement to those who depend on the system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper highlighted the complex relationship between technology and ideology in shaping the fundamental structures of society. It is of utmost importance for individuals to be aware of the growing dependence on advanced technology and the inherent risks associated with it.

By emphasizing the fact that technological devices can be used as a means of both government control and ideological imposition, this study broadens reader's horizons regarding the potential risks and challenges associated with the growing dependence on advanced technology. It also illustrates the dehumanizing effects of technology when used as a tool for imposing ideology, depicting how technology erodes the agency of the public in society and how it can lead to job displacement.

Slavoj Žižek as the primary theorist of the current study addresses the profound impact of technology and ideology on human agency. Through his theories regarding technology and government control, he attempts to provide critical insight for the readers. Likewise, in the short story, *Harrison Bergeron*, Kurt Vonnegut illustrates the influence of advanced technology on society during his time. In this story, the government controls not only people's minds but also their actions. George's analytical thoughts are constantly interrupted. For instance, when he thinks the ballerinas on the TV show should not be handicapped, his thought is suddenly interrupted by radio transmitters that make loud noises. Analogously, in *Player Piano*, Vonnegut portrays a society in which technology is so advanced that machines have replaced human labor. As a result, a great number of people lose their jobs. For example, a player piano, which functions as the eponymous title of the novel, is a mechanical instrument that plays without requiring a musician.

Vonnegut, by criticizing and satirizing the dystopian society of both *Player Piano* and *Harrison Bergeron*, portrays how technology is utilized by the government agents as a *modus operandi* for both imposing its ideology and controlling people. Consequently, the Handicapper General the short story and the elites in the novel, as the government agents, turns people into robotic beings who abide by all social rules. According to the argument that has been furnished so far, it is also of overarching importance for readers to engage in self-reflection and examine their relationship with technology. The readers must critically question the ideologies embedded in technologies controlled by those in authority and thus be cognizant of the repercussions emanating from them. Thus, what Vonnegut tries to express throughout these two precious works of art is that one must not be treated as a technological machine since human beings are more valuable. Moreover, one should respect their own agency, identity, and dignity to as to deliver themselves from such so-called utopian societies. Ultimately, this paper set out to achieve its threefold objectives: firstly, the paper explored how ideological subjects consider their unfreedom as

freedom, as explained through the lens of Žižek's theory of freedom; secondly, it delved into the dehumanizing effect of technology when employed as a means of ideology; finally, it examined the erosion of agency within a technologically advanced society where the government agents utilize technology to exert control over its citizens.

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