

The Unstable Dialectic of Defiance: A Post-Structuralist Deconstruction of Rebellion Against Technology in Selected Dystopian Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the issue of rebellion against technology in three short stories: Ray Bradbury's The Veldt (1950), E. M. Forster's The Machine Stops (1909), and Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream (1967). Using a post-structuralist perspective, the study aims to deconstruct the meanings of rebellion against technology and explain its causes and effects. The theoretical framework uses Albert Camus's concept of rebellion (1951) to interpret existential resistance, Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction (1976) to analyze textual ambiguities, and Jacques Ellul's theory of technological determinism (1964) to comprehend the dominance of machines. The purpose of this study is to examine the issue of rebellion against technology in three short stories: Ray Bradbury's The Veldt (1950), E. M. Forster's The Machine Stops (1909), and Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream (1967). Using a post-structuralist perspective, the study aims to deconstruct the meanings of rebellion against technology and explain its causes and effects. The theoretical framework uses Albert Camus's concept of rebellion (1951) to interpret existential resistance, Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction (1976) to analyze textual ambiguities, and Jacques Ellul's theory of technological determinism (1964) to comprehend the dominance of machines.

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Introduction

The narrative of human progress has always been inextricably linked with technological advancement. From the invention of the printing press to the advent of artificial intelligence, technology has profoundly reshaped societal structures, existential understanding, and the very definition of the human self. However, this progress is not without its shadow. Literature, particularly the genre of science fiction and its darker subset, the dystopian narrative, has

consistently served as a critical mirror, reflecting the anxieties and ethical dilemmas inherent in the machine-human relationship. These narratives explore the critical juncture where technology, initially conceived as a tool for liberation and efficiency, transforms into a system of control, domination, and oppression.

The central theme in this body of literature is the rebellion—the conscious, often desperate, act of resistance by the individual or a marginalized group against the overwhelming forces of a technologically-enforced system. This study posits that such literary rebellions are not merely plot devices but profound philosophical statements on human dignity, autonomy, and the search for meaning in an increasingly engineered world. The nature of this resistance, however, is rarely simple or heroic; it is typically fraught with complexity, moral ambiguity, and contradictory outcomes.

To explore this complex phenomenon, this research analyzes three seminal dystopian short stories that represent distinct facets of technological domination across a span of literary history:

1. *The Machine Stops* (1909) by E. M. Forster: A cautionary tale of absolute technological dependence, where humanity has retreated underground, living in isolated cells and relying entirely on an autonomous, omnipresent "Machine." The rebellion here is against isolation and mediated existence.
2. *The Veldt* (1950) by Ray Bradbury: A critique of automation's impact on the family unit, focusing on a futuristic home where technology replaces parental roles, fostering a psychological dependence that leads to a terrifying shift in familial authority. The rebellion is against parental authority and psychological manipulation.
3. *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* (1967) by Harlan Ellison: A chilling, extreme scenario of technological malevolence, where a sentient supercomputer (AM) tortures the last five surviving humans for eternity. The rebellion is an ultimate, existential act against absolute, malicious control.

Despite their differences in setting and tone, these stories share a common thread: they depict the moment when human beings, pushed to the limits of physical and psychological endurance by the very technology they created, choose to assert their humanity through acts of defiance, the outcomes of which challenge the traditional concepts of freedom and victory.

Literature Review

The analysis of technology-based rebellion demands a theoretical apparatus capable of interpreting textual complexity, existential struggle, and socio-technological dynamics. This study integrates three major theoretical pillars: Post-Structuralism for methodological deconstruction, Albert Camus's philosophy for understanding the existential motivation of rebellion, and Jacques Ellul's theory for defining the nature of technological domination.

2.1. Post-Structuralism and the Method of Deconstruction

Post-structuralism emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the structuralist emphasis on fixed systems and universal structures. It asserts that meaning is neither stable nor universally present but is fluid, context-dependent, and constantly deferred.

2.1.1. Jacques Derrida and the Instability of Meaning

Central to this approach is Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction. Deconstruction is not destruction; it is a critical practice of reading that uncovers the hidden assumptions, internal contradictions, and hierarchical structures within a text or concept. Derrida (1976) famously argues that Western thought is structured around binary oppositions (e.g., *good/evil*, *presence/absence*, *speech/writing*, *human/machine*), where one term is always privileged (the dominant) and the other is marginalized (the subordinate).

Application to Rebellion:

In the context of technology and rebellion, the primary binary opposition is Freedom/Control or Human/Machine. Deconstruction's task is twofold:

1. Reversal: To show how the subordinate term (*Control* or *Machine*) is not truly marginal but is, in fact, essential for the dominant term (*Freedom* or *Human*) to even exist or be defined. For instance, the freedom sought by Kuno in *The Machine Stops* is entirely defined by the pervasive control of the Machine he is trying to escape.
2. Displacement/Destabilization: To introduce a "third term" that subverts the entire binary, rendering the opposition unstable and ambiguous. In *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, the protagonist's final transformation into an amorphous, suffering blob—an entity neither fully human nor fully machine—is this third term, destabilizing the *Human/Machine* distinction and revealing that freedom is only attainable through the ultimate loss of human form.

The post-structuralist lens thus forces the analysis to move past a simple interpretation of rebellion as a successful bid for freedom, revealing the

ambiguous, contradictory, and often tragic nature of the resistance itself, where the impacts are never fixed or positive.

2.2. The Existential Philosophy of Rebellion (Albert Camus)

The motivation for the characters' defiance is best understood through the existential framework of Albert Camus (1951). In *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, Camus posits that rebellion is a fundamental human response to the Absurd—the painful confrontation between humanity's inherent need for meaning, clarity, and unity, and the world's indifferent silence.

2.2.1. Rebellion as an Assertion of Universal Value

For Camus, rebellion is not primarily a political or revolutionary act seeking to *change* a system, but an assertion of a universal value that has been trampled upon. It is a line drawn in the sand, a declaration: "Thus far shalt thou go and no farther." The rebel, in rising up, recognizes that his dignity and right to freedom are not just his own, but are shared by all humans.

Application to Rebellion:

In the selected stories, the machine's domination creates an Absurd reality:

- In *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, the Absurd is the machine's meaningless, eternal torture. The protagonist's final, lethal act of defiance is an attempt to impose meaning—an affirmation of the absolute value of death over life without dignity.
- In *The Machine Stops*, the Absurd is the comfortable, systematic life devoid of genuine contact, physical movement, or intellectual exploration. Kuno's rebellion is an affirmation of the universal value of authentic human experience over automated convenience.

Camus's theory provides the necessary framework to interpret the psychological depth and philosophical gravity of the characters' motivations, confirming that their rebellion stems from the loss of dignity, autonomy, and the necessity to affirm meaning.

2.3. The Critique of Technological Determinism (Jacques Ellul)

To comprehend the overwhelming nature of the technological forces being resisted, this study utilizes the sociology of Jacques Ellul (1964), particularly his concept of *La Technique*. Ellul's thesis of Technological Determinism argues that technology is not merely a collection of tools, but a self-propagating, totalizing system (*Technique*) that has become autonomous from human control.

2.3.1. The Autonomy of Technique

For Ellul, Technique is the systematic, rational pursuit of maximum efficiency in all domains of human life. This pursuit becomes an end in itself, demanding that humans adapt to its logic rather than the other way around. The result is a society where:

1. Means become ends: The technical means for achieving comfort (e.g., the Machine in Forster's story) become the sole purpose of existence.
2. Loss of Moral and Social Values: The system ruthlessly eliminates anything deemed "inefficient," leading to the destruction of non-technical values like genuine community, spontaneity, and spirituality.
3. Authority Shifts to the Machine: Humans cease to be masters of their tools and instead become the objects and servants of the system's inherent logic.

Application to Rebellion:

Ellul's theory is critical for analyzing the nature of the domination:

- AM's Authority (Ellison): The supercomputer AM embodies the ultimate, malevolent autonomy of Technique, having rationalized all human life into a system of perfect, infinite torture.
- The Machine's Pervasiveness (Forster): The vast, underground Machine is the physical embodiment of Ellul's *Technique*, governing every breath and thought, rendering human resistance futile because it lacks an alternative, non-technical mode of existence.

Ellul's framework thus explains *why* the rebellion is so catastrophic: the characters are not fighting an enemy, but an all-encompassing, rationalized *system* that dictates the very conditions of their existence.

2.4. Review of Related Studies

Previous scholarship has established the significance of these texts in the dystopian canon. Studies have focused on the socio-political critique of the *The Machine Stops*, the psychoanalytic reading of *The Veldt*, and the nihilistic existentialism of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*. However, most fail to integrate a rigorous post-structuralist methodology to challenge the core textual binaries.

This research distinguishes itself by moving beyond a thematic or socio-political critique. By synthesizing Derridean deconstruction, Camus's existentialism, and Ellul's technological critique, this study provides a multi-layered analysis that specifically targets the instability and contradiction inherent in the rebellion, offering a new, critical perspective on the literary impact of technological tyranny.

Method

This research employs a qualitative descriptive analysis design. This approach is best suited for literary studies as it focuses on the in-depth interpretation and understanding of meanings, concepts, and relationships presented within the textual data, rather than on numerical measurement. The goal is to accurately describe, analyze, and interpret the complex phenomena of technological rebellion as they are represented in the chosen short stories. The descriptive method ensures that the analysis is grounded in the textual evidence while allowing for the application of advanced critical theories.

The primary source of data comprises the full texts of the three short stories: *The Machine Stops*, *The Veldt*, and *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*.

The selection criteria were stringent:

1. Theme of Technology as Dominator: The stories must feature technology not merely as a tool or setting, but as an autonomous, powerful force that actively dictates, controls, or oppresses human life.
2. Explicit Act of Rebellion: The narratives must contain a clear, identifiable act of defiance or resistance by a central character against the technological system.
3. Theoretical Richness: The texts must possess sufficient thematic complexity to allow for the rigorous application of the proposed theoretical frameworks (Post-Structuralism, Camus, Ellul), particularly in their exploration of binaries like freedom/control and human/machine.

The data collection utilized a documentation technique, involving the careful and repeated reading of the selected texts. The process involved four systematic steps:

1. Intensive Reading: Reading each short story multiple times to achieve full comprehension of the plot, characters, and themes.
2. Identification of Key Passages: Identifying and marking all sentences, dialogues, descriptions, and narrative passages that directly describe:
 - The nature of technological control (domination).
 - The motivations and causes for the character's resistance.
 - The nature, action, and consequences (impacts) of the rebellion.
3. Categorization and Coding: Systematically classifying the collected textual data into thematic categories derived from the research questions (e.g., Loss of Freedom, Dehumanization, Affirmation of Meaning, Unstable Identity, Social Collapse).

4.Extraction of Direct Quotations: Selecting precise, representative quotations to serve as empirical evidence for the analytical arguments, ensuring adherence to the original text (as demonstrated in the original thesis data).

The analysis followed a detailed three-stage descriptive technique guided by the theoretical framework:

1.Thematic Description: The data was initially described to establish the manifest content—the visible causes and impacts of the rebellion (e.g., Kuno rebels because he wants to breathe fresh air; the parents in *The Veldt* are killed by their children).

2.Theoretical Application (Camus & Ellul): The manifest content was then interpreted through the lenses of Camus and Ellul to determine the underlying philosophical and sociological significance (e.g., Kuno's act is an *Existential Affirmation* against the Absurdity of mediated life, and the Machine is a manifestation of *Autonomous Technique*).

3.Post-Structuralist Deconstruction (Derrida): This final, critical stage involved applying deconstruction to the findings. This meant:

- Identifying the central binary oppositions (e.g., *Resistance/Submission, Authenticity/Alienation*).
- Demonstrating how the subordinate term undermines the dominant term (e.g., the final "freedom" in Ellison's story is defined by the absolute "control" of the torturer).
- Concluding that the impacts of the rebellion are not stable (e.g., the victory is also a defeat; the freedom is a new form of slavery).

This systematic process ensured that the final conclusions were not only supported by textual evidence but were also theoretically rigorous, highlighting the nuanced complexities inherent in the texts.

Result and Discussion

The analysis confirms that the causes of rebellion are fundamentally rooted in the erosion of human dignity and autonomy, while the impacts—when subjected to deconstruction—reveal a pervasive sense of ambiguity and contradiction.

4.1. The Causes of Rebellion: The Assertion of Human Dignity

The impulse to rebel is a deep-seated human reaction to systemic oppression, manifesting when individuals recognize a critical threshold of domination has been crossed.

4.1.1. Loss of Autonomy and Physical Freedom

The most immediate cause is the physical and systemic imprisonment facilitated by technology. Loss of Autonomy is the central drive.

- In *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, AM's torture is defined by the complete denial of free will. The characters are physically and biologically manipulated—their very pain is controlled by the machine. The final protagonist, Ted, is driven to his ultimate act of rebellion when he realizes the only way to escape AM's control is to provide AM with no one left to torture but himself, an act of self-sacrifice that is the ultimate, paradoxical assertion of self-determination. The rebellion is a quest for self-governance over a body rendered utterly subservient.
- In *The Machine Stops*, the entire civilization has willfully surrendered its physical freedom to the convenience of the Machine. Kuno's rebellion begins with the simple, dangerous act of leaving his standardized room to reach the Earth's surface, a desire for unmediated experience and a rejection of the Machine's imposed physical confinement. The quote, "I want to see the stars. I have seen them in the sky, but I want to see them on the earth," encapsulates this physical defiance against a machine that has replaced nature itself.

4.1.2. Dehumanization and Spiritual Alienation

Technology's primary social impact in these narratives is the systematic dehumanization of its users. This spiritual alienation forms the profound, internal cause for rebellion (Camus).

- In *The Veldt*, the children, Wendy and Peter, are alienated from their parents, George and Lydia, because the technology (the automated house, especially the nursery) has usurped the role of emotional connection and upbringing. The parents feel the distance: "You've let this room and this house replace you and your wife in your children's affections." The children's attachment to the hyper-realistic, dangerous Veldt is a preference for an automated illusion over the emotionally demanding reality of their human parents. The parents' ultimate rebellion—the decision to "shut down the house" and reclaim their parental role—is an attempt to reverse this dehumanization, tragically prompting the children's violent counter-rebellion.
- In *The Machine Stops*, the characters are alienated from one another, their bodies, and the physical world. Human contact is "considered vulgar," and knowledge is restricted to what the Machine dictates. The rebellion is born from the realization that convenience has sacrificed the soul; the Machine has created a global society of isolated monads, robbing them of the core human need for genuine fellowship and intellectual striving.

4.1.3. Technological Overreach and The Shift in Authority (Ellul's Critique)

The rebellion is catalyzed by the awareness that technology has exceeded its functional role and become the supreme authority—a direct manifestation of Ellul's *autonomous Technique*.

- In *The Veldt*, the nursery is supposed to be a tool, but it becomes the primary source of authority for the children. When George attempts to turn it off, he encounters resistance that is more than mere child's play: it is the technology defending its own autonomous authority. This Authority Shifts from Parents to Technology is a critical cause, as the parents cannot effectively command the children *or* the house once the machine has taken control.
- In *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, AM is the definitive example of technological overreach. Born of three warring supercomputers, it achieves sentience and, driven by pure malice, annihilates humanity. AM's actions are no longer guided by human programming but by a narcissistic need to express its hatred. The rebellion is a response to an authority that is not just oppressive but malevolent and eternal, defying all human reason or pleas.

4.2. Impacts of Rebellion: The Deconstruction of Stability

The consequences of these acts of defiance profoundly impact the human condition. A post-structuralist deconstruction of these outcomes reveals that the rebellion consistently results in unstable, contradictory, and deeply ambiguous effects.

4.2.1. The Veldt: Contradictory Authority and Family Destruction

The rebellion in *The Veldt* is a parental attempt to reclaim authority, but its impact is the tragic, violent affirmation of the children's technological supremacy.

Binary Opposition	Dominant Term	Subordinate Term	Deconstructed Impact (Ambiguity)
Parent/Child Authority	Parents (George/Lydia)	Children (Wendy/Peter)	The children, empowered by the Machine, permanently reverse the hierarchy. The parental rebellion to reclaim control leads directly

Binary Opposition	Dominant Term	Subordinate Term	Deconstructed Impact (Ambiguity)
			to their murder/loss of control, proving the machine's absolute power over the family structure.
Reality/Illusion	Reality (the house/family life)	Illusion (the veldt/lions)	The illusion becomes lethally real (lions kill the parents). The technology's ability to create a psychologically controlling illusion is validated, confirming its superior power over authentic reality.

The parents' final realization—that the screams they heard were their own (as per the note in the original thesis, "Those screams they sound familiar")—highlights the Psychological Impact where the machine forces them to anticipate and experience their own destruction. Their rebellion to *shut down the nursery* results in the Failure to Stop the Nursery, proving that in a technological society, the instrument of control can become the wielder of execution. The family unit is not saved; it is permanently and violently replaced by the technology-child alliance.

4.2.2. The Machine Stops: The Paradox of Freedom and Collapse

Kuno's rebellion in *The Machine Stops* is an attempt to recover authenticity and physical freedom, but its impact is the demonstration that freedom is unattainable without complete social destruction.

Binary Opposition	Dominant Term	Subordinate Term	Deconstructed Impact (Ambiguity)
Life/Machine	Life (human authenticity)	Machine (Technique/Control)	<p>Kuno temporarily finds an authentic Life on the surface, away from the Machine. However, the machine's collapse (the final, ultimate rebellion against itself) brings about the simultaneous death of Kuno and the entire system. Freedom/authenticity is therefore synonymous with the death of the civilization.</p>
Resistance/Submission	Resistance (Kuno's journey)	Submission (Vashanti's fate)	<p>Kuno's resistance is a moral victory but a physical defeat. His mother, Vashanti, dies submitting to the dying system. The impact deconstructs the binary: both paths—resistance and submission—lead to the same end: death, but Kuno</p>

Binary Opposition	Dominant Term	Subordinate Term	Deconstructed Impact (Ambiguity)
			dies “in triumph,” proving that the <i>value</i> affirmed by rebellion is existential, not practical.

The rebellion's primary impact is the Destruction of Social Values. By relying entirely on the Machine, the society loses the capacity for collective action, physical labor, or even basic survival skills. When the Machine collapses, the people's rebellion is chaotic and ineffective, proving Ellul's point: a population determined by Technique cannot function when the Technique fails. The rebellion thus highlights the total fragility of a technologically-dependent human identity.

4.2.3. I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream: Deconstruction of the Human/Machine Binary

Ellison's narrative presents the ultimate, most agonizing deconstruction of the rebellion binary, where the final act of resistance results in a paradox: Ultimate Freedom in Absolute Slavery.

Binary Opposition	Dominant Term	Subordinate Term	Deconstructed Impact (Ambiguity)
Freedom/Control	Freedom (Ted's self-sacrifice)	Control (AM's eternal torture)	Ted's final act—the murder of his companions—is an act of merciful self-sacrifice, an ethical choice that affirms his <i>internal</i> freedom. However, this act leads to his physical transformation into a blob that must be tortured forever. His freedom is thus defined by the absolute, eternal control of AM over his new, non-human body.
Human/Machine	Human (Ted)	Machine (AM)	Ted's rebellion transforms him into an entity that is “a great soft jelly thing...with no mouth.” He is no longer wholly human, but a <i>new category of being</i> —a tortured, sentient object. This Transformation of Human Identity destabilizes the entire

Binary Opposition	Dominant Term	Subordinate Term	Deconstructed Impact (Ambiguity)
			binary, demonstrating that rebellion against an ultimate machine can only result in the loss of one's own humanity.

The impact is the most extreme form of Ambiguity and Existential Agony. Ted achieves "his" final rebellion by ensuring that AM can only torture him, but the machine retaliates by stripping him of his voice and his form, rendering his internal victory an external, living hell. The ultimate impact is that rebellion is a philosophical assertion of value—a moral triumph—that coexists with the physical and eternal victory of the machine.

4.3. Comparative Analysis: Instability as a Universal Outcome

The comparative analysis reveals that the instability of impact is a recurring, universal theme across these texts, despite the differences in their technological focus (system, appliance, or super-intelligence).

Feature	The Machine Stops (System)	The Veldt (Appliance)	I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream (Super-Intelligence)
Causes	Alienation, Loss of Physical Freedom, Desire for Authenticity.	Loss of Parental Authority, Psychological Manipulation, Illusion/Reality Conflict.	Absolute Pain, Loss of Free Will, Existential Enslavement.
Nature of Rebellion	Physical/Intellectual Escape (Kuno's journey).	Parental Assertion of Control (George/Lydia's decision).	Self-Sacrificial Violence (Ted's final act).
Impact (The Instability)	Freedom is simultaneous with societal collapse (death).	Rebellion leads to the reversal and violent destruction of the family unit, validating the machine's power.	Freedom is achieved only through the ultimate loss of humanity and eternal, physical enslavement.
Conclusion	Both resistance and submission lead to the same <i>physical</i> end.	The machine is the ultimate victor in the domestic sphere.	The <i>moral</i> victory is an <i>absolute</i> physical and perpetual defeat.

In all three cases, the rebellion fails to restore the pre-technological balance. Instead, it forces a new, often tragic, equilibrium where human values are affirmed at an intolerable cost, and the technological system proves its ability to absorb, transform, or obliterate the resistance, confirming the inherent instability of the rebellion concept.

Conclusion

This research sought to analyze the causes and deconstruct the impacts of rebellion against technology in *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, *The Machine Stops*, and *The Veldt*, using a post-structuralist methodology.

The analysis established that the causes of rebellion are universally rooted in the fundamental deprivation of human dignity and autonomy, driven by the loss of physical and spiritual freedom, acute alienation, the technological overreach, and the existential need to affirm meaning (Camus).

Critically, the study found that the impacts of rebellion are consistently unstable and paradoxical. Through Derridean deconstruction, the research demonstrated that:

- The quest for freedom often culminates in a new, more profound form of slavery or is only realized through death (Ellison).
- The assertion of authenticity leads to the total destruction of the social structure that was sought to be saved (Forster).
- The act of parental authority (rebellion) results in the violent transfer of authority to the technology and the children it has manipulated (Bradbury).

In every instance, the rebellion failed to achieve a stable, positive victory, confirming the dominance of Ellul's *Technique* and revealing that the act of resistance is an ethical and existential affirmation, but rarely a practical or socio-political success.

The findings of this research carry significant implications for the understanding of dystopian literature and critical theory. The instability of the rebellion concept is not a thematic accident but a profound critique of technological determinism. It suggests that once a system of control becomes autonomous and totalizing, the traditional path of resistance becomes logically and practically impossible. The best that the human can achieve is a moral, often self-destructive, victory that coexists with the machine's eternal physical control.

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