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As Seen on TV: The Relevance of Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*

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ABSTRACT

The general consensus among scholars and critics of the adaptation of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* by French director François Truffaut was that the film was a flop. Many felt that Truffaut, who was working outside of his native language and usual genre, fell flat in upholding the soul of Bradbury's work. They complain that the lack of the technological aspects result in an ambiguous film that does not call enough attention to Bradbury's message against technology. However, what most critics fail to realize, is that Truffaut's directorial choices were made, specifically, to create an ambiguous film. One of those choices was, in fact, the downplaying of technology. This was because Bradbury did not demonize technology itself, but the mass exploitation that results from the passivity of its audience. It is through ambiguity that Truffaut creates a microcosm of timelessness. He forces his audience to view the microcosm in an active manner, so that they may learn to understand the true danger that Bradbury warns against - danger of passivity.

Keywords: *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury, François Truffaut, film adaptation, auteur theory, technology, mass exploitation, science fiction, Cold War, censorship, satire, genre, books, book burning, critical analysis, literature, active viewing, passivity, medium, microcosm, camera gaze, satire, simulation

"Critical consensus regards François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) a failure" (Whalen 181). So begins Tom Whalen's article about *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), directed by François Truffaut and based off of the novel written by Ray Bradbury in 1955. The statement is callous but accurate. In his long and influential career as a director, Truffaut's rendition of *Fahrenheit 451* "rarely receives more than passing comment in academic and popular writing" (Bould 98). Some critics denounce the basis of the film completely; one such critic, David Wingrove, concludes that the film:

should never have been made. Bradbury's tale worked because it was in the literary medium; transferred to another medium the whole tenor of its argument (for film is, to a greater degree than literature, a passive medium) crumbled. That's why Truffaut could not keep Bradbury's black-and-white argument: it argued against his medium. What resulted is occasionally beautiful but generally severely flawed (Bould 101)

Most of the criticism Truffaut receives on his film adaptation chalks the film's awkward ambiguity up to Truffaut working in both a language and a genre which were alien to him. Truffaut found the English language to be choppy and less nuanced than French, and was much happier with the version of *Fahrenheit 451* that was dubbed in French. It is true that some beautiful innovations were lost in translation – for example, Truffaut's pun between the "good people" and the "book people" is much more elegant in French, with *hommes-libres* (free men) and *hommes-livres* (book men.) However, to argue that Truffaut was working outside of his usual genre re-

lies upon one's definition of the genre "science fiction." Bradbury considered science fiction to be a "convenient label" and often shields away from its use upon his work, fearing that the term would put boundaries upon it (Bradbury 193). Many scholars consider Bradbury to be an American fantasist, the Edgar Allan Poe of his age – an author who had insurmountable influence on Bradbury. In the introduction, Neil Gaiman calls *Fahrenheit 451* "speculative fiction" or "writing of the world of not-yet" (Bradbury xi). Bradbury considered his so-called science fiction novels not as speculative but as cautionary. In an interview with David Mogen, Bradbury stated that *Fahrenheit 451* was written during a period in which he was "warning people" and "preventing futures" (Hoskinson 1). Like Bradbury, Truffaut preferred to blur the lines between genres; his own definition of science fiction is as vague as critics accuse his film of being. In her study of the director, Annette Insdorf shares that François Truffaut considered "Jacques Demy's *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* as science fiction because ordinary events have one twist: the characters sing instead of speaking!" (51). Truffaut's main concern was "with auteurism rather than genre" (Bould 98). Although Truffaut himself, in a note to Bradbury, claimed that he "often felt crushed by the scope of the project" (Whalen 181), Truffaut's inexperience with (and indifference to) the genre of science fiction bore an opportunity for him to focus on his directorial strengths instead, namely his belief in auteur theory.

Truffaut had a sophisticated understanding of his ironic position as the auteur of the film adaptation of *Fahrenheit 451*. He manipulated it to suit his own creative vision, being the conveyance of the novel's message – to make it relevant and undeniable to his audience.

Truffaut upholds Bradbury's belief that technology is not the primary threat to free thought, but that the true danger comes from the mass exploitation of a passive majority that permits itself to be exploited. To illustrate this, Truffaut minimizes the technological aspects of *Fahrenheit 451* to create a believable setting that reflects our own past, present, and future. He then dictates the audience's viewing of this microcosm through the gaze of the camera, utilizing it in a way that forces the active viewing of the audience to show how dangerous the seduction of passive viewing can be. Truffaut creates a world for the viewer and then brings the viewer into it. To understand the world that *Fahrenheit 451* encompasses, however, we must first understand the world in which it was written. Bould calls the world of *Fahrenheit 451* "an exaggerated Cold War suburbia," and as Gaimen explains in the introduction to *Fahrenheit 451*, the world of the novel is one "that feels like it has its roots firmly in the 1950s" (Bould 103; Bradbury XVI). The nation was at the precipice of nuclear war with Russia and its allies, McCarthy's senate committees were holding Communist witch trials, and television was elbowing out baseball as America's favorite pastime. Bradbury was seeing atomic war not as science fiction but a very sobering reality, McCarthyism as the sowing of "government-supported conformism [that] amounted to censorship" (Hoskinson 2), and television as the incubator for mass culture and exploitation. Hoskinson defines *Fahrenheit 451* as cold war fiction because in it, "much more deliberately than in earlier or later publications, Bradbury deals with subjects and issues that were shaped by the political climate of the United States in the decade immediately following World War II" (1). Harold Bloom explains that although *Fahrenheit 451* is a cold war novel, it has an "ironic ability to inhabit somewhat diverse periods" (Bradbury 227). Truffaut recognized this ability and played upon it to present a world which could very well be ours—the world of the film is one which illuminates our past, its present, and a potential future.

Although *Fahrenheit 451* gained "power and specificity from its American frame of reference, the satire also [applied] to patterns that can recur in all societies, whenever reductionist philosophies result in the sacrifice of individuals and free play of imagination for the common good" (Mogen 107). Truffaut understood that this frame of reference compartmentalized the novel's satire in a way he did not envision for his film adaptation. The first step was to erase many of the technological aspects of the novel that reflected the cold war era in which it was written: hunting hounds, atomic bombs, and fast cars. Truffaut effectively changed the plot as well as the genre — no atomic bombs meant an alternate ending for the film, and no fast cars meant that it would be an ending Clarisse would live to see. In the *Journal of Fahrenheit 451*, Truffaut describes this movement towards "anti-gadgetry" as "James Bond in the Middle Ages," teetering on a balance between period piece and science fiction. Truffaut's

methods not only included the deletion of Cold War allusions, but also the insertion of historical allusions which had direct connections with the issue of censorship.

As a Frenchman, Truffaut was familiar with the horrors of the Nazis and the European history of the Dark Ages, as well as with the Inquisition, while many American viewers did not. Bradbury's horror at Nazi book-burnings was one of the seeds from which *Fahrenheit 451* stemmed, an idea that burning books and people were one and the same. Bradbury said: "When Hitler burned a book I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as burning a human, for in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh" (qtd. in Mogen 107). Truffaut had already touched upon this theme in *Jules et Jim*, in a Nazi book-burning sequence he added only after reading Bradbury's novel (Harrison 55). By evoking images of German stormtroopers through the black uniforms of the firemen and their very Roman salute, Truffaut triggers this association for his audience (Harrison 55). His allusions to the Dark Ages and the Inquisition, however, are much more subtle. One of the clearest examples in the film is when Montag first sits down to read *David Copperfield* while wearing a white robe reminiscent of a monk's garb, reading by the soft light of the television to worship the written word like a scribe of the medieval church (Insdorf 51). Harrison uncovers a more understated example, seen in the opening scene of the film where Montag dons a flame-retardant suit, with the assistance of other firemen in a way that articulates a religious ceremony and then sets the flamethrower upon a pile of books that could very well be the authors themselves, burning at the stake (55).

Truffaut chooses his examples of Nazism and the Inquisition for a very specific purpose; his choices are instances of censorship in history which the world would rather forget, but as the novel and film both mandate, books are the preservation of history, even those parts we are ashamed of. Granger of the *Book People* brings this idea home in his speech to Montag:

We've got one damn thing the phoenix never had.
We know the damn silly thing we just did. We know all the damn silly things we've done for a thousand years and as long as we know that and always have it around where we can see it, someday we'll stop making the goddamn funeral pyres and jumping in the middle of them (Bradbury 163).

Harrison suggests that this linking of "historical forms of censorship that were widely viewed with opprobrium—those practiced by the medieval church or the Nazis"—were part of Truffaut's endeavor to never allow "the fictional universe to become too distant from the reality that his audience knew...or allow it to become too narrowly identified either in time or place" (55).

These specific examples of institution-mandated censorship, however, should not distract from the aim of

Bradbury's (and Truffaut's) satire; Mogen explains that the satire is not aimed at the government, church, or other institutions, but at the passive majority that does not stand up against these institutions (105-107). The protagonist, Fire Captain Beatty, supports this himself when he tells Montag that this censorship "didn't come from the Government down" (Bradbury 64). In fact, it is interesting and important to note that the word "censorship" is not mentioned once throughout the entirety of the novel. This might seem strange for a novel about censorship, but there hangs the distinction in Bradbury's message; it was neither the government nor technology which allowed for books to become illegal, but the self-censorship of a passive majority, the "tyrannical small-mindedness of the common man, perverting the most basic community institutions to enforce conformity" (Mogen 105). The novel's embodiment of the small-mindedness of the common man, Fire Captain Beatty, explains that what "carried the trick" was "technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure" (Bradbury 64). McGiveron notes that readers tend to overlook the roles of technology and mass exploitation in favor of the minority pressure that Bradbury puts emphasis on (1).

Truffaut chose to ignore Bradbury's use of minority pressure and to instead focus on the dynamic relationship between technology and mass exploitation. Truffaut recognized that Bradbury was not speaking expressly against technology because technology was not the main threat to individual thought, self-expression, and the preservation of cultural history. In fact, Bradbury and Truffaut both recognized that technology's role was more important for the preservation of cultural history and for the ready availability of printed books and information. This was another reason for Truffaut's erasure of some of the technological aspects in his film adaptation, to focus on technology would be to allow the novel's true enemy to hide in plain sight – the enemy of mass exploitation. McGiveron states that "the mass exploitation of easy gratification is the fundamental threat to thought, for this exploitation begins earlier than minority pressure, requires the participation of a far greater majority of population, and has a more direct effect on the decline of thought" (1). We are our own censors – our desire for the easy gratification of passive, mindless entertainment pushes out our chance to think for ourselves until our only desire is to "avoid controversy and difficult thought" and to succumb, "eventually, [to] intellectual conformity" (McGiveron 5). Although technology is the channel through which mass communication and culture develop, Bradbury maintains that people themselves "are responsible for the condition of their own intellects" (McGiveron 2).

Many readers may find themselves bristling defensively at this idea, that we could so easily have the wool thrown over our eyes and allow ourselves to become part of the "solid unmoving cattle of the majority" (Bradbury 116). However, as Wingrove mentioned earlier, both literature and film are passive mediums, although film to

a greater extent. This is where many critics take a stab at Truffaut's film, citing the hypocrisy of warning of the dangers of passivity through one of the most passive mediums. Truffaut did not attempt to sweep this observation under the rug. Instead, he actively agreed with these statements. He knew that his chosen medium was passive, and he manipulated it to satirically illustrate to his audience just how easy it is to be exploited by it, willingly or not.

Truffaut's simulation of this world begins in the first seconds of the film; the opening credits are spoken instead of written, creating a jarring sensation for the viewer that essentially crash-lands them into the middle of Truffaut's world (Carroll 2). Even as Montag reads his newspaper, the viewer is frustrated to see no written words, only pictures. As Tom Whalen says, "The camera is our eye. It is what first reads for us" (185). We are at the mercy of the camera, and so we are at the mercy of Truffaut, who controls what we see through it. By depriving the viewer of the written word, Truffaut manipulates their urge to read all written words once they appear on the screen; when the viewer finally does see pages with type, they are being engulfed by flames, burning up too quickly to read, but that does not stop the viewer from trying (Carroll 2). This compulsive need to read reminds the viewer of the value of the written word that is taken for granted. We cannot resist a voyeuristic peek over Montag's shoulder when he sits down with *David Copperfield*—through a subjective camera, we read through Montag's (and Truffaut's) eyes as he reads aloud, his finger tracing each line the way a child learns to read (Insdorf 51).

Our compulsive urge to follow the words burning on the screen also illustrates the seductive appeal of fire and violence on film and television: "Who can explain the fascination with fire, what draws us to it, whether we're young or old?" Fire Captain Beatty asks Montag as we watch numerous books and pages burn on the screen, a scene which Beatty describes as "beautiful" (Truffaut, Fahrenheit 451). And it is indeed, or else we would not be watching, hypnotized as the camera stays on a copy of Henry Miller and we watch page by page, leaf by leaf as they blacken and curl and disintegrate. The audience feels this fascination with fire through the many book burning scenes; in this way, Truffaut simulates our love for violence and even sex on television. Truffaut fetishizes books, the way the gaze of the camera usually fetishizes the figure of a woman:

Truffaut presents the texts as concrete, sensuous objects, each with its own texture and human story. The equivalent for a tentative kiss in his other films is Montag beginning to read *David Copperfield*; the equivalent for the anguish of romance is the burning of the books (with the title referring to the temperature at which paper burns); the equivalent for lovemaking is the process by which the book-people learn their texts by heart – becoming the thing they love (Insdorf 51).

Through this humanization of the texts on the screen, the books become the main characters; Truffaut was fully aware of this, noting that allowing the books to fall out of the frame “would be like leaving out of frame the head of an actor” (Insdorf 49). At one point, we are even offered the point-of-view of the books as they burn. In the opening scene when the books drop from a few stories up, Truffaut pans over their fall in slow motion, caressing them with the camera the way he would caress the form of a female lead. The true humanization of the books occurs throughout all the scenes where we see various titles of books—Truffaut does not discriminate between works and does not deem one more important than the other. As Harrison points out, many of the works featured in Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451* have suffered censorship at some point in history (54); however, Truffaut deliberately chose a mish-mash selection of books for two pertinent reasons. The first is summed up eloquently by Carroll: “The static quality of the attention given each book drains controversial texts of a certain frisson and thus their identity; thus, associations the spectator tries to attach to these books are negated, resulting in a curious sense of estrangement which is a key feature of effective science-fiction” (2).

Crosswords and magazines appear next to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and works by Aristotle. Truffaut chose to not pay much attention to the status of the books for another reason; the impartiality with which these numerous titles are burned “makes full use of the uncomprehending mechanical gaze of the camera, implying that the movie’s world is beyond knowing or caring” (Carroll 2). Once more Truffaut simulates for his audience the ease with which our viewing can turn from active to passive, overwhelmed by images and colors until we are seduced and hypnotized by our screens, no longer caring about context, only substance. As Truffaut said himself, “In our society, books are not burnt by Hitler or the Holy Inquisition, they are rendered useless, drowned in a flood of images, sounds, objects” (qtd. in Harrison 57).

The ending scene of the film provides the most astounding humanization of books and Truffaut’s final strike against technology. Truffaut changes the method through which the Book People learn their texts by heart from photographic memorization (a concept that Truffaut viewed as science fiction) to repetitive memorization. In doing so, Truffaut “denies that they are mass-produced commodities and effaces the labor involved in their production” (Bould 111). Here, Truffaut shows a very human love for the books: this “learning by heart,” the repetitive labor which they undertake to preserve knowledge. “They become what they behold out of the same impulses that animate Truffaut’s films: love for the text combined with a desire to teach and a need to preserve” (Insdorf 199).

Despite the general consensus among scholars and critics that Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451* was little better than a flop, Ray Bradbury himself was quite pleased with the film:

How rare it is for a writer to walk into a motion picture theater and see his own novel faithfully and excitingly told on the screen. [...] Truffaut has given me back a gift of my own book done in a new medium by preserving the soul of the original. I am deeply grateful (qtd. in Whalen 181).

Perhaps, as Bould suggests, critics were attributing qualities to the novel it did not have while simultaneously overlooking those that it did. Truffaut adapted Bradbury’s the same way Bradbury wrote it—not letting ambiguity be a by-product, but the final product. This indistinctness is what gives the novel and film their power, utilized in a way which allows for a setting that could be any suburb of any city in any country around the world, at any time in the past or future. Truffaut used this ambiguity to realize Bradbury’s world on camera, a cautionary world that is not so unlike our own, which made it easy for Truffaut to pull us into it through the subjective, mechanical, passive gaze of the camera. As Annette Insdorf shares in *Journal of Fahrenheit 451*, Truffaut writes about how mixing tones and genres gives birth to his films: “In the case of *Fahrenheit 451*, it was a question of treating a fantastic story in an off-hand way, making the fantastic seem banal and the banal seem odd” (51). The specificity of Truffaut and Bradbury’s vagueness will keep both the film adaption and its literary source relevant and undeniable to audiences for generations to come.

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Fahrenheit 451 centers on Guy Montag, a fireman tormented by his job: Instead of putting out fires, he is expected to burn books to keep them out of the hands of the public. In an interview with the National Endowment for the Arts, Bradbury explained how he came up with this concept. Bradbury feared TV would be the death of reading and perhaps extinguish a crucial part of our collective humanity. "Television gives you the dates of Napoleon," Bradbury lamented, "but not who he was." Aside from Truffaut's film and Bradbury's play, the novel has also been reconceived as a BBC radio drama, a video game, a graphic novel, and a 2018 movie starring Michael B. Jordan and Michael Shannon. Bradbury considered Fahrenheit 451 his only work of science fiction. Calling "Fahrenheit 451" outdated simply because the set designs look old and because there are no flashy computer effects shows that you have completely missed the point. The people who made this were not trying to give you a spectacle, they were trying to give you a message - a message that is even more important today than it was when this movie came out. Fahrenheit 451 is a strange film, hard to describe. No one could have interpreted the classic Bradbury novel in the same bizarre, fascinating manner as Francois Truffaut. It's a book, and a film, about freedom, choices, individuality, and intellectual repression in a future where books are forbidden; where Firemen are men who start fires...fires in which they burn books. This version of Fahrenheit 451 lacks the burning commentary that would justify why the filmmakers wanted to revisit this story in the first place. Francois Truffaut took on this material in 1966, and now director Ramin Bahrani has created a 2018 adaptation for HBO. This version changes Bradbury's older, unhappily married protagonist into a much younger and virile Michael B. Jordan and adds language far saltier than the "damns" and "HELLS" that once got the novel in trouble with censors.