

Film Adaptations: Fahrenheit 451

The Book

Author: Ray Bradbury (1920–2012)

First published: 1953

The Film

Year released: 1966

Director: François Truffaut (1932–1984)

Screenplay by: Jean-Louis Richard, François Truffaut

Starring: Oskar Werner, Julie Christie, Cyril Cusack, Anton Diffring

Context

Censorship has existed since humans first codified laws of behavior. City-states of ancient Greece, for example, developed laws regarding worship and imposed harsh sanctions against those who spoke disrespectfully about local gods. In more contemporary eras, speech, writing, art, and other forms of communication have been suppressed by governments, authorities, or organizations, usually on moral, political, religious, or security grounds.

The most extreme form of censorship is the permanent elimination of an offender. Over the centuries, individuals who fell afoul of existing standards have been put to death to prevent the promotion of ideas perceived as heretical or dangerous. Slightly less drastic, symbolic censorship involves the deliberate destruction of works judged objectionable. From antiquity to modern times, book burnings have among the most visible attempts to obliterate the physical expression of thought considered subversive or antithetical to the ruling regime.

Censorship in the form of book burning is at the heart of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Bradbury, first published as a teenager and a full-time writer by his early twenties, was particularly known for his forward-looking science fiction, fantasy, and horror short stories. He also wrote plays, children's literature, mystery novels, screenplays, and nonfiction. In addition to *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury's most widely recognized works—many of which were adapted for film—include *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), *The Illustrated Man* (1951), *Dandelion Wine* (1957), *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), and *I Sing the Body Electric* (1969). He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation in 2007 in recognition of his influential career.

Though celebrated as a director, screenwriter, producer, and actor, François Truffaut was a somewhat odd choice to bring *Fahrenheit 451* to the screen. For one thing, he spoke little English: the screenplay was written in French with cowriter Jean-Louis Richard and then translated into sometimes awkward English. Furthermore, while Truffaut was nominated for the Academy Award for best screenplay for his debut film, *The 400 Blows* (1959), his screenwriting and directorial work prior to 1966 was focused on crime dramas, such as *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960) and *Breathless* (1960), and romances such as *Jules and Jim* (1962) and *The Soft Skin* (1964). Truffaut struggled with his adaptation of Bradbury's novel, which was a larger production than any of his previous films and his first work in color. He subsequently returned to more typical French new wave projects, and he won an Academy Award for best foreign-language film for *Day for Night* (1973). *Fahrenheit 451* would be Truffaut's only association with a science-fiction movie until he appeared as a supporting actor in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

While *Fahrenheit 451*, in both book and film form, is seen as one of the premier works dealing with censorship and its effects, such themes are dealt with in numerous films. Some examples include *The Front* (1976), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), *Pump Up the Volume* (1990), *Howl* (2010), and *Trumbo* (2015). Book burnings are featured in such movies as *Storm Center* (1956), *Footloose* (1984), *Pleasantville* (1998), and *The Book Thief* (2013).

Film Analysis

According to Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* was written in response to the suppression of opposing viewpoints during the "red scare" furor of the McCarthy era, when authors, actors, and others suspected of being or associating with communists were purged from Hollywood and blacklisted. The dystopian tale, set in a nameless Midwestern American city late in the twentieth century, began as a series of short stories before Bradbury expanded it into a novella and finally a novel. The title refers to the temperature at which the paper stock typically used for printed books is popularly believed to burst into flame. The film version retains the general plot and the overall feel of Bradbury's book, but it also makes several major changes to the story and characters.

The novel is presented from the third-person point of view of protagonist Guy Montag. He is called a fireman, not because he prevents fires—in his world, house exteriors are fireproofed—but because he starts fires, using reading materials as kindling. In Montag's time, ordinary people have lost the power of concentration and their attention span has been drastically

reduced. Citizens, such as Montag's wife, Mildred "Millie" Montag (called Linda in the film), are devoted hedonists who gulp down tranquilizers by the handful. Some risk their lives by driving at high speed around the city. Most spend their days being mindlessly entertained and indoctrinated by broadcasts on wall-sized television sets, which also serve as a surrogate family. This environment and perspective is largely preserved in the film, with some minor changes.

The authorities in Montag's futuristic world consider books dangerous, because they contain ideas that force readers to think. Thinking creates uncertainty, which erodes the illusion of happiness and puts governmental-imposed conformity in jeopardy. Thus, books must be rooted out wherever they are hidden and destroyed. The firemen are tasked with this destruction using kerosene and flamethrowers. Again, this central plot point is retained in Truffaut's adaptation.

In the novel, Montag, on the job for ten years, is content with his occupation until one day he encounters a teenaged neighbor, Clarisse McClellan. A genuinely happy person—an antisocial aberration in the futuristic society—Clarisse exhibits childlike appreciation for everyday natural phenomena, such as rain, dandelions, and dew. Her upbeat attitude rubs off on Montag. He begins to question his role and starts surreptitiously collecting and reading books. He discusses literature with an elderly former teacher, Faber. His new habits bring him first into conflict with his shallow wife. Eventually, his boss, Captain Beatty, suspects Montag of illegal behavior and taunts him with his fear of the Hound, a terrifying eight-legged mechanical beast with a refined olfactory system for tracking and built-in hypodermics for subduing fugitives from justice.

Bradbury's Montag converts from law enforcer to law-breaker after two particular incidents. First, he learns that Clarisse has been killed by a speeding driver, a death that made no impression on anybody but Montag. Second, when on call at an elderly woman's house, the firemen discover an entire hidden library of books. The forbidden tomes are piled up downstairs and saturated with kerosene, ready to be torched by Montag and his colleagues. The homeowner, not willing to outlive the things she loves, strikes a match herself to start the fire as an act of suicide. In the conflagration, the books, house, and woman are all consumed. When Montag's wife informs on him, he goes rogue and runs to avoid arrest. He seeks refuge at Faber's, where he learns of the existence and location of an underground group of book readers who memorize texts to preserve them. After giving the ex-teacher the means to thwart the Hound, Montag escapes the city.

Truffaut's film begins with innovative sequence: title and screen credits are read by a disembodied voice rather than displayed in text. The result is a reflection of the theme of a world deprived of written literature. Like in the book, the film depicts a futuristic world in which most people no longer have the desire or ability to read. Opening scenes and the overall linear progression of the plot match Bradbury's novel quite closely. Black-clad and helmeted firemen rush in their bright-red engine (called a Salamander) to perform their book-burning duties. Afterward, Montag (Oskar Werner) returns home to his beautiful but empty-headed wife

(Julie Christie), who is transfixed by the vapid programming provided by the home's wall-screens when she is not overdosing on drugs.

The plot—but not the tone, which remains stark, thanks to the work of well-regarded cinematographer Nicolas Roeg—begins to deviate from the novel with the introduction of Clarisse. She is also played by Christie, but with shorter hair, different makeup, and a slightly cheerier affect. In the cinematic version, Clarisse is a disgraced twenty-something teacher under scrutiny and on the run for her subversive behavior. Unlike in the book, she lives to reappear at the end of the film (a change Bradbury reportedly approved of). The major alterations to the character of Clarisse are among the most significant ways in which Truffaut strays from Bradbury's source material.

Other characters in the film are also changed from their novel counterparts. Faber, a key character in a number of chapters in Bradbury's work, is left out completely. The role of Montag's boss, the Captain (Cyril Cusack), is greatly reduced. An important and complex figure in the novel (even as he warns his underlings of the dangers of books, he quotes from a variety of written sources, suggesting he may be a secret reader), the Captain is rendered into a two-dimensional villain in the film. Montag's coworkers, given substance in the book, are relegated to the background on screen. The mechanical Hound is also deleted in the adaptation, replaced by men dressed in flying equipment who search for Montag. Other science fiction aspects of the book were also toned down. The threat of nuclear war against an unnamed foe, a constant presence in Bradbury's fiction and a major plot point at the end of the novel, is barely mentioned in the film.

Truffaut's greatest contribution comes at the end of the film. Montag has escaped capture, found the underground network of Book People, and reconnected with Clarisse. In a final memorable scene, individual men and women (in the novel, only men) wander through a forest as snow falls, reciting written works they have committed to memory so that books and the ideas they contain will never die.

Significance

The novel *Fahrenheit 451* was received with a wide range of critical reactions, from unabashed praise to lukewarm approval to downright condemnation for its perceived bitter opinion of modern technology. However, it was generally recognized as an important work of science fiction and social commentary, winning an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award and other honors. Since its publication, the novel has become further regarded as a classic and demonstrated considerable staying power. It has been reprinted dozens of times and translated into numerous languages. Thirty years after its release, the novel won the Prometheus Hall of Fame Award, and on its fiftieth anniversary it was given a Retro Hugo Award. The book is frequently taught in schools and lauded for its critiques of censorship and intellectual decline. Ironically, considering the

subject matter, the novel has itself been periodically censored or banned in some districts, mainly on the grounds of its mildly offensive language.

Truffaut's film adaptation did not fare well either critically or commercially when released in 1966. The movie returned just two-thirds of its estimated \$1.5 million budget at the box office. Contemporary reviewers, cool about the film in general, especially panned the indifferent, impassive production and Christie's lackluster performance in a dual role. Despite this, Christie was nominated for a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award for best actress. Some critics remarked positively on the cinematography and lush colors. The film was nominated for a Hugo Award, and at the Venice Film Festival it was nominated for the Golden Lion, losing to Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*.

Since the movie's release, its reputation has improved greatly. Many critics now see *Fahrenheit 451* as especially prescient in its prediction of the domination of large-screen television sets and other entertainment technology in everyday life. They suggest the film is topically relevant for its depiction of a society more interested in virtual reality than reality, seemingly reflecting a trend in twenty-first-century human behavior. With Bradbury acknowledged as a forward-thinking master of science fiction and Truffaut regarded as a premier filmmaker of his generation, the film adaptation of *Fahrenheit 451* continues to earn attention from film scholars and fans.

Further Reading

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