

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Fahrenheit 451 (1966)

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

A bold trip through Google (*dystopian, utopian*) fiction) will remind the reader of the prominence of bleak literary horizons in twentieth century American culture. (Literature was the standard bearer for this cultural parade, with its wide readership, and with the readiness, furthermore, with which literature invited conversion into the increasingly popular genres of film and television.) None of the arts was excluded from this growing aptitude to envisage the human future as disastrous. Are we not referring to a 'western world' in which two world wars, calamitous economic Depression, and the Cold War, with its destructive fixations, had prompted alarming anticipation of a future inexorably torn from a losing present? Will we not at this writing (like today, man!) have reached a stage at which Covid 19 has brought death, social disruption, and mental panic to a global setting from which only a century before, it had started to seem possible that a global humanity was in the eventual offing. Hopeful early 20th century fictions, like *A Passage to India* (1924), *The Magic Mountain* (1924), or visionary poetries like *The Waste Land* (1922) or Pound's *Cantos* (1922 and onward to 1962) were at least suggesting our ability to carry it forward in terms of our global cultural backdrop. But by the present author's wakening time (b. 1928) the new genre of the dystopian (Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), which Truffaut followed from the visual direction, was pressing for prominence, as a descriptor for the new society awaiting us. We were quite aware that a new and degraded future awaited us.

CHARACTERS

Guy Montag	the protagonist
Linda Montag	wife of Montag
Clarissa	neighbor to Montag
Captain Beatty	Commander of Book Burning squadron
Headmistress	who immolates herself on her books
Prof. Faber	English prof
Granger	the first of the Book People met by Montag

SYNOPSIS

Fahrenheit 451 (the temperature at which paper burns) tells the story of a future society in which priority will be placed on collective behavior centered around empty distraction—tv watching, fast driving, gossiping, hating others, remaining indifferent to one another—and in which books, the chief promoters of individuality, privacy, and sustained thought, will be burned. The narrative tracks the development of an idealistic young man, who is, as we meet him, a member of his community's book-burning fire brigade, on regular duty setting fire to caches of books throughout the city. We first see him on his job, then returning from work; encountering an innocent young lady neighbor, who still has the old sense of curiosity and nature-love which, for one thing, the book burners are attempting to stamp out. (It is their conviction that without books we will be freed of our old individualistic, dreamy, idle selves.) From that point on, both with his boring wife at home and in conflict with his superiors at work, we see Montag gradually being disillusioned from his book-burning mission, and converted into an opponent of the entire perspective.

The conversion of Montag, to an anti-burning position, follows a variety of experiences: his disillusionment with the empty life his wife and her friends lead; the thought of the innocent neighbor, who is subsequently killed in a speeding car accident; his betrayal by his wife, who reports on his own cache of texts, and alerts Montag's boss, Captain Beatty, to this danger to the community. After a prolonged night of reading, in his own book cache, Montag concludes that he has been turning his back on the whole rich

reading-acquired world, and in fact on the crucial importance of books, to the maturity and support of culture.

From that point on, Montag allies himself with a shadowy community of book and culture savers, the book-people, who have devoted themselves to memorizing the great book texts of the western tradition, each 'soldier of culture' given a crucial text to memorize, almost 'to become.' It will be the further mission, of this group, to which Montag commits himself, to build the grounds for a new civilization, that will survive the global war just beginning at the time of Montag's conversion.

STORY

Overview The film will take us through three stages of Montag's life in his (American) society, the first stage of which shows him in action, heading out with his fellow firemen, on a book burning call. We will quickly find that the world Montag lives in is lacking in independent, observant, curious, or philosophical residents. Residents with personality or depth are almost impossible to find. The citizens are fast drivers, sensoria attached to 'seashell radio' plug ins through which their ears inform them of the banner headlines, and addicts of television, which is fed to the public on tall vertical TV screens posted ubiquitously throughout the city.

Volunteer fireman We move directly into the fiery blaze of red flame—the first color film made by Truffaut—as though the Director was exploding into the thrill of a new expressive medium. Foremost to our eyes, as the flame colored fire-truck pulls out of its station, is Gary Montag, a fresh faced volunteer fireman who has joined the Brigade appointed by the city, to get rid of its chief nuisance, books. For this society books are a distraction from, say, pleasurable or useful behaviors, such as practical aid to others. Books are a way of vanishing into a private world, and forsaking the social world which is your home.

Neighbor The securities of Montag's world are about to give way. He has as a young person known the joy of books, until he was indoctrinated, and came to 'know better.' The break in his security wall comes home one afternoon when he is taking the subway home from work. He meets a seventeen year old woman who is a neighbor. She is innocent, perceptive, and very openly interested in knowing who he is. Having become a tight and fearful personality, he has no idea how to deal with her, and suspect her of being a frivolous example of the many who have not learned the dangers of books, and simply let their minds wander.

Montag's growth Montag's growth curve, however, is not to be so smooth. He soon learns that his jerry built analysis, of life, death and distraction in his society, is greatly simplified. Even those most scrupulous about avoiding books find themselves suffering. Montag's own wife tries to kill herself with sleeping pills. On one book burning tour he encounters a lady with a stash of books, who prefers to be immolated along with these relics of the past. The last straw of the week in question falls when he learns that Clarissa, his young neighbor, has been hit and killed by a fast driving car. At this point Montag does some thinking. He opens a hidden air vent in his house, where he long ago stashed away some valued books, and he begins to look at them.

Commander Beatty The next week Montag fails to show up for work, and his book-burning squadron leader decides to see what's going on; he pays Montag a visit, at home, and offers him some advice. Beatty, this heavy jowled, tough and avuncular commander points out that many citizens, who have essentially forgotten the reasons for the ban on books, have difficulty in totally eradicating their ancient addiction to the book. Beatty re-explains that books become sources of conflictual opinions, lead to conflict and argument among the citizenry, and as a consequence have found themselves banned and burned. Beatty urges Montag to look through his book stash, to see if he can find anything there of value, and to turn in the remainder for incineration.

Professor Faber Plunging into his chore of reading, Montag is reminded of a friend, a retired professor of English, whom he had met by accident in a park. Professor Faber, as it quite naturally turned out, was very much the old-fashioned type, loved reading, loved sitting in the park and reflecting, cultural

values he had urged Montag to indulge. To Montag, living in the culture he did, Faber's values had seemed seriously antiquated, but now they came back to Montag as worth consideration.

Confrontation with wife Montag, increasingly drawn to reevaluate his attitude toward books, keeps accumulating redirective experiences. Returning home he finds his wife and a couple of other women intensely caught up in a brainless TV show. Noting that there is a consequential war going on out there in the world, he reproves the brainless ladies by reading them Matthew Arnold's severe poem, 'Dover Beach,' at which the ladies are outraged, and lodge a complaint with Captain Beatty. Calling Montag into the station, Beatty avuncularly berates him, and treats him to a surprisingly adroit lesson in literary history; citing a wide variety of texts whose points contradict one another, leaving the old fashioned reader swimming in a fishpool of oddly assorted arguments, and no unified clarity.

Wife as an informer As Montag and Beatty are talking, the fire alarm siren goes off, and Beatty and Montag, jumping in the fire wagon, drive off to discover that the burning alarm is at Montag's house. His wife, who has turned him in, betraying his cache of hidden books, is just driving away, leaving him. Then all hell breaks loose. Beatty orders Montag to burn his house down, but Montag reacts instantly, turning his flamethrower on Beatty and incinerating him.

Community of book lovers In a hairsbreadth escape, Montag manages to change clothes, and to escape down river, and following a set of abandoned railway tracks out into the country. He meets there a man named Granger, who informs him he is a member of a nationwide community of book lovers, who have committed themselves to memorizing the greatest works of literature and philosophy as a protection for mankind against the upcoming war. Enemy jets fly overhead, and the city burns, while Montag and his new fellowship drift past one another in a Dantesque haze, memorizing the texts—Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Bunyan, Macchiavelli, Milton—on which the salvational wisdom of the present depends. Montag is given *Ecclesiastes* to memorize. The Book People drift on, looking for survivors, thinking of ways to rebuild civilization.

THEMES

Books. Bound volumes of papyrus or wood pulp pages have exercised great power over humans, in their creation of societies and their cultures. Books have been portable repositories of valid, profound, and useful thoughts, and they have maintained, sometimes freely, sometimes confiningly, a record of the creative minds of some of the most risking of human creatures.

Fire. In certain religious traditions—Zoroastrianism, Hindu—the purity of fire is a cornerstone of value and purity, and an expression of the clean. Fire and water are ultimates in the expulsion of the unneeded. Flame throwers function, in the present novel, as the priestly instruments of a social cult.

Television. Television serves, in the present film, as a source of widespread popular entertainment, capable not only of amusing in a visual way, but of interacting with tv watchers, like Montag's wife, to give them a fake sense of coziness and community.

Culture. Culture is the social product in the enjoyment of which we do most to individualize, deepen, and protect the intimate places in our awareness. In the present novel, culture—predominately maintained in books and the arts—is in danger of being replaced by slick and time consuming versions of itself.

Order. The books which sustain culture, and which are threatened by burning—as they have been in many totalitarian states-- (The Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Maoist China)—present various world views, and inevitably contradict one another on every major issue. On the other hand, though, value issues gravitate toward consistent perspectives onto life, and within each culture there are themes of order—discipline, control, sacrifice, insight, consistency—which dominate the discourse that keeps the society going forward. Disorder only makes sense in terms of order.

Tradition Tradition is largely sustained by books which help us remember texts, tales, rites or landmark events. The burning of books serves as a threat to the very traditions on which we rely for our long serving practices, our traditions. *The most effective assault on traditions is fire*

Confusion. The conflict between order and confusion is given great prominence in Beatty's discussion with Montag. The avuncular master book burner, Beatty, has a coherent view of the problem with books in society. Books, he asserts, are diverse, carry diverse messages, and frequently contradict one another. Furthermore the whole body of books—all reference is to western culture—is full of contradictions; one book proposes one thing, another with the result that the 'great books' become nothing but a scrambled mess of mutually confusing ideas. Dr. Faber, the English Professor, feels comfortable that 'the tradition,' human experience, will sort out the scramble.

Fear. The governing forces in Montag's city build their communal power around the group's fear of the individuality of the citizen, and his/her tendency to look inward, to step onto the existential stage and live as a fully developed person. The burning of books, which invite us to precisely this kind of individuality, is the most obvious expression of communal fear.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Montag Montag, is an ardent, if rather pallid, culture hero, whose life trajectory takes him from orthodox book burning timidity, through a gradual attraction to the book world and to some individuals in that world, finally to escape into another realm of being, in which the residents are devoted to remembering the past, and preparing for a postwar reconstruction of civilization. The leading figures, in promoting Montag's ascent into ever wider perspectives, are women—his neighbor Clarissa, the book collector who insists on being incinerated along with her books—and Prof. Faber, the English professor, with whom Montag discusses culture and life.

Explorer Montag has the rare courage to go into his old cache of books, and to reread in them closely—at the suggestion of Beatty—to see whether he can find value there. The night Montag devotes to this exercise is crucial for his decision to join the side of the Book People. He discovers forgotten riches in the works he has valued as a young person. He feels his commitment to the old culture world.

Rebel Montag has from the start a querying spirit of rebellion toward the orthodox book burning perspective imposed on his society. We see this close up in his reaction to the neighbor woman with whom he rides home on the subway. She is curious about everything she sees—nature, him—and her freshness catches his attention. It doesn't take him long, upon opening his own front door, to see how depressing, and without freshness, his own wife is. He too has become embedded in the lifeless ideology of his society, and he begins to rebel against it.

Parallels. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his *Gulag Archipelago (1958-1966)*, raises a bold and believing face against Communist ideology, and against the totalitarian desire, to control all thought under its aegis, and to stifle the unpredictable in everything from philosophy to driving rules of the road. Proponents and defenders of the essential place of the arts—novels, paintings, plays-- in society as a whole, can be found throughout western criticism, and would include such British aesthetes as Walter Pater in *The Renaissance (1873)*, Clive Bell in *Art, 1913*, Adrian Stokes, *The Stones of Rimini 1934*), or Roger Fry; while, to pick another kind of example, we could turn to the theorists of the Bauhaus Movement in architecture (Walther Gropius, Marcel Breuer), for whom beauty in urban form was a direct embodiment of desire for a liberal culture.