

Fahrenheit Now

Ramin Bahrani's 2018 HBO film *Fahrenheit 451*

A recent *New Yorker* cartoon depicts two bookstore staff, a man and a woman, moving books from a shelf labelled "Fiction" to another labelled "Non-Fiction." The woman holds a pile of nine hardcover novels. The top three are George Orwell's *1984*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

In the early 1950s – during the Cold War, the Korean War, and Senator McCarthy's domestic war on liberal and democratic values – Bradbury, an American, wrote *Fahrenheit 451*. Set in a dystopian future, this cautionary tale tells the story of Montag, a futuristic fireman tasked with burning books. (Most buildings are fire-proof; firefighters no longer *extinguish* fires.) The state knows that readers tend to be free-thinking and non-compliant, so when books are discovered in private hiding places, they are destroyed. ("We burn them to ashes, and then we burn the ashes.") In time, of course, Montag rebels and goes over to the other side, to the "book people": small scattered communities of men and women committed, in self-exile from the modern world, to memorizing word for word what books once said. Thus each "book person" becomes a specific volume and safeguards it for the future.

In the mid-1960s, French film director François Truffaut adapted Bradbury's short novel for the screen, with the author's support. The filming in England was chaotic and unhappy, but Truffaut's eventual creation is, for many of us, a magical, endearing, and timeless work of art.

Except that's it's *not* timeless, even in the short run. Styles, outlooks, and technologies change constantly, and what seems flawless to one generation can appear dated (awkward, forced, amateurish) to the next. In 2016, therefore, American director Ramin Bahrani started work on an updated HBO version of Bradbury's book. His adaptation wasn't a critical success when it screened two years later, but I think many reviewers missed the point.

Set in the United States in the near future, Bahrani's movie was intended for young people raised on reality tv, crisis-oriented local news, video games, social media, and 24/7 connectivity. It is noisy, edgy, stylish, and hyperkinetic, and it has a pumping musical score. There are insistent electronic media wherever people go, and a Siri-like personal helper/surveillance apparatus at home. There's trash-talking, drunken male camaraderie, group bravado, and mixed martial arts machismo. The film is frequently violent and suspenseful, if in predictable ways. It is speculative and familiar at the same time, depicting sharp ultramodern architecture and chic/bleak interior design, and it makes the most of cool special effects, emojis, and touch screens. This time around, books aren't the only analog media at risk: non-literary works, including paintings, musical scores, photographs, and films are also put to the torch. Meanwhile, state-prescribed drugs in the form of eye drops pacify the people, in part by suppressing their memories, and "natives" (compliant citizens) are addicted to "the Nine," the sole electronic news medium and digital platform in an America governed by the "Ministry."

The film zooms in on some of society's "eels" (outcasts, book-reading subversives), including Clarisse, a punky, gamine love interest, and there's an intense, almost father/son relationship between Montag and Beatty, his fire captain. Some reviewers see this relationship as macho bromance, but it's deeper and more intriguing than that. Finally, there's an unconvincing ending that features an Asperger's boy, his bird, and something about DNA and returning all previous knowledge to a world saved by Montag, the book people, and scientists across the border in a bizarrely picturesque Canada.

The film is often stagey and clunky in both dialogue and action, but it has some very nice non-verbal touches. My favourite is a brief scene in which the adult

Montag (played by Michael B. Jordan) sits on his bathroom floor slowly revisiting his small, illicit collection of analog objects, including a computer mouse, a movie cassette from Blockbuster (“Please rewind”), what appears to be the rotary dial from an old telephone, and a postcard: “Greetings from Washington, D.C.” Later, the camera lingers on a blind black woman defiantly reading a braille document while the firemen close in. The casting of Bahrani’s adaptation is strikingly multiracial, and the film highlights (and burns) a global selection of documents, including many created by 19th and 20th century African-American writers and artists.

True to Bradbury’s intent, Bahrani has Khandi Alexander – the actor playing the woman who has memorized Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* – say that “the disconnected human mind is the last bastion against the technological world . . . it is the most secure place to preserve these books.” And books, she adds, “remind us what fools we can be.” She and the others in her group live “off the grid” to avoid detection.

Again true to Bradbury, Clarisse tells Montag that “we did it to ourselves; we demanded a world like this.” (Clarisse has a turntable and vinyl LPs, and she shows Montag what to do with a harmonica.) In Bradbury’s novel, written more than sixty-five years ago, one of his characters said: “Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord.”

Shortly before his film screened, Bahrani wrote a piece for *The New Yorker* entitled “Why ‘Fahrenheit 451’ is the Book for Our Social Media Age.” Near the end he wrote:

Bradbury believed that we wanted the world to become this way. That we asked for the firemen to burn books. That we wanted entertainment to replace reading and thinking. That we voted for political and economic systems to keep us happy rather than thoughtfully informed. He would say that we chose to give up our privacy and freedom to tech companies. That we decided to entrust our cultural heritage and knowledge to digital archives.

He wonders what contemporary teenagers make of Bradbury’s story now that so much of its future resembles their present:

Bradbury's novel is a classic taught in high schools across America. But the more I thought about it, the more relevant the novel seemed. For Bradbury, books were repositories of knowledge and ideas. He feared a future in which those things would be endangered, and now that future was here: The internet and new social-media platforms – and their potential threat to serious thought – would be at the heart of my adaptation.

For Bahrani, it is an act of rebellion to own physical books while “the virtual world becomes more dominant.” “When a printed book is in your possession, no one can track, alter, or hack it.” And: “Bradbury was warning us about the threat of mass media to reading, about the bombardment of digital sensations that could substitute for critical thinking.” Bahrani’s craft serves not only the act of reading but the cause of thought, reflection, and the examined life.

Sometimes his *451* tends to spell things out – to prefer the didactic to the subtle – but so what? So what if his movie lacks Bradbury’s offbeat originality or Truffaut’s sweet restraint? It’s agitprop in 2018, an attempt to reach young people who might experience his version of the story and act on it. If its tone seems “hectoring” and “portentous,” as one reviewer says, surely this is justified by the moral immediacy of its themes. Bradbury said of himself that he was a *preventer* of futures, not a predictor, and Bahrani, like Bradbury and Truffaut, wants to stop the wicked thing he sees coming.

Regardless of the *New Yorker* cartoon, *Fahrenheit 451* in all its forms remains fiction, one vision among many, but it gets at much that is real. There is a rationale for Bahrani’s restyling of the story, and if his film is uneven, it’s also a smart, honest, and brave attempt to face *in the present* what the filmmaker sees as scary stuff playing out in the early 21st century. His *451*, for example, takes a stand not only against the corrosive effects of mass communications but our daily drift in the public sphere toward surveillance, anti-intellectualism, and amoral disinformation.

Bahrani’s shiny red fire-engines scream through the fictional night: the future, they say, is present, and the danger is now.

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Rahmin Bahrani's article in *The New Yorker*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/books/review/fahrenheit-451-ray-bradbury.html>

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