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Duality, Duplicity, and Death Defied:

A Brief Look at the Textual and Filmic Versions of Fahrenheit 451

The movie can never be “as good as” the book, some will complain. Of course not. Two different media, and two very different opportunities for artistic expression conveyed differently in terms of everything from time (time passing in a book is only translated in so many or so few ways in film) to technique (representation, action, and intonation are going to be interpreted for you in a movie and might not always be done to satisfaction at that). But ironically enough, especially in the latter instance, that is exactly what one would expect from the Fahrenheit 451 text (written by Ray Bradbury) and the film (screen adapted by Jean Luis Ricard and François Truffaut and directed by François Truffaut)—that the book will allow the reader to bring his or her own experiences to and take his or her own experiences from the text; the movie, however, will be one way the director and screenwriter bring their experiences to the book, to the film, and to the “reader”. So what results, in this instance, is an interpretation of the interpretation, in some respects disappointed, but in others pleased.

The visual appearance of the film is darker than I expected. But the character portrayals are cleverly cast—especially the creepy Captain Beatty, played by Cyril Cusack, and the interesting duality of womanhood, played both by Julie Christie as the obedient, mush-brained Linda [Mildred] Montag (on society’s drugs to stay that way) and as the rebellious, civilly disobedient Clarisse. This is perhaps to make up for the fact that in the book Clarisse is a teen who nevertheless is a way out of that dystopia for Montag, but it still offers a clever interpretation of two equally attractive (literally to us,

figuratively to the film) women who are polar opposites that serve a function in Guy's life in two very different but still meaningful ways. And Guy Montag, played by a stoic Oskar Werner, makes Montag the everyman and the futuristic firestarter fitting societal expectations but also being reinvented as a fugitive and then again as a living book.

The operative symbols in the book are sometimes done justice in the film: the fire is everywhere the most potent of dualities: both the hearth fire, the warm and welcoming bonfire comforting the exiles, and the destructive, awesome powerful force that is used against people to keep them conforming, "equal", the same, and therefore purportedly happy. The fire also extends in its two-sidedness to the red-hot anger in one scene then to the hot passionate in the next scene. The living versus the brain-dead (drugged) society is the second contrast that is remarkably well done. Linda Montag is almost automotonic, robotic, stilted and stifled as she is in her world of pleasure drugs, earbuds (radio seashells), and TV (a three-walled system of televised programs that allow for interactivity and that mandate attention and participation—which are creepy in the book and equally disturbing in the movie as the "actors" and "announcers" speak directly to the so-called audience, calling her by name and making demands of her as they go, revising a script that does not, of course, exist.

The absence/criminalization of written text is the most profound of messages behind the predominant theme of censorship and technology overtaking society, so the opening credits being voiced rather than appearing in font is well done as being representative of Bradbury's message. And the presence of the outlawed contraband is almost as well-represented: the camera

several times zooms in on the book titles, so viewers get an ironic sense of repression and hypocrisy when they see, for example, the burning of Hitler's Mein Kampf in the same film as the burning of Ray Bradbury books, including Fahrenheit 451! However, the living essence that Bradbury clearly sustains throughout the novel is somewhat lacking in the film. The scene with the middle-aged woman in a beautiful house of beautiful volumes upon volumes of books is one of the most important, representative scenes in the book. There is emphasis on the good use of fire (as a "candle", the woman says to the captain), there is the emphatic comment the "anti-social" (what the woman and everyone else who is caught with books is called) makes about the books being "alive"; but in Bradbury's novel, there is an unforgettable description of the books as birds, the leaves like wings, which is not really successfully recaptured in the film.

That the metaphors, similes, and symbols are not so well recreated in the movie aside, there are also those tangibles that are hauntingly, frighteningly ominous in the book that apparently could not be sufficiently recaptured on film: in the most obvious instance, it is with the mechanical hounds. In the book they seem so high-tech, so accurate and therefore powerful and threatening to "anti-socials" with their book scent-sniffing capacities, and so terror-instilling with their hypodermic needle-like snouts (?) that in the movie, being absent, really take away some of the dramatic weight, or the impact, of Guy being caught, cornered, and outed by the mechanical book-hunting beast.

Other technology could have been much better developed, not just as mentions, and not just as token gestures toward the futuristic tone of the

work. For example, while the TV screen is huge and the characters are real to Linda, etc., in the book, there is more than one message being conveyed about technology as a function of the future as it is lived by Montag and the others: it is technology that has been adapted to control people, to equalize all people, to keep them ostensibly “happy”: this is actually technology that is meant to repress, oppress, and suppress, and to keep all of society conformed. In the book, then, there is emphasis on the three TV screens, wall-sized, that create a three dimensional world that envelops Linda and elicits from Linda the very behavior the society wants to elicit. And to demonstrate how drawn in and controlled she is, there is dialogue to that effect, with her bugging her husband for that fourth wall screen. In the movie, the absence of technology is compensated for with dialogue—usually by the Captain, as he discusses why certain books are burned (the Robinson Crusoes burned to keep from offending/making unhappy the Black people; the pro-Germany Nietzsches to keep from offending and to keep from being unhappy the Jews); as he explains several different times the reasons for the need for equalizing society, etc.. Because the actor, Cyril Cusack, is just smarmy enough, and because of his position/rank, the dialogue works to inform, teach, and constantly belabor the points that this totalitarian regime is relentless, even though the book is more subtle and better defined through its props, objects, and creatures.

And in terms of dead versus living, dead, versus alive—which Bradbury distinguishes in so many ways in the book, to show the dystopian censorship/control as it kills, both figuratively the souls of society’s people but also literally, as it hunts down and takes the life of a teenager—there is

something lacking in the film when Clarisse does not die. This brings in the next change, the use of the ex-professor Faber, who in the book is the guide for Montag's reinvention of self and escape/exile, but who in the movie is instead channeled through Clarisse, which is likely why she is kept alive in the movie.

This brings us to the end of the book and the end of the movie—one of the most original, and hauntingly beautiful sets of scenes a reader could ask for in a futuristic novel. The themes of censorship escaped (freedom) and individuality are most obvious, but also clear is the theme sustained as living versus dead. The end returns the audience to reflect on what the first woman who martyred herself for her books said, that “ These books were alive. They spoke to me.” This dialogue is a foreshadowing to the conclusion, whereby the few escapees or self-exiled persons have isolated themselves out in a rural part of society, have each memorized a book, and can recite it verbatim. So that it will continue to live. The books will live as long as do the persons who memorized them, and as each person gets near old age, it is implied, he or she passes on the work to a youngster. Here is where the book also has more that ties the themes and symbols together: for example, in the book, Granger is one of the chief constituents of the exiles, and he is keeping everyone rapt with attention by way of a discussion of the story of the ancient, mythological phoenix. Here is the fire as well as the life, or rebirth, of the great bird as it rises out of the ashes. So here, too, is the bird imagery, the fire as being destructive, but the living as surviving that power and control. This takes away some from the end of the movie version of Fahrenheit 451, as Granger does not exist. But the rehearsing, in tandem,

though by each person on his or her own in a different area of this rural, snowy [also filmic] setting, of the books aloud is as haunting and memorable as is their way of introducing themselves—as the very books they have recited; for, they have become the books.

At this point in the movie, real credits will roll, now, because books are still alive, and words have survived in a place where it is okay to be smart, literate, creative, and a reader. In the book at this point, the destructive censoring, technologically driven and drugged to the point of recklessness culture has destroyed itself in war. So the living books drift back into that wasteland to bring their stories back and repopulate and reproduced (it is implied). Who is to say which ending is more ideal: the living books as they speak the profound words, phrases, lines, sentences, stanzas, and paragraphs. or the living books, closing their back covers and packing themselves up for a real, live, living, speaking, reading new world?