

Theme: Control and Conflict in Cities Book: Fahrenheit 451

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I wasn't worried about freedom, I was worried about people being turned into morons by TV.

We've never had censorship in this country, we've never burned books...

Fahrenheit's not about censorship, it's about the moronic influence of popular culture through local TV news, the proliferation of giant screens and the bombardment of factoids.¹

-Ray Bradbury

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* presents a society of engineered contentment, a world where firemen burn books to extinguish the embers of unsettling thoughts.² While often read as a straightforward critique of censorship, the novel's deeper power lies in Bradbury's own central

¹ Cheerbrarian, "There Must Be Something in Books, Something We Can't Imagine, to Make a Woman Stay in a Burning House; There Must Be Something There. You Don't Stay for Nothing.," *Cannonball Read 17*, March 28, 2023

<<https://cannonballread.com/2023/03/fahrenheit-451-ardaigle/>>.

² Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Ballantine, 1991).

warning: it is a critique of how society itself, seduced by speed and convenience, chooses to abandon complex thought. The urban environment is not a passive backdrop for the narrative but an actively *produced* space, meticulously designed to enforce social homogeneity and suppress dissent. Applying the theoretical framework of Henri Lefebvre, we can understand Bradbury's city as an "abstract space" that manufactures consent by eliminating the intellectual and social friction that books—and authentic human interaction—represent.³ The central conflict of the novel, therefore, is not merely about a man versus the state, but about the struggle of human consciousness to reclaim a meaningful, "differential space" from a sterile, controlled environment.⁴ The protagonist Guy Montag's journey from a compliant state agent to a fugitive intellectual is an ascent from this produced reality, a flight from the city of shadows toward a world where conflict is not a threat to be extinguished but a necessary component of knowledge and freedom. To fully understand the evolution of this spatial control, it is necessary to compare Bradbury's original text with Ramin Bahrani's 2018 film adaptation. By examining how the 2018 film reimagines Bradbury's domestic spaces through modern digital ubiquity, we can see how the production of "abstract space" has shifted from physical isolation to a totalizing digital overlay, reinforcing the novel's warning for a contemporary audience.

The city in *Fahrenheit 451* is a textbook example of what Henri Lefebvre terms "abstract space." This is a space that appears neutral and objective but is, in reality, a tool of political and economic power, one that "grind[s] down and crush[es] everything before" it in a push towards

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁴ Lefebvre, p. 52.

homogeneity.⁵ The regime's objective is a conflict-free society built on pleasure and devoid of intellectual friction. As Captain Beatty, the novel's articulate antagonist, explains, social harmony is achieved by removing sources of contradiction and offense: "A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it... Breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man?"⁶ This drive for a "serenity" free of controversy is physically inscribed onto the city's design.⁷ Clarisse McClellan, the catalyst for Montag's awakening, observes the architectural manifestation of this social engineering when she notes the disappearance of front porches, which her uncle says were removed because "they didn't want people sitting like that, doing nothing, rocking, talking; that was the wrong kind of social life."⁸ This erasure of spaces for spontaneous social interaction is a key strategy in producing a controlled urban environment. The novel reflects a postwar American fear of a "nightmare of total organization" where individuality is subsumed by a corporate, consumerist ethos.⁹ The city's very structure—its vast, empty boulevards designed for high-speed, isolating travel and its identical, inwardly-focused homes—is a physical representation of this controlled, anti-social ideology.

Control is primarily maintained through the manipulation of what Lefebvre calls "representations of space"—the conceived, dominant space of planners and power.¹⁰ In *Fahrenheit 451*, this is the space of mass media, epitomized by the parlor "walls." "These immersive screens project a shallow, interactive spectacle that creates a "simulacrum of carnival,"¹¹ an illusion of participation that

⁵ Lefebvre, p. 285.

⁶ Bradbury, p. 73.

⁷ Bradbury, p. 74.

⁸ Bradbury, p. 63.

⁹ David Seed, 'The Flight from the Good Life: Fahrenheit 451 in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias', *Journal of American Studies*, 28.2 (1994), 225-40 (p. 225).

¹⁰ Lefebvre, p. 33.

¹¹ William F. Touponce, *Ray Bradbury and the Poetics of Reverie*, *Studies in Speculative Fiction*, 2 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1984), quoted in James Filler, 'Ascending from the Ashes: Images

masks a profound passivity. The media, in effect, induces a "kind of narcosis,"¹² a powerful tool for suppressing conflict and creating a population that, as Beatty boasts, is spinning happily. This has been likened to the prisoners in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, who mistake shadows for reality. Mildred is a willing prisoner, as her life is reflected in the flickering pictures on the wall and that the tragedy of the woman dying because of her books is real but "nothing to me."¹³

Nevertheless, when comparing it with the film adaptation of 2018, one can notice a massive changing of these "representations of space. Although the novel by Bradbury is based on the physical imprisonment of the parlor walls to close the subject of abstract space, the wall is completely destroyed in the 2018 movie in place of The Nine, an all-encompassing digital interface. The control of the city in the movie is not tied to certain rooms but through the news feeds and emojis that are floating in the air and project the abstract space onto the world, forming a so-called "mixed reality" which cannot be denied. Where the book's spatial control is architectural—removing porches and building TV walls—the film's control is cognitive and pervasive. This modernization supports Lefebvre's theory even more aggressively: the digital overlay of the 2018 film ensures that there is no "outside" to the abstract space. The conflict Montag faces in the film is arguably more desperate because the "cave" is no longer a physical location one can walk out of, but a digital filter superimposed over the entire city.

of Plato in Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451', *Philosophy and Literature*, 38.2 (2014), 528-48 (p. 545, n. 17).

¹² David Seed, 'The Flight from the Good Life: Fahrenheit 451 in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias', *Journal of American Studies*, 28.2 (1994), 225-40 (p. 230).

¹³ James Filler, 'Ascending from the Ashes: Images of Plato in Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451', *Philosophy and Literature*, 38.2 (2014), 528-48 (p. 533).

The city's technological apparatus, most menacingly the Mechanical Hound, serves to police the boundaries of this cave, hunting down and destroying anyone who, like Montag, turns away from the shadows to seek a more authentic reality. The conflict is thus framed as one between the state-sanctioned, two-dimensional representation of life and the multi-dimensional, often painful, reality that books contain.

The initial conflict, however, does not occur between Montag and the state but rather in Montag himself. This homogenous space of the city has made him deeply alienated a condition that he does not realize until he meets Clarisse. Clarisse functions as a "metaphorical mirror,"¹⁴ forcing Montag into a moment of critical self-examination. When he sees his own "dark and tiny" reflection in her eyes, he is seeing himself for the first time not as an agent of order, but as a diminished figure within a vast, empty system.¹⁵ Her simple question, "Are you happy?" shatters his carefully constructed complacency.¹⁶ He realizes, "He wore his happiness like a mask," a facade that conceals a deep-seated unhappiness born of the city's manufactured emptiness.¹⁷ The actual moving force behind the plot is this internal struggle, the widening disintegration between his official persona and his inner horror. It is the point where he starts to come out of the cave, the point where he begins to doubt the shadows and experience the attraction of being outside the walls of the city. His stealing of a book is not an intellectual act, but an instinctual one, a frantic

¹⁴ Rafeeq O. McGiveron, "'To Build a Mirror Factory': The Mirror and Self-Examination in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 39.3 (1998), 282-87 (p. 283).

¹⁵ Bradbury, p. 7.

¹⁶ Bradbury, p. 12.

¹⁷ Bradbury, p. 23.

effort of a representative space, the space of the lived, symbolic and frequently contradictory space of human experience, which has been systematically deprived to him in the city.¹⁸

This repressed "representational space" erupts into open conflict when Montag reads Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" to Mildred's friends. The poem, with its themes of lost faith, uncertainty, and the chaotic clash of "ignorant armies," introduces a profound and unwelcome note of melancholy and complexity into the sterile happiness of the parlor. Mrs. Phelps's subsequent weeping is not just a reaction to a sad poem; it is the shattering of the city's primary defense mechanism. The poem validates a truth that the abstract space of the city is designed to deny: that life contains "disquieting, evoking neither pleasure, nor joy, nor calm- only intellectual interest and most likely anxiety."¹⁹ The contrast between the richness of human experience in literature and the vacuous hedonism of the world Montag inhabits is demonstrated in this scene in stark contrast.²⁰ The hysterical breakdown of Mrs. Phelps serves as a strong argument of why the books need to be burnt: they are the vectors of struggle, bringing all the fears and contradictions the state did so much to eradicate in the space of its productions. Beatty's condemnation of books as a "regular damned Tower of Babel" where "none... agree with each other" is an admission that their value lies precisely in their diversity and their capacity to generate conflict, the very qualities abstract space cannot tolerate.²¹

Finally, the struggle that Montag is going through manifests itself outside the house as he brutally fights the city. His killing of Beatty and his escape later make the city a real hunting ground, a

¹⁸ Lefebvre, p. 33.

¹⁹ Lefebvre, p. 302.

²⁰ Peter Sisario, 'A Study of the Allusions in Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451"', *The English Journal*, 59.2 (1970), 201-12 (p. 204)

²¹ Bradbury, p. 55.

place of open confrontation. This is not only a flight out of the law, but out of the city as a lost and deadly place. When he runs away into the river and sails towards the wilderness, he has been symbolically cleansed and has been washed of the artificiality of the city. This journey is a movement "away from the people who ate shadows for breakfast and steam for lunch and vapors for supper" and toward "the real natural world... outside the narcissism of the city."²² When Montag is in the countryside, his senses which are so deadened by the homogenous surrounding of the city become alive. He smells the hay, touches the leaves, and sees the stars, the first time he sees them. This is his last ascent out of the cave, an outburst into a differing space that is full of sensuous richness and natural cycles, the opposite of the abstract, managed space he has abandoned. The contradiction between the city and the individual is solved through the complete renouncement of the urban space of control to a natural space of possibilities and genuine experience.

In conclusion, *Fahrenheit 451* provides a deep reflection of the idea of the urban space generated as the tool of social control, aimed at forming a homogenous society by eradicating the roots of intellectual and emotional conflicts. With the spatial theory by Henri Lefebvre, we can see that the city of Montag is an extremely well-designed abstract space, where technology, media, and architecture are manipulated to encourage conformity and passivity. The fact that the 2018 film adaptation compares with the foresight of how Bradbury viewed the world, be it the physical barrier of the novel or the digital omnipresence of the film, the creation of space is the main weapon in the arsenal against dissent. The conflict of the novel is developed around the fact that Montag ignites the protests of his own humanity and refuses to accept this managed space and begins the painful path to a more genuine, more different space in the form of books and the natural world.

²² Bradbury, p. 155.

His final meeting with the "book people" and their leader, Granger, culminates in a new vision for society. Granger's desire "to build a mirror factory" is a call to institutionalize the very self-reflection that the old city sought to destroy.²³ It is a plan to produce a new kind of social space, one that does not fear the contradictions and conflicts of the human condition but embraces them as the foundation of knowledge, freedom, and, ultimately, a life worth living. From the ashes of the destructive city, a new, more conscious urbanity can finally ascend.

²³ Rafeeq O. McGiveron, "'To Build a Mirror Factory': The Mirror and Self-Examination in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 39.3 (1998), 282–87 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619809599536>.

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