

Revisiting Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451: A Critique of the Culture Industry

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Abstract

Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 is a text of sempiternal pertinence for myriad reasons. Some of them are beyond our ken while some are ineffable. Bradbury's prescient and trenchant critique of the culture industry has often been neglected or overlooked for no fault of his. The consensus of the critics' opinion for instance, attests to this fact. Although many critics and literary scholars have classified this novel under the rubric of dystopian fiction, it's far from the truth. Brecht's poem about burning books/censorship was premonitory in many ways. However, the landscape isn't Germany but America, a land that has always been identified as a beacon of hope for writers and artists from across the globe. This short review in spite of its shortcomings will focus on the text and its perennial relevance in a world that has always shown a predilection for conspicuous consumption and dilettantism.

Keywords: Adorno, Culture Industry, Bradbury, conformity, Arendt.

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Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 is a classic dystopian novel dealing with myriad themes, including the issue of censorship, a much controversial one pertinent even in the 21st century. Bradbury wrote quite presciently about a future where culture Industry has taken control over our lives. The futuristic (24th century) world of Fahrenheit 451 is marked by a strong animosity towards learning; to quote Gray's prophetic (nonetheless, unintentional) lines 'Where ignorance is bliss'. Unlike the Orwellian world, the forbidden fruit here is the book. Reading is tantamount to sedition. One becomes a threat to the status quo of the society by imbibing knowledge; by becoming a deviant, one ruptures the carefully woven fabric of homogeneity, which makes sure that mass deception or something vaguely similar to Arendt's 'Banality of Evil' (Here, Ignorance) prevails. We find the characters in the novel blindly adhering to a totalitarian regime, one which is reminiscent of the deeds of the Nazi officers. When they were put under trial for the atrocities they had meted out to 6 million innocent Jews, they came up with a justification. They were just following orders from superior officers. The characters of the novel, especially the ones who assume a position in the vanguard of book burners are no less innocent. The protagonist, Guy Montag for example, before starting to develop dissenting views, mindlessly burns a plethora

of valuable tomes including classics, for reasons he is not cognizant of. Nor does he feel any compunction for the same like Beatty, the leader of the firemen.

We are introduced to a dystopian society where we find the roles inverted. The Firemen, who are supposed to douse fire and preserve property and life, finds a sadistic joy in burning books and bibliophiles. The fact that they do it to appease the higher authority wielding power makes it even more deplorable. Bradbury writes, "Montag grinned the fierce grin of all men singed and driven by black flame." (p.4) The moment of realization comes after he is introduced to his precocious 17 year old neighbor Clarisse McClellan, who questions the *raison de etre* of what he does. He goes back and finds that he is not happy with his life. The other characters are no different. His wife, Mildred is introduced as a character, addicted to the ways of the 24th century. The tragic situation is highlighted when the paramedics who treat Mildred, reveal before leaving that they are not practiced doctors but people who do what they do on a regular basis. In a world of charlatans and people who commit mindless violence, Montag feels out of place. Mildred's robotic routine reminds the reader of his own disorientation with the reality. The seashell radio from a futuristic society and the three-wall television makes sure that her better faculties like

creativity and the ability to criticize/question are kept quiescent. Instead, these contrivances guarantee a complete 'obedience to authority', to quote Milgram's famous phrase. What is even more pernicious is how they are disillusioned into believing that everything the higher authority does is for their own good and a hegemony functions quite smoothly without facing public opprobrium. The dissenting voices are suppressed by the mechanical hounds, which are capable of tracing the dissenters by following their chemical balance. A kind of futuristic surveillance prevails in this society which creates docile and disciplined subjects by instilling fear in their minds and making them believe that they are under the gaze of a higher power. This hierarchical gaze makes sure that the anomalies are rectified and made an example of. The dangers of this conditioning are further revealed when Montag contemplates over the circumstances that lead to his marrying Mildred. He is clueless and overcome with thoughts of his lifeless marriage and the modern technologies his wife spends her days immersed in. She even forgets to tell him of their neighbor's unprecedented death and it reinforces his belief in a transformation that is expedient.

Beatty's assertion that people are not born equal but are made equal through laws and regulations brings to light how homogeneity and conformity are the prevailing norms of the futuristic society. Montag decides to go against the grain and starts reading all those books that he had collected over the course of his career as a fireman. He is demotivated by Mildred, who could be considered as the typical conformist. She turns him over to Beatty like an obedient subject. We find this futuristic society to be the quintessential victims of the culture industry. Mildred feels more comfortable blindly adhering to a norm that is mediocre in nature rather than nurturing a curiosity for knowledge like her husband who feels compelled to read out of his own volition. Mildred and her friends who come over to watch a mindless show are quite content with the way things are. Their ignorance creates a sort of indifference for the real world and its problems. They don't mourn the loss of a close friend, but could easily get sentimental over the characters on screen. A loss of touch with reality is symptomatic of ignorance and a reality check in the form of an oration of Arnold's 'Dover Beach' moves one of Mildred's friends and she breaks down mawkishly before Montag. The people who wield power want them to live under an illusion,

which guarantees conformity at all cost. The very fact that people are not aware of why reading is treated as sedition itself proves how dreadful the condition of being under a totalitarian regime is. It is mentioned in the novel that the colleges have been closed for 40 years and censorship in the form of incineration works without being questioned in the society. Faber, a liberal arts professor is one of the few members of an intellectual coterie who still believes in the radical power of reading and pines over a future devoid of philistinism. Faber is introduced as a person unaffected by the technological advancements and stands for man's 'will to knowledge' in spite of all the contrivances of distraction and the normalizing gaze of authority. It is ironic that Faber tells Montag the world necessitates leisure, in addition to information and the right to act on free thought, because leisure is one entity that no one lacks. Here, Bradbury makes a distinction between the free time afforded by technology and the will and knowledge to use it productively.

Montag's disdain for Millie's friends is a microcosm of his disdain for all of society. Montag, after burning his home feels rather relieved from all those burdens that had seemed onerous until then. The destruction of the television walls that had always worked as a distraction unchains him from the manacles of a society vitiated by ignorance and the decadence of consumerism. In a way the incineration is a symbolic purge. Something that we are badly in need of. Montag is not an Icarus in pursuit of forbidden knowledge, but a Prometheus who surreptitiously steals the flame of knowledge to liberate his fellow beings from their benighted existence.

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