

The School of Athens before *Fahrenheit 451*: All That Remains

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Abstract In *Fahrenheit 451* there is a scene in which the protagonist Montag recalls a childhood memory where he tries to fill a sieve with sand in order to get a dime from his cousin. An impossible feat. This task symbolizes Montag's efforts to find meaning in a world that works to erase it. As we all become mirror images of each other in a society that values uniformity and conformity, and numbers speak against the benefit of the humanities, I write this manuscript as a warning: we have reached the burning point. Hence, I intend to explore the contours of a skepticism about technology as mediating the status of the humanities through Bradbury's novel.

Keywords Bradbury; *Fahrenheit 451*; Mass Media; Plato; *The School of Athens*

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“The world in general, [...] is riding a very fine tiger. Magnificent beast, superb claws, etc. But do we know how to dismount? You see this as a very unstable world and a very dangerous world” — John von Neumann

Ray Bradbury's (1920- 2012) *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is a text that helps us to evaluate the present and sketch the future. Since at least the 1950s, science

fiction has often depicted the mass media as a controlling and numbing force, highlighting the audience's passivity in the era of spectacle and revealing the risks of authoritarian exploitation through mass television practices. *Fahrenheit 451* typifies the model. A dystopian novel that presents an Orwellian society (irrelevant is the American setting) in which stability (disguised in happiness) is the end achieved through conformity and endless entertainment. The novel follows the path of Guy Montag, a fireman who eventually becomes disenchanted and commits himself to the preservation of literary works.¹ The environment is made of surveillance, monitoring devices, and robotic beasts that seem to have developed a malevolent consciousness. Thoughts and books are outlawed while firemen, instead of policeman, burn those that are left as a guarantee of order.² Yet this is not another manuscript about science fiction as a genre per se.

Recently, Donald Watt read the novel as a “rich body of symbols emanating from fire to shed a variety of illuminations on future and contemporary man” (36). Indeed, besides the notorious burning of books, the novel also describes the warming campfires of the exiles, the flames of nuclear war, and the enlightening flame of Clarisse and altruistic individualism. David Seed (1995) and Kevin Hoskinson (1994) place Bradbury's work in its time and place, the Cold War, and illustrate a common American Studies approach. More provocative and relevant to contemporaneity is Susan Spencer's analysis. She explores the paradox arising from the novel. *Fahrenheit 451* is about books being destroyed, yet the fact that we read *Fahrenheit 451* is self-evident proof that books have not been destroyed. The dystopian future is not here and due to this absence, Bradbury's endeavor loses its warning impact. Here Spencer concludes that the text is about Bradbury making “a comment on the fact that textual knowledge is power, even—or perhaps especially—false knowledge” (332). Hence, the text assumes poststructuralist connotations, with Power becoming invincible when textual information is uniform and unchanging. Rather surprisingly, David N. Samuelson, a noted science fiction critic, dismissed it as “an incoherent polemic against book-burning” (77). While there is some evasiveness on Bradbury's part regarding the controversy that has brought to burning books (“You must understand that our civilization is so vast that

1 The book's literary roots were already in the short story “The Pedestrian” (1951). A man taking a walk at night through his neighborhood is stopped and apprehended by an overzealous police officer. In the world of “The Pedestrian,” people are encouraged to watch television for leisure, the concept in which is grounded *Fahrenheit 451*.

2 Bradbury chose the title *Fahrenheit 451* since this is the temperature at which paper catches fire and starts to burn.

we can't have our minorities upset and stirred" (56)), *Fahrenheit 451* remains for many a haunting manifesto.

A warning against censorship is behind the book's motivation.¹ *Fahrenheit 451* was written during the Second Red Scare and the McCarthy era,² with in mind the book burning in Nazi Germany and the ideological repression in the Soviet Union by Stalin's Great Purge.³ But it was also written in the decade following Nagasaki and Hiroshima, with the nuclear age ushering questions about the power, limit, and danger of technology. Hence, it is written in defense of humanity against computer-generated ideas, in defense of literature, the arts largely intended, against the dangers of an illiterate society infatuated with mass media. It is not Orwell's *1984*. It is less political, less about freedom and tyranny. It is a book about knowledge. The core message of *Fahrenheit 451* is about the destruction of culture, the destruction of knowledge. A sadomasochistic attempt to torch human heritage. I am here not concerned with censorship or the individual's struggle for identity and freedom in a conformist world. Instead, I am interested in the role of knowledge in a society in which technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have become increasingly dominating if not paramount. Instead of burning texts, obliterating the

1 During a radio interview, in 1956, Bradbury said: "I wrote this book at a time when I was worried about the way things were going in this country [*America*] four years ago. Too many people were afraid of their shadows; there was a threat of book burning. Many of the books were being taken off the shelves at that time. [...]. But at the time I wanted to do some sort of story where I could comment on what would happen to a country if we let ourselves go too far in this direction, where then all thinking stops, [...] and we sort of vanish into a limbo and we destroy ourselves by this sort of action." *Biography in Sound. Narrated by Norman Rose. NBC Radio News. 27:10–27:57.*

2 Joseph Raymond McCarthy (1908-1957) was the American politician that during the Cold War contributed to widespread anti-communism campaign. McCarthyism, or the Second Red Scare, (being the first the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I), was a period of political repression and the targeting of left-wing individuals. Spanning from the late 1940s to the 1950s, it involved a widespread campaign that fueled fear about communism and Soviet influence on American institutions, as well as concerns over Soviet espionage in the United States.

3 Again in a radio interview, Bradbury talked about his intention in writing the book: "Well, we should learn from history about the destruction of books. When I was fifteen years old, Hitler burned books in the streets of Berlin. And it terrified me because I was a librarian and he was touching my life: all those great plays, all that great poetry, all those wonderful essays, all those great philosophers. So, it became very personal, didn't it? Then I found out about Russia burning the books behind the scenes. But they did it in such a way that people didn't know about it. They killed the authors behind the scenes. They burned the authors instead of the books. So I learned then how dangerously [*sic*] it all was."

text, AI attempts to minimize our own use of language, to disburden us from it by making our use of language in reading and writing superfluous. As a result, we are discharged from the Emersonian self-reliance we so desperately need to exercise our full humanity to acquire knowledge. The analogy cannot be lost. I consider *Fahrenheit 451* as something more than futuristic science fiction, and certainly more than a historical warning. *Fahrenheit 451* is a prophecy already fulfilled. Bradbury's text explores the consequences of a society disconnected from its humanity and cultural legacy. More modestly, I here attempt to sketch contemporaneity as a society that has already burnt all its books.

The School of Athens

Giorgio Vasari explains that with “The School of Athens” (1509-1511) Raphael (1483–1520) had intended to show “theologians reconciling philosophy and astrology with theology” (312).¹ In the *Stanza della Segnatura*, a room that functioned as the library for Pope Julius II, a celebration of all aspects of human knowledge takes place.² Raphael is here the bearer of the Renaissance commonplace that philosophy leads to theological understanding and a more general quest about knowledge as an endeavor of interdisciplinary learning. The painting is a colossus, standing over 4 meters high and almost 8 meters wide. It takes up one entire wall with 52 figures larger than life. Figures move purposefully in and out of the scene along the right and left edges, while others turn and progress across the vast space, seemingly advancing into the actual room or turning back to ascend the steps of the open-air hall. The activity of the young students on the right, and the absorbed older scholars on the left concur on creating an atmosphere of knowledge being discovered, accumulated, and shared. At the center of the painting an elderly Plato, holding one of his own books, the *Timaeus*, walks down the steps with Aristotle, holding his book, the *Ethics*. They advance in a fairly empty foreground, the ascent to knowledge. With the vanishing point located at their feet, Raphael is here summarizing the contrasting philosophical view. Plato points upward to indicate the

1 In 1550, Vasari wrote: “Having been greeted very affectionately by Pope Julius upon his arrival [in Rome] Raphael began a scene in the room of the Segnatura, depicting the theologians reconciling philosophy and astrology with theology, in which he portrayed all the wise men of the world presenting different arguments. There are some astrologers to the side who have drawn geomantic and astrological figures and characters in various forms on some tablets, and they send them by means of certain beautiful Angels to the Evangelists, who explain them” (312).

2 *The School of Athens* is one of four wall frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura. Each wall represents one of the four branches of knowledge during the Renaissance—theology, literature, justice, and philosophy.

world of pure forms. In contrast, Aristotle focuses his attention on the observable, the actual, the physical. Hence, his palm is down, as to suggest that knowledge comes from experience.

The philosophers on either side of Plato and Aristotle highlight the contrasting philosophies. On Plato's side, those philosophers focused on the concept of the ideal. First is Socrates reasoning with a few listeners, down below on the lower left is Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician, drawing a formula on a slate. He is known for his discoveries in the laws of harmony, both in music and mathematics, representing the idea that a higher, transcendent reality exists beyond the observable world. Among cross-cultural moments, Raphael celebrates Michelangelo. Heraclitus, the philosopher who believed that all things were always in flux, is depicted quietly writing and contemplating on his own, in contrast to most other figures in the painting, who are engaged in conversations with others. He appears absorbed in his thoughts, writing on a block of marble. Interestingly, his features resemble those of Michelangelo, who was known for his solitary and introspective nature.

In contrast, on the right, there is a group of astronomers. Ptolemy, for example, the one who theorized about the movements of the planets, holding the sphere of the earth, Zoroaster holding the celestial orb, and next to him is Raphael himself looking on at the viewer. On the lower right, mirroring Pythagoras' position, is Euclid, the father of geometry, the practical side of philosophy, focused on measurement and the tangible. He appears to be drawing a geometric diagram for a group of eager students. On the top left, in the niches, Raphael has placed classical sculpture. On the Platonic side, it is recognizable Apollo, the god of the sun, music, and poetry, again symbolizing ideals that align with Platonic thought. On the right, however, we find Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom, who is associated with the more practical aspects of human affairs.

The scene that the most grasps my attention happens just behind Euclid: One figure is leaning against the wall, with his leg crossed over in a relaxed posture, while the other is hurrying, writing notes quickly. The first figure watches attentively, leaning over to observe the action. It could be the hallway of any college or university anywhere in the world, a moment in between courses, a note, an idea just formed and cannot be lost. It is a scene that recalls an academic intimacy.

With "The School of Athens," Raphael has responded to the Renaissance dictum, noted by Leon Battista Alberti, "leave more for the mind to discover than is actually apparent to the eyes" (77). The painting stands as a celebration of worldly knowledge (Greek) and spiritual (Christian) thinking, an exhortation toward

individual excellence, and a belief that philosophy, science, and theology concur toward the discovery of universal truth. And while Raphael was engaged with “The School of Athens,” a few doors away Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel.

With his nightmarish plot, Bradbury has, symbolically, set “The School of Athens” on fire. Knowledge is being obliterated. Montag’s marriage is less than ideal. Mildred, his wife, is obsessed with watching television on wall-sized screens. She is meant to symbolize the apathy and denial of the dystopian world in which Plato and Shakespeare are unknown. Sound, music, and images roaring from the TV-wall, broadcasting sentimental mush have made communication virtually impossible. Montag and Mildred cannot even remember the first time they met. As the plot unfolds, one has the feeling of moving backward in time to a preliterate society. With reason, Scott Bukatman argues that in the book burning of *Fahrenheit 451*, “the overthrow of the Word is presented as tantamount to the overthrow of Reason itself, leaving an infantilized— if not barbaric— citizenry poised passively before the pseudo- satisfactions of the spectacle, bereft of the ability to think, judge, and know” (29). On the way back home, Montag discovers his wife overdosed on happy pills, a fact she later denies or cannot remember, highlighting the pervasive escapism and denial that characterizes their society. The scene assumes expressionist features with a setting that closely recalls Edward Munch’s art. Her face is pale as “snow-covered island” (11), she has glassy-coloured eyes and a faint breath. In contrast, Bradbury places Montag, alone, standing under a sky that seems screaming.

The pivotal moment is his encounter with the new neighbor, the seventeen-year-old Clarisse McClellan. She is young and irreverent, her diversity is rendered by her simplicity; she observes dew on the grass in the morning, sits knitting on the lawn, walks in the rain. As they walk together Montag senses “the faintest breath of fresh apricots and strawberries in the air, and he looked around and realized this was quite impossible, so late in the year” (4). This impossibility is symptomatic of Clarisse’s role, brief but necessary: she is about to upset the order of his universe by stirring dissatisfaction with his role in society and the essence of society as a whole. The world is populated by uneducated simple-minded people who do not think instead they “walk on and leave” (21). Clarissa is considered insane because she does not comply: “I just sit and *think*” (20) she utters before observing the ultimate stage of humanity: “No one has time any more for anyone else” (21). It is a simple question, almost obvious, to break the scent of his ordinary life: “Are you happy?” (7) she asks before shutting the front door. Well into the night, Montag must recognize the horrible truth: “He was not happy” but there was no way back. At this altitude,

it is impossible for him to fall back into the Platonic cave of darkness. Clarissa had taken back the mask of conformity, “there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back” (9). Doubts creak in: “I don’t know anything anymore” (15), he concludes.

His rebellion begins. A book comes his way, by mistake he reads a line: “Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine” (34) and suddenly he realizes the all extent of his life: “how do you get so empty” (41) he wonders. But the triggering incident is the burning of a woman who would not let go of her books. Slowly he turns against the system. He begins collecting books rather than burning them, yet any form of resistance strikes one as pointless: “Any man’s insane who thinks he can fool the Government and us” (31) is Capitan Beatty’s warning. Next, Montag reevaluates his job in society, “I can’t do it, he thought. How can I go at this new assignment? How can I go on burning things? I can’t go to this place?” (106). But this time the house to be burnt is his: “There was a crash like the falling parts of a dream” (108).

In a dramatic showdown, Montag chased by troopers must either kill Capitan Beatty or be killed. As he turns the flamethrower on Captain Beatty, Beatty in defiance of death recites Shakespeare: “There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats, for I am arm’d so strong in honesty that they pass by me as an idle wind” (113). Bradbury explicitly writes that “Beatty wanted to die” (116), a statement this one that literary criticism has already confirmed. The “honesty” Beatty is referring to is one of “confession and remorse” (Smolla 899). Meanwhile, Montag breaks free from the oppressive system he served. His escape is televised to captivate the city’s inhabitants with a live manhunt. Implied is society’s twisted craving for entertainment and the government’s exploitation of technology to sustain power and divert attention from deeper, more meaningful aspects of human life. For example, the burning of books or death. Montag ultimately discovers comfort and hope among a community of intellectual outsiders, book-lovers exiles, former university professors, forgotten writers, led by a man named Granger. They all exist on the margins of society. These individuals, each having committed a portion of literature to memory to safeguard it through oral tradition, symbolize a quiet rebellion against the oppressive regime. Bradbury seems to suggest here that civilization can be saved through memory: “all bits and pieces of history and literature and international law, Byron, Tom Paine, Machiavelli, or Christ” (145). They stand as a testament to the enduring strength of human wisdom and culture, even amidst efforts to erase it. Granger’s belief in the power of resistance is captured in his words: “We’re remembering. That’s where we’ll win out in the long run” (157).

As the narrative plot ends, an attentive reader is left to wonder about its significance and conclusions. Is civilization truly in danger? Is knowledge at stake? What is the role of art? Do we still have art? Those are not mere academic questions, but the invisible stage on which we all play a part. It is to give the right name to contemporaneity that I, most humbly, write the pages that will follow.

Contemporaneity under Scrutiny

In the *Republic*, with the Cave Allegory, Plato has the philosopher, who has freed himself and enjoys happiness in the contemplation of pure Forms, returning to the cave to share his knowledge with the inmates and rule the ideal city. Here, however, a doubt rushes in, the prisoners might want to kill him. Implied is the idea that knowledge and belief are not the same and while belief comes with safety and comfort, knowledge is possibly threatening. Ignorance, therefore, becomes the norm when the condition of humanity is one of darkness and apathy. Knowledge, on the other hand, is possibly dangerous and so is the device that generates it, one for all art. In book ten of his ideal Republic, Plato, famously, expels the poets and decides that the guardians, the philosopher kings, should not read poetry save being *infected*:

And the same may be said of lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action-in all of them poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue (35).

Art (poetry) can possibly weaken the Republic by manufacturing images, spreading irrational thoughts, nourishing imitative behaviours. Plato wants an Apollonian republic, rational, and stable. He does not want Dionysian irrationality and ecstatic states. Poetry is contagious, it is madness, a form of possession that can be passed to the audience and therefore break the stability of the Republic. Likewise, Bradbury depicts a society in which books, and therefore knowledge, are a source of dissent. The ruling power believes that reading literature can stir conflicting ideas, ultimately causing disagreements among the citizens. Ergo, all forms of literature are banned in so much as it might potentially incite to question happiness and freedom to the detriment of the status quo. According to the sinister fire chief, Beatty, the main danger in books is that “none of those books agree with each other” (35). Very true, but if they are a threat, then a threat for whom? In his critical interpretation, Harold

Bloom indicates the answer: “if you cannot read Shakespeare and his peers, then you will forfeit memory, and if you cannot remember, then you will not be able to think” (2). Here I think is the core significance. The action of burning books is a vivid symbol of repression, more at large power’s repression of thought: “It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed” (1). This reversal of roles underscores the twisted nature of a society, where instruments meant for preservation and enlightenment are instead used for annihilation and control. The burning reflects the deep corruption of a system that has distorted its values, turning what should protect and uplift humanity into mechanisms of oppression and ruin.

At this altitude, the objection is that we still have books. We should not confuse science fiction with reality. But for all that, to have books is not the same as having knowledge. *Fahrenheit 451* presents the image of books as a form of culture in clear antagonism to image culture. It is not the book itself to have significance but the book as a receptacle of knowledge. Faber, the retired English professor, illustrates the idea well: “It’s not books you need, it’s some of the things that once were in books” (78). What are those things? And how did it start? Beatty explains to Guy how the intellectual decline of the twentieth century gradually led to the eventual banning of books in future centuries: “It didn’t come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God” (55). In other words, Bradbury argues that it began with the people. Destruction is a condition that moves upward, and the Government went along.

I believe that this analysis is somewhat misleading. The fireman is the guardian of a Frankfurter Cultural Industry, that is, new forms of mass media communication and the entertainment industry. Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) believed that the rise of the culture industry has resulted in the standardization and rationalization of cultural forms, and that this in turn has weakened, atrophied, and destroyed the capacity of the individual to think and act in a critical and autonomous way. He argued that standardization emerges largely as a result of the capacity of those with power to control the production of cultural goods to employ positivistic methods in an attempt to formulate a scientific measurement of people’s precise ‘tastes’ and expectations, and in doing so increase profitability. As the culture industry develops, this process has become more specialized, leading to the emergence of a very precisely targeted hierarchical range of goods aimed precisely to align with consumers’ preconceived expectations of the product itself ‘so none may escape.’ In his aphoristic *Minima Moralia* (1951), Adorno put it most laconically: “Today

progress and barbarism are so intertwined as mass culture that only barbaric asceticism against this latter and against the progression of the means may again produce that which is unbarbaric” (30). In this sense, *Fahrenheit 451* is an extreme version of homogenized culture, “they all say the same things and nobody says anything different from anyone else” (28), where chemical treatments anaesthetize the masses into submission: “That’s all we live for, isn’t it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these” (56). I imagine the four wall TV screen described by Montag as a dull wasteland of advertisement and propaganda. Mind-numbing programs are designed with hypnotic effects, the same Adorno is concerned about.

The first victim in this *barbaric process* is education. Clarisse outlines the problems of the educational system pointing out that teachers are prevented from incorporating literature into their lesson plans. Instead they “run answers at you, bing, bing, bing, and us just sitting for four more hours of film-teacher” (27). The dystopian teaching system pictured by Bradbury in 1953 has become our reality with teachers who use videos to fill lack of substance. Nowadays academic content is secured by a copy-and-paste process. The scholar’s endeavor is reduced to copying material from online pages and pasting it back into a PowerPoint. Lectures have been reduced to a mere collective reading, while human intelligence is secretly replaced by artificial intelligence. Beatty describes how schools ceased to teach, focusing instead on stuffing students with factual information rather than providing a true education:

School is shortened, discipline relaxed, [...] spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, [...]. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts? (53).

Prophetically, Bradbury seems to have foreseen the online teaching that humanity has developed after the Covid-19 pandemic. I am not here concerned about the relation between online coursework and student performance but about the invasive presence of AI within the net of knowledge. AI algorithms personalize learning experiences to suit the unique needs of each student, it delivers customized educational experiences. In contrast, the lack of personal connection comes with a lack of immediateness leading to feelings of isolation and less human engagement that has already produced numb ‘firemen.’ AI increases speed and precision for high level cognitive tasks. But it has also made simplicity more valuable than

reflective thought, immediate gratification has become the national sport. Indeed, we are not far from the nightmarish condition in which books are condensed, into “dictionary resume” (52). Softwares like ChatGPT have the ability to create academic manuscripts, more or less functional, yet the unethical consequences are self-evident: plagiarism, cheating, and stunted learning. Montag is nearly killed by a group of children and he wonders about the reason: “They would have killed me, [...] For no reason in the world they would have killed me” (122). Random, average citizens are willing to kill for no specific reason, incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong. But the real tragic loss is not morality. None of us is a masterwork of excellence, there is always a person before the ideal. The most consequential aspect is the irreparable loss of human critical judgment, loss of originality, and creativity. That is, foundational aspects of education such as critical thinking, evaluation, social interaction, emotional development, all of which are to vanish. Those are the “things” that, Faber warned, are no longer in books.

Bradbury further critiques the overwhelming influence of technology and its contribution to fostering a shallow and disconnected society. The parlor walls—massive screens that dominate homes and substitute authentic human interaction—serve as a metaphor for the numbing and isolating impact of excessive media consumption. Montag’s wife is addicted to electronic waves: “in her ears the little Seashells, the thimble radios tamped tight, and an electronic ocean of sound, of music and talk and music and talk coming in, coming in on the shore of her unsleeping mind.” (10). The scene is representative of the growing detachment of individuals from their own lives and from one another. But, of course, it also implies that the side effect of technology is to erode meaningful connections and self-awareness. The reckless progression of technology without moral or ethical boundaries recalls a Frankenstein’s form of experiment. Here, I think, there is a lesson that we tend to ignore. Frankenstein’s relationship to ethic and science suggests that society may not be capable of keeping pace with its own scientific advancements. By and large, Frankenstein is the picture of a finite and flawed god at war with, and eventually overcome by, his creation. This is the *dual end* of technology. Technology being invented for a benign purpose but abused for ends that reveal themselves malignant. As a hammer can be used to build homes or crush skulls, so nuclear power can be used for energy and mass destruction weapons. Innovators, creators, hide behind dual-use language to insulate them from responsibility. The consequences are then for the users to bear. Nearly every sector of society and even the fibers of our being, share a Promethean (dangerous) perspective. Our life is integrated with computational power; we fuse natural

processes, as reading, with updated techniques, as an iPad. The purpose is to offer benefits, but it is a benefit that questions human ingenuity. In a world of smart technology, virtual language assistants, do we still need to learn another language? Would it not be faster to teach history through video games?¹ In fact in a world of Smart technology why learning at all. Then, let us start by burning the books.

Do we need books? In a society that moves toward “solid entertainment” (58) where media “tells you what to think,” and our “mind hasn’t time to protest” (80), books, knowledge, art, become irrelevant as never before. I write these lines as a provocation of course, and as a statement. After all, in the past decade at least, I have not met anyone holding a book in the countless underground I sat in. And much of what museums of contemporary art have to offers are factory made products. The issue has more overstretching ramifications. Does art serve a useful function in society? As society is becoming more and more technological, do we (still) need art (books)?

With Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) “All art is quite useless.”² Modernism will say that such an aesthetic position is ridiculous because everything is ideology. Postmodernism will say that not everything is ideology, but everything is relative. Yet, in *Fahrenheit 451* none of this complexity remains. A book remains useless, downgraded to a story about “nonexistent people, figments of imagination” (59). Montag has a Platonic doubt: “Maybe the books can get us half out of the cave” (70). Somewhere along the line, Faber emphasizes the significance of literature in

1 There is already a line of scholarship focusing on education and video games. As there are courses at university level as “History in Video Games.” Martin Wainwright (2014) comes with an updated bibliography and a surprising conclusion: “video games are an effective tool for teaching complex historical concepts to undergraduates and introducing even non-History majors to advanced theoretical arguments” (603).

2 In 1890, after the release of Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a curious young admirer named Bernulf Clegg reached out to the author, requesting an explanation for the now-iconic line from the novel’s preface: “All art is quite useless.” Surprisingly, Wilde responded: “Art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way. It is superbly sterile, and the note of its pleasure is sterility. If the contemplation of a work of art is followed by activity of any kind, the work is either of a very second-rate order, or the spectator has failed to realise the complete artistic impression. A work of art is useless as a flower is useless. A flower blossoms for its own joy. We gain a moment of joy by looking at it. That is all that is to be said about our relations to flowers. Of course man may sell the flower, and so make it useful to him, but this has nothing to do with the flower. It is not part of its essence. It is accidental. It is a misuse. All this is I fear very obscure. But the subject is a long one.” <https://janwriter.medium.com/oscar-wilde-on-art-75c05aeeb9b>.

comprehending the human experience, stating, “The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us” (79). A book’s function is then to offer significance by weaving the fragments of the universe into a cohesive tapestry. But there is an additional function, Faber suggests, and it is the one Plato feared the most: a text is capable of showing “the pores in the face of life” (79). Statement this one that echoes the belief that art must be negative.

A central tenet of Adorno’s argument is the idea that art, under certain social conditions, must provide an alternate vision of reality. The culture industry has reduced, if not annihilated, art’s ability to act as a vehicle for utopian visions, projecting real life instead; for Adorno and Horkheimer, that is a nightmare. They believe that the decay of great artistic works and the simultaneous mass production of high culture are elements of cultural stagnation and decline. Art, they claim, must remain negative—it is only through negativity that it escapes the naïve optimism of knowledge and the culture industry. “At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia” (2004 41). The role of art, therefore, is a reminder of a lack, that the present society lacks something and being aware of it is the precondition of social critique. The most that art can do for us is to aid us in our battle against total reification and to arouse a sort of nostalgia without content.¹ Understanding and striving for high art therefore becomes a necessity, a social demand comparable to reading. Following Adorno’s lead, one must conclude that of course a book is dangerous, it has to be if it has to carry knowledge.

A Finale Without a Finale

Plato wants us to expel the poets, Bradbury complied and burnt the books. Montag is too intuitively horrified to rationally pose alternative objections. But we can. What if poetry was not an imitation of an imitation, but the artist was able to grasp, by intuition, the original form (idea)? Rather than stirring our irrational side, might poetry not purge our irrational side? And why cannot art work out as a catharsis of our irrational emotions, instinctual behaviour? Plato says that the poets are possessed. Very well, might not be then that the universe is trying to speak to us through them? In this sense art is a form of prophecy, it is a possession of sorts but it is a possession that takes us closer to the truth. Those are perhaps academic questions. Even so, between Plato and Adorno, some of us are compelled to ask where one stands today.

¹ Indeed, the Frankfurt School’s rejection of mass culture contains a strong component of nostalgia for the pre-capitalist world of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This nostalgia also extended to the rejection of all mechanization and reproduction of art.

Montag's transformation from a compliant enforcer of the status quo to an awakened rebel mirrors Bradbury's critique of societal apathy and underscores the necessity of personal awakening and defiance in the struggle against ignorance. His journey highlights the dangers of passive conformity and the vital role of critical thinking and resistance in preserving, essentially, knowledge. Yet the key figure is not Montag, clearly dramatic, but Beatty, a victim in disguise, a Grand Inquisitor of sorts.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821-1881) masterwork *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) contains in Book V the legend of the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor. Sometime during the sixteenth century, Jesus himself, is back to Earth in Seville, Spain, at the height of the Inquisition, and again arrested and sentenced to death. The night before the sentence is carried out, the Grand Inquisitor visits Jesus in his cell to tell him that the Church no longer needs him. The Grand Inquisitor's argument is that Christ was wrong to have rejected the three temptations offered to him by Satan, namely, the physical temptation to turn stones into bread, the temptation to question God's love by casting himself from the Temple and be saved by the angels, and the temptation of power to rule over all the kingdoms of the world. On the contrary, the Grand Inquisitor claims, the world is ruled by the opposite principle: give one bread, give one miracles, and control one's conscience. Jesus' mistake was to have misjudged human nature, to have held man in high esteem, to have won free will for humanity. But while offering individual responsibility and free choice, man's security was taken away: "You demanded too much of him" (256). Humanity, the Grand Inquisitor goes on, cannot tolerate freedom: "nothing has ever been more insufferable for man and for human society than freedom" (252). Thus, the Grand Inquisitor, and his representatives in the Church, have relieved people of the terrible burden of freedom of conscience: "the most tormenting secrets of their conscience—all, all they will bring to us, and we will decide all things, and they will joyfully believe our decision, because it will deliver them from their care and their present terrible torments of personal and free decision" (259). Jesus does not reply but kisses the Inquisitor on his "bloodless, aged lips." He leaves, still in silence into "the dark square of the city" while Ivan concludes: "[t]he kiss burns in his heart, but the old man holds to his former idea" (262). In Dostoevsky's portrayal, the Grand Inquisitor becomes the quintessential of the Church whose mission is to provide a dogmatic belief, a structure of power to the detriment of one's sense of responsibility. Hence, the Grand Inquisitor represents Dostoevsky's critique, of any institution that aims at depriving individuals of their spiritual freedom, of those societies founded on the Hobbesian belief that people must surrender their freedom to achieve a peaceful and content commonwealth.

I am not here concerned with the message's political implication, but its significance in terms of human condition. The Grand Inquisitor's reference to the burden of freedom is meant to suggest that humans are frail creatures; if one is to find happiness or peace, then individual freedom must be surrendered to the control of a selected few who will determine one's fate. Argument this one that not only explains the totalitarian regimes that rose in the twentieth century, but also illustrates, from a more ground-level perspective, the human dimension of *Fahrenheit 451*. The reasoning explained by Faber goes on the line of 'if you want a man unhappy, give him choice:' "Better yet, give him none" (58). Instead, the individual has to be given "non-combustible data," brilliant information, facts that lead nowhere. By so doing one will receive "a sense of motion without moving" (58). In other words, the appearance of knowledge. In the era of mass media and digital economy, *Fahrenheit 451* becomes a commentary on how technology captured our personality through social media. Frankenstein is no longer a creature formed in the laboratory. Technology allows us to design our own bodies and identities. We make and un-make ourselves. We are the creator and the creature. A world without books is certainly a violent one, "Do you notice how people hurt each other nowadays?" (27). Clarisse notices that people wildly dance, shout, and kill without restraint. The prophecy has been fulfilled, technology has ushered in an alienated age of disillusionment and mental dullness.

Beatty's meting body, twisted "like a charred wax doll" (113), is the emblem of a society that destroys knowledge for the sake of an artificial stability. But it is also a reminder of a society based on irresponsibility. The novel reaches its climax when Montag meets his newfound allies. They embody the opposite of the fireman's world—a surviving fragment of a culture that cherishes literature, critical thinking, and dialogue: "We are all bits and pieces of history and literature and international law" (145). Together they observe the city being obliterated by atomic bombs:

unrecognizable, taller than it had ever hoped or strived to be, taller than man had built it, erected at last in gouts of shattered concrete and sparkles of torn metal into a mural hung like a reversed avalanche, a million colours, a million oddities, a door where a window should be, a top for a bottom, a side for a back, and then the city rolled over and fell down dead. (153)

The metaphor is easily explained: this is a civilization that moves toward self-destruction. In contrast, Montag seeks in books "something enduring in man's existence—history, heritage, culture [...] in essence, a definition and a preservation of the identity of human kind" (Watt 200). He is the relic of a world that no longer exists, the resilience of human culture and the enduring value of intellectual

heritage. In this Faustian race for artificial forms of intelligence and unbridled progress, one must wonder without rhetoric whether we have lost humanity in the sense of our humanity. Of course, I recognize that while the run of unharnessed technology seems to be inevitable, to acknowledge its side effects sounds to be an exercise for a few intellectuals. And the intellectual is of course another relic.

However, I do not share Bradbury's optimism. Montag's final escape, and redemption, leave some doubts about its functionality. Beatty rebukes Montag: "Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he's burnt his wings, he wonders why" (107). The allusion here is to the mythological Icarus who flew into the sky alongside his father Daedalus on wings made of wax. Yet he flew too near the sun, the wings melted, and he fell. In contrast, Bradbury wrote a different finale. Montag, although crippled, survives his bold actions. He narrowly escapes the destruction that Beatty intends for him; at the outskirts of society, together with a few other bookish outcasts, they will cultivate small tissues of truth that remain untouched. They are tasked with the responsibility of rebuilding society, holding onto the hope of a future where knowledge and freedom are valued. The character of Granger epitomizes this optimism: "some day, some year, the books can be written again, the people will be called in, one by one, to recite what they know" (146). Nor do I share Montag's sense of hope for rebirth and renewal. Montag, which means Monday in German, becomes the leader of a new beginning, ("Montag went ahead" (157)), and finally recalls a quote from the Book of *Revelation*: "And on either side of the river was there a tree of life [...] and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (158). The reference to a new Jerusalem after the apocalypse is a call for enduring hope, final redemption, and healing even in the face of self-inflicted destruction. In sum, it is possible to kill a book but not its ideas. Such a conclusion, brought scholars, the likes of Mark R. Hillegas, to define *Fahrenheit 451* as "the archetypal anti-utopia of the new era in which we live" (158). For all that, this is an assessment that does not seem to match the book's finale which is utopian in its essence.

The haunting issue the text truly leaves open has not been resolved as yet: is it possible to save knowledge? To answer this question is to understand our role in society and the one of our civilizations. In book eleven of the *Republic*, Plato allows the poets to come back if they meet given conditions.¹ Truth is that they

1 Plato adds that poets can come back to the 'ideal republic' if someone can write in defense of poetry proving two shreds of evidence: on a moral ground that poetry is socially useful, and on a philosophical ground that poetry does not deceive but enhances our knowledge of the truth. All critical theory that will come after that is a rigorous answer to Plato in one way or another. To say "I like this book" is not enough because it is neither moral nor philosophical.

did not. In Granger's words, "we didn't use what we got out of them. We went right on insulting the dead" (156). In symbolic terms, 'burning' is simultaneously a constructive and a destructive action, paralleling humankind's nature, creative and destructive. I write aware that at this altitude we are riding for a fall. *The School of Athens*, the marriage of art, philosophy, and science has been burnt, lessened in best cases. Contemporaneity has shown a tendency toward repetition and reproduction (cfr. Fredric Jameson and Roland Barthes), not much of originally after all. Meanwhile, technology reshapes society's values having homologation as final destination: "We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other" (55). The body is a place of consumption: tattoos, piercings, drugs, those that control fertility and those that take users across altered state of consciousness. Sex is a recreational activity rather than a means of reproduction and sex knows no gender. Primary organs of education, family, school, Church are outdated, traditional bonds are obsolete, and any reference to them is subject to scrutiny. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud reflects on the reason why societies place restrictions (taboos) on personal desires and argues that communal life cannot allow individual passions to dominate, as they pose a threat to the well-being of the collective. For the sake of an anonymous collective interest, we have abdicated individuality and surrendered to mass-produced gods and goods, both of which generate mass-produced emotions. The twenty-first century has begun by creating a new taboo: the individual. We have learned to live with the same expectations, wear the same clothes, speak and write in the same language if we want a chance to be heard, love with the same words, die the same death.

There is at work a hidden force more dangerous than evil. One that the theologian and philosopher Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed was responsible for the inhuman destruction during WWII. It spreads silently, it is immune to logic and its named stupidity. It is not an intellectual failure but a moral and social crisis.¹ Stupidity is a greater threat than evil for it is a slippery opponent. Evil carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction; it can be resisted, confronted, and defeated. On the contrary, stupidity is immune to good sense, blind to reason, and deaf to truth. Thus, it can be manipulated and used by evil. Stupidity does not engage, it does not question itself, it is impervious, and it is unconscious. That is, stupidity

1 Here Bonhoeffer has in mind Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century but one who pledged loyalty to Hitler and remained unrepentant until the very last day of his earthly life. Based on Bonhoeffer's view in stupidity, Heidegger was intellectually capable and utterly, morally, stupid.

does not recognize itself but move forward. Stupidity thrives in conformity, it spreads within society, silently and invisibly, it infects individuals, groups, political systems. Stupidity is a weapon that enslaves the mind. How does it happen?

If we pose to reflect on human nature, people are not inherently evil. But people do stop thinking. Throughout history the individual more than once has surrendered intelligence to the power of one. This is the reason why mass stupidity has often brought about the rising of authoritarianism.¹ Stupidity is a transformation that infects the masses. It kills critical thinking and questioning while replacing it with oversimplification. We seem to have forgotten that truth is complex and it never has a single cause. Today we are filled with misinformation, ideological propaganda, herd mentality, and a narrative that discourage critical thought. Is liberation ever possible?

A call for intellectual and moral independence as solutions seems to me again a simplism. Humanities as a set of academic disciplines in the academic world no longer offer protection from the secular landscape.² Overwhelmed by the intoxicating appeal of digital and virtual realities, we walk past the physical and sensory moments and when they become physical they have no dignity. Genuine relationships have given way to fast cable connections, virtual dates, logograms, we have learned to live in a world of diminished sensation and ‘consensual hallucinations.’³ “We are all too rushed to smell the rose, savor the sunset, taste the rain, feel the cool of the grass” (Smolla 909). Rodney Smolla refers to Newton’s Third Law of Motion in order to explain contemporaneity. The law states that for every action (force) in nature, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Hence, “For every forward movement in science and technology that improves the physical quality of human life, there is a potential backward movement in the spiritual quality of human life” (911). Has technology shortened or enlarged the distance between individuals? Will gene editing make society less accepting of people who are different? We split the atom and then built mass destruction weapons, high-tech

1 Bonhoeffer notes that stupidity goes side by side with power: “On closer inspection it would seem that any violent revolution, whether political or religious, produces an outburst of folly in a large part of mankind. Indeed, it would seem to be almost a law of psychology and sociology” (23).

2 Are the Humanities in crisis? While the numbers confirm a decline of humanities degrees, in contrast to my view, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon argue, interestingly and surely more optimistically, that the humanities are and will remain a necessary feature of the social and academic landscape because the forces that shape the humanities are ever present. Wellmon writes: “the permanent crisis also prevents any particular crisis from becoming particularized and, thereby, rendered contingent and fleeting” (220).

3 This is William Gibson’s definition of cyberspace.

medicine allows us to live longer, but what dignity is there in a man kept alive by tubes? One is allowed to conclude that as science enshrines greater truths about the universe, the increased knowledge is abused at the expense of life itself.¹

A questing is haunting me. If Darwin meant humans had evolved directly from apes, and if it was possible to evolve into humans, it is also possible to degenerate into something more primitive. It is possible to regress from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde. The firemen of *Fahrenheit 451* in this sense represent a more primitive and less developed version of humanity as we know it. Devolution is possible, life can evolve *backward* into more primitive forms when knowledge becomes the results of shortcuts. Books might not be burnt, but ideas are already scarce. Faber feels to be “one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the ‘guilty’” (78). I write this manuscript because I want to speak so not to be guilty myself. We should fear degeneration and decadence in the human race. The process is on the move, and from where I observe, we can hardly escape from ourselves. What is so dramatic in losing the sound of a turning page over a morning coffee? Bradbury, I think, links it to a decline in humanity. Knowledge is the result of sacrifice and knowledge is the precondition of humanity. We deal instead with information made of bits and bytes, easily stored on ever-cheaper cloud computers, retrieved at will, and at a speed and scale that humans cannot possibly match. There is no sacrifice in a knowledge that is a click away. The day will come when the bookshelves are empty and the minds shut. Man’s record of folly will have by then reached its burning point. This is why between books burning and the city bombing we are no Phenix, but a Saturn eating his children.

Post Scriptum

As I re-read this manuscript before submission, a few notes I took for one of my lectures came to my eyes. They were written a few years ago, yet they seem so utterly appropriate.

I would like to conclude with a last remark on the importance of Liberal Arts. Being postmodernity non-linear, fragmentary, ambiguous, non-self-revealing, blurring, and being culture an expression of history, I truly believe that we are living through an age that is shaking. If we look beyond the Voltairean little garden that we cultivate, there are clouds at the horizon line. No solution has been found to the dramatic condition of underdeveloped countries. The world is divided into 80%

¹ I think here about environmental degradation. The construction sector, for example, contributes to 23% of global air pollution, 50% of climatic change, 40% of drinking water pollution, and 50% of landfill waste.

and 20%: 20% of the world population owns 80% of the world's GDP. And this is much better than before. When consumer society was born, 160 years ago, 1% of the world population owned 99% of the world's GDP. The difference between today and yesterday is that now the 80% sees how the 20% lives. They see us. The first thought we must have when we read these numbers is that, because we do not choose where or when to be born, we have to remember how lucky we are to be born in that 20%. And because we are so lucky, some of us feel in need to seek forgiveness for it. We do charity sometimes, but the best way is to give it all to our work field, so to create new jobs, so to make changes. When history shakes, scholars must make it new by offering fire and knowledge, daringly as Prometheus did

Thus, Francis Bacon's essay *On Studies* suits the age. A true liberal arts education based on *studia humanitatis* and which emphasizes an understanding of and appreciation for the great classics, aims at the excellence of the individual. It offers critical thinking, which we need in our daily life, every time we select reality. Understanding a text, the hidden meaning behind the lines, is understanding better ourselves, discovering what we like (want) and what we do not. Literature offers the possibility to spy on the lives of others. Reading a great book, a poem, to analyse a painting is not a museum tour, instead, it is an exceptional entry into a reality we have not seen yet. Art at large is about how people live, love, and die, it is an insight into human possibilities. All in all, art is a training ground: here we can experience what we would like to experience, what we will experience and what hopefully we will never experience.

Bacon writes: "STUDIES serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability" (501). That is, texts must have potential, academic courses must have content, our readings must have a practical purpose, our knowledge must be perfected by experience, our intelligence accompanied by experience. All this is to say that knowledge is not an abstract principle but it has to promote individual excellence and collective consciousness. Otherwise, it is just vanity, little bits of trivia, a postmodern ornament. And this is why the value of Human Sciences is even more fundamental in the twenty-first century.

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