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Yes, But At What Temperature Do Movies Burn?

by Benjamin Hooper

(English 154)

The Assignment: An analysis of how the film version of "*Fahrenheit 451* compares and contrasts to the novel on which it is based.

In 1953, the science-fiction community welcomed the arrival of a new masterwork in the field; a book titled *Fahrenheit 451*. The novel, written by Ray Bradbury, was the story of a malcontented public servant in a dystopian future. Thirteen years later, in 1966, French director François Truffaut and co-screenwriter Jean-Louis Richard adapted the science-fiction epic to the big screen. Although the two works share the same basic story, there are several striking changes made to the story in the adaptation process; some that severely limit the effectiveness of the film. In the following paragraphs, we shall examine the similarities and differences between the book and the film.

In the translation from written words into moving pictures, it is generally a given that certain scenes, passages, and even sub-plots will need to be cut in the interests of time and pacing. However, it is generally assumed that any faithful adaptation would retain the major characters and plot points of the original work, as is the case with *Fahrenheit 451*. In both the book and the film, Guy Montag, the protagonist, is a "fireman" living in a future not too far removed from our own society. In Montag's world, firemen are public servants with some similarities to the firemen of our modern world. However, Montag and the other firemen don't fight fires, they start them. The fire department receives information about people who hide books – all of which are illegal – and dispatches firemen to burn the books. In both book and film, Montag begins to doubt the validity and necessity of his profession. He begins reading books, eventually deciding that it's the burning of books that is the crime, not owning and reading them. At the climax of both works, Montag is shunned by society and his own former comrades attempt to arrest him, resulting in Montag killing his former boss, Captain Beatty. Montag flees his pursuers and eventually joins a roaming band of former academics who have made it their life's work to preserve literature through memorization. Although all of these major plot points take place in both Bradbury's and Truffaut's works, many events, characters, and symbols were omitted or drastically altered in the latter version – and the film is poorer for it.

The novel opens with Montag reflecting on his day while walking home from the train that takes him to and from work. He recalls the pleasure he had burning books earlier that evening. The film opens with the firemen rushing away in a fire truck – somewhat that similar in appearance to modern fire trucks – to a house they suspect has books in it. They arrive, find the books, and burn them. While this does an effective job of setting up who the firemen are and what they do, it does very little in the way of setting up Montag as a character. It isn't until the end of the scene, when his superior calls him by name, that we even know which of the firemen Montag is. Once he's identified, however, we see right away through his expressions and flat tone of voice that Montag is not enjoying himself. This is contrary to the Montag of Bradbury's

novel, who is happy in his work because he does not yet realize that he has any reason not to be. Thus, the early “ignorance-as-bliss” theme is missing from Montag’s character and the story itself. Montag is not the only character to be radically changed from the outset, though.

In the novel Montag is confronted on his walk home by a 17-year-old girl named Clarisse McClellan. She recognizes Montag’s uniform, and seems fascinated by him. She strikes Montag as a very odd sort of person, and even explains that she is “crazy.” Clarisse tells Montag that she comes from a family that does odd things, such as talk to each other and walk places, despite the fact that excess walking is against the law. In the film, Clarisse and Montag meet on his train ride home. Rather than a young girl, her character has become a 29-year-old teacher suspended from working for exercising what she calls odd practices. In both works, Clarisse and her strange comments and questions make Montag noticeably nervous and uncomfortable. The decision to age Clarisse – no doubt intertwined with Truffaut’s decision to cast the same woman, Julie Christie, as both Clarisse and Montag’s wife – drastically alters the character, and even detracts from many of the themes surrounding her, most notably those stemming from the contrasts between her and Mrs. Montag.

Ironically, the only character renamed for the film is also the character that went through the least changes in the translation from book to film. Mildred Montag – or Linda, as she’s known in the film – is very much Clarisse’s opposite. When we first encounter Mildred in the book, she’s just overdosed on sedatives in an apparent suicide attempt that she later denies. This is important because it sets her up right away as the opposite of Clarisse. Where Clarisse’s entrance portrays her as energetic and alive, Mildred is first seen as little more than a shell of a person, a human being that seems to care for nothing, not even whether she lives or dies. In the film, Linda is first introduced glued to the television – as she is in much of the film and the book – which she refers to as her “family.” She doesn’t attempt suicide until well after her character has been established, thus lessening its impact. The contrast between Clarisse and Mildred is at the very heart of Bradbury’s novel. It would seem that Truffaut hoped to accentuate those contrasts when he cast Christie in both roles. The character’s identical appearances was apparently meant to show through words and actions how opposite the two women are. However, in making the characters physically identical, Truffaut abandons some of the symbolism in Bradbury’s descriptions. Although Clarisse is considerably younger than Mildred – 17 years to Mildred’s 31 – Montag thinks to himself that Clarisse seems older than Mildred. This is especially interesting considering that Clarisse’s character essentially embodies innocence and curiosity. What Bradbury is saying here is that innocence and curiosity are at the very heart of wisdom, a trait we tend to associate with older people. In Clarisse’s curiosity and innocence, she truly was the wisest character in the novel, making her seem to Montag as if she were older. While the theme of curiosity versus ignorance on the road to wisdom is explored in the film, the ideas of how it relates to youth and innocence is lost, just as the book loses its own innocence and youth upon the untimely apparent death of Clarisse, an event omitted from the film. However, not all characters were so drastically changed. Indeed, some were written out altogether.

Once again, it is important to note that in the adaptation process, certain events and characters need to be dropped in the interests of time and pacing. However, when a major character is dropped, it is important for the filmmaker to find other ways to incorporate the themes surrounding that character, as Truffaut did with the character of Professor Faber. In Bradbury’s novel, Faber represented the counterpoint to Captain Beatty. Where Beatty wanted to convince Montag of the evils and dangers of knowledge, Faber struggled to convince Montag

of the opposite, with a great deal of success. In the film, this role was taken over by Clarisse. Where the book had Clarisse die of uncertain circumstances, the film allowed her to live to fill the role of mentor to Montag, guiding him along his self-discovery and eventual rejection of his old way of life. However, while this was a somewhat effective substitution, it was not as effective as Bradbury's version of events. The romantic connection Truffaut concocts between Montag and Clarisse suggests that perhaps his decisions aren't fully the result of changes within himself, but at least partially influenced by attraction to a pretty girl. While Montag did feel an attraction to the Clarisse of Bradbury's tome, she died well before he made the final decision to change his life. While her memory was undoubtedly an influence upon him, it could not have been romantic attachment that steered his actions. While the book's Clarisse represented wisdom, it was Faber who represented knowledge. Truffaut combined the two, and found limited success. What was not successful – and perhaps the film's greatest shortcoming – was the decision to omit another major character.

Every fire station in Bradbury's world houses a Mechanical Hound. These hounds can be programmed to track down human beings by their chemical structure. The hound in Montag's fire house holds significance not only as a symbolic object, but as a character in itself. If Mildred is the opposite of Clarisse and Beatty is the opposite of Faber, then it is the Mechanical Hound who is the opposite of Montag. The hound represents oppressive and violent technology, whereas Montag represents humanity and human nature. Where Montag comes to conclusions and deductions that lead to changes in his behavior and character, the hound never thinks anything other than exactly what it is meant to. Indeed, Montag at one point contemplates what the machine must think about, and Beatty responds that it only thinks what they tell him to think. A machine will only think and do as it's told, while a human being will think and do as he or she believes is right. This is part of what eventually convinces Montag that he is not a machine. A machine only thinks what people tell it to think, but Montag concocted thoughts and ideas that society told him not to. In the very first scene of the book to take place in the firehouse, Montag is surprised when the hound growls at him for seemingly no reason. It is never fully explained why this happens, but it can be noted that since Montag has begun his transformation into an independent mind, the machine knows – or possibly smells – that he is no longer like it. In becoming independent, Montag has made himself a threat to society, and the hound's purpose is to hunt down and destroy threats. Montag pities the machine's inability to think anything other than what it's told, and so in the same thought he is admitting that anyone who thinks only what they're told is someone to be pitied. Since his society is completely based on people thinking only as told, another seed of discontent is sewn into his psyche. In the film, a similar event to the hound's growling occurs: the automatic pole will not elevate Montag. While this goes far to represent an essential and symbolic moment, it doesn't quite have the same effect on Montag as the frightening contact with the hound, which foreshadows later events when Montag and the hound do battle outside of his house. The confrontation builds a sense of tension and suspense that pays off in the battle sequence and the chase afterward. The film's version of Montag fleeing the authorities causes very little suspense, as it never really gives an impression that Montag could be caught or harmed. But the novel, with the ominous hound, creates a very real sense of danger. The conflicts of man versus society, man versus man, and man versus technology add to their ranks man versus time as Montag struggles to outrun and outthink the hound. In fact, it is Montag's independent thinking and creativity that lead to his ultimate escape, as he masks his scent with Faber's dirty clothing. Man triumphs over machine – not only the mechanical hound, but the machine Montag once believed himself to be – using the very

traits that ostracize him from society.

Not all of the film's shortcomings were a result of alterations to the story, however. In numerous scenes, the film loses pacing and is distracting in its lack of action. For example, the scene in which Montag phones for medical assistance when Linda overdoses includes several seconds of unnecessary dialogue and information (Montag's description of the pills, for example). In Montag's first meeting with Clarisse, the dialogue often takes on a pace that is hard to follow. At the end of the scene, when Clarisse asks Montag if he is happy, the question is difficult to hear because she delivers it while Montag is still speaking, and his voice overpowers her. Furthermore, when she delivers the line, her face is not in a good position to be read. In framing the shot, the director should have paid more attention to making sure Clarisse's face was more of a focal point, so it would be obvious that she was speaking. The background music itself was often distracting, as it took on a ridiculous, cartoon-like tone at several points in the movie, most notably at the film's opening at the fire house. Additionally, Truffaut chose to film the movie in a high key throughout. At the more suspenseful sequences, such as the climax at Montag's house, the film could have benefited from beginning low key and ending high contrast with the fire. In fact, the film could have achieved a more serious and suspenseful tone if shot in mostly low key colors, with bright contrast during fire scenes. Perhaps a high key style would be appropriate for the final scene of the film, when Montag joins with the crew of literary enthusiasts.

Fahrenheit 451 the film is not without its strengths, there are some powerful symbols and visuals that have much stronger impact on film; such as the sight of burning books and Montag's "newspaper" with no words. However, when compared with Ray Bradbury's novel, the film is found wanting. With a faithful adherence to the characters – or at least the symbols they represent, a big screen adaptation might have a stronger impact.

Works Cited

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