

# A new film version of *Fahrenheit 451*: A frightening future world where firefighters set fires

David Walsh  
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*Directed by Ramin Bahrani; written by Bahrani and Amir Naderi; based on the novel by Ray Bradbury*

Ramin Bahrani, the Iranian-American filmmaker, responsible for two of the more humane films made in the US in the past 15 years, *Chop Shop* (2007) and *99 Homes* (2015), has directed a new version of Ray Bradbury's novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, published in 1953. It aired on HBO and is available online.

French director François Truffaut's well-known adaptation of the novel, featuring Oskar Werner and Julie Christie, was released in 1966.

The novel and the two film versions based on it have many differences, but they all include the central character of Guy Montag, the "fireman" who, in a future, authoritarian America, has the job of *setting fires*—specifically, of burning books (451°F is "the temperature at which book paper catches fire and burns," according to the novel's tagline).

Reading books has been made illegal on the grounds that it only generates discord and unhappiness, and an ultra-banal, conformist culture has been imposed on the population through the most up-to-date technology.

When Bradbury began working on the novel, in the late 1940s, the first wave of Nazi book-burnings in May 1933 were still fresh in humanity's collective memory, and only a few years had passed since the end of the Hitler regime itself. Moreover, the repression and conformism of the McCarthy era in America disturbed and angered Bradbury. In fact, as the author explained in a 1993 foreword, initial efforts to find a magazine publisher for portions of *Fahrenheit 451* "came to a dead end. No one wanted to take a chance on a novel about past, present or future censorship."

In Ramin Bahrani's new adaptation, Montag (Michael B. Jordan) is a firefighter in Cleveland. The US, following a Second Civil War, is ruled by the Ministry, a dictatorial regime that spies on and closely controls its citizens, using repression, drugs and media over-stimulation in equal proportion.

News and information are restricted to the all-pervasive, government-run Internet, projected onto the sides of glittering high-rises and broadcast in homes, called "The 9." Books are banned with a few exceptions and subject to burning by firefighters like Montag. All unauthorized writing is labeled "graffiti." The Ministry, a merger of the state and the giant technology firms, rewrites or eradicates history.

Montag at first does his job enthusiastically and unthinkingly. His personal assistant device, Yuxie, doles out drugs and conversation. Montag works under the fierce Captain Beatty (Michael Shannon), who spends his nights writing tortured aphorisms ("To live is to suffer—but to suffer is to find meaning in one's suffering") on cigarette paper, only to later burn them.

An encounter with an informant, Clarisse (Sofia Boutella), who has

connections with the "Eels" (book-reading outlaws) and who knows something of America's actual history and how the Ministry came to power, proves fateful. She disabuses Montag, for example, of the notion, circulated by the current powers that be, that Benjamin Franklin established the first fire department in America for the purpose of burning books.

Through Clarisse, however, Beatty and the firefighters also learn of the existence of a house filled with books, an entire secret library. When the books' owner prefers to martyr herself and die in the flames with her volumes, Montag's complacent world is irreparably shaken. He steals a copy of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* and soon becomes obsessed with reading.

Ultimately, Montag deserts Beatty and company and joins forces with Clarisse and a group of Eels who have a grandiose and unlikely plan for preserving the entirety of human culture.

Bahrani and co-scenarist (veteran Iranian director and screenwriter) Amir Naderi have decided to represent a dark and gloomy potential future reality through creating a dark and gloomy film. Virtually every scene in this *Fahrenheit 451* is set at night. Considerable effort has gone into creating a tension-filled, intimidating urban environment and atmosphere, presided over and manipulated by a fascistic techno-elite.

Some of this is effective, and telling, including the oft-repeated official slogans, "Stay Vivid" and "See Something, Say Something." The firefighters' drunken and backward delirium, their brutal chants as they prepare for a raid, hint at American military violence in Iraq and elsewhere. The hunting of immigrants is also suggested. Beatty's cry, "Time to burn for America again," presumably refers to a recent campaign slogan. That technology corporations, hand in hand with the government, might turn to censorship and repression is not the stuff of science fiction, but a present-day reality.

There are digs here then at the "war on terror," at Donald Trump, at the anti-immigrant campaign, at National Security Agency spying, at identity politics, at corporate power.

But the digs largely remain digs. Why? In part, it would seem, because the ideas underlying this *Fahrenheit 451* are diffuse and confused.

In an essay published in the *New York Times* May 10 ("Why 'Fahrenheit 451' Is the Book for Our Social Media Age"), Bahrani argued that the original novel was thoroughly "relevant" today. "For Bradbury, books were repositories of knowledge and ideas. He feared a future in which those things would be endangered, and now that future was here: The internet and new social-media platforms—and their potential threat to serious thought—would be at the heart of my adaptation."

Bahrani observed that "Bradbury was no Luddite. ... But in *Fahrenheit 451* Bradbury was warning us about the threat of mass media to reading, about the bombardment of digital sensations that could substitute for

critical thinking.”

The director asserted in the *Times* that “Bradbury feared memory loss. Today we have designated Google and our social-media accounts as the guardians of our memories, emotions, dreams and facts. As tech companies consolidate power, imagine how easy it could be to rewrite Benjamin Franklin’s Wiki entry to match what the firemen in Bradbury’s novel learn about the history of the fire department.”

The danger to serious and critical thought emerges not from the technologies, but from the irrational and outdated ownership or control of these technologies by private, capitalist interests and the reactionary, anti-social purposes to which they can be put. They also have a potentially liberating, democratic side to them.

And the threat to critical thinking certainly has not arrived—whether Bradbury held this view or not—because, as the film director suggested in the *Times*, “we wanted the world to become this way ... we asked for the firemen to burn books ... we wanted entertainment to replace reading and thinking ... we voted for political and economic systems to keep us happy rather than thoughtfully informed.” (Emphasis added).

These conceptions have helped lead the filmmakers along a false path. They cannot be substantiated or dramatized in an aesthetically satisfying manner. The often morose, sour, guilt-ridden looks of the characters do not accomplish what Bahrani wants them to. They don’t overcome the holes in the narrative.

A Second Civil War has occurred, we are told, in which 8 million people died. A “Civil War” between which forces? The Ministry claims sweepingly that ideas contained in books assisted in setting the stage for the bloody divisiveness. What ideas? What were the divisions? What were people fighting about?

The lack of concreteness about how the society ended up as it did, with the implication that somehow “we” were at fault, lends a pessimistic and misanthropic coloring to the film. A catastrophic event has taken place and it’s essentially taken for granted. There’s something both unserious and unlikely about this.

The quasi-morbid notions direct Bahrani, whether he likes it or not, back toward the conventions and tropes of contemporary studio filmmaking, which are sustained by approximately the same meager outlook. In terms of the film’s look, its overall tone, its action sequences, he finds what he needs, so to speak, in current cinema all too easily.

What should be a stinging and *complex* critique of a debased culture and repressive political system reduces itself largely to a succession of sullen faces, barking voices, harsh actions and murky images that would not be out of place in one of Hollywood’s darker “blockbusters” these days (Christopher Nolan, etc.). The filmmakers have taken the line of least resistance. It is disappointing.

Jordan (*Fruitvale Station*, *Creed*) has a few moments of inner conflict and irresolution, but Shannon, a truly fine actor under the right circumstances (including in Bahrani’s *99 Homes*), is unconvincingly and monotonously harsh and Boutella almost unrelievedly surly and even self-pitying. There is very little that is moving or affecting in their fates.

Sadly, even the impact of the shocking motif of the firefighter whose job in this authoritarian society is to start fires is dissipated in the grim, noisy swirl. Because everything is so ghastly, the viewer tends to be inured to the specific ghastliness of Montag’s activities. Its unnaturalness and horror doesn’t stand out as it should.

The opening of Bradbury’s novel remains chilling and disturbing:

“It was a pleasure to burn.

“It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed. With the brass nozzle in his fists, with this great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history. With his symbolic helmet numbered 451 on his

stolid head, and his eyes all orange flame with the thought of what came next, he flicked the igniter and the house jumped up in a gorging fire that burned the evening sky red and yellow and black. He strode in a swarm of fireflies. He wanted above all, like the old joke, to shove a marshmallow on a stick in the furnace, while the flapping pigeon-winged books died on the porch and lawn of the house. While the books went up in sparkling whirls and blew away on a wind turned dark with burning.

“Montag grinned the fierce grin of all men singed and driven back by flame.

“He knew that when he returned to the firehouse, he might wink at himself, a minstrel man, burnt-corked, in the mirror. Later, going to sleep, he would feel the fiery smile still gripped by his face muscles, in the dark. It never went away, that smile, it never ever went away, as long as he remembered.”

In François Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451*, the filmmaker organized the awfulness of the fireman’s occupation to contrast sharply with the relatively ordinary surroundings. The French filmmaker set out “to film fantastic things as if they were everyday, everyday things as if they were fantastic, and to mingle one with the other.”

The following conversation in the Truffaut version between Montag (Werner) and Clarisse (Christie) about his book-burning duties is made more unsettling by the everyday suburban setting (albeit with a few “futuristic” touches):

Clarisse: Why do you burn books ?

Montag: What? Well, it’s a job like any other. Good work with lots of variety. Monday, we burn Miller; Tuesday, Tolstoy; Wednesday, Walt Whitman; Friday, Faulkner; and Saturday and Sunday, Schopenhauer and Sartre. “We burn them to ashes and then burn the ashes.” That’s our official motto.

Clarisse: You don’t like books then?

Montag: Do you like the rain?

Clarisse: Yes, I adore it.

Montag: Books are just so much ... rubbish. They have no interest.

Clarisse: Then why do some people still read them although it’s so dangerous?

Montag: Precisely because it is forbidden.

Clarisse: Why is it forbidden?

Montag: Because it makes people unhappy.

Clarisse: Do you really believe that?

Montag: Oh, yes. Books disturb people. They make them antisocial.

Truffaut’s film is not entirely successful, but it does contain a number of affecting sequences, including the sharp crisis into which Montag’s sudden doubts and new habit of reading throw his drug-addled, television-addicted wife (also played by Christie). The final, snowy scene of the self-exiled “book people” (individuals who have taken it upon themselves to memorize and “become” a particular work), living out of doors in the countryside, is tremendously evocative and poignant. One feels here Truffaut’s genuine love of culture and literature.

The decline in historical “memory” is a harmful fact of contemporary life, and not only in the US, which has to be fought and overcome. How much, one wonders, does Bahrani know, for example, about the influence of the 1917 October Revolution on Iran, about the impact of Stalinism, about the role of the Tudeh Party in Iran and the various Communist Parties in the Middle East and many other historical issues?

If the Bahrani-Naderi version of *Fahrenheit 451* had focused more soberly and objectively on what “book-burning” and “memory loss” mean today in our concrete social circumstances, it might have been a meaningful contribution. As it is, unfortunately, their work will make little more impact than any of the other garden variety, self-consciously ominous “dystopian” films around, which are more or less a dime a dozen at present.



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