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Fahrenheit 451 in 2018: Can film bring Ray Bradbury's classic into the modern age?

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Introduction

I love teaching the novel *Fahrenheit 451* - I think every English probably teacher does. What's more fulfilling than hearing a classroom of students talk about the importance of books? In a time when math, science and engineering education are lauded, it's refreshing to have a reminder that, when it comes down to it, we know that books are important.

Last year, when I taught this text to my 9th grade class, we did a "process drama" activity in which the students assumed the roles of school board members, teachers, students and parents in a school district that was considering banning *Fahrenheit 451*. I've done this activity several times, in multiple classes a year, and it always end**s** the same way -- students delve into their roles, on opposing sides of the question, with relish -- but at the end of class, the board inevitably votes to keep the book in the curriculum.

This time, they voted to ban.

The activity is structured so that either possibility is feasible. Students are instructed to play their character - a "conservative" board member, a parent concerned with the book's unsettling scenes, a student activist who values the protection of important literature - but they are allowed to be persuaded to the other side. Still, I was startled at the outcome. One of the students who held a "swing" vote on the board was swayed by the arguments of one outspoken audience member who used persuasive rhetoric to rally the room behind her.

I've thought a lot about the outcome of this activity over the last year and the way that *Fahrenheit 451* is received by students as the years go on. Do they value books the same way that Ray Bradbury argued was necessary in 1950s America? Are alternative ways of consuming information - online newspapers, social media, e-books - making physical books less important to them? And is that necessarily a bad thing?

I stumbled upon the 2018 film *Fahrenheit 451* directed by Ramin Bahrani entirely by accident. I've never shown students a film version of the novel, so I was intrigued. I was surprised to find, after reading up, that it received mixed reviews. Reviewers lauded its acting but criticized its use of too much modern technology, ham-handed future speak and some of the directorial choices in adding or removing content from the original. Still, there seemed to be so many questions raised in the potential of a modern remake that would be valuable

to my students -- particularly given their reactions to the school board activity. Additionally, the outcome of the reviews raised questions about the expectations viewers have for film adaptations of classic literature -- that would allow students to investigate more deeply the novel and the film as separate texts.

In this unit, students will view Bahrani's 2018 film *Fahrenheit 451* in conjunction with a reading of Bradbury's novel. As they watch, they will consider the complications of translating a dystopic novel like *Fahrenheit 451* into a modern context. Students will consider how the director uses the techniques of film to tailor a message specific to a 2018 audience and whether the changes made effectively beg the viewer to question society.

Content Objectives

"This is a book of warning," Neil Gaiman wrote in an introduction to the novel *Fahrenheit 451* written in 2013. He goes on to consider the questions asked by science fiction or speculative fiction about imagined futures: they can ask what if, if only and if this goes on. He writes, "'If this goes on…' fiction takes an element of life today, something clear and obvious and normally something troubling, and asks what would happen if that thing, that one thing, became bigger, became all-pervasive, changed the way we thought and behaved."[1]

Gaiman's description eloquently explains the genre of dystopian fiction - arguably, the most effective dystopic stories imagine a future not for the purpose of looking forward to wonder what will happen, but instead to use a future to reflect on our present. In this way, dystopian stories have a complicated relationship with time. In many ways they are ephemeral, latched closely to a particular moment and aged quickly to obsolescence as time marches forward. Bradbury's novel -- Gaiman calls it a "period piece" -- ties itself tightly to 1950s America. It deals with the advancing ubiquity of the home television and its potential to disconnect people from others, a discomfort with dissension and anti-American fears brought on by the Cold War and very real episodes of book burning and censorship.

Some of their features, however, linger a bit despite the world changing around them. Though these elements have not ceased to be problems of the modern age, they've certainly evolved -- Bradbury's seashell ear pieces are today's wireless earbuds, the fears of all-enveloping television watching haven't been quelled with Hulu and Netflix. State-sponsored censorship through systematic book burning may seem futile with the advent of eBooks and iClouds, but now we grapple with whether to regulate Facebook as it selects which stories pop up on our newsfeeds and which don't see the light of day.

In reflecting on the rise of dystopic literature's popularity in young adult books, Serafini and Blasingame comment that dystopian worlds are "a vaguely recognizable condition," but give enough space to separate the problems readers deal with from the immediate present to give the ability to process them. The world must be recognizable, it must appear feasible to the reader -- but not so far separated that they can disconnect from it fully.[2]

Chris Berg writes that typical dystopian stories focus on the protagonist's rebellion against an overbearing, totalitarian state, and reflects society's fears of that kind of rule. "The dystopia…differs from traditional science fiction by its emphasis on political and social systems rather than science or technology, and therefore allows filmmakers to speculate wildly on the political future."[3] Berg argues that dystopian stories (specifically, films) in the last half century have often failed in their political message because their representation of the

state is too unrealistic. The most effective dystopias -- he points to *A Clockwork Orange* -- exaggerate a current condition, but importantly, more accurately pinpoint the recognizable problems of the society they hope to criticize.[4] It's clear from both of these analyses that a really important issue for dystopian stories is the distance from reality created in the "alternate tomorrow" of the text.

At times, dystopian stories also attempt to present "solutions," if sometimes inchoate, to the problems raised by the political commentary of the story. Jack Zipes argues, in his essay "Mass Degradation of Humanity and Massive Contradictions in Bradbury's Vision of America in Fahrenheit 451," that though the book is inextricably tied to 1950s America, it fails to envision an appropriate vehicle for solving the problems. "Fahrenheit 451 is structured around fire and death as though it were necessary to conceive new rituals and customs from the ashes of an America bent on destroying itself and possibly the world."[5] I think what he means is that as important as the believability of the problem is, its solution must also be feasible. The reader must be able to reflect on their current society and their own behavior, but there must also be a reasonable lesson to be learned, or the mission of the dystopian story will fail.

The dystopian story's distance from the reality of its context becomes especially salient in film, and even more complicated in adaptation. Not only does the director need to create the dystopian world in a way that effectively engages the viewer in a current political or social message with the film, they also wrestle with the audience's knowledge of the source text.

Though fidelity to the text is not the question of this unit, a film adaptation will always live in the shadow of its base text, for better or worse. Phil Nichols refers to Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* in pointing out that adaptations are works of art that comment or are in conversation with the source text and that viewer's thoughts will "oscillate actively between the original work and the adaptation even as they read or watch."[6] The interplay between the two texts cannot be avoided and, hopefully, can be a boon to the director.

Linda Costanzo Cahir addresses the question of fidelity and interplay between texts; she calls films based on literature "translations," rather than adaptations, because they are a transfer of a text from one medium to another and results in a "materially different entity…one that simultaneously has a strong relationship with its original source, yet is fully independent from it."[7] Any act of translation is necessarily an interpretation; because the text now exists in a different medium, it is impossible for it to simply move, or adapt. It must change because of the impossibility of exactly replicating a book on film.

When evaluating the effectiveness of a translation, one must also understand what kind of translation it is - Cahir names them literal, traditional or radical. A literal translation "reproduces the plot and its attending details as closely as possible to the letter of the book;" a traditional translation changes details as the filmmaker "sees necessary or fitting;" and a radical translation "reshapes the book in extreme and revolutionary ways," offering a new interpretation and separating the film farther from the source text.[8] Each mode has its strengths and weaknesses; literal translations bring the world of the book to life, but "tend to fail at plumbing the depths of the book's ideas."[9] Traditional and radical translations often allow for a deeper exploration of concepts, and they inevitably carry with them the interpretations of the filmmakers that may not adhere directly to the source text.

Because of the relative freedom of the traditional or radical translation, one could argue that film might do a better job of conveying the particular political message of a dystopic story. Bahrani seems openly to only comment in reverence of the novel, so the chances that he was trying to assert with his film that film was the more appropriate vehicle to untangle the questions raised by this book is unlikely. However, it may happen

that in 2018, this fact is true despite the author's intentions.

The Questions of the Novel

Embarking on his adaptation, Bahrani said that he "vowed to be true to [Bradbury's] ideas" -- that, at their heart, they were still relevant, if not more so, today.[10]

The narrative keystone in *Fahrenheit 451* is the state-sponsored banning and burning of books. Guy Montag, the main character, is a fireman charged with ensuring that clandestine stores of books, wherever they turn up, are erased with fire. Montag relishes his work in the beginning -- "it was a pleasure to burn" is the first line of the novel -- but he quickly questions why and whether what he is doing is right. Montag has allies and enemies - the first character he meets is Clarisse, a young girl who seems insane because she doesn't fit in. She refuses to conform and she asks difficult questions. Mildred, Montag's wife, is the opposite - a ghastly, empty woman who worries about her "friends" and buying a fourth TV screen for their living room rather than the world around her. Beatty, Montag's boss, spouts propaganda and urges Montag to stay the course, trying to convince him that what the firemen are "custodians of our peace of mind."[11] Faber, an aging former professor, gives Montag the push he needs to finally rebel.

In the world of Fahrenheit 451, books are banned not because of a government decree but because people wanted them gone. Beatty, Montag's captain and the novel's ambassador of state propaganda, explains that "the bigger the market, Montag, the less you handle controversy!" In needing to please more diverse groups of people, information had to be more of a nice blend of "vanilla tapioca."[12] We didn't learn to accept or appreciate difference; instead we burned it. The books Beatty, Montag and the firemen burn are quickly realized to be symbols for ideas, intellectualism, questioning, disagreement. These things can certainly exist or be done without books, though at the time, the alternatives -- television, film and radio -- were much less pervasive.

Though the steps that follow are outgrowths of a desire to avoid confrontation, they are also actions reinforced by the state to maintain the people's mollification. The only shows pumped through the airwaves lack substance - Mildred loves *The White Clown* and describes a plot where a group discusses how great an unidentified idea is.[13] Faber admits that television could contain the same information that books do - it just doesn't. "There is nothing magical in them at all," Faber says. "The magic is only in what the books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us."[14] School teaches "an hour of TV class, an hour of basketball or baseball or running, another hour of transcription history, of painting pictures, and more sports."[15]

Clarisse, Montag's herald into a world of questioning and critical thought, laments the loss of other hallmarks of thinking and social interaction. The architects have rid houses of front porches because, she says, "they didn't want people sitting like that, doing nothing, rocking, talking; that was the wrong kind of social life. People talked too much. And they had time to think."[16] As we read, we increasingly come to realize that what's material here is the way that people communicate -- what they talk about, how they handle ideas, and even when and where they are allowed to think and talk at all.

The practices of the fireman attempt to separate books from the people who held them. The police went ahead of the firemen and cleared out the living. "You weren't hurting anyone, you were only hurting *things*" and this allowed a cognitive dissonance. He was not harming anyone; ultimately the book was inanimate, not alive. However, after Montag begins questioning the burning, he is confronted with a woman who refuses to

leave her books. Books begin to take on life: a book “lit, almost obediently, like a white pigeon, in his hands, wings fluttering” and they “fell like slaughtered birds” as he burnt. Later they lay “like great mounds of fishes left to dry” and “titles glittered their golden eyes, falling, gone.”[17] It doesn’t seem coincidental that this kind of description comes along with Montag’s witness of a woman burning herself alive. The book goes on to confound books and people, until they are so inseparable that books become people (or, people become books) at the end of the story.

The people of this alternate tomorrow, ultimately, were seeking comfort -- the freedom from worry, sadness, confusion -- which, they think, they have found in a world with vapid television shows, empty schooling, little socializing and no books. It becomes clear early in the novel that this comfort is empty. Clarisse asks Montag, “are you happy?” (7) -- as readers, we believe this is what sets him on his path of questioning, but we later learn that months earlier he met Faber in the park and had kept his phone number. We also know that Montag has already been stashing books. Something started in him before; something about an existence that was supposed to provide comfort did not, even before the catalyst of Clarisse.

The book struggles with the idea of happiness -- what truly makes happy? It wasn’t the world before, and it isn’t this one, either. At the end of the story, civilization is destroyed by a nuclear bomb; those left, Granger’s wanderers carrying books in their minds, will start anew. Will they be able to construct a better world from the ruins of this one? It’s not clear, and the book really provides no answer to what that world might be. Montag screams at Mildred that reading and talking about ideas might help us avoid making the same mistakes. *Might.*

Though people were responsible for creating this world, books alone will not save or reconstruct it - that will also have to come from people. Zipes criticizes *Fahrenheit 451* for its hypocrisy - he claims that it blames the masses for resisting intellectualism, then asserts that an elite group (the intellectuals representing books in Granger’s group) will be responsible for solving the problems of the society. To Zipes, this solution seems inadequate - it “defends humanity but has no faith in the masses.”[18] Zipes points to this as elitism -- that intellectuals will be the ones to save humanity from itself, but I think the contradiction isn’t untenable. It’s possible that, with some sort of enlightenment and new understanding, characters who are not “elites,” like Montag, can come to see the importance of the exchange of ideas to society's well-being.

Fahrenheit 451 seems to point to a problem that also contains the best possible solution -- if the thing that is lost isn’t just knowledge, but the connection between humans that brings that knowledge alive, then that connection is what might save a world like this one. Even though Clarisse challenges and upsets Montag, she also likes him and knows him.[19] She shares vulnerable moments with him that, in and of themselves, are not “intellectual,” but instead bridge the gap between a lonely Montag and the rest of the world. The ability of Granger’s vagabonds to rekindle society from the ashes of one that humans destroyed may be grandiose, but something about the ability of people to learn to understand and exchange with each other is reassuring.

The Questions of the Film

The opening sequence of Bahrani’s *Fahrenheit 451* is a series of burning books.[20] The books are shot in extreme close up to focus the viewer on the unsettling act of fire eating paper -- we can almost see the threads of each page being unwoven by the growing flame. We see beloved words of classics eaten by expanding black rings, we see grotesque bubbles grown in paper by heat expand before they pop into a full flame that engulfs the page. The camera cuts quickly, so the viewer barely recognizes the work before the next is burnt. *As I Lay Dying*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Lolita*.

Using the term “better” can suck us into the kind of comparison that Cahir warns about -- and certainly our goal should not be to say whether the film is “as good as the book” if what we really mean to talk about is whether it was *faithful* to the book. But, this is a story about the conveyance of knowledge and ideas, how ideas are shared and questioned and eventually manipulated by people making use of the vessels that hold them, whether that is a book, a television broadcast, a server or something else. There is something to be said about whether a film can effectively, possibly more effectively, convey these truths.

Phil Nichols wrote, in his critique of the 1966 Truffaut film, “the visual showing of the burning books can have a stronger, almost visceral impact than the verbal ‘telling’ of the same scene in a novel.” (101). This impact works on two levels in Bahrani’s version. As film viewers, we see something we were only asked to imagine when reading the novel. Bradbury uses vivid metaphors to bring the burning books to life, but the images are still only in our imagination. In just the opening sequence of Bahrani’s film, we are startled, captivated, disgusted, horrified by the image of pages burning. On a second level, the burning acts as a spectacle and a metaphor for the tight reign the government holds on all kinds of information. Beatty admits repeatedly that the firemen are hardly necessary anymore because there are so few physical copies of books remaining. For the residents of this alternate tomorrow, seeing the books burn might be as startling to them as it is to us.

The broadcast of book burning creates an interesting parallel to our modern tendency to watch the news play out on social media and to participate in “Facebook activism.” In both our world and the world of Bahrani’s film, we see things happen that were much more difficult to see in the 1950s era of the novel and even five years ago for us. When the residents of Cleveland see Montag and Beatty burning books and arresting EELs, they can immediately comment in support and “like” it and will reinforce or form an opinion immediately. Seeing controversy play out in front of our eyes is a tool of truth but also a tool of control. We have more information than we have ever had, but is that information being used purposefully, as the staged burnings by the firemen are, to control our opinions?

Both levels underscore the importance of visuals to the way we see and feel an event and the way that we are able to react to it -- and it also reinforces that this is something film can do that books simply cannot. This becomes apparent in another scene that is not present in the novel -- a group of students, lined up in rows in a school gymnasium, wearing identical uniforms and absolutely eating up the admonitions of Beatty and Montag against the written word. It is a jarring act of brainwashing that previously we only heard through the voices of other characters -- Clarisse’s description of her superficial classes or Beatty’s scourge on the masses not wanting intellectual challenge and schools following suit.

Bringing to life this twist on Fire Safety Day - where instead of stop, drop and roll the students watch the firemen burn books, things they have *never seen in real life* -- makes the absence of education much more salient and also reinforces to us the ways that our schools might not just fail to teach anything of substance but can actively do harm to children. In the scene, there is a sequence of shots where the camera switches from panning across the rows of students and following Beatty and Montag as they pace the room to three abrupt cuts. First, it positions itself in front of the students to show the rows and rows of them chant “happiness is truth.” Then, it quickly cuts to a high-angle shot from behind that shows the entire auditorium, including the firemen up on the stage in front, as they chant “freedom is choice.” Then, it cuts to Beatty, Montag and the fireman filling the shot. They’re arranged symmetrically in a tableau - a frozen picture - and chant “self is strength.” The entire sequence recalls the uniform lines and structure of a Nazi rally. Of course, the act of burning books also directly refers to the burning of literature in Nazi Germany; this scene visualizes the sort of brainwashing that led to those acts and calls on our deepest fears about the loss of diverse ideas and intellectualism could lead us to do, beyond just burning literature.

These opening sequences complicate the book's mantra that "people didn't want books anymore, so they got rid of them." That statement obviously oversimplifies (one of) the book's messages, but the film, through the scenes above, creates a complexity that would be challenging to articulate - visuals can play a troublesome role (the way that we, almost voyeuristically, can watch the news unfold in front of our eyes and react to it immediately) as well as a illuminating one (the reality of seeing actual books burned and witnessing the brainwashing of our children remind of us those acts in history). The visuals, in a subtle way, heighten the connections we make to our contemporary situation as well as allusions to the past. Both of these scenes conjure a more sinister feeling through this complexity.

Throughout the film, Bahrani capitalizes on the way that the genre allows him to subtly raise questions and contemplate issues. Countless scenes assert a film's ability to develop ideas more deeply and in some cases more subtly than a book would, and that creates the appropriate dystopic distance for the story's social critique to be effective in 2018.

A reading of this film would be incomplete without considering the ways it deals with "the other." The book raises the issue in some quite obvious ways - those who question society's norms or who dance to their own music, so to speak, are eliminated (as in the case of Clarisse, who is taken away and likely killed, and the woman who burns herself alive rather than abandon her books and the pursuit of ideas). Montag himself, when he reaches the apogee of his awakening, has to flee the city to escape persecution and joins a group of vagabonds who must also live on the outskirts because of their nonconformity.

The film carries this idea forward -- they are called "EELs" for illegals, and they exist as a subclass of citizens whose identities (down to their fingerprints) are erased as punishment for their crimes against people's happiness. It's made clear early in the film that one becomes an EEL when they are caught with "graffiti," the term society uses to refer to literary contraband. As the film progresses, we see distinctions between those who are EELs and those who are not. The EELs are a diverse group -- more women and non-white people than the only other groups we see, the firemen, who are predominantly white men.

And then there's the fact that Montag is black. On a first watch, it's easy to overlook the significance of his race -- it's never mentioned outright. It doesn't present itself as an obvious form of conflict - Montag isn't struggling to fit in because of his race or overcoming outright prejudice. There's no mention of any recent civil rights struggles, and though the notion that there are black people in this society at all is certainly reflected, their place in it isn't talked about. The other black characters in the film (there are a few), appear as EELs. It seems mind-boggling that this wasn't purposeful and that this story wouldn't be, at least in part, about race -- there's no way an Iranian director casts a black actor in the lead role of a story where all the characters were white without it carrying meaning.

It might be entirely possible that Montag doesn't realize he is black; or, that for him, at this point in the development of this society, his blackness is not a distinctive feature for him. One of the daily rituals for Montag, and ostensibly for everyone in this society, is the use of eye drops that obscure memory. In the second sequence of the film, Montag has visions of a dark, hazy corridor in an old home. The camera cuts back from the vision to a close-up of Montag's face, illuminated only by the light of a match. It then cuts back to the vision and this time there is a young black boy in the hallway. Given this editing, the viewer immediately understands that this is a young Montag. At this point, this is all Montag (and the viewer) sees in the vision; as the film progresses and Montag begins to skip his eye drops, more of the vision becomes clear. He sees an older black man, who we know is his father because of a cut to a shot of a fire helmet belonging to Granger Montag. His father hands him a book, pages open. Later, as Montag violently assaults an EEL in hopes

of gaining information, he has the vision that reveals his father being assaulted by a group of firemen. He realizes that he has been lied to his entire life -- Beatty has told him that his father was a heroic firefighter who died in the Second Civil War. Beatty often calls him son and says, at one point, that he essentially raised him. It's never said that Granger Montag was killed because he was black; but the image of a black man beaten at the hands of an authority figure calls up a very real and unavoidable condition of America that continues to the present.

There are only a few scenes in the movie where race is discussed overtly. One of those is the scene in which Beatty lectures Montag about the origin of society's hatred for books. He talks about Huck Finn and "his n____ friend." Beatty says, "the whites knew that the blacks would be offended. So we burned it." Then he moves on to *Native Son* and says that the whites didn't like it. Montag asks why, but Beatty doesn't respond. The question hangs in the air both for the characters and for the viewer -- why doesn't Montag seem more concerned, given his identity? Why wouldn't Beatty respond?

Beatty's rattling off of the reasons books were burned closely mirrors the novel -- various "minority" groups weren't pleased with the content of certain books, so to keep them happy, the books were burned. It's possible that the idea that Montag's race makes him different is incomprehensible to him by design. Not only were minority opinions eliminated, and ideas that offended minority groups, but the awareness of being a minority itself is now gone. Because conflicting ideas made people unhappy, they wanted rid of them. The same could be said for the conflicting identities of minorities. "We're not born equal, so we must be made equal by the fire," Beatty says earlier in the film.

Montag never considers his otherness. But the film suggests in multiple ways the problems with this kind of post-racial world by presenting the "solutions" as moments in which diversity is included and (subconsciously) celebrated. Both the problem and the solutions are not directly addressed by the film - the characters don't discuss why Montag is one of the few black firefighters, or what happened to his black father, or exactly why *Native Son* was upsetting to white people (ironically, probably because it talked about race). Though there is an absence of direct "dealing" with these issues, they are made salient by visual depiction. We notice Montag's blackness, and notice the conspicuous lack of discussion, so the issue is present in our minds anyhow.

Over the course of the film, Montag develops a bond with Clarisse, who (surprise!) isn't dead. Their closeness intensifies slowly over the film -- when we first see them together, Montag is watching from afar as Beatty and Clarisse exchange information. Later, Montag seeks her out and they go to her apartment to talk. They initially make pains to stay far away from each other -- the camera follows them as they circle the room, reminiscent of a dance. Montag opens her drawers and touches her records, actions which seem invasive yet endearing. The camera repeatedly shoots Clarisse keeping her distance or turning away from Montag, while he faces her head on in a medium shot. The scene begins to build their intimacy when she reads to him from his copy of *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The most startling and emotive part of this sequence is when Clarisse pulls out a harmonica -- as she plays, she moves closer to Montag and eventually sits next to him on the edge of her bed. She hands the harmonica to him and asks him to try; when he fails, she puts her hands over his to show him how to manipulate the air to make music. The camera frames the two in close up and Clarisse smiles as he plays and they look into each other's eyes -- this is their moment of connection.

This scene brings to life the act of sharing things of beauty-- something about the connection of the two characters because of the sound of Dostoevsky's words or harmonica music amplify the ability of that sharing to bridge the gaps between different people. The sequence makes a statement - subtly - about the things that

are being stamped out in this society that might actually provide the true happiness that everyone is seeking.

Montag and Clarisse are clearly very different - both in their upbringings, as a fireman and EEL, but also their skin color. Clarisse has an accent, but it's never made clear exactly where it's from -- she only says she was "raised by EELs to be an EEL pretending to be a native." Earlier, Clarisse references the fact that there are only 16 different languages left in the world. She asks Montag rhetorically why he thinks they would create only one language for "The 9," the state-controlled internet. He fires back with a line clearly pelted at him by the state propaganda machine - "for the connection and happiness of all natives." Montag slows on the phrase "the natives," realizing a truth that Clarisse (and the film as a whole) is hoping to reinforce -- that even the control of information is something people wanted, the state has doubled down and for a nefarious purpose. Using the term "the natives" sets them apart from the "illegals" in the film, but that language also calls to mind our contemporary struggle with those who "belong" in America and those who don't.

Bahrani pays careful attention to the scene in which Montag, with Clarisse, meets a group of EELs who parallel the group of vagabonds in the novel that carry on important works via memory. Instead of a group of intellectuals who remember primarily canonical works by white men, the "vessels" in the film are a more diverse set, both in identity and in the books they carry. A black woman remembers Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*; another black girl *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. An Asian woman carries *The Little Red Book* of quotations from Mao Zedong. Overwhelmingly, the books they carry "fit" their identities, and the scene is shot to show them in a tableau, arranged so purposefully as if they are books on a shelf come alive.

None of these sequences openly discuss issues of race or otherness, but it is clear that Bahrani hopes to evoke the notion that minority identities and opinions have been marginalized, if not eliminated in this world and that the resistance to these mechanisms of the state includes valuing diversity. The film can raise this without speaking about it openly through the actors cast and the choices made in staging and filming the scenes.

A final question the film can answer subtly and that will bring the dystopia closer to a modern audience is whether burning books really matters. I think through the analysis presented above, I've hopefully conveyed that I believe this film shows that the books are a superficial part of the problem. To say that this is a movie about burning books would be to gloss over the real issue, which is actually the eradication of communication and intimacy among people, the embracing of diversity and the willingness to hold in your mind an unanswered question or a complicated truth.

Throughout the film, Bahrani presents a plethora of technology that can contain or transmit information. The alternate tomorrow of the film is rich with information in a way the 1950s simply could not be. There are giant TV screens in Montag's house, like the novel, but television feeds are also displayed on the sides of skyscrapers, making Montag a literal larger-than-life hero. There is a constant feedback loop on "The 9," the state-sponsored broadcast / internet hybrid. There's Yuxie, the personal assistant that also acts as surveillance. There are servers and the "Dark Nine" where the EELs upload texts.

And there are still old-fashioned media like film strips, postcards, and pen and paper -- Montag's secret store, rather than just books, is filled with a canister containing 35 mm strips from *Singing in the Rain*, an old blockbuster VHS tape and a postcard featuring Washington, D.C. Beatty keeps a pen locked in his safe; he writes quotations from great works on cigarette rolling paper before burning them away. Including these vestiges of "old" modern technology alongside the hyper-new suggests that as certain media become obsolete, new ones will replace them -- it isn't so much what the medium is, but what's done with it.

This theme is certainly also present in the novel and it's made even more real by the closing sequences of the film. The EELs have discovered an ability to splice a bird's DNA with the collected "graffiti" so that it can eventually be transferred to other animals, so widespread that it could never be eliminated. Montag is tasked with finding a transponder so the bird can meet up with a Canadian scientist. In the final scene, as Montag is caught by Beatty, he releases the bird through a hole burn**ed** in a barn filled with books. The bird flies away, joins a flock of other birds that dance through the twilight. Just before, Montag is killed by Beatty.

The fact that the bird, with all of humanity's knowledge, survives while the people die and the books are burned suggests that there is something important about books themselves, but stories are not important in themselves; it's about the enlightenment of ourselves and connection to others that those stories create. Montag dies at the end of the film, rather than joining the vagabond crew and memorizing a book of his own. But he has become one of those who *understands*, something that the government has tried to subdue with fire, but cannot.

Teaching Strategies

Close Reading Film

The analysis provided above focuses on a few key themes that I felt best underscored the ways a film can develop ideas in a deeper way than a novel. This is not an extensive analysis and, of course, there may even be counterexamples.

Teachers should select a key sequence to use as a model for analyzing film, using it as an opportunity to demonstrate the use of film language and to model the skill of close reading. Students should pay particular attention to the choices made by the filmmakers -- they can look at the kinds of shots, use of color and light, and editing as well as narrative choices made in the construction of the story.

After modeling, teachers can decide to allow groups or individual students to close-read more independently and even select scenes on their own to analyze with the guidance of a larger question -- how do the filmmakers' choices impact the larger meaning or theme of the film?

Student-led Discussion

Because of the wide range of themes and questions that can arise from the close reading of film, and the sheer number of things that can be noticed about the choices in film, the activities in this unit will lend themselves particularly well to student-led, inquiry-based discussion.

Once students are equipped with close reading skills for film, the teacher should create situations where students can ask their own questions and decide the course of the discussion based on their own answers and those of their peers. With students that are new to these kinds of discussions, it may help for the teacher to have prepared a series of questions to propel discussion in the event the**y** are needed; once students gain confidence, the teacher may be able to stay out of the discussion almost entirely as a controlling force and can contribute instead as a learner.

Student-led discussions allow for varying voices to be given equal tread in the discussion -- there isn't a

“right” answer in response to a teacher’s question, but instead there are paths for various questions and answers to be validated by peers’ acknowledgement.

It’s important to set up norms for discussion so that students understand how to “behave” in this type of situation, especially since, for some, it can be very different than the expectations in other classrooms. As much as possible, students should create norms and protocols themselves so they can take ownership of the discussion and classroom environment. This will also help teach the skill of collaborative discussion that is essential to many academic and workplace environments.

Some examples of norms can include: listen to peers’ responses, build a conversation rather than merely giving an answer, raise hands to speak, the facilitator chooses participants, make an effort to ask for the opinions of those who haven’t participated, balance voices in the discussion.

Teachers can set up structures for tracking participation and assigning grades, if they wish; this type of discussion, however, is often useful at times when students need to explore a new topic or idea, so grading may not always be appropriate.

Student-created Questions

Whenever possible, students should be encouraged to ask questions about texts. Questions may arise naturally from curiosity or ideas presented by the teacher or other students; at times, purposeful questioning should also be taught so that students learn patterns of thinking that will help them think critically and close-read texts in the future.

I teach students the acronym “HOTS” to help them remember how to form questions that are high-level (upper levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, rather than merely recall or comprehension), open-ended (to encourage thorough responses), text-based (encourage and/or require evidence from the text as support) and several possible answers (allow for multiple interpretations that can be supported).

Student questions can be used to begin a student-led discussion; they are also useful for creating writing prompts or beginning further research into a text.

Classroom Activities

School Board Process Drama

Traditionally, I have done the activity described in the introduction when students have read most of the novel. This activity can be used at that time, using text evidence from the book, or could be adapted to use the film as evidence.

Set up

Decide on the framework for the process drama activity. The important piece is to have a central question and a deliberative body who must come to a decision about that question. I have had the class form a board of directors of a school district that is considering banning Fahrenheit 451. If you’d rather use the film and

update the activity, a nice way to start might be to ask students to come up with a problem that arises from their discussion of the film. For example, students might identify social media as a problem because it encourages people to focus on getting "likes" and can distort their perception of reality because of fake news. Students could then decide on the question and the body to deliberate – maybe they are legislators aiming to pass a law censoring political content from Facebook. Or, they might remain a school board and question whether to ban the use of social media at school. The key here is to have students focus on a problem that is brought up and considered by the dystopic elements of the novel and film.

Students should be given specific roles so they can prepare for the activity. In the school board activity, nine students were school board members, six students played parents, six students played students, several students acted as teachers and the rest were other stakeholders in the school community. I assigned students a "position" so that at least some students would be forced out of their own personal opinion and to make an argument they didn't necessarily agree with (though school board members were allowed to "switch" when they voted).

Students were given a graphic organizer to prepare the key arguments on their side of the issue and organize evidence in support (mainly from the text, but they were invited to add real-world examples). This prep took the majority of a 40 minute class period so students had ample argument and evidence for the activity.

Activity

I allotted a 40 minute period for the "school board meeting" and vote. I created an agenda for a meeting that included time for introducing the problem, parents, students, teachers and community members to give short statements, school board members to discuss and time for a vote. The specific times for each part can vary depending on class size and student willingness to share. An easy modification for classes reluctant to participate is to assign speaking spots ahead of time so students know when they will be asked to speak and for what duration (I suggest 2 minutes).

After the activity, students should reflect (in writing or discussion) on how their own views aligned or diverged from the arguments of their role and the arguments of other stakeholders in the discussion. They should also reflect on ways that the activity helped to stretch their own thinking on the topic and to what extent it changed or complicated their opinion.

Book Chat

At the end of the novel, Montag joins a group of vagabonds who have each memorized a book to preserve; this scene is mirrored in the film, though the people and books are much different.

This activity asks students to imagine they are in a world in which books are banned and select a book that they believe is worthy of saving. They should then select a passage (between 10-20 lines) to memorize and present to the class. They should also write a short essay that explains why they chose the book, calling on themes and ideas that arise in class discussion of the book and film. For example, a student might select a book that they feel connects to their identity, much like the characters in the film.

I have had students "present" their passages by sitting around a campfire, as though they are one of the vagabonds that escaped the city in the novel. The campfire could be adapted to mirror the film (though, it is fun to create a fake fire out of paper and have campfire sounds and s'mores as snacks).

After students have shared, they should reflect on the difficulty of memory as a way of preserving literature and whether it is an effective method of preservation (specifically in reference to the end of the film, where the human books are complemented by storing the data in the bird DNA). They should also reflect on the text choices and what might be missing from their collection. I have also asked students to reflect on the value of literature in general – to what extent should we treasure it? Why is it something we keep and study in school? These are big questions that can begin with the novel, continue with the film and be further dealt with in this activity and culminating project.

Curriculum Addition – Group Activity

Students should select a text that they believe should be added to the curriculum at their school and write an essay that argues for its inclusion. Their essay should include references to the ideas in Fahrenheit 451, both novel and film, but should also draw on other sources. The first step is for students to create criteria for placing a text in the curriculum, which can include text difficulty, cultural diversity, themes and skills to be taught, etc. Most importantly, students should generate this list based on their reading and viewing of the novel and film.

Students should work in a group to select and read a text, write the argumentative essay and create a presentation to share with the class. The parameters of this activity can be adjusted to meet the needs of your students. I have used groups of 4-5 and given free rein on text selection; you might make the groups smaller and vary the requirements of the essay or give more specific instructions for book selection.

One of the key challenges of this assignment is collaborative writing; you may want to instruct students directly in group management skills or assign specific roles to group members. Students who are more advanced in collaborative work can have more freedom to design their own roles.

Resources

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Appendix

Standards

This unit is written for use in a 9th grade classroom, though could easily be adapted for other grade levels and for mainstream or advanced students. Because students are reading the novel and viewing scenes in the film, the unit should span at least 4 instructional weeks (20 days of 40 minute periods). Teachers who do the culminating activity listed above may want to increase the duration to allow more time for research, writing and presentation.

The following Pennsylvania Core standards for English Language Arts, grades 9-10, are addressed in this unit:

CC.1.3.9–10.A Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.1.3.9–10.B Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as inferences and conclusions based on an author’s explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

Students will use evidence throughout the unit as they close read both the novel and the film. They will use this evidence to make claims about theme and its development in both texts.

CC.1.4.9–10.X Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Students should write regularly throughout the unit, including shorter pieces where they reflect or answer high level questions about passages in the text and scenes in the film, and longer pieces (some of which are described in the classroom activities above).

Notes

1. Neil Gaiman, “Introduction,” in *Fahrenheit 451*, xi.
2. James Blasingame and Frank Serafini, “The Changing Face of the Novel,” in *The Reading Teacher*, 148.
3. Chris Berg, “’Goddamn you all to hell!’: The Revealing Politics of Dystopian Movies,” in *IPA Review*, 39.
4. Berg, 42.
5. Jack Zipes, “Mass Degradation of Humanity and Massive Contradictions in Bradbury’s Vision of America in *Fahrenheit 451*,” in *No Place Else: Explorations in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, 183.

6. Phil Nichols, “Classics Cut to Fit? *Fahrenheit 451* and Its Appeal in Other Media,” in *Critical Insights: Fahrenheit 451*, 95.
7. Linda Costanzo Cahir, in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*, 14.
8. Cahir, 16-17.
9. Cahir, 19.
10. Ramin Bahrani, “Why ‘Fahrenheit 451’ is the Book for Our Social Media Age,” in *The New York Times*, online.
11. Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 56.
12. Bradbury, 55.
13. Bradbury, 19.
14. Bradbury, 79.
15. Bradbury, 27.
16. Bradbury, 60.
17. Bradbury, 35.
18. Zipes, 194.
19. Bradbury, 26.
20. Bahrani, *Fahrenheit 451*.