

*Films in Books/Books in Film:
Fahrenheit 451 and the Media Wars*

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Four minutes and forty-seven seconds into the film *Fahrenheit 451* sits a strange, striking and distinctly Kittlerian intersection of media technologies. A troop of uniformed men are ransacking an apartment in a search for contraband books. Having rifled through cabinets and furniture with some success, they turn their attention to the TV set and, prising back the screen, uncover the largest hoard of all: a stack of books secreted where the jumble of wires and circuits should be. This is an image worth pausing over. Its immediate effect is incongruity – something on which the film in general trades. In this opening sequence, viewers' expectations are confounded by the slightly absurd mismatch between the seriousness of the search on the one hand, its tension ramped up relentlessly by Bernard Herrmann's Hitchcockian musical score, and on the other hand the innocuousness of its object. It isn't weapons, political dissidents or secret files that the sinister-looking storm troopers are after, but a pile of dog-eared paperbacks. In this future dystopia full of paradoxical reversals, reading is illegal and the job of these 'firemen' is not to put out fires but to burn books.

But the image of a television stuffed with books is prescient as well as incongruous. It undermines our assumptions about media and the relationship between them. The real 'content' of any

medium is always another distinct medium, according to Marshall McLuhan. New media technologies incorporate and synthesize the capabilities of older ones, so that 'the content of the book is speech, and the content of the movie is the novel' (McLuhan 305). But this perversely literal manifestation of his words has a troubling logic that leads us away from McLuhan and in the direction of an altogether different approach to media. The motif seems to undercut McLuhan's developmental trajectory for a start; these books inhabit the space that should be taken up by the technological machinery of the TV, and instead of being effortlessly subsumed into a newer media, they threaten to disrupt its workings. But beyond this, in its absurdity and 'out of placeness', the concept of books inside the TV carries a strange and even dreamlike quality. It could almost function as a dream symbol, in fact. The spectacle of actual novels behind an actual screen doesn't so much illustrate McLuhan's well-known dictum of media theory as refract and distort its logic into a visual pun, much as Freud describes dreams as condensing waking thoughts into apparently nonsensical images.¹ This moment of haunted media is one in which technologies cut across and into one another in unexpected ways, and media theory collides with psychoanalysis and the Freudian uncanny. It is precisely at such dense junctures of technologies, theories and subjectivities that the work of Friedrich Kittler positions itself.

If the discovery of a library inside a TV provides an oblique, unconventional and Kittlerian entry point into a discussion of media interrelations, in the context of *Fahrenheit 451* these interrelations are themselves particularly intriguing. Ray Bradbury's 1953 science fiction novel, a cautionary tale of a future in which reading is criminalized, is a piously humanist defence of Literature and literary values. The film adaptation, released thirteen years later by New Wave auteur Francois Truffaut, does not alter Bradbury's narrative significantly (the film has a novel as its 'content', in other words), but exists in considerable tension with it. If Bradbury's novel is a paean to Literature, then Truffaut's film seems to have a quite different, opposing subtext, in which reading is defamiliarized and the book is an alien object, at odds with the world of the screen. This chapter explores the antagonisms between book and film as played out across the two versions of *Fahrenheit 451*. In the

first instance, I will argue that this fraught relationship between media is to do with the conflict between text and film staged by the central narrative itself, a conflict which ensures Truffaut's remediation of the novel has a paradox built into it from the start. The plot and themes mean that there are problematic issues surrounding the representation of one medium (the printed book) in another (the celluloid film). Second, however, I set out to show that these issues can productively be seen in terms of what Kittler has described as the 'competition between media' (*Gramophone* 153), a competition that arises as a result of the twentieth-century divergence of media channels into the written, the visual and the auditory.

For Kittler, writing is a serial storage medium, one that for centuries enjoyed a monopoly. In the era of German Romanticism (which forms the starting point of his work; see *Discourse Networks*), writing faced no competition, so there was effectively 'no concept of medium' (*Gramophone* 6) at all. For readers in this pre-technological 'discourse network', text was more than mere text. It was able to merge with the inner voice, since literacy was culturally constructed as a kind of 'imaginary orality'. Writing could thus lay claim to a particular kind of magic, conjuring up the sound and even images that no technology could yet store: 'words quivered with sensuality and memory. It was the passion of all reading to hallucinate meaning between lines and letters; the visible and audible world of Romantic poetics' (*Gramophone* 10). The act of reading enabled an imagined dematerialization of the page surface, so that writing enjoyed a very special privilege: it could, in effect, make itself disappear. Readers could forget they were reading and the book 'would forget being a book' (*Discourse Networks* 53). At the close of the nineteenth century, however, when the advent of the typewriter closely coincided with the invention of other technologies able to store sound and moving pictures, media began to develop specialized functions. As Winthrop-Young and Wutz suggest, a 'differentiation of data streams' (xxv) occurs which transforms the book's place in the media ecology. Writing now becomes technologized; but just as importantly, as merely one media channel among others its monopoly is now lost. Film technology, able for the first time in history to record and project moving images, usurps the magic

of writing, and 'feature films take over all of the fantastic or the imaginary, which for a century has gone by the name of Literature' (*Gramophone* 154). The printed page, newly demoted, emerges anew as a two-dimensional, inscribed surface, generating meaning through the pure differentiation of typewritten symbols rather than the transcendent voice of poetry. No longer the ultimate expression of inwardness or spirit, writing becomes visible simply as a series of mechanical marks on a material page.

This new milieu – 'discourse network 1900' – thus introduces an antagonistic relationship between media, one which Kittler frames in characteristically martial terms: 'The real wars are not fought for people or fatherlands, but take place between different media, information technologies, data flows' (*Gramophone* xli). Occupying distinct registers and roles, media now have no option but to cultivate their own specificity. Writing, post-1900, writes about itself, about the materiality and opacity of signs. It writes, so to speak, about what it can do and other media cannot. In the words of the modernist poet Stéphane Mallarmé: 'one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words' quoted in Kittler, *Discourse Networks* 184). Cinema, likewise, participates in the media turf wars of the twentieth century, cultivating its own language, utilizing illusions and devices, conjuring doppelgängers and manipulating the flow of time through camera trickery. 'Books (since Moses and Mohammed) have been writing writing, films are filming filming [. . .] [M]edia have always been advertising themselves', states Kittler (*Gramophone* 155). In what follows, I show how both iterations of *Fahrenheit 451* – Bradbury's text and Truffaut's film – may be seen as what Kittler calls 'discourses on discourse channel conditions' ('The God of Ears', this volume 000). Such (meta)discourses are 'messages about their own medium' (Winthrop-Young 4), but they are also, in this case, messages about the complex interrelations of media, about books in films and films in books.

Ray Bradbury's novel was first published less than a decade after the Second World War, and the spectre of Nazi-orchestrated book-burnings clearly hovers in the background, along with incipient post-war anxieties about threats to liberty and free speech, from McCarthyism on the one hand and communism on the other.² Easily packaged as both a cold-war-friendly message about

individual liberty and a humanist polemic about the value of reading, it was quickly established as a fixture of the American High School Literature curriculum, and brandished over subsequent decades as a mobile and adaptable emblem of the dangers of censorship and cultural vandalism more broadly. Yet, on closer reading, the novel is less concerned with ‘book-burning’ itself than with another threat: the corrosive effects of mass media. The novel’s protagonist, Montag, may be a fireman whose job is to find and destroy illegal literature, but it is clear that the disappearance of books is only partly to do with state control, and mainly to do with the triumph of debased, popular cultural forms. Captain Beatty, Montag’s superior, explains:

[T]he public, knowing what it wanted, spinning happily, let the comic books survive. And the three-dimensional sex magazines, of course. There you have it, Montag. 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. (61)

Even before they were banned, books were rejected by a gullible public seduced by the tawdry and superficial allure of subliterary visual forms. Beatty’s point is embodied by Montag’s wife, Linda. Surrounded by wall-sized TV screens pumping out inane entertainment shows, she is not only uninterested in books, but confused and frightened by them. She is also unable, when questioned, to recall any concrete details about the programmes she watches. This post-literary, amnesiac society has been brought about not by the will of the state, but by the creeping influence of the screen. The novel therefore delivers the familiar refrain of cultural conservatism: that popular culture (and in particular television) will rot your brain. If Bradbury’s novel is a polemic, then its main target actually seems to be popular, primarily visual media, and the threat they present to literary values.³

Truffaut’s film carries a subtext that exists in considerable tension with this polemic, despite implementing only slight changes to Bradbury’s narrative. Whereas in Bradbury’s dystopia only certain (canonical, literary) books are banned, Truffaut’s film depicts a

world in which the printed word has been outlawed completely. From the distinctive spoken-voice opening credit sequence to Montag's pictorial bedtime reading and the blank facsimiles of books he uses in training exercises, this is a world strangely devoid of text, a fact which makes writing seem all the more alien when it does appear. Laura Carroll argues that we are 'pre-sensitised for the scarifying impression of print [. . .] by a staggering demonstration of what it means to be deprived of it', and that the film's close-up shots of burning pages force us to race in order to take in the text almost in the same instant as it is devoured by flames, manipulating and intensifying our desire to read. This may be true, but we are also curiously estranged from text, and forced to see it through fresh eyes. Montag, having taken an illicit copy of *David Copperfield* from its hiding place, begins reading to himself, aloud and awkwardly. The scene has been viewed as an expression of Truffaut's supposed 'reverence for books': Montag's white bathrobe, reminiscent of a monk's habit, could perhaps suggest sacred ritual (Allen 116). However, this is to ignore the distinctive way that the act of reading and the book itself are filmed, not to mention the idiosyncrasies of Montag's unpractised technique. Apparently unsure where the book starts, he begins reading not with page one but with the paratextual publication information and title page. The camera foregrounds his physical interaction with the book, gradually closing in not only on the text, but on his moving finger as he traces it beneath the lines. The page eventually fills the whole screen, but the familiarity of the page surface and this most recognizable of texts, when presented in extreme close-up, is made to seem unfamiliar. The camera movements, ostensibly mimicking the movement of the eye by jerking back and forward across the page, make reading seem unnatural, effortful rather than absorptive, immersive or enjoyable.

And if the act of reading, seen through the eye of the camera, is rendered strange, then so too is the book in general. In Bradbury's novel, images of 'flapping, pigeon-winged books' serve to anthropomorphize them, but also often to lend them a fragile, otherworldly and unmistakably seraphic quality: 'A book alighted, almost obediently, like a white pigeon, in his hands, wings fluttering. In the dim, wavering light a page hung open and it was like a snowy

feather, the words delicately painted thereon' (*Fahrenheit 42*). In contrast to Bradbury's weightless and ethereal books, however, Truffaut's film presents us with volumes that *have* volume. They seem continually earthbound, falling and weighty. The initial book search culminates in a sack of books being thrown from a balcony, splitting open as it hits the ground and spilling its contents in slow motion on the tarmac below. On another occasion, a news report from one of the ubiquitous wall screens itemizes the destruction of illegal books by weight: '2750 pounds of conventional editions, 85 pounds of first editions. 17 pounds of manuscripts'.

Over and over, it is the mass and materiality of books, their dimensions and bulk, their 'thingness', that the film foregrounds. 'I don't want these things in the house' declares Linda, Montag's wife, while he in the course of his work describes them simply as a 'rectangular object'. In a demonstration exercise about how to find such objects, he employs other, similar objects to stand in for them: book-simulacra with entirely blank pages, or else rectangular blocks of wood. Books play a central role in the film, yet aside from Montag's encounter with *David Copperfield*, they are hardly ever depicted in the process of being read. Instead, they feature in ways that draw attention to the space they take up, their physical presence, and, of course, their physical destruction, itemized neatly by Laura Carroll:

Books are hidden, revealed, furtively, or openly handled, fingered, torn, burned. People throw books out of windows, at heads, secrete them in pockets; they slot them into toasters and roll them inside vases; they hoard them inside dummy TV sets, heaters, clocks, laundry baskets, light fittings, cocktail cabinets, and scoop whole shelves of them to the floor.

In Bradbury's novel, books are of course objects, too, but are most often referred to in terms of their contents: Whitman, Thoreau, Faulkner, Shakespeare. The authors' names designate a body of work, a set of texts perhaps, but not a mound of paper. In such canonical lists, it is not books as physical things, but the category of Literature in the abstract that is being evoked. In the film, such abstractions are replaced, inevitably, by the visual reality of specific

editions. And Truffaut's choice of these editions is telling. Where the prop men reportedly collected beautifully bound hardback books for use in the film, the director objected that these were too elegant and promptly replaced them with a much more eclectic set of used books, mostly paperbacks in recognizable cheap editions, many appearing noticeably worn or tatty (Bluestone).

The discovery of an entire hidden library in the attic of a house provides the film's central bibliophobic set piece. Here we see not neat rows of orderly leather spines but messy, teetering piles of books organized according to no discernible system. Cramped and dark, its space difficult to read, this library bears little resemblance to any idealized space of bookish knowledge and enlightenment. The claustrophobic effect is in stark contrast to the uncluttered, spare and blandly futuristic look of the film in general. Panning across the crowded shelves and tables, the camera reveals an indiscriminate array of genres and languages, in all shapes and sizes – pages creased and dirty even before they are thrown onto the pyre. The highbrow mingles with crime fiction, metallurgy primers, children's books, comic strips and snooker manuals in a bizarre mix which bears little relation to the neat canonical list of literary greats presented in Bradbury's novel. Truffaut pans across and cuts between Proust's *Swann's Way*, Charlie Chaplin's autobiography, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, a book of Salvador Dali's paintings, *Cahiers du Cinéma* (a publication in which Truffaut himself regularly featured) and *MAD* magazine. The 'uncomprehending mechanical gaze of the camera' (Carroll) cuts from title to title, registering no qualitative difference between them.

Removed from their shelves and thrown (once again from a height) into the hallway, where they cover the floor in a jumbled mess, these texts then take on the appearance of waste and detritus rather than a collection of individual books. The camera observes in close-up, in almost pornographic detail, as they are first hosed with kerosene and then set alight. Such sustained and detailed book-burning scenes makes Truffaut's film something of an anomaly in post-war cinema. Book pyres undoubtedly make compelling viewing but are rather too thrilling to watch, given that their strong association with Nazism renders them such an uncomfortable and ethically difficult subject and has even, according to

Matthew Fishburn (167), rendered them something of a post-war cinematic taboo. Truffaut exhibits no such qualms about voyeurism, however. His lovingly framed montage sequences of curling and blackening pages, some of the most arresting scenes in the film, create a cumulatively hypnotic effect: 'The lingering close-ups of burning books have a depth and colour that makes them the emotional highlight' (Fishburn 163). There is an ambivalence, to say the least, between the film's ostensible anti-censorship message, and its sheer enjoyment of book-destruction.

But 'why should cinema, after all, deplore the disappearance of books?', ask Denis Hollier and Alyson Waters (Hollier and Waters 16). The death of paper is clearly not film's problem, and so, they suggest, 'Truffaut is led, by the logic of his medium, to something diametrically opposed to the humanist cult of the books associated with Bradbury's novel' (16). The idea leads us back to Kittler's concept of warring media channels, which seems a promising way to frame this cinematic antagonism towards the book. From the outset, the film renders the book strange, transforming this most familiar and benign of objects into something dangerous, illegal and, above all, alien. We are forced to read the world through 'the language of film', in which books are figured in terms of mass, weight and waste rather than textual content (Whalen). They have a disquieting material presence, emanating from unexpected hiding places and proliferating in disorderly piles. They appear where they do not belong, out of place and also out of time, haunting TV sets and inhabiting darkened gothic attics in this otherwise brightly lit and anodyne science fictional future. Truffaut positions the book as an odd, uncanny, anachronistic and occasionally abject thing, and there is no doubt which side his film is on in the war of media. Little wonder that his firemen travel to book-burnings not on an actual fire engine but – in a serendipitous piece of prop provision – on a converted and painted film truck.

To explore this fully, however, we need to revisit briefly Kittler's concept of media, understanding how it is inflected by psychoanalytic theory. The splitting of media channels circa 1900 is something he reads not only in technological but in Lacanian terms, since for Lacan, entry into subjectivity involves a potentially analogous splitting of the psyche. The symbolic order – the realm

of language, system and signification – becomes separated from the imaginary order, the realm of desire and dream. For Kittler, these ‘methodological distinctions of modern psychoanalysis clearly coincide with the distinctions of media technology’ (*Gramophone* 16). Such symmetries make sense because the psychological and the technological, self and media, are always closely bound together. In the words of Nietzsche, which Kittler uses more than once, ‘our writing tools are also working on our thoughts’ (quoted in *Gramophone* 220). And so, since it is ‘[o]nly in the competition between media [that] the symbolic and the imaginary bifurcate’ (*Gramophone* 153), Kittler proceeds to map the media channels of discourse 1900 onto Lacan’s psychic registers. The symbolic order, with its logic of structure and differentiation, he links to the typewritten technology of the written word. Film, meanwhile, corresponds to the imaginary realm. For Lacan, the imaginary realm is so called because it centres on a misrecognition of the self’s wholeness – a delusion necessary in order to sustain the fantasy of a unified, coherent subject. In this sense the self is something of a psychic illusion, and, as Kittler points out, it operates according to the same logic of optical trickery as film, which conjures an illusion of wholeness and continuity from the celluloid reel’s succession of disjointed still images. The third part of Lacan’s triad, the real, is something Kittler maps onto early sound recording technology, which stored not only words but also the raw, unfiltered noise which could not be incorporated into any symbolic system.

Approaching Truffaut’s film in these terms may explain not only its distinctive treatment of books, but also its other idiosyncrasies. *Fahrenheit 451* was a departure for the director on several levels, as his first in colour, his only film in English, and certainly his only dalliance with science fiction. It remains a curio in his oeuvre, and one which many considered a failure. Truffaut’s breezy New Wave aesthetic, transferred to unfamiliar territory both geographically and in terms of genre, left many critics bemused. Those attempting to find humanity and believable relationships in the film were frustrated. It was condemned as ‘unconvincing’, while some of its technical tricks were bizarre or clumsy, and the acting performances – particularly that of Oskar Werner as Montag – were stiff and robotic (see Whalen). But perhaps such criticisms miss the

point. The film may lack 'humanity', but its central subject ~~may not be~~ humanity at all, but rather technology. Just like his later self-referential work *Day for Night*, *Fahrenheit 451* films filming itself, employing tricks and devices unique to film. Repeatedly, it exploits the technical ability to manipulate and reverse the flow of time (the firemen slide up rather than down the pole at the station, while Montag, donning his fireproof suit, is actually taking it off in reverse). It also conjures up doppelgängers in the form of Julie Christie's peculiar dual role as both Montag's zombie wife Linda and mysterious, subversive neighbour Clarisse. Such devices show Truffaut revelling in a distinctively filmic, visual language, but they also seem to hint at a very Kittlerian correlation between media and the unconscious. The film's creaky effects, as well as its curious doubles and its wooden acting, are best understood not as a failure to achieve naturalism, but as examples of a distinctively unreal, uncanny quality, evident in images such as a miniature book retrieved from the pocket of an infant, the solipsistic and sensual self-caressing of passengers on a train, and most bizarrely of all, one of the firemen appearing briefly in drag as a teacher. Truffaut's film often summons up not the 'real' world, whatever that might be, but a dreamlike, fantasy realm, lending weight to Kittler's claim that 'dreams are films and vice versa' (*Gramophone* 159). And, to pursue this logic of juxtaposing the technological and the psychoanalytic, it may be that in staging a conflict between media, the film also produces an uncomfortable meeting of psychic orders. If dreams are indeed films, and vice versa, then the object of the book, when it appears on screen, functions as a troubling intrusion of the symbolic order into the film's imaginary realm. It makes sense that the flat, hard surface of the printed page, seen through the gaze of the camera, seems out of place, or belongs to another sphere of being.

Truffaut's film wages war on the printed word, then, but is the antagonism mutual? It would certainly appear so from the novel's impassioned defence of books, and its polemic against the seductive dangers of the visual. The typewriter, according to Kittler, is a technology 'whose basic action [. . .] consists of strikes and triggers [and] proceeds in automated and discrete steps, as does ammunition transport in a revolver or a machine-gun' (*Gramophone* 191).

And in Bradbury's case, this 'discursive machine-gun' (*Gramophone* 191) – firing relentlessly as he hammered out his novel in just nine days – seems to have the cinema screen firmly in its sights. Yet before positioning the two versions of Fahrenheit 451 in a neatly symmetrical relationship of enmity, we first have to confront a potential obstacle. When Kittler discusses the competition between film and writing, it seems that he has in mind only a specific kind of writing. Since 1900, he argues, literature has aspired to the condition of 'unfilmability', experimenting with its own specific media channel. Mallarmé is Kittler's exemplar of this trait. However, writing that does not correspond to this model of modernist formal experimentation is designated as the 'entertainment novel', a category which, it seems, is more properly seen as a subset of film (*Gramophone* 174). The distinction, as Winthrop-Young argues, is a stark one between 'intramedial autism [and] intermedial serfdom' (63).⁴ One form of writing positions itself in opposition to film, while the other is already a form of 'screenplay', merely awaiting its transition into visual images. Faced with this choice, it is obvious that the label of entertainment writer must be applied to Ray Bradbury, whose work keenly anticipates rather than resists adaptation into film. A writer for whom the boundary between film and print was porous, he described himself as a 'hybrid author', producing no fewer than thirteen screenplays from his own work, adapting four of his novels *from* screenplays, and overseeing seventy-six TV adaptations of his work, including the long-running series *Ray Bradbury Theatre* (Touponce 7). *Fahrenheit 451* is a novel written by a jobbing screenwriter in little more than a week, on a typewriter hired for a dime per half-hour. In Kittler's terms, this was evidently a 'typewritten screenplay' (*Optical Media* 179) even before it was adapted by Truffaut into a movie script. It seems that it could have little or nothing to say about the media channel of writing, since it actually speaks the language of film.

However, while it is certainly true that as a novel *Fahrenheit 451* is implicated in the world of visual media, its attitude towards the screen, and technological media in general, is in reality highly ambivalent. It refuses Kittler's distinction between resistance to, or collusion with, film, and instead develops a complex, if contradictory critique of the intermedial condition of print in the

mid-twentieth century. Through the mouthpiece of chief fireman Beatty, the novel describes the changing nature of the book, and its relationship with technological media:

Picture it. Nineteenth-century man with his horses, dogs, carts, slow motion. Then, in the twentieth century, speed up your camera. Books cut shorter. Condensations, Digests. Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending. (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 58)

Beatty's history lesson is delivered, significantly, using the language of visual media. It is the accelerated, visual sensibilities of film that are responsible for the disappearance of Literature, which demands too much time and thought to be consistent with the demands of modern life. In this speeded-up age, culture has been transformed and traduced by the pace of twentieth-century media and the shortening of attention spans. Print may survive in some form, but literary reading, associated with humanity, emotional depth and the endurance of memory, cannot survive when the book is subsumed into an all-pervasive multimedia environment. The transformation of the book in this twentieth-century technological world has other implications too. Beatty describes the changes wrought by the advent of motion pictures, radio and television:

Things began to have *mass* [. . .] [a]nd because they had mass, they became simpler [. . .] Once, books appealed to a few people, here, there, everywhere. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of eyes and elbows and mouths. Double, triple, quadruple population. Films and radios, magazines, books levelled down to a sort of paste pudding norm, do you follow me? (*Fahrenheit* 58)

In actual fact, this logic is rather difficult to follow. On one level it appears to be a rather garbled account of the emergence of 'mass media' or 'mass communications', terms conventionally used to designate technologies capable of reaching large numbers of people more or less simultaneously. Beatty seems to describe a quantitative change in the audience, as well as a change in its nature which would tally with this reading. Yet there is a strange slippage in the

use of the term 'mass', which is not actually used to refer to this large-scale audience (the masses), as we might expect, but instead is a property of media itself. Things begin to 'have mass', making them problematic in an increasingly crowded world, and somehow leading to the simplification and uniformity of cultural products. Mass media are media that have a *physical* mass – that take up space.

As a media historian, Beatty shares a surprising amount of common ground with Kittler. He describes here writing's incorporation into the technological ecology of media. Like Kittler's, this is a narrative about writing's fall from grace – its transition from universal alpha medium to mere material or 'mass'. Moreover, this sense of the book's materiality is given a certain set of implications by the strange term 'paste pudding', and by the analogous images of 'vanilla tapioca' and 'dishwater' used elsewhere by Beatty (*Fahrenheit* 61). Such terms convey a visceral disgust at the blandness and uniformity of writing in the technological era. They are clearly at odds with the imagery of flight used elsewhere to describe books. Illegal, canonical literature is vaguely seraphic, it seems, whereas permitted, popular types of printed entertainment are mere sludge. But there is something else at work in this persistent mushy imagery that is worth teasing out. The term 'paste' is only a semantic step or two away from another, far more loaded term: 'pulp'. And pulp literature – that lowly, derided milieu of print ephemera – was where Bradbury enjoyed something of a celebrity status. Dubbed 'the poet of the pulps' by *Time* magazine, he spent his early career writing prolifically for such popular SF titles as *Amazing Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Weird Tales*. *Fahrenheit 451* had itself been published in an early, shorter form as 'The Fireman' in Horace Gold's magazine *Galaxy* (Mogen 17). The invitation by Ballantine to extend the story into his first full-length novel was a crucial juncture in Bradbury's career. Leaving behind the cheap, disposable SF magazines with their lurid covers and publishing instead in the relative permanence of book form was a step up on the cultural ladder.⁵ Seen in this context, the novel's visceral disgust at the sordid nature and sludgy 'mass' of popular, subliterary forms acquires a new dimension. It seems to be a rejection of the commercial and all-too-material world of pulp publishing, from which the novel emerges but attempts to

distance itself. To use Kittler's term again, it is a discourse 'on discourse channel conditions'; it is a report on the status of popular print in the mid-twentieth century, with its inescapable materiality and ephemerality, its promiscuously intermedial relationship with film and the visual, and perhaps even its imminent technological obsolescence.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that while it emerges from this 'paste pudding' world of pulp materiality, *Fahrenheit 451* eulogizes a different kind of literary world altogether. It is suffused with a conservative nostalgia for the direct antithesis of its own commercial, media-saturated environment. Montag, the fireman turned bibliophile, reads Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' to his horrified wife and her friends, and the choice of text is by no means an arbitrary one. Bradbury's novel, like Arnold's poem, is a lament for vanished certainties, presenting an Arnoldian view of 'Culture' – as 'the best which has been thought and said' (Arnold 6). Only the written word, conceived as part of this ennobling vision of high culture, promises to restore coherence and even spiritual meaning to life. The kind of reading the novel idealizes is that which belongs to Kittler's discourse network of 1800, prior to the advent of technological media, when 'to read was to raise and cultivate a soul, to internalise the fundamental order of nature and culture' (Winthrop-Young 63). *Fahrenheit 451* longs for the return of the pre-technological, transcendent poetic word, and of an oralized mode of reading epitomized for Kittler by German Romanticism, when text is more than just text, when words change into 'optical acoustic hallucinations' (*Gramophone* 167), and the book could forget about being a book. In short, this is a novel that dreams of its own disappearance.

This disappearance is, in a way, precisely what it tries to enact. It closes with Montag, a wanted criminal, on the run from the authorities. Fleeing the city, he encounters and joins a group of itinerant dissidents dedicated to the preservation of Literature through its destruction. Each commits a book to memory and then burns it. This denouement has often prompted bemusement, since it seems to run counter to the novel's defence of the book. Fishburn states that 'if the novel is a fable which suggests nothing can ever be lost, it is also one in which books are redundant' (163).

True, except that it isn't books themselves that are of primary concern but rather their contents, which are safer preserved in an oral tradition than in print. 'Better to keep it in the old heads, where no one can see it or suspect it' (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 146), as Montag's new compatriots tell him. Books and literature become separated at this point, therefore. Books are mere matter, subject to decay and destruction, whereas their content is immortal. Or, at least, content of a certain kind, since it is only the high-water marks of bookish culture and knowledge that these wandering bookmen are memorizing: Thoreau, Swift, Plato, Darwin and Bertrand Russell. Here, the literary is allied with the philosophical and scientific discourse to constitute an unmistakably virile, masculine canon of writing, in the context of which there is a strong suggestion that burning books is purifying rather than destructive. What rises, phoenix-like, from the ashes of this cleansing fire is words and ideas in their pure form.

Burning is an apotheosis that frees writing from its material receptacle because, in the world of this novel, print can be a problematic thing. On the one hand it can carry Plato or Shakespeare, and on the other hand give rise to 'three-dimensional sex magazines' and other horrors. Books are corruptible, sullied by their incorporation into the paste, sludge and 'mass' of popular culture. Better to dispense with them altogether in an act of cultural purgation. If book-burning is the hallmark of dystopia, it is historically also never far from utopia either, and from a desire to erase the past and start again (Fishburn 10–15). To reinforce the point, the city Montag has escaped is promptly annihilated, and as this technological Sodom and Gomorrah burns in the distance it seems that the slate has been wiped clean, leaving only the enduring wisdom of the canon transformed into human memory and voice. In Bradbury's novel, writing does indeed enter into the competition between media, but it must triumph in the only way it can. It does away not only with its technological rival, the screen, but with the book too. Only in this way, paradoxically, can it restore literature to its pre-technological status as universal medium. Through getting rid of the book itself, the novel stages a nostalgic return to an 'originary orality', recovering 'a transcendent inner voice superior and anterior to [. . .] written language' (Winthrop-Young and

Wutz, xxv). Once again, the book can forget about being a book, and text becomes interiorized, dematerializing into pure voice.

A pyrrhic victory for writing, then. But Truffaut gets his revenge on the written word, and the media wars have a different outcome in the film adaptation even if the closing episode is essentially the same. The notion of Literature without books in one sense allows the film to resolve the tensions inherent in visually representing the printed page. In counterpoint to the claustrophobic and cramped shelves shown earlier, this library of ‘book-people’ wander backwards and forwards in the gently falling snow, absorbed in memorizing and reciting their own text. The contrast with Montag’s earlier laboured reading lesson could not be greater. And so, like the novel before it, the film dispels the base materiality of books in favour of the voice. But there are some crucial differences. The film gleefully dismantles the literary hierarchies that Bradbury’s monastic community strives so earnestly to preserve. Much like the earlier chaotic jumble of books, this human library mixes high and low. Stendhal, Sartre and Dickens mingle with Poe and even, in a wry twist, Bradbury himself. But also, represented visually, these human tomes are made to seem more than a little strange. If their murmured recitations are in contrast to effortful reading, they are also weirdly solipsistic figures, wandering like sleepwalkers, oblivious to one another; murmured and disconnected snippets of different books and different languages becoming audible as they pass in front of the camera. The human library doesn’t so much hold out the promise of an organic cultural community as threaten to dissolve into a meaningless Babel. This is not so much a nostalgic return to ‘imaginary orality’ as a surreal parody of it. Because, of course, there is a deep irony in staging such a return to a pre-technological, oralized mode of reading via the technological medium of film, and this irony is one Truffaut seems to enjoy. The joke is ~~really~~ on the book ~~after all~~. If, as Kittler argues, film has stolen writing’s auditory and visual magic, the only way this magic can now be invoked is through film, not writing. Bradbury’s novel can only *write* about writing’s dematerialization, whereas the film can truly perform a disappearing act on the book. Truffaut has the last laugh: the book might yearn to forget being a book, but the only place this can take place is in on the screen.

Notes

- 1 In chapter 6 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud gives the term ‘rebus’, or puzzle, to such dream symbols which work through the logic of puns and wordplay, and must be decoded in order to reveal the dream’s ‘latent’ meanings.
- 2 Bradbury made explicit the influence of the Nazi *autos-da-fé*, with obvious echoes of Heinrich Heine: ‘When Hitler burned a book I felt it as keenly . . . as the burning of a human. For in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh’ (‘At What Temperature’ 19).
- 3 Roger Luckhurst locates the novel in the context of a more general hostility towards mass culture in the 1950s, but notes the contradiction inherent in using a popular genre – science fiction – as a vehicle for such conservative sentiments (118–19).
- 4 One of the more recurrent criticisms of Kittler is the crudeness of this distinction, and an unwillingness to engage with popular fiction on any meaningful level. See, for example, Luckhurst’s comment that Kittler ‘steadfastly ignores’ science fiction (29).
- 5 As if to illustrate this point, a limited run first edition of *Fahrenheit 451* was produced in asbestos covers. While the fireproof binding obviously works as a tongue-in-cheek punchline to the novel, it also meant that Bradbury’s publications took a slightly comical leap from the ephemeral to the indestructible. The novel’s move out of the realms of the popular and the lowbrow was only partial; it was serialized in early issues of *Playboy* magazine.

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