

The 40th Anniversary of *Fahrenheit 451*

by Paul A. Trout



Last year was the 40th anniversary of the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury's gripping futuristic novel about a dumbed-down American society-of-the-spectacle that pays its "firemen" to burn books. Despite its bleak vision of the future, *Fahrenheit 451* was well reviewed when it appeared, and it soon became ranked with *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as one of the most powerful and alarming dystopias in English—and certainly the best one written by an American. *Fahrenheit 451* has also been popular with the general reader. Since its publication in 1953, it has sold about seven million copies and has never been out of print.

So, where was the anniversary party? Why did this important and riveting novel go virtually unnoticed? National Public Radio remembered the date by interviewing Bradbury one Sunday morning in September, some high school kids—the novel is often taught in secondary schools—created various "451" projects, and Simon & Schuster celebrated by issuing a new anniversary edition, but that was it. Perhaps party hats and helium balloons were too much to expect for a book with such a depressing prognosis, but where were the somber professors and their academic conferences, MLA panels, symposiums, festschriften, and scholarly articles? Hereby hangs an academic tale.

Oddly enough, even during these feverish decades of publish-or-perish, academics have been reluctant to write about *Fahrenheit 451*. The PMLA bibliography from 1966 to 1991 (25 years) lists only 12 articles (in English) on the novel—an article every *other* year! By contrast, there are 57 entries for *Brave New World* (475 percent more) and 290 for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2,416 percent more). Moreover, 30 of the entries for *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are not for single articles but for entire books, making the discrepancy even

more dramatic.

One would think that professional academics imaginative enough to find clever things to say about Petrarchan eroticism in video arcade games and Clint Eastwood as a cultural icon would be able to find tenure-friendly things to say about a dystopian novel that condemns censorship and endorses their own humanistic values and commitments. So why have university scholars given *Fahrenheit 451* the cold shoulder? Because, I think, they do not like what *Fahrenheit 451* says about censorship, especially about the etiology of censorship.

In *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, books are also loathed, feared, and censored, but the censorship comes—one might say—from the top down. In *Brave New World*, censorship is enforced by the Council of World Controllers through an operant-conditioning program that instills an "'instinctive' hatred of books" in its subjects, making the test-tube-hatched citizens "safe from books . . . all their lives." The only people to escape this dehumanizing conditioning are the "Savages" imprisoned behind electrified fences on a remote reservation in New Mexico. It is from this saving remnant that the last Booklover emerges, John, who has read and memorized the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the censorship that sacrifices "freedom" to "happiness" is also imposed by an oligarchy, in this case the "priests of power" within the Party, who use Thought Police, terror, and Newspeak to control every aspect of society. "By 2050—earlier, probably—all real knowledge of the past has been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron—they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be." But even this society has its saving remnant of savages—the working-class proles, who manage to sing, dance, recite doggerel, and read—even if it is state-produced pornography. "If there was hope," Winston Smith realized in the midst of his despair, "it *must* lie in the

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proles." In both dystopias, then, censorship comes from the top down and is a weapon of the "government" to control a victimized citizenry.

This *Wild Palms* view of censorship is immensely popular with literary academics, most of whom are convinced that the greatest threat to freedom of speech and thought comes from the *government*, not from the people. That's why an ACLU membership letter I received tries to press my academic buttons by focusing exclusively on governmental attacks on the First Amendment:

President Bush has been in the very forefront of an unrelenting assault on the Bill of Rights and the personal liberties it protects. The assault has been so widespread, on so many issues, that every American who looks to the Bill of Rights for protection must now step forward to preserve it. . . . In fact, the consistent pattern of attacks on personal liberties that George Bush has championed shows that *it is up to people like you and me to stand up and defend our precious liberties ourselves.*

To the discomfiture of many literary intellectuals, however, *Fahrenheit 451* advances a startlingly different and "offensive" view of the etiology of censorship. In *Fahrenheit 451*, censorship comes *not* from the top down, but from the bottom up. When the novel begins, of course, the social mechanism for burning books has been institutionalized for decades. "Monday burn Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner, burn 'em to ashes, then burn the ashes." But Beatty, the fire chief, explains that censorship was not imposed by an oligarchy on an unwilling populace of victimized citizens but was the Will of the People. As the population grew, he explains, the people fractured into more and more subgroups or "minorities," each jealously guarding its own special interest and demanding an insult-free existence. As a result, writers, TV producers, textbook committees, filmmakers, teachers all began to walk on eggs, to censor themselves and to create only innocuous material:

Don't step on the toes of the dog lovers, the cat lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Ital-

ians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico.

All the minor minor minorities with their navels to be kept clean. Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters. They *did*. Magazines became a nice blend of vanilla tapioca. Books, so the damned snobbish critics said, were dishwater. *No wonder* books stopped selling, the critics said. But the public, knowing what it wanted, spinning happily, let the comic books survive. And the three-dimensional sex magazines, of course.

The people got what they wanted: a happy-face culture in which nobody would have their exquisitely sensitive feelings offended by idea or word:

You must understand that our civilization is so vast that we can't have our minorities upset and stirred. Ask yourself, What do we want in this country, above all? People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren't they? Don't we keep them moving, don't we give them fun?

To make sure that everybody stays happy and content, any book that might upset any member of any ethnic, racial, or ideological group must be incinerated:

Colored people don't like *Little Black Sambo*. Burn it. White people don't feel good about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Burn the book. Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag.

This serenity is so appreciated that a grateful public calls the firemen "Happiness Boys." The people recognize that the book-burning firemen stand between them and a "small tide" of misfits who want to make "everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought." The redoubtable fire chief urges the wavering Montag to hold firm: "We have our fingers in the dike. Hold steady. Don't let the torrent of melancholy and drear philosophy drown our world. We depend on you. I don't think you realize how important *you* are, we are, to our happy world as it stands now."

A FEW WORDS ON *FAHRENHEIT 451* BY ITS AUTHOR

At the outset I must admit that this is probably the most outrageous piece of logrolling you have laid eyes on in a generation. Yet, reading over Professor Trout's essay, I gave in to temptation and herewith add my analysis and recommendation. I do so mainly because we have moved quietly, and sometimes not so quietly, into the dim years of political correctness, in which we put silencers not only on guns but on mouths. Someone said to me recently, aren't you afraid? No, I said, I never react in fear; I react in anger. As with graffiti, you must counterattack within the moment, not a day, a month, or a year later. All the politically correct terrorists must be driven back into the stands. There is no place for them in the open field of democratic ballplaying. There is room only for Kipling and his Empire, Mark Twain and his Nigger Jim, Dickens and his Fagin, Shakespeare and his Shylock, and Conan Doyle's Holmes, opiate needle in hand.

I did not, 40 years ago, predict. I observed tendencies or wrote doubts. Today, there is no fear of book-burners, only nonteachers and nonreaders, which means no need of books and so no burning.

I will not press these observations further. Professor Trout has done the job for me. And, since you are a reader—read on.

—Ray Bradbury

So, in *Fahrenheit 451*, censorship is not imposed by a sinister elite of power-mad corporate managers or apparatchiks but is the will of the common people themselves:

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. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read comics, the good old confessions, or trade journals.

Whether the First Amendment is shredded by contending and jealous racial, ethnic, and ideological groups or made otiose by a dumbed-down populace, the real enemy of freedom in *Fahrenheit 451* is not some centralized authority but ourselves.

Bradbury's story-crime in *Fahrenheit 451*, then, is not to have blamed *government* for censorship but, in the words of Jack Zipes (a Marxist literary critic and just about the only academic to confront the theme of censorship in this novel), to have "shift[ed] the blame" to "the people, i.e., the masses, [who have] brought this upon themselves and almost deserve to be blown up so that a new breed of book-lovers may begin to populate the world." What upsets Zipes (and other literary academics, I suspect) is that Bradbury's novel exonerates "the state and private industry from crimes against humanity and places the blame for destructive tendencies in American society on the masses of people who allegedly want to consume and lead lives of leisure dependent on machine technology." As far as Zipes is concerned, Bradbury has "an *inaccurate* notion of what led the 'bad old' society to become fascist and militaristic" (*italics added*). The novelist's illiberal, elitist notion that the "masses" themselves will subvert their own freedom is "false," "distorted," and "regressive"—in short, politically incorrect.

Zipes, of course, got it wrong. Bradbury's "false" and "distorted" depiction of the etiology of censorship has more credibility and relevance now than it did 40 years ago. Every day there is more evidence that free expression is being whittled away not just by Big Bad Government but by a "rainbow coalition" of ethnic, racial, and political "minorities," each contending with each other for turf in the culture and campus wars and each hell-bent on suppressing any form of expression that gives the slightest offense. Without shame, academics now ask, "Can We Live with the First Amendment?" (as they did in a conference ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* last September).

In the current cultural climate, just about anything that is said, written, performed, displayed, or published will offend someone—and this is now excuse enough to suppress it. A satiric cartoon portraying politicians as fat, greedy hedonists was attacked not by the politicians it defamed but by a gallery visitor—a "woman of size"—who was offended by greed being equated with fatness. The gallery, denying this was censorship, took down the painting. *Show Boat* was recently attacked because some African-Canadian and African-American groups found its sympathetic and honest portrayal of blacks in the age of steamboats as poor and oppressed to be demeaning. Wiccans try to get the works of Roald Dahl out of school libraries because of his unflattering portrayal of witches. A student who called inconsiderate students "water buffalo" was deemed to

have offended racial harassment codes. A professor who invited racists to address his class on tolerance and intolerance was attacked by administrators, colleagues, and students (*not* the ones in his class) for tolerating racist and insensitive speech, apparently something not to be tolerated from a professor who teaches about tolerance. The founding editor of *Peace Magazine*, Metta Spencer, attacked the *Toronto Globe and Mail* for publishing a book review that contained a description of self-mutilation, arguing that printing "the details of this violence . . . should be made a punishable act." *Huckleberry Finn* (*Little Black Sambo* long ago disappeared down the memory hole) was removed from high school reading lists for being "morally insensitive," "degrading," and "destructive to black humanity." As one high school administrator put it, "There's simply no reason to use books that offend minorities if other books may be used instead."

Of course this assault on freedom in the name of sensitivity has been going on for decades. When William Shockley was invited to talk at Yale in 1974, a student wrote that he was "dismayed" by Shockley's "lack of sensitivity to others." The "feelings and dignity" of students should *not* be "sacrificed" on the "altars of freedom of speech and academic freedom." Bradbury was right—people themselves will whittle away their own freedoms until all that is left is tinder for firemen.

Perhaps even more alarming than these *ad hoc* instances of suppression is the vigorous theoretical assault against the First Amendment coming from some "cutting-edge" intellectuals. I am thinking, for instance, of Stanley Fish and his notorious and thought-provoking essay "There's No Such Thing as Free Speech—and It's a Good Thing, Too," which he has now expanded into a book with the same title. To create a compassionate community, campus leaders across the nation have pushed for speech codes to suppress anything that a self-defined "victim" deems "insensitive," "offensive," "harassing," "stigmatizing," or "politically repugnant." Law professors have facilitated this attack on constitutionally protected speech by contending that freedom of speech has been unjustly "privileged" over other and more important rights, such as the right to be unoffended. A law professor from the University of Oregon, for example, has argued that "our fixation on rights is dysfunctional and deranged," especially our fixation on First Amendment rights. This point of view has also been advanced by Leroy Martin, police superintendent in Chicago, who argues that "we need to take a look at [the Constitution] and, maybe from time to time, we should curtail some of those rights." As Judge Learned Hand explained, "liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it." If we do not watch out, the government may heed our braying against freedom, as it did in *Fahrenheit 451*.

In the alchemy of our souls, almost all noble attributes—courage, hope, love, beauty, loyalty—can be transmuted into ruthlessness. As Lionel Trilling warned, "we must be aware of the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes." It is hard to believe that a virtue as exalted as *compassion*—tenderness of heart—can be carried too far, but it can. As John Sparrow wrote in *Too Much of a Good Thing*, "it is difficult to see how any . . . civilized society could survive if the doctrines of pure humanitarianism were consistently applied. . . . A man who cannot face the fact of suffering cannot meet his responsibilities as a member of society." Too much compassion leads not only to paralysis but also to coercion. Life is rough and it

requires us to be thick-skinned and *desensitized* to the many cultural allergens around us. Alarmed by attacks on free thought in the name of "sensitivity," Jonathan Rauch, in *Kindly Inquisitors* (1993), reminds compassionate professors, students, and administrators that freedom of speech compels us to go against our natures, to hear unpleasant and even hateful things, to tolerate unpleasant and even hateful people:

We would like to think that knowledge could be separated from hurt. We would all like to think that painful but useful and thus "legitimate" criticism is objectively distinguished from criticism which is merely ugly and hurtful. Surely criticism is one thing, and "Hitler should have finished the job" is another. But what we would like to think is not so: the only such distinction is in the eye of the beholder. The fact is that even the most "scientific" criticism can be horribly hurtful, devastatingly so. . . . In the pursuit of knowledge many people—probably most of us at one time or another—will be hurt, and this is a reality which no amount of wishing or regulating can ever change. It is not good to offend people, but it is necessary. A no-offense society is a no-knowledge society.

Leon Botstein has said that cultural debate is now so rowdy and debased that "the only honest way to deal with it is to remain silent." This is wrong; we must never abandon our right, indeed our moral duty, to speak out in protest. Bradbury warns us where silence leads when he has his now-jobless English professor, Faber, say to Montag:

Montag, you are looking at a coward. I saw the way things were going, a long time back. I said nothing. I'm one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the "guilty," but I did not speak and thus became guilty myself. And when finally they set the structure to burn the books, using the firemen, I grunted a few times and subsided, for there were no others grunting or yelling with me, by then. Now it's too late.

It is time, I believe, for English professors, and others, to confront *Fahrenheit 451*'s offensive and prescient message: that freedom will be incinerated in the name of happiness and sensitivity and that we ourselves will direct the flame.

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Federico Fellini and the White Clowns

by R.H.W. Dillard



Anna Mveck-Wodecki

Near the beginning of Federico Fellini's *Intervista* (1988), a very large camera crane is about to rise, wreathed in smoke and artificial moonlight, high above the soundstages of Cinecittà. One of the camera operators calls down to his director (Fellini being played by Fellini), "Aren't you coming up?" "No," Fellini immediately replies, "I can imagine it from here." The cameraman shrugs, turns to his colleague on the crane, and says, "What did I tell you?"

That brief exchange about sums it up: both the distinctive personal, imaginative, and visionary quality of Fellini's cinema and, at the same time, the response of his detractors, who for years have claimed that his work is composed of predictable and repetitive fantasies, without experiential, intellectual, or ideological content. But, in fact, the only truly predictable thing about Fellini's films over the years was the response of the critics, repeating in chorus "What did I tell you?" or perhaps a Reaganesque "There you go again."

Ideologues and social (as well as socialist) realists have always been uncomfortable with Fellini, so it came as no great surprise when on the day of Fellini's death National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* trotted out an insignificant critic named Stefan Scheiss (or something very like that) to denounce him, to declare that he was without artistic or social importance, to aver that his work had no influence on the history and development

of film art, and generally to "dis" him. After all, Shorty Shrift (or whoever) was just joining a long line of attackers from the right and the left who have accused Fellini of not being politically correct. He was subject throughout his career to Church interference and censorship on the one hand and, on the other, to attacks in the press from Marxist intellectuals, which even led on occasion to actual brawls, such as the one that followed Franco Zeffirelli blowing a noisy whistle to disrupt the ceremonies awarding *La Strada* a Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1954.

Fellini, however, discovered the best way of dealing with his pompous critics: he simply wrote them into his films, made them a part of that cinematic world they despised so much. Think of the sterile intellectuals in his films, the infanticidal Steiner in *La Dolce Vita* (1959) or the French intellectual Daumier in *8-1/2* (1963) who urges the director Guido Anselmi to achieve that purest of artistic expressions—silence. (Both of them, by the way, in look and behavior, are clearly allusions to Hjalmar Poelzig, played by Boris Karloff in Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Black Cat* [1935], the intellectual architect who lives in a cold, bare, modernist mansion built on the ruins of the fortress he betrayed in the First World War and who murders his beautiful young wives and preserves them in glass cases to be perfect forever.) Or, in a lighter vein, think of the gloating reporter in *8-1/2* who gleefully says of Guido, "He's lost! He has nothing to say!" Or the woman who says offscreen during the credits of *City of Women* (1980), "With Marcello, again? Please, Mae-

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