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JULIE CHRISTIE

# Truffaut's Icy, Bookless Future

FAHRENHEIT 451

directed by François Truffaut

(RICHARD SCHICKEL)

**F**ahrenheit 451 is, as readers of Ray Bradbury's novel know, the temperature at which paper burns. One might expect a movie based on the novel and visualizing for us a society where the printed word is banned, where books are automatically burned on discovery and where reading is punishable with prison terms, to be a "hot" movie, one that would take its emotional coloration from the bonfires that illuminate it and from that passionate sense of cultural outrage that ritualized book burning is supposed to stir in the humane heart.

But Director François Truffaut has never been a man to cater to expectations, and here he has deliberately chosen to give us a cold, distant, unemotional vision of the terrors that might result from a world without print; he challenges us, as we are rarely challenged in movies, to follow him on a difficult journey to a precise understanding of just how forbidding such a world would be. Ultimately, the film has a powerful emotional impact, but it is achieved the hard way—through the mind rather than the viscera—and only in its own good time.

In an unspecified future it seems firemen are employed not to put out fires but to start them whenever some upright citizen discovers a hoard of printed words somewhere and turns in an alarm. Only a few eccentrics cling stubbornly to books; everyone else is content to cuddle up to the wall-sized TV and listen to the steady drip-drip-drip of state-sponsored smarm.

There comes a day, however, when a bright young fireman (Oskar Werner) realizes there is something wrong with this life. His wife (Julie Christie) spends most of her time in a state of drug- and TV-induced tranquillity and stupidity, emerging from it only when her essential boredom becomes unbearable—at which point she becomes a restless, ravening shrew. Then, on the commuter monorail, Mr. Werner meets another girl (also played by Miss Christie) who is remarkably, eccentrically alive. Obviously she's a book reader, so obviously the forbidden volumes contain

valuable secrets. Soon he's sneaking the fuel of his fires home and studying on the sly. From there it is only a little way to open revolt—he kills his fire chief—and thence to exile among the bookpeople, citizens who have taken on the task of keeping culture alive for posterity by memorizing a book apiece in order to pass their contents on.

There are many striking things about Truffaut's visionary work. The most obvious one is the similarity between the landscape he presents and our own. The former is not wildly futuristic—not a science-fiction landscape—but is, instead, barely one step removed from that of today. We can easily imagine ourselves living to see such sights as his characters see.

Even more arresting is the quality of printless life Truffaut projects. As he sees it, literature is an irreplaceable social cement. Without it as an emotional teaching aid, as a repository of past experience and of the human universals, our personalities would have nothing to feed upon and grow. Moreover, we would literally have no culture and so would have nothing in common—no community life, no hope of communication. Society would be atomized, blasted apart as surely as if the big bombs actually fell.

**I**t is his honesty in setting forth a world of this kind that accounts for the chilly, occasionally off-putting atmosphere of *Fahrenheit 451*. Without print there can be no passion. The only hint of real feeling comes when the fire chief (played with fine official ooze by Cyril Cusack) defends the status quo and denounces the potential for unhappiness (and therefore inefficiency) which the old literary culture stirred with its upsetting ideas and theories. But for the most part *Fahrenheit 451* is a deliberately antiseptic dissection of a world scrubbed so clean of life as we know it that we have trouble relating to it in customary movie-audience fashion.

How little this is a star's picture is evidenced by the fact that Miss Christie and Mr. Werner appear only as faces among the outcasts in a fittingly cold, symbolic finale. How much it is a brilliant director's picture is demonstrated by our sudden awareness of how much control Truffaut has exercised. One leaves the theater awed by the daring with which he has held back his own commitment to the humane tradition until this last possible moment, by the exquisite irony of placing that statement against the coldest of all his cold backdrops.