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A PALIMPSESTUOUS INTERPRETATION OF RAMIN BAHRANI'S *FAHRENHEIT 451*

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ABSTRACT. ***A Palimpsestuous Interpretation of Ramin Bahrani's*** **Fahrenheit 451.** Drawing on a poststructuralist approach to adaptation as an instance of intertextuality (Stam 2000) and Linda Hutcheon's metaphorical description of adaptations as palimpsests (2006), this paper will analyse the ways in which Ramin Bahrani, director and co-writer of the script of *Fahrenheit 451* (2018, HBO), rewrote Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel by the same name, leaving only traces of the source text visible in his appropriation. Supposedly reimagining Bradbury's text for a new generation of viewers, digital natives of the online virtual worlds, the film reads more like a heavy-handed filmic palimpsest that allows only some of the book's ideas and memorable lines to resurface from underneath the new writing. Relying mostly on visual spectacle and the screenwriter-director's own concerns about the fragility of civil rights, democracy and humaneness in a world increasingly controlled by certain interest groups through the internet and social media, the film leaves audiences wondering about the appropriateness of the title—an anchoring device promising a straightforward adaptation of the text—and the film's actual relation with Bradbury's novel.

Keywords*: palimpsestuous interpretation, appropriation,* Fahrenheit 451*, Ramin Bahrani, Ray Bradbury, dystopia, technology*

REZUMAT. ***Interpretarea filmului lui Ramin Bahrani*** **Fahrenheit 451** ***ca palimpsest.*** Pornind de la abordarea poststructuralistă a adaptării ca manifestare a intertextualitățiii (Stam 2000) și descrierea metaforică a adaptării ca palimpsest

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pe care o face Linda Hutcheon (2006), această lucrare va analiza modalitățile prin care Ramin Bahrani, regizorul și coscenaristul filmului *Fahrenheit 451* (2018, HBO), a rescris romanul distopic cu același titlu al lui Ray Bradbury păstrând în ecranizarea sa doar urme ale textului sursă. Anunțat ca o reimaginare a textului lui Bradbury pentru o nouă generație de spectatori, nativi digitali ai realităților virtuale online, filmul se prezintă mai degrabă ca un palimpsest cinematografic stângaci care permite ca doar o parte dintre ideile și pasajele binecunoscute ale romanului să fie vizibile în noul text. Bazându-se preponderent pe spectacolul vizual și pe preocuparea regizorului-scenarist pentru fragilitatea drepturilor civile, a democrației și umanității într-o lume controlată din ce în ce mai mult de către grupuri de interese prin internet și platforme sociale, filmul îi face pe spectatori să se întrebe dacă păstrarea titlului romanului—care promite o adaptare cinematografică convențională—este potrivită și care este de fapt natura relației dintre film și romanul lui Bradbury.

Cuvinte-cheie: *interpretare palimpsestică, apropriere,* Fahrenheit 451*, Ramin Bahrani, Ray Bradbury, distopie, tehnologie*

Introduction

In 2023, Ray Bradbury's groundbreaking dystopian science fiction novel about a book-burning society of the future, *Fahrenheit 451*, celebrated its 70th anniversary and it continues to be a classic of the genre. Today the novel feels relevant and old in equal measure because it is a piece of speculative fiction in which we recognise various technological, social and cultural realities of our time, and in which Bradbury indirectly comments on social, political, cultural and technoscientific realities of the 1950s displaying the same kind of scepticism about the benefits of technological development, especially when controlled by governments and politicians, and in an ideology-saturated Cold War context, that other 1950s and 1960s science fiction writers did (Csicsery-Ronay 2005, 48, 49).

Set in a future America that is difficult to anchor in a particular historical moment, the novel does what dystopian fiction does so well: it reflects on the present by envisioning a future reflecting the writer's fears about the course humanity might take if the "liberal humanist 'civilization'" falls victim to mass consumption, television and a sense of paranoia resulting from the menace of a nuclear war (Baker, 2005 490; 492). Two of the most visible concerns of the author are the effects of McCarthyism and the gripping power of television in the 1950s, which the novelist felt were linked and contributing to a perverse kind of totalitarianism. In a 1956 interview, the author described his novel as a cautionary tale: "I wanted to do some sort of story where I could comment on

what would happen to a country if we let ourselves go too far in this direction, where all thinking stops, and the dragon swallows his tail, and we sort of vanish into a limbo and we destroy ourselves by this sort of action" (Bradbury 1956, 27:10—27:57). The novel may not be as "overtly *political*" as George Orwell's *1984*, but it nevertheless strikes a chord in generations of readers through its exploration of "the essence of humanity, about that which makes life worth living … a life of the mind and a life of humanity" (Smolla 2009, 906).

Reflecting on the successful marriage of dystopia and science fiction and the increasing cultural status of this type of fiction after World War Two, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. writes that "SF had [by then] acquired a reputation for correctly prophesying technological innovations (well earned) and social transformations (much less so)" (2005, 49). Bradbury was one of the few mainstream science fiction writers at the time and his critical stance on "Cold War politics of science, mass-destruction technology, and simplistic morality" served as an example for subsequent writers (49).

The novel's cultural impact was also reflected in cinema. It was first adapted for the screen in 1966, by French New Wave auteur François Truffaut. The film is a highly personal interpretation of the novel, in which the director read his own love for and appreciation of books and his humanist values, yet it was neither a critical nor a public success at the time. Being absent from all streaming platforms, it is now beyond the reach of many young viewers, though the scores and reviews on both IMDb and the leading online aggregator of film and TV shows reviews, *Rotten Tomatoes,* suggest an increased interest in the film in the past decades. The latest adaptation of the novel, the 2018 HBO production, directed and co-written by Iranian-American indie director, Ramin Bahrani, is different from Truffaut's film on multiple levels, but perhaps the most obvious ones would be the recent production's extensive rewriting of the novel and its more pronounced political quality.

Working on the screenplay in the tense atmosphere of the presidential campaign of 2016, when the line between news and fake news was so volatile, Ramin Bahrani reread Bradbury's novel as a text that could speak to his contemporaries about one possible route that America might take (Bahrani 2018a), and decided to rewrite the story by anchoring it more clearly in the realities of his time and in a contemporary visual language appropriate for young audiences in particular. "With Bradbury as my guide, and a vow to stay true to his ideas," he wrote in a *New York Times* piece, "I began working on the script" (2018a).

Although the film recontextualises the story, reinterprets the novel's themes, and significantly rewrites the central characters, Ramin Bahrani and the HBO producers decided to release it with the same title as the novel, implicitly

advertising it as a straightforward adaptation by foregrounding its literary source and capitalising on its fame and position within the canon of dystopian fiction. In reality, more appropriate laymen's terms would be *reimagining,* or *rewriting* (both signalling a more radical process of intervention on the adapted text), or the more specialised term *appropriation*. *Appropriation*, as defined by Julie Sanders, refers to a form of adaptation that uses fidelity strictly as a metrics assessing the distance from the original that the adaptation reflects, the interrelation between the two texts being primarily political (2006, 8), based on the reinterpretation of the literary text through present-day values and a contemporary sensibility. Sanders's perspective was based on a poststructuralist understanding of all texts as intertexts, as posited by Julia Kristeva (1967) and Roland Barthes (1973), which makes adaptation a form of intertextuality as well.

In her groundbreaking *The Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon is similarly interested in adaptation as an intertextual phenomenon in which there are countless possibilities of meaning creation and reinterpretation as a consequence of this co-presence of texts (regardless of the medium), insisting on the fact that adaptations need to be discussed *as adaptations* even in the absence of some universal criteria for their evaluation (such as fidelity). When all adaptations (including appropriations) are democratically explored as instances of intertextuality, existing in a cultural context, the adaptation critic's task is to focus on what and how is interpreted, added, creatively transformed, also looking at the politics of adaption.

An appropriation such as *Fahrenheit 451* (2018) poses some interesting questions as to the nature of its relationship to the adapted text and the extent to which the filmic text allows the literary one to be "seen" in the adaptation and how the two create meaning together. In what follows these questions will be addressed from a perspective that reflects one of the several current tendencies in adaptation studies, harmonising theory and criticism, starting from Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation as a complex interplay of intertextual material and as a palimpsest (8; 9), a site of textual dynamics. As a comparative analysis, it will also include some comments on the creative transformations resulting from the bringing together of literary, filmic and cultural texts in a filmic palimpsest, with some recognisable features of the novel faintly resurfacing, like the old writing on a recycled, parchment, from underneath the fresh filmic text.

The palimpsest metaphor, first used by Linda Hutcheon to directly refer to adaptations (2006, 8), is a much older one, revived and theorised in poststructuralist narratology by Gérard Genette (1982), part of the larger theoretical framework of intertextuality, describing texts as part of a "tissue," a "polysemic space where the paths of several possible meanings intersect" (Barthes [1973]1981, 37), a site of textual co-presence and play of signification.

Not all instances of intertextuality are also adaptations, but adaptations are special instances of intertextuality, as Sarah Cardwell (2018) aptly demonstrates, as they openly state (or imply, as many appropriations do) their engagement with other texts. Adaptations require a relational reading, the source, the adapted text and the adaption being interpreted as inextricably linked. Moreover, they both carry traces of other texts as well which may or may not be identified by the interpreter. In *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* ([1982] 1997, 339), Gérard Genette uses the term 'palimpsest' instead of 'intertext,' making the idea of textual co-presence more visual and, for the purpose of this paper, more appropriate to use in an analysis of a film adaptation, where the visual aspects of the filmic text often outweigh the linguistic. Phillip Lejeune, whose yet unpublished work was referenced by Gérard Genette (339), speaks of the need to perform a "palimpsestuous reading," a relational reading that the nature of the hypertext (the adaptation) dictates. As Sarah Dillon explains, "palimpsestuous" is an adjective that replaces Tomas De Quincey's older term, "involuted," which he used to describe the nature of the palimpsest as "an involuted phenomenon where … texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other" (2007, 1; 3-4). "Palimpsestuous" presents us with a visual image for this type of relationship whereby the words and phrases on the piece of recycled parchment or tablet—the palimpsest—are intertextually engaged and together they create meanings that emerge precisely from that engagement in/on the palimpsest.

The key to fully understanding the implications of such textual relationships is being aware of them and performing a palimpsestuous interpretation: "we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests," Linda Hutcheon writes, "through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (2006, 8). A palimpsestuous interpretation is a reading together, an appreciation and interpretation of the hypo- and the hypertext, a hermeneutic process that cannot take place outside the interpreter's awareness of this togetherness of, in this case, the novel and the film *Fahrenheit 451*. Instead of focusing on fidelity, however, the interpretation will highlight the "creative transformation" rather than a "vain and simple-minded matching" (Dudley 2011, 38) at work in the adaptation, assessing whether the adaptor's promise of "staying true to [Bradbury's] ideas" (2018a) was indeed fulfilled.

The hypotext: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

"If someone tells you what a story is about, they are probably right. If they tell you that that is all the story is about, they are probably wrong" (Gaiman 2013, xvi). One of the difficulties faced by any adapter is deciding on a timely or

novel interpretation of the literary text considered for adaptation. Speculative fiction texts resist conventional adaptations because they age quickly. The film adapter of a science fiction novel with old technology must consider a significant reimagining of the context and realities of the fictional future according to genre norms. *Fahrenheit 451* is a novel about an America where books and reading have become illegal, being replaced by simplified content on television, the radio and in schools. Any form of intellectualism or high culture is no longer tolerated by the people or the state (McGiveron, 1996; Kagle 2008, 29), censorship being enforced with the implicit (and careless) approval of the majority of the population, technology playing a significant role in controlling people's minds through the elimination of alternative truths and critical thought and a good surveillance system that helps the identification and elimination of any form of dissent. All books must be traced and burnt by firemen, whose duty now is to ensure that streets and minds are kept safe from the rebels, surviving intellectuals who may cause confusion and panic in society with the dangerous ideas found in books. The government can enforce this type of control because people themselves willingly gave up their freedom when they stopped reading and caring, their ignorance and propensity for a comfortable life with no dilemmas or the responsibility of making choices, their hedonism and addiction to mind-numbing drugs, allowing the state to take control of all aspects of their lives, banning books and stifling any form of individuality or expression of freedom in the name of the greater good: people's "happiness."

Bradbury avoids being very precise about other aspects of the government, focusing on its ability to control people through a well-functioning surveillance system that is supported by the citizens themselves, afraid that the few surviving intellectuals might endanger a lifestyle that allows everyone to be equal in their (sub)mediocrity. With the constant menace of a nuclear war further instilling fear in people glued to their wall-size televisors—the main government-approved source of information—there is little hope for change or improvement, unless the resistance groups living in rural areas manage to survive and rescue books by memorising them. One day, they hope, the war will end and they will be able to save humanity by returning to it the knowledge and intellectual treasures that they have been storing in their memory.

The protagonist of the novel, young fireman Guy Montag, leads a perfectly dull life with his wife Mildred, a young housewife who spends her days watching television on the three wall-TVs in their home, listening to the radio and sleeping, occasionally taking too many sleeping pills, like so many other people who have to be saved by special operators and their blood-recycling machines. The evening Mildred overdoses for the first time—forcing her husband to witness a dark reality he has never seen before—Montag has just had a most

disturbing conversation with Clarisse, a teenager who is very different from anyone he has ever met: bold, articulate, happy, inquisitive and lovely at the same time. She seems to see right into his soul and mind and asks him questions he has never dared to even consider. Bradbury modelled Clarisse on himself it seems, making her "the essence of life and the essence of love [who] educates Montag without knowing she's an educator … [or] teacher who inspires" (Bradbury 2010, 16:52-17:22). She is a symbol of what is still pure and beautiful in Montag, who sees himself in her eyes and is able to access memories of childhood love and connection in his mother's presence—a past he has long forgotten. Clarisse's warm presence and eccentricity present Montag with the possibility of a life very different from his own, one of genuine questions and unexpected answers, so he starts looking critically at his marriage, his drug and TV-addicted wife, and his job as a fireman. When he witnesses a woman setting herself on fire together with her books after her house is invaded by firemen, Montag's awakening takes a more accelerated turn. It is her courage and self-empowerment that Montag finds astounding, her "defiance unto death [being] a kind of martyrdom that is entirely at odds with, and therefore throws into stark relief, the powerlessness of the model citizen" (Bloom 2007, 23).

Captain Beatty, Montag's superior and former role model, is quick to notice Montag's hesitation and budding moral crisis. In one of the most enlightening scenes of the novel, Beatty visits Montag, concerned that the young man might start reading books he should be burning and join the resistance. He tries to dissuade Montag from becoming too interested in books and their contents, so he gives him a lecture on the country's recent past and how the current regime is simply enacting the public desire for a guilt-free, simplified, pleasure-seeking lifestyle, relieved of any moral pressure or intellectual standards. First people started to prefer watching movies, then they showed a preference for the classics in Reader's Digest form, cut and simplified to the maximum. And then, as the population increased, intellectualism had to give way to mass culture, the oversimplifying tendencies of the past becoming the new norm: "Books cut shorter. Condensations. Digests, Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending" (Bradbury [1953] 2008, 72). There was really no need for people to know more than what they would use at the work place, simple, mechanical gestures, Beatty explains: "Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts?" (73)

There is a strange matter-of-factness about how the captain shares his knowledge—all apparently coming from the official rule book that firemen in key positions like himself must read—almost a cheerful, dutiful appropriation of the official truth, but at the same time there is something about the way he communicates that truth that also suggests a critical distancing from the

masses, a quiet, barely repressed contempt for people's choice for a dumbing down of the entire society: "Out of the nursery into the college and back to the nursery; there's your intellectual pattern for the past five centuries or more" (72). Here and elsewhere, it is as if Beatty were voicing Bradbury's critical perspective on this dystopian future. The captain's neutral tone and his disassociation from the controlled masses also suggest that he mirrors the attitudes of the ones in charge, who know how to control not only people's lives, but also their minds; only some have access to information, but even they seem to lack the ability to think for themselves becoming, like Beatty, transmitters of official information and enforcers of state policy. The captain repeats what he was trained to, making one wonder, however, how much of it he actually believes:

> 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 … we're the Happiness Boys, the Dixie Duo, you and I and the others. We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought. … I don't think you realize how important you are, we are, to our happy world as it stands now. (Bradbury [1953] 2008, 76;81)

There is one idea to which the captain obsessively returns in his account, and which several interpreters of the book (Eller and Touponce [2004] 2008; Kagle [1992] 2008; McGiveron 1996; Smolla 2009; Zipes 1983) consider central to *Fahrenheit 451*, namely that the undoing of the world, the emergence of a radically dehumanizing totalitarian state were caused by mass culture and minority pressure eliminating independent, rational, profound thought in return for easy gratification, by a flattening of all differences among people, making them all equal in ignorance, by a low tolerance for pain, suffering, controversy and difference, and by the illusion of happiness and control. The America of the future described in the novel is modelled on Bradbury's apprehension of an already changing America, making passionate and avid readers like himself ridiculous and the cultural legacy of human thought, creativity and a quest for knowledge, beauty and truth superfluous.

In the novel the solution is both individual and communal. Montag undergoes a "process of rehumanization" (Zipes 2008, 10), distancing himself from the totalitarian state mentally and physically. He begins to think independently and later, as a runaway, learns to experience nature through his senses and acquires a higher understanding of what makes him human, part of a natural environment beyond the state's control. He then joins the resistance, a community of intellectuals who survive outside society waiting for the nuclear war to destroy the totalitarian state, enabling them to return to the cities and

rebuild society on correct moral principles and the wisdom of earlier thinkers, whose ideas they have been storing in their memories. The novel ends with the promise of regeneration, rebirth, redemption. Even without the guidance of professor Faber or of Granger—who both contribute to the awakening of Montag's conscience and his freedom—Montag is now ready for the promises of a meaningful life, in which he will play a part in "the healing of the nations" (Bradbury [1953] 2008, 211), because Bradbury believes that humanity can, like a Phoenix bird (an important symbol in the novel), emerge from its own ashes through a "rebirth of man's intellect" (Sisario 205).

The novel is also the writer's declaration of his love for books. As Peter Sisario (1970, 201-205;212) aptly demonstrates in his exploration of literary allusions in Bradbury's novel, it is a book about books directly or indirectly "present" in the text through allusions, references and even quotations, a palimpsest itself inviting readers to decipher its underlying texts and, in the process, experience glimpses of human knowledge as Montag does. Readers accompany young, naive Guy Montag on his quest, as he, like a modern version of the fairytale hero, overcomes obstacles and vanquishes his enemies (captain Beatty, other firemen, the uncanny Mechanical Hound—part robot, part animal of prey sniffing weakness and betrayal—all symbols of the totalitarian state), and gradually reaches a higher understanding of the world by learning to think for himself with the assistance of three helpers: Clarisse, a symbol of his dormant humanity, his true self buried for so long by layers of conformity and complacency; professor Faber, whose voice will become Montag's conscience as the fireman turns into an undercover rebel; and Granger, the leader of the book people, who presents him with the plan and the path to fulfil his destiny as one of the saviours of humanity. The novel is a love letter to writing and reading modelled on childhood fairytales, tapping into the readers' warm memories of a time when reading was a time of connection, of safety and of happy endings, an important aspect of the novel that is barely visible in the film.

A palimpsestuous interpretation of Ramin Bahrani's *Fahrenheit 451*

If the palimpsestuous quality of Ray Bradbury's novel reflects the writer's understanding of the interconnectedness of authors and texts across spatial and temporal boundaries (Bradbury 2010), with an implicit recognition of the fact that books can only emerge in a space of pre-existent texts, that of Ramin Bahrani's *Fahrenheit 451* (2018) is the result of an intentional overwriting of the original text designed to drive the adapter's own political agenda across. The overwriting is so extensive that, had the film been titled differently, it could have easily been experienced by the general public as an independent artefact,

just like *Equilibrium* (2002), written and directed by Kurt Wimmer, which borrows extensively from *Fahrenheit 451* and other major dystopian novels that inspired Bradbury, such as Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. Seen as a film promoted as an adaptation, however, its rapport with the novel is important and needs to be addressed. Consequently, this palimpsestuous reading of the HBO adaptation will focus on exploring the ways in which the novel's themes and characters were woven into the fabric of the film, analysing the adapter's ability to create meaningful relations among textual elements of the hypo- and the hypertext and, last but not least, commenting on the film's artistic qualities, as an adaptation is also an artefact with a cultural life that is also independent from that of its source. The metaphor of the palimpsest is appropriate for Bahrani's film because two texts are co-present in the palimpsestuous work, but the new text is so different from that of the novel (the recontextualization of the story causing the dialogue, the setting and even the characters to suffer dramatic changes as well), that the act of scraping, rubbing off, aggressively removing the underlying writing—part of the process of making a palimpsest - becomes a fitting visual metaphor for the equally aggressive act of rewriting the text to the extent that the dialogue in the screenplay only echoes that in the novel, sounding more contemporary and reflecting the social and political atmosphere of the presidential elections of 2016, the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration, and the anxiety caused by tech industry's involvement in politics.

In Bahrani's dystopian world, the Ministry is completely in command of the United States after a Second Civil War, which Bahrani sets in a not-so-distant future that feels like an "alternate tomorrow" (Bahrani 2018b). The Ministry is a mysterious government that, according to the film's Clarisse, could be a cross between tech companies that used artificial intelligence to seize control of people's minds and lives and some form of traditional government. The society is a divided one, citizens being grouped on the basis of their relationship to the Ministry. The Natives are the obedient, thoughtless masses controlled through the official internet network, The Nine. The Eels, or the outcasts, are people with criminal records for having committed crimes against the state (including the use and ownership of graffiti—the official term for books and art stored on any medium), whose online identities and travel rights are electronically erased for as long as their sentence lasts, and who struggle to survive in slums. The same term is used to refer to any rebel working to destabilise the social order by hacking The Nine and/or storing graffiti. Everything that happens in the city is broadcast live on gigantic screens across the city, the interactive medium allowing people to instantly react through emoticons to the sensational nocturnal incursions of the firemen into the Eel dens across the city,

burning not only books, but also computers, servers, art works—any manifestation of complex human thought, creativity, or art. The firemen are genuine internet celebrities, especially rising star Master Trooper Montag, a narcissist feeding on the enthusiasm of his followers, hooked on his looks, passion and screen charisma.

Bahrani's dystopia is noticeably more political than Bradbury's novel. The writer was concerned with the danger of politicians exploiting the masses and taking advantage of people's thoughtlessness and search for comfort at all costs, but he felt equally menaced by the guardians of political correctness policing writers' works (Bradbury 1979, 175-179) and criticised people's complacency and intolerance for anything or anyone that could mirror back their ignorance, mediocrity and passivity. In Bahrani's film, people are also responsible for the country's totalitarian rule, but the director shifts the emphasis from the irresponsible behaviour of weak-minded people to opportunistic politicians' perverse tactics of gradually taking control of people's lives, using or teaming up with powerful media and tech companies to take control of people's essential information about their private and professional lives, making them completely vulnerable to manipulation and thought control, practically owning their lives and filling their minds with propaganda and fake news. The sophisticated surveillance systems with AI software and the daily drug doses that they must all take, the omnipresence of audio-visual content—mostly live-streamed tabloid news programmes designed as the ultimate form of participatory entertainment, people instantly reacting to the news through emoticons—create a media-controlled society where people react emotionally to the version of reality that they are being offered 24/7. And it is messages of hatred and fear of the Other that the state obsessively broadcasts through The Nine, creating a sense of paranoia in a state in crisis, which Ramin Bahrani and co-writer Amir Naderi link to the rhetoric of Donald Trump's presidential campaign and of his administration. It may not be "Time to make America great again!" that the crowds scream in the film, but their attitude is a reflection of the same kind of inflammatory (pun intended) rhetoric that American extremists and self-titled patriots displayed in public discourse when the film was in production:

> MONTAG: Eels don't deserve freedom, now, do they?
> ALL: No!
> MONTAG: We won't let 'em take our jobs and steal our tax money, now, will we?
> WOMAN: Hell, no! Self is strength! Happiness is truth!
> MONTAG: Guess what time it is?
> ALL: **Time to burn for America again**! [Bahrani 2018c, 9:30-9:44; added emphasis]

In 2018, American viewers could easily recognise Trump's slogan paraphrased in the Natives' scripted reply part of the fire show, and his references to immigrants as threats to the country's economy were easy to see in Master Trooper Montag's attacks on the Eels, the anti-socials accused of posing a real threat to the well-being of the Natives.

There is a certain sensibility to the cause of the underdog, the experience of the immigrant at the core of Ramin Bahrani's films prior to his *Fahrenheit 451*, especially after the 9/11 events and the subsequent noticeable rise in xenophobia and islamophobia in the United States, acutely felt by the second-generation Iranian immigrant director, so it is hardly surprising that he chose to address in the film the question of racial and ethnic friction at the heart of the presidential campaign going on in 2016, when he was working on the script. For Bahrani it is the irresponsible, greedy politicians and interest groups that pose the greatest threat to individual freedom and democracy, although people's mindless consumption of internet content—so easily configurable to create the illusion of truth—is also implied as a reason for people's inability to escape the state's grasp of their minds and lives. Ultimately, it is the perversion of American democracy and the paranoia artificially induced by the state that enslave and dehumanize, as visually conveyed through the presence of predator animal imagery on The Nine, the virtual space people seem to inhabit more than their homes.

If in Bradbury's novel the possibility of humanity's regeneration is paradoxically linked to the disappearance of the totalitarian state and its mindless model citizens during a nuclear war, in the film the only threat to the state is artificially created and domestic (the Eels) rather than foreign. If democratic values are lost, Bahrani suggests, if the American Dream (an immigrants' dream after all) becomes impossible because dreamers no longer have a place in American society, then the country heads towards self-destruction—a pessimistic outlook that overwrites the novel's trust in the possibility of regeneration and rebirth. Even if the Eels are successful, with Montag's help, to save a digital version of world literature and art encoded in a strand of DNA called Omnis, which an Eel scientist has managed to implant in a bird that will eventually reach the free world, it is hard to believe this will have any impact on the country, that it will enable the free world to successfully remove the country's totalitarian government and allow American society to heal.

There are quite a few loose ends in the script apart from the ending, which is simply not thought through. There are references to the characters' past that lead nowhere, or implausible situations like the Eels being able to survive in the slums with no jobs or money or hacking into The Nine, maintaining illegal servers and using scientific labs to transfer cloud data on a strand of DNA

bypassing the well-designed and efficient system of (online) monitoring and surveillance. The geopolitical context is so imprecise and questionable, that it is hard to understand how the future of human culture can only depend on the American Eels' ability to scan and digitally store books from across the world, especially as we also learn from them that Omnis—that encoded DNA cloud of digitalised cultural production—is supposed to reach scientists in Canada who will extract the information from the DNA strand, implying that Canada is part of the free world but somehow only the Americans can save the world's cultural heritage from destruction.

The film also reinterprets the main characters undermining precisely what makes them special, their symbolic value consistent with Bradbury's understanding of their role in this tale of redemption. The novel's Montag, for instance, is an unexceptional young fireman who experiences a series of life-changing events that expand his vision and turn him into an agent of change, of redemption for humanity. Captain Beatty, Montag's superior, is the embodiment of the perverse system of control of the masses through censorship, fear, and punishment. Clarisse, Montag's neighbour, is a symbol of freedom, individualism, and humanity; she acts as Montag's conscience, helping him rediscover his true self and triggers in him the desire to escape the oppressive regime in which he has lived most of his life. Mildred, Montag's wife (absent in the film), represents the result of years of brainwashing and overexposure to the mind-numbing wall-TVs. Ramin Bahrani's Montag, Clarisse and Beatty are in themselves palimpsests, only glimpses of the original characters' traits being visible in the film, a consequence of the recontextualization of the story and the adapter's understanding of their function in the appropriation.

In the words of Michael B. Jordan, who plays Montag in the film, his character is "the poster boy of the Fire Department" (2018), being captain Beatty's protegee and his future replacement. Jordan plays a surprisingly weak man, a marionette that Beatty dominates, intimidates and uses because he is young, charismatic and makes the firemen popular on The Nine. There is also a more personal connection between them, one that the film fails to properly address. From a series of flashbacks from Montag's childhood, memories of a past deeply buried in his mind, the viewers can understand that as a little boy, Montag witnessed his father's arrest in the presence of Beatty, who may have orchestrated the arrest and who, out of guilt, decided to become a father substitute for him.

Montag's inner revolution is ignited not by young Clarisse, as in the novel, but by the woman who chose to set herself aflame with her books during a raid. In her house Montag sees an extensive library of physical books for the first time, their texture, smell, and concreteness, in spite of what Beatty has just

told him about them being dangerous to people's peace of mind and to their racial sensitivities, make the young fireman reconsider what he knows about the Eels and graffiti. It is almost as if it had finally dawned on Montag that the relationship between books and people (authors, readers) is something real, more real and certainly more meaningful than his connection with his fans or with the Ministry. He crosses from the world of virtual reality, a post-print world of social media and internet communication, to the actual world of people who have chosen to safeguard their humanity through reading and art, and are willing to die for what they believe makes them human.

Michael B. Jordan's Montag is not the hero type. He is mostly reactive, allowing both Beatty and Clarisse to control him, the former through fear and an elusive sense of a complicity of sorts, Beatty posing as a paternal figure, and the latter through seductiveness, both as a beautiful woman and as a knowledgeable Eel survivor, who will guide him on his path to a higher understanding of reality and his final sacrifice for the Eel's noble cause: saving human knowledge from destruction. Having failed to kill Beatty when he had the chance, unlike the book Montag, he creates an opportunity for the captain to eliminate him later on, but not before releasing the bird that carries Omnis and watching it fly way, hoping that his sacrifice was not in vain. Beatty not only ignores the significance of Montag's refusal to kill him, but he feels compelled to eliminate the malfunctioning young cadet, the image of his failure as a mentor.

If the novel's captain Beatty was more than willing to accept the new social order and help enforce its laws, Michael Shannon's Beatty is elusive and duplicitous. Bahrani and his co-writer leave us wondering about Beatty's true nature, carefully disguised under the mask of flawless authority and unquestionable dedication to the Ministry. In the middle of the night, he struggles to remember passages from the books he must have read, writing them on cigarette paper—the only kind of paper available to the Natives in this highly digitalised world. It is an act of memorisation similar in kind to the Eels' salvaging and storing of cultural artefacts on illicit hard drives and servers. His motivation for doing that and his apparent knowledge of canonical works of world literature remain unexplained and without any visible influence on his behaviour, which makes the character even more baffling than the novel's captain. His character development in the screenplay is incomplete, almost as if the film had rushed into production before Bahrani could decide how to explain the captain's contradictory behaviour in a compelling way.

Clarisse, played by Sophia Boutella, is nothing like the sweet, innocent teenager in the book. She is modelled on the *femme fatale* type, sensual and amoral, spying on fellow Eels to reduce her own sentence and luring Montag on the side of the resistance, where his help is much needed. She is a spiritual guide for Montag to whom she offers an alternative history, unavailable on The Nine,

and the possibility to make his life meaningful. By aging her and making her a deeply flawed character, Bahrani reimagines Clarisse as a woman of her time, a survivor who waits for an opportunity to find her way back to the resistance as a form of atonement. Lost are the charming quirkiness and irresistible innocence of her literary counterpart and, with them, her character's symbolism. She is, however, reimagined as a hero type, active, strong, initiating rather than responding and bravely accepting her fate, knowing she has no future after the Eels' hiding place is discovered by the captain's men and set on fire. Seeing that the bird carrying Omnis is on its way to the free world makes her sacrifice worthwhile, just like Montag's, or so the film's ending suggests.

The relationship between Montag and Clarisse is fleetingly addressed as a romantic one, instrumental in Montag's awakening, part of his process of self-discovery and understanding of the world through the discussions he has with Clarisse—more experienced and with access to both worlds, Montag's and that of the resistance. Initially reading together is their love language and their act of resistance, but there is nothing in this brief love story to suggest that their love can save the world. On the contrary, the literary passages Bahrani chose to include in the text of the script, lines from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novella *Notes from the Underground*, speak of death, sorrow, and the impossibility of saving mankind from its own self-destructive impulses.

It is difficult to see optimism in Bahrani's adaptation, his world being darker and more sinister than the one in the novel. Affection, love have no place in this world, and the stolen moments of intimacy, of meaningful connection cannot last, making the viewer wonder about the possibility of change, of the rehumanization of the world that Bradbury's novel offered as a real possibility. Moreover, the fact that, in the final shots of the film, the bird carrying Omnis in its DNA is shown flying free, disappearing into a huge flock of birds possibly heading for Canada, where its DNA cloud might be extracted, multiplied and then spread around the world via animal DNA (rather than human DNA, for some unexplained reason) further confuses viewers, especially those who remember Bradbury's humanism and trust in man's ability to save humanity from self-destruction, a beautiful idea on which Bahrani superimposed his more sceptical view of the world.

Conclusion

The present palimpsestuous reading started from the idea that a film adaptation can be "read" and interpreted as a palimpsest with traceable inter-textual dynamics that can be explored to identify the interpretative possibilities

opened up by the co-presence of literary, filmic and cultural texts. This was done by analysing the ways in which this palimpsestic work reinterpreted Bradbury's novel focussing on its themes and key characters, pointing out that some of the creative decisions of the adapter were motivated by his desire to stay true to Bradbury's ideas while pushing his own political agenda, which he did in a very personal manner.

Ramin Bahrani's *Fahrenheit 451* (2018) is certainly a film of our time in its reliance on visual spectacle, a contemporary aesthetics and its recontextualization of the story. With the exception of relatively brief and neutral pieces in online publications published around the time of its screening at the Cannes Festival on 12 May 2018, viewers and film critics alike have been less than enthusiastic about it, as indicated by the 5/10 rating on IMDb, a 31% Tomatometer [critics'] score and a 22% audience score on *rottentomatoes.com*, reviews only reinforcing the low scores. Professional reviewers such as John Lui, for instance, deplored the reduction of the dystopian novel to an "action flick" where the themes of censorship and conformity are insufficiently explored (2018), while BBC reviewer Nicholas Barber pointed to its lack of depth and insufficient exploration of the themes it introduces: "There is no time for nuance, or depth or anything else" (2018).

Oversimplifying the novel's themes and undermining the hopeful message of the novel, using a filmic discourse attuned to the sensibility and visual practices of young viewers, digital natives more used to scrolling than reading, and prioritising the visually spectacular, the film sacrificed precisely what Bradbury feared visual media would eventually destroy: the complexity of discourse and of the philosophical message. This palimpsest may be vibrant, colourful and contemporary, but one cannot help but wonder if the film is simply not strong enough to generate a meaningful conversation about the course humanity is already taking in the age of internet supreme and artificial intelligence, topics that this adaptation flashes before our eyes but feels unprepared to properly address with the depth and commitment a compelling dystopia should.

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