

Ray Bradbury on Screen: Martians, Beasts and Burning Books

By Phil Nichols

Ray Bradbury was a child of the cinema, reportedly seeing *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) on first release at the age of three. His teenage years in Los Angeles gave him an intimate familiarity with Hollywood, as he roller-skated from studio to studio, collecting autographs of the stars. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to learn that he spent a significant part of his long career writing for the screen. Since his death in 2012, there has continued to be interest in adapting his works for the screen, but not always successfully.

A little-known fact is that Bradbury was an established scriptwriter – for radio – even before his first book was published. His 1947 radio play “The Meadow” (for *World Security Theater*) was aired four months before his debut book *Dark Carnival* appeared from Arkham House. Through the 1940s and 1950s, he submitted many stories to radio shows such as *Suspense*, and his stories have remained popular in this medium right through to the present.

The 1950s was the decade that brought Bradbury to the screen. In late 1952 he wrote a treatment titled *The Atomic Monster*, later retitled *It Came From Outer Space – a story for films*. Due to his relative inexperience, his “treatment” was more like a complete script, with dialogue and detailed camera directions. Longtime screenwriting pro Harry Essex, given the job of turning Bradbury’s “treatment” into a full screenplay, found the task very simple, as Bradbury had done nearly all the work. *It Came From Outer Space*, released in 3D in 1953, established Bradbury as a writer of intelligent screen science fiction.

As if that weren’t enough, that same year saw Bradbury’s name attached to *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, one of the first “radiation monster” movies and a precursor to *Gojira* (1954). It was based – loosely – on Bradbury’s 1951 *Saturday Evening Post* short story of the same name (later re-printed as “The Fog Horn” in his 1953 book *The Golden Apples of the Sun*). The short story centers on a lighthouse whose fog horn inadvertently awakens a creature from the depths of the ocean, a prehistoric beast who mistakes the horn’s bellow for

another of its own species. Discovering the source of the sound, the beast destroys the lighthouse in a fit of rage and sadness.

On screen, the creature was brought to life by legendary animator Ray Harryhausen, coincidentally a close friend of Bradbury. But Bradbury didn't write the script, and almost went uncredited. When Bradbury visited Harryhausen on set, producer Hal Chester invited him to look at the script (by future *Star Trek* producer Fred Freiberger and future *Outer Limits* producer Lou Morheim). Bradbury pointed out a similarity to his short story. Chester immediately offered to buy the rights, and made sure to capitalize on the source material by plastering "suggested by the *Saturday Evening Post* story by Ray Bradbury" all over the publicity material.

Meanwhile, Oscar-winning director John Huston had read "The Fog Horn", and saw something in it that reminded him of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), the very property he was planning to film next. He invited Bradbury to write the screenplay for this prestigious film, leading Bradbury to spend the best part of 1954 in Ireland with Huston, working on the script. This experience encouraged Bradbury to always think big: in future, with his own screenplays, he would target big-name directors such as David Lean, Carol Reed, and Akira Kurosawa.

If the 1950s was the decade that established Ray Bradbury as a screenwriter, the 1960s was the beginning of his books providing source material for film. Starting around 1962, the leading French new wave writer-director François Truffaut sought to film Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Truffaut's previous films, all of them hugely successful around the world, showed no evidence of any interest in science fiction: *The Four Hundred Blows* (1959) was a semi-autobiographical, largely realist portrayal of a troubled schoolboy; *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960) a noirish adaptation of an American thriller; and *Jules and Jim* (1962) an adaptation of a historical novel. What attracted Truffaut to *Fahrenheit* was not the science fiction, but the love of books: Truffaut was a bibliophile.

Being courted by Truffaut was a dream come true – for the first time since Huston, a major figure in contemporary cinema was noticing Bradbury's works. Truffaut teamed with actor Jean-Louis Richard to write the script, writing in French, since it was always Truffaut's expectation that the film would be made in his native language. Surprisingly, after many years in development, the project eventually attracted American and British investment,

leading to Truffaut shooting the film in England and in English – despite his inability to speak the language himself.

As a film, *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) is brilliant and hokey in equal parts. It doesn't help that leading man Oskar Werner speaks with an Austrian accent, while his wife and neighbour are both played by the same actress, Julie Christie. But magnificent cinematography by Nic Roeg and the superb staging of the book-burning scenes combine with Truffaut's Hitchcockian style to produce a film which is, ultimately, a memorable and colorful experience. Bradbury loved it at the time, writing to Truffaut that "My novel looks at your picture and sees itself, your picture looks at my novel and sees itself!" Bradbury also wrote positively of the film in a *Los Angeles Times* review (November 20th, 1966). Later, Bradbury was triggered to revisit *Fahrenheit 451* in his own stage adaptation (1986), borrowing a number of innovations from Truffaut's film.

Bradbury had a more mixed response to another of his best books adapted for screen in the 1960s. *The Illustrated Man* (1969) was written for the screen by a real estate agent – or at least, that was Bradbury's claim. The film, directed by Jack Smight and starring Rod Steiger, made a bold attempt to bring Bradbury's world to life with an energetic framing story taken from Bradbury's 1951 book. But its adaptations of several of Bradbury's short stories were incoherent, and the whole was wrecked by an ill-advised attempt to put Steiger at the center of every story. What could have been a *Dead of Night*-style portmanteau film, crystal clear in its portrayal of fantastical material, ended up as a surrealistic blurring of one story into another. Bradbury was initially positive about this film, but his positivity was short-lived as he soon gave it a thumbs down.

For much of the 1970s, Bradbury was hopeful of finally getting his novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* on screen. What had started out as a 1955 screen treatment for Gene Kelly (*The Dark Carnival*) turned into the 1962 novel, and by 1973 was converted by Bradbury back into a film script for Kirk Douglas's Bryna Productions. Sam Peckinpah was to direct, but eventually dropped out. Then Jack Clayton, famed British director of *The Innocents* (1961) was aboard, but also dropped out. By 1981, the film was back on again with Clayton returning. Press coverage at the time looked very promising. Bradbury and Clayton, the best of friends, were photographed on set at the meticulously-created "Green Town" set in the Disney studios.

Behind the scenes, alas, a small tragedy was playing out. Clayton had brought in a script doctor (John Mortimer) to improve Bradbury's screenplay; Bradbury only found out when asked to give notes on Mortimer's draft. Bradbury used a disastrous audience preview as an opportunity to lobby for reverting the film to something closer to the source material, and to an extent his suggestions were adopted. For the most part, however, the Disney "machine" took over, and a crack post-production team led by Lee Dyer effectively re-worked several major sequences of the film. The result, released in 1983, is a film that really does feel like Bradbury – it captures the small-town and the autumnal atmosphere – although the final act is messy and rushed, with an ending which barely stands up to scrutiny. Bradbury declared this one to be "not a great film, but a nice one". The tragedy is that the thirty-year journey from idea to finished film destroyed the close relationship between Bradbury and Clayton.

As well as providing material for the big screen, Bradbury was a fine source for TV. His work has been adapted countless times for television anthology shows such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Twilight Zone*, and for TV movies and specials. His short stories adapt well to the shorter form, and Bradbury himself adapted several for *Hitchcock*, the best being "Special Delivery" (1959; a boy sends away for giant mushrooms, which turn out to be part of an alien take-over) and "The Life Work of Juan Diaz" (1964; a Mexican from a poor family turns out to be worth more dead than alive, when his mummified body becomes a tourist attraction).

Bradbury also debuted his story "I Sing the Body Electric!" as an episode of *The Twilight Zone* in 1962 – the more famous short-story version of this tale didn't see print for another seven years. But Bradbury's experience on this show was not good. While he was initially supportive of Rod Serling, introducing the creator/writer/host to writer friends Charles Beaumont, Richard Matheson and George Clayton Johnson, the two ended up at loggerheads. What Serling intended as homage in his own episodes (such as "Where Is Everybody?", "Walking Distance", and "The Lonely"), Bradbury took as plagiarism. The two fell out over an alleged broken promise on Serling's part, and never spoke to each other again.

Matheson, always a close friend of Bradbury, was later significant in bringing Bradbury's work back to the small screen, when he took on the gargantuan task of adapting Bradbury's book *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) as a TV miniseries. Two things had changed

since Bradbury's own failed attempts to get his Martians on screen back in the 1950s. First, *Star Wars* (and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) had burst onto screens in 1977, proving that there was money to be made from science fiction. And second, much more modestly but in that same year, Bradbury's stage play adaptation of *The Martian Chronicles* had proven a surprise hit in a Los Angeles theater. Science fiction and Bradbury were hot once again.

Matheson's teleplay is actually a very smart adaptation of Bradbury's book. It carefully selects which stories to tell, and wisely ties the narrative together more cohesively than the book, making it highly suitable for television: it combines both an overall arc with a distinctly episodic structure. Unfortunately, however, the miniseries as filmed for MGM and NBC (1980) is fairly dire. Despite one or two strong episodes, its first hour suffers from sluggish direction and a deadly pace of editing. Perhaps worst of all, the effects work throughout is unconvincing, and executed with a pre-*Star Wars* attention to detail. Director Michael Anderson – previously known for *The Dam Busters* (1955), *1984* (1956), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (also 1956), and *Logan's Run* (1976) - was clearly past his peak. Bradbury very publicly distanced himself from the production, announcing to a press conference that the whole thing was “boring” – thus earning himself a reprimand from NBC's lawyers.

But Bradbury was primarily a short story writer, and so for many years he toyed with ways of getting his short works on screen in a more substantial way, either in the form of portmanteau films or in his own anthology TV series. Examples include his 1960 screenplay based on *The Illustrated Man*, and his 1983 proposal for an anthology, *The Bradbury Chronicles*. None of these got off the ground, although the latter would form the basis of Bradbury's most sustained period of work in media: *The Ray Bradbury Theater* (1985-92), his own personal *Twilight Zone*. Not only was he an executive producer, he was the sole screenwriter and – in the earliest batch of episodes – the on-screen host. While he didn't have the sarcastic wit of Hitchcock or the intense magnetism of Serling, he brought a personal connection to each of his stories, introduced from his real-life toy-cluttered office. The production values of the series, however, were compromised. *The Ray Bradbury Theater* was a product of early cable TV, an HBO production that later shifted to more down-market networks. International co-production was the only way to sustain the series, with Canadian producers Atlantis teaming up with overseas partners and filming in the UK, France and New Zealand. Bradbury kept in touch with the remote productions by phone and fax.

The Ray Bradbury Theater looks cheap today (all the episodes are on DVD and *Youtube*, where they all look distinctly smeary, a victim of an era when shows were shot on film but transferred to NTSC video for editing), and some episodes are difficult to watch because of poor direction, photography and performances. But as the production got into its stride, a number of gems emerged. Generally, these are episodes which steer clear of visual effects and deal just with characters and situations. Check out “To the Chicago Abyss”, and “The Great Wide World Over There” – and even “Mars is Heaven” and “A Sound of Thunder” are quite absorbing, if you can forgive the low rent effects.

Finally, late in Bradbury’s career, two of his cherished projects made it to the screen from his own screenplays. *The Halloween Tree* (1993; based on his 1973 book) earned him an Emmy Award for this Hanna-Barbera-produced animated film – twenty years after he first adapted it for screen for Chuck Jones, a version which never got made. And Stuart Gordon, taking a break from Lovecraftian horrors, directed Bradbury’s screenplay for *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit* (1997) – decades after Bradbury had written the original, unfilmed version. Now in his seventies, Bradbury was with these two modest projects re-established as a successful screenwriter.

Following Ray Bradbury’s passing in 2012, there has been no let-up in interest in his work. Big names have been attached to proposed new adaptations of his books *The Illustrated Man*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and *The Martian Chronicles*, although as is typical in Hollywood, most of these announcements have yet to yield any actual productions. So far, there have been just two, highly trumpeted but both failing to live up to their potential: ABC’s *The Whispers* (2015; executive producer Steven Spielberg; based on Bradbury’s “Zero Hour”) and HBO’s re-adaptation of *Fahrenheit 451* (2018; directed and co-written by Ramin Bahrani).

For all its failings, the mere existence of the 2018 *Fahrenheit 451* reveals something curious about most of Bradbury’s works. They exist in an always fantastical world, built on magical technologies such as totally immersive wallscreen TVs, so they never really date. They make acute social observations (see the bad parenting in stories such as “Zero Hour” and “The Veldt”), and their observations are timeless. Or they set out to terrify or unnerve (see early classics such as “The Crowd” or “Skeleton”), and do so with an insight which is universal. To an extent, then, any filmmaker or playwright in any age is going to find something in Bradbury which is for “now”. Bahrani achieved this in the 2018 *Fahrenheit*,

managing to find a way in which paper books can still have relevance even in an age of e-books and emojis. Ray Bradbury's legacy, it seems, is a body of visually creative, endlessly adaptable work which has already inspired generations of creative talent, and which will carry on doing so.