

(Catalogue essay, on the work of Gerard Byrne) published in *The Science of Imagination*, edited by Hajnalka Somogyi, Kati Simon and Thomas D. Trummer, Budapest: Ludwig Museum, Budapest and Siemens Stiftung, 2011: 38-43.

Bradbury and Beyond

Maeve Connolly

‘Would you like, some day, Montag, to read Plato’s *Republic*?’

‘Of course!’

‘I am Plato’s *Republic*. Like to read Marcus Aurelius? Mr. Simmons is Marcus’

‘How do you do?’ said Mr. Simmons.

‘Hello’, said Montag.

‘I want you to meet Jonathan Swift, the author of that evil political book, *Gulliver’s Travels*! And this other fellow is Charles Darwin...’

Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)

The basement of a Los Angeles university library, sometime in the year 1950. Ray Bradbury is typing on a typewriter that he has rented for 10¢ a half-hour. He is writing *The Fireman*, a novella that will form the basis for *Fahrenheit 451*. It takes him nine days and costs him \$9.80 in total. Every two and a half hours, he runs upstairs to search for books from which to extract quotes, which will be read and spoken by his characters – a mix of book-lovers, book-burners and book-people.

It is 2010 and I’m speaking to my computer, but it doesn’t understand me. Words appear onscreen but most of them are wrong. The process of training the computer to recognise my voice is painfully slow, although not quite as painful as the sore wrist preventing me from typing today. The Microsoft Speech Recognition tutorial, pre-installed on my PC, encourages me to rehearse a series of phrases, to help my computer ‘learn’. It explains to me that, while computers find it difficult to predict human speech, a great deal of progress has been made and even more will be possible if I join an online community of users and allow my experience to be monitored. From time to time the computer fails to recognise simple words (his, the, but), instead substituting the proper names of people and places, ones that are obscure, yet familiar to me. Even though I realise it is simply drawing this information from my spell-check profile, I feel uneasy, fearing that I may be contributing to the eventual overthrow of humans by robots.

Ray Bradbury is a child of about three years old and it is 1922 or 1923. Tutankhamun has been raised from his tomb and his image appears on the covers of all ‘the weekend news gazettes’.¹ This experience awakens the young Bradbury’s interest in Roman, Greek and Egyptian mythology and eventually leads to his discovery of the multiple burnings of the library of Alexandria. Libraries, librarians, booksellers and teachers subsequently appear in many of his stories.

It is sometime in the early 1990s, and I see an exhibition of large black and white photographs by

¹ This experience was recalled by Bradbury many years later in ‘Burning Bright’, an afterword to *Fahrenheit 451*, Harper Collins, 2008: 21.

Gerard Byrne. Each one is an image of the Wellington Monument in Phoenix Park, Dublin, reputed to be the largest park in Europe. The obelisk was constructed in the nineteenth century to commemorate the victories of the Duke of Wellington and took many years to complete. All four sides of the obelisk are pictured in the photographs, with the structure placed at the exact centre of each image so that, for a moment, the Obelisk appears to be the only static element of a rapidly changing landscape.

It is 1963, and Ray Bradbury is famous. Some of his stories have served as sources for films, such as *It Came From Outer Space* and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (both released in 1953), while others have been adapted for television shows, including *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits*, and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. He is the subject of a documentary, entitled *Ray Bradbury: Story of a Writer*, and he is invited by *Playboy* magazine to contribute to a panel of science fiction writers who will speculate about the world of 1984.

It is July 2010, and I am reading Sven Lütticken's book *Secret Publicity*. It includes an essay about Georges Bataille's interest in the mythologies of secret societies, and the potential of these societies as tools for radical change.² Bataille was particularly fascinated by the Egyptian obelisk located at the Place de la Concorde, believing that it existed in an imaginary constellation with the site of the guillotine where Louis XVI was decapitated. While checking some details on the arrival of the Luxor obelisk in Paris, I learn that it is shorter than the Wellington monument in Phoenix Park. The same source informs me that the Phoenix Park is merely 'one of the largest walled city parks in Europe'³, and makes reference to a 'Dublin Legend' concerning the obelisk, which I have never encountered before. Apparently a fund-raising dinner was held in 1820 to enable its construction. The dinner took place in a vault under the monument, and the tables and chairs were subsequently sealed inside. Some days later, a butler who served at the event was reported missing and assumed to have been accidentally entombed.⁴

It is August 1953, and Ray Bradbury is back in the university library. He has a contract to turn *The Fireman* into a book, but he needs to add another 25,000 words. He finishes on time, and in the same week he receives an unexpected phone call from John Huston, inviting him to co-write the screenplay for *Moby Dick* in Ireland. The process of writing the screenplay does not go smoothly, and it is later fictionalised in Bradbury's novel *Green Shadows, White Whale*. Before he leaves for Ireland, Bradbury and his agent try to find a magazine in which to print portions of *Fahrenheit 451*. It is the era of the McCarthy hearings, and a novel about censorship is topical, but controversial. Eventually, Hugh Hefner, 'a brave publisher in a frightened nation',⁵ pays for sections of the book to appear in issues two, three and four of his brand new magazine - *Playboy*.

I am standing in the Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà, visiting the Irish pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale. Gerard Byrne's new work *1984 and Beyond* is playing on three TV screens, each with two

² Sven Lütticken, 'Secret Publicity: The Avant-Garde Repeated', *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam and Amsterdam: Nai Publishers and Fonds BKVB, 2005: 21-42.

³ 'Phoenix Park' Wikipedia entry, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix_Park (accessed July 2010) Emphasis added.

⁴ 'Wellington Monument' Wikipedia entry, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wellington_Monument,_Dublin (accessed July 2010).

⁵ Ray Bradbury, 'Burning Bright', 225.

seats and two sets of headphones. The exhibition space is busy and most of the seats are occupied. At first, I assume (incorrectly) that the same work is presented on all three screens – almost too late, I see that each version is different. I visit the exhibition several times, hoping to view the work in its entirety and trying to match the performers, all male and middle-aged, to the science fiction writers mentioned in the press release. The only writer I can identify with any certainty is Bradbury, simply because he refers to one of his own stories, *The Million-Year Picnic*, from the *Martian Chronicles*. In this story, two young Earth boys stranded on Mars continually pester their father to show them the ‘Martians’. Eventually their father takes them to a canal and tells them to look down. Pointing to their reflections in the water, he says: ‘Those are the Martians’.

It is 2009 and I am in a car travelling along the North Circular Road in Dublin. I suddenly see the Wellington monument in the distance, rising at the end of a tree-lined avenue that seems to have been constructed for the exact purpose of framing the obelisk. It occurs to me that I don’t know which was built first - the street or the monument.

Towards the close of 2007, I am writing a book that will include a discussion of *1984 and Beyond*, focusing mainly on Byrne’s use of multiple locations.⁶ This time, I can watch DVDs of the work at home on my own television. Again, I try to match the actors to the list of writers participating in the panel. Later, I learn that each writer is actually played by several actors. ‘Bradbury’ appears in three scenes, and his is played by Jur van der Lecq, Jos van Hulst and Wim Bouwens, all of whom have worked extensively in Dutch TV.

In the imagined future of *Fahrenheit 451*, Mildred (the wife of Montag the fireman) is addicted to television. Like many others, she has installed three moving ‘parlour walls’ and is saving up for a fourth, so that she can more fully immerse herself in the action on screen. Television in this future offers the illusion of interactivity. When Montag returns home one day, Mildred is preparing to deliver her lines in a nightly television play and she explains her role to him: ‘the homemaker, that’s me, is the missing part. When it comes time for the missing lines, they all look at me out of the three walls and I say the lines.’

Reading through the script for *1984 and Beyond* while writing this essay, I am surprised to find that Bradbury actually says very little. He does, however, end the discussion on a positive note: ‘we are part of a miraculous explosion of the senses. The important thing is that the race is on the move, and that we, selfishly, as writers, have long dreamt of this movement and cannot help but be exhilarated at our own involvement in this voyage of self-discovery.’ For some reason, these words remind me of a sequence in *Dandelion Wine*, in which the young hero feels a sense of terror, followed by a sudden realisation:

And at last, slowly, afraid he would find nothing, Douglas opened one eye. And everything, absolutely everything, was there. The world, like a great iris of an even more gigantic eye, which has also just opened and stretched out to encompass everything, stared back at him.

⁶ Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books and Chicago University Press, 2009: 155-161.

And he knew what it was that had leapt upon him to stay and would not run away now. *I'm alive*, he thought.⁷

At some point during the late 2000s it occurs to me that there might be a connection between Ray Bradbury and the Bradbury building. This LA architectural landmark appears in *Blade Runner*, as the fictional home of the inventor J.F. Sebastian and the scene of the final rooftop confrontation between Dekard and Batty. There is a connection, of sorts. The building, which dates from the late 19th century, takes its name from Lewis Bradbury, the mining millionaire who commissioned it. But the designer of the building, George Wyman, was strongly influenced by Edward Bellamy's book, *Looking Backward From 2000 to 1887*, published in 1888. Widely referenced in Marxist literature, *Looking Backward* describes a utopian society from the perspective of a young nineteenth century Bostonian who is hypnotised, falls asleep and wakes up in 2000. The hero encounters a world where men and women are equal and in which technological innovation has given rise new forms of entertainment, such as the 'music rooms', which are connected to every home by telephone link. Unlike the 'parlour walls' of *Fahrenheit 451*, the music rooms do not offer the illusion of participation in a performance. Instead, as Bellamy's heroine Edith Leete explains: 'we all sing nowadays as a matter of course, but the professional music is so much grander and more perfect than any performance of ours [...] All the really fine singers and players are in the musical service, and the rest of us hold our peace for the main part.'

It is sometime in the late 1990s, and I decide to buy lots of old science fiction paperbacks from the 1960s and 70s, with the intention of developing a project (maybe even a film) about the cover images. The project never materialises and the books are abandoned on a shelf to gather dust. Several years later, in a concerted effort to begin reading fiction again, I choose Ray Bradbury's semi-autobiographical *Dandelion Wine*, mainly because I like the psychedelic cover. The print is tiny, but the story is gripping and I read it in a matter of hours. Later I learn that that this is just one of a number of books by Bradbury set in Green Town - a fictionalised version of Waukegan, Illinois, where the author spent his childhood. I wonder if in the future I might be one of the visitors to Waukegan to walk through Ray Bradbury Park, dedicated in 1990, with the aim of recognising places imagined and remembered in *Dandelion Wine*.

⁷ Ray Bradbury *Dandelion Wine*, New York: Bantam Books, 1964: 7.