The Impermanence of Norms

a Study of Fahrenheit 451 Based on Foucauldian Concepts

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Abstract

In 1953 Ray Bradbury wrote the novel Fahrenheit 451. The plot is set in a fictional, North American future. This essay aims to show that what is considered normal regarding fundamental values such as knowledge, love, and respect in this imaginary future society is different from what was considered normal in North America in the 1950s when Bradbury wrote the book. The norms differ to such an extent that it is possible to claim that *Fahrenheit 451* is set in a new episteme. Episteme is a term used by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. It designates a time in which society has an underlying understanding of what is considered normal. According to Michel Foucault, the year 1953 when Bradbury wrote the book, belonged to the episteme of Modernity. This essay aims to illustrate that in the future fictional society of *Fahrenheit 451*, the norm regarding some aspects of the culture has changed to the extent that there is reason to call the era a new episteme, and that a proper name would be the episteme of Ignorance. This name signals the lack of regard for knowledge in the society of *Fahrenheit 451*. This essay's analytical tools are Michel Foucault’s terms, theories, and concepts.

Keywords: Episteme, Michel Foucault, Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451, knowledge, ignorance, norms, power.
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There is a division in the tradition of philosophy between thinkers who claim that there are constant values and essences in existence and those who, like Michel Foucault, believe that nothing is ever firm, constant, fixed, or everlasting. The previous group believes that there is an eternal truth to be found if one searches long enough, whereas the latter group believes that nothing is absolute and that everything is created in relation to something else. These two fundamentally different premises of human existence naturally lead to two different ways of perceiving the world and humans’ place in it. Although the answers to the questions might change, the issue of what it encompasses to be human and how we govern ourselves and our societies seems eternal. Foucault wrote about these subjects, although his only advice on how to live was never to stop observing and questioning. Michel Foucault discussed epistemes, underlying currents of thought shaping the thought patterns of a specific time. He discussed how different epistemes looked upon some of the previously mentioned eternal questions about life and humanity by studying certain phenomena like madness or power.

There are many fictional narrations of totalitarian states such as Brave New World (1932) by Aldous Huxley and 1984 (1948) by George Orwell. Many of these fictional societies are depicted from the angle of a government trying to create the law-abiding, controlled, perfect man through austere conditions, ideological indoctrination,
and deprivation of pleasure. In 1953, Ray Bradbury wrote the book *Fahrenheit 451*, in which he depicts a dystopic society from another angle. The population in this novel is disciplined and dominated through deprivation of knowledge and an overflow of entertainment. It is a society where happiness is the motto, and it is reached through consumption. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury, in depicting a society where knowledge is redundant, discusses the importance of knowledge and how a totalitarian state would fear the concept of insight and the freedom of thought it inspires since people who think for themselves can constitute a threat to the domination of a state. The rulers in *Fahrenheit 451* have identified this threat and hence forbidden the existence of books. The firemen, who used to put out fires, are now instead employed to light them and burn the homes where books are found. In what Foucault called the episteme of Modernity, literature contained most of the world’s knowledge and inspired individual thought processes, something naturally dangerous to a state aiming at total control of people’s minds.

This essay will illustrate some central themes of Foucault’s theories by applying them to the novel *Fahrenheit 451*, with the aim of proving that the underlying patterns of thought in the book differ from those of Foucault’s last described episteme, Modernity, to the extent of constituting a new episteme. The essay will illustrate that the values which seemed absolute and true in North America in the 1950s, in the episteme of Modernity when Bradbury wrote his book, have transformed in alignment with Foucault’s theories about the impermanence of everything, and that the characteristics of this new episteme are such that it would be suitable to call it the episteme of Ignorance. To fulfil this aim, a selection of Foucault’s concepts will be presented in a theory section and then applied on to the novel in an analysis section.
Foucault’s theoretical concepts

Michel Foucault, whose theories are the basis of this paper’s analysis, claimed the death of the author. The reader should understand or interpret a text without knowing much about its writer. The text should speak for itself and be analyzed and valued on its own merits, and the author is not relevant. Therefore, in the spirit of Foucault, there will be no extensive presentation of the person Michel Foucault in this essay. Suffice it to say that he was a French historian, philosopher, and author, who lived between 1926 and 1984. Unlike many philosophers, Foucault never developed any specific model or theory to apply to a certain phenomenon or context. Instead, he formulated several concepts which he discussed and reformulated over the years in a “constant reinventing of himself, his theories and his terms” (O’Farrell, ch. 5). Foucault did not want to tell people how to live. He adhered to a personal morale but did not want to moralize over others – he only observed and analysed. The moral code that he lived by was the process of refusal, curiosity, and innovation (About). He sought to constantly interpret, change, and evolve the underlying thoughts of the present and never ceased to question what is perceived to be eternal truths.

According to Clare O’Farrell, strands of his reasoning are found in his books and lectures and are not explained or stated clearly and orderly in one book (ch. 5). Foucault develops specific themes which he discusses in several works. However, these themes can also change and be subjected to alterations in Foucault’s reasonings. Foucault claims his analysis is: “A way of theorizing practice, not a theory” (About). Foucault is intimately associated with the term discourse. In his archeological studies, Foucault analyzed the discursive practices regarding his subject of study. He believed that the way a society discusses and treats a specific phenomenon shapes the society’s underlying patterns of thought, its norms at that specific time, regarding that particular
concept. To analyze language and discourse was a fundamental part of his theoretical process.

In his denial of an absolute order of things and an underlying eternal truth, Foucault claimed that all objects, tangible and intangible, are created and receive their value in relation to other objects or phenomena (O’Farrell, ch. 2). According to O’Farrell, Foucault was not interested in deconstructing knowledge, notions, and concepts only to discover structures. He wanted to point out the impermanence of everything, “He was interested in showing that one cannot simply assume that certain institutions, disciplines or objects of knowledge are truths that go without saying” (ch. 9). Foucault wanted people to observe that ideas shape our societies and how these ideas change over time. To do so, he investigated specific phenomena such as madness.

Foucault observed society and humanity from the perspective of the intellectual. O’Farrell writes that “in 1980 Foucault explains that he is interested not in ‘institutions’, ‘theories’, or ideologies, but in ‘practices’. Hence, Foucault’s history of the prison is not a history of a particular institution, but it is a history of “‘the practice of imprisonment’ (1980c:[225)” (ch. 5). Foucault was primarily interested in thought and its importance. He was interested in the thought underlying actions, phenomena, or institutions. O’Farrell writes, “As early as 1966, Foucault was already describing what he did as the history ‘of all that “contains thought” in a culture, of all in which there is thought’” (ch. 5). This approach allowed him to compare areas which seem vastly different, such as literature and science or literature and social institutions (ch. 5).

“Foucault’s work, rather than providing a rigid philosophical system or methodological template, works best as a toolbox giving people ideas they can apply to the most diverse of areas” (O’Farrell, ch. 9).
Two central terms that Foucault used in his writings are archaeology and genealogy. Johanna Oksala writes that the archaeology of knowledge is the underlying knowledge of a subject, for example, science, where the thought patterns governing the scientists are found. The scientists themselves are probably unaware of these patterns (ch. 3). Oksala states that Foucault’s archaeology “…digs down deep into the soil of our thought to define larger time scales and the more general modes of thinking that lie behind individuals’ diverse opinions and actions” (ch. 3). According to Gutting, archaeology “is a structural, synchronic mode of analysis, not a causal, diachronic method” (ch. 5).

Gutting explains that Foucault’s genealogy complemented his archaeology in that it was “a method of causal explanation” of thought development through history (ch. 5). Archaeology of thought is a term used for a point in time and its underlying current of knowledge. As Foucault explains, the genealogy of a subject traces the origin and development of thought and the rupture between epochs (About). According to Oksala, Foucault never gave a clear explanation of his use of genealogy, and he used it on several occasions in several books. However, one can most easily understand it as “a multilayered, critical practice rather than a strict method” (ch. 5). Oksala continues by explaining that it was central to Foucault’s genealogy to study the power relationships of society and the relation between power and knowledge (ch. 5). This relation will be further discussed later in this essay.

Episteme

In his genealogical studies, Foucault was concerned with the development of the history of thought and how the underlying thought currents shape society. He called these thought patterns epistemes. According to Oksala, Foucault explains the concept of
episteme with the example of a scientist like Darwin (ch. 3). Oksala states that Foucault means that it was not only Darwin’s genius that allowed him to formulate his theory on evolution but the intellectual climate in which he lived: “We must understand the underlying structures of thought that formed the context of his thinking” (ch. 3). Oksala claims that Foucault meant that the time and its prevailing ideas were more important than the actual scientist (ch. 3).

Episteme is what Foucault called an era during which people share the same fundamental values and patterns of thought. To study an epoch and its thought patterns was according to Oksala, “an attempt to show that the history of thought could not be understood only by studying the thought of individuals” (ch. 3). Oksala ascertains that Foucault’s view of history is accepted by most today, and history is rarely described as individual achievements by great minds separated from any context (ch. 3). However, Oksala claims that Foucault’s division of his epistemes is still a matter of discussion. The epistemes he defines are the Renaissance, the Classical Age, and Modernity (ch. 3). She explains that according to Foucault, the breaks between these periods were direct and not a gradual progression. Scientists whose theories seemed to clash were in fact part of the same underlying pattern of thought, whereas those whose theories seemed similar might in reality be operating under two different orders of thought, in separate epistemes (ch. 3). Oksala illustrates the concept of episteme with an explanation from the historian Paul Veyne. Veyne described Foucault’s method as if he was looking at the world through a kaleidoscope, with patterns organized by chance, and to move the kaleidoscope would be to move from one episteme to another (ch. 3).

The underlying consciousness of an episteme defines what is normal. However, people living in a particular episteme might not be aware of what they consider to be the norm. The definition of normal as well as abnormal thus differs between epistemes. Gatting writes that the differences between epistemes were not conscious, “the changes
in thought” were not the “product of thought” (ch. 5). Foucault illustrates this in his research and his discussion on madness and the view of this phenomenon during history. He observes how the thought patterns and discourse of the epistemes formerly mentioned differ in their view of insanity and norm. In the episteme of the eighteenth century, there were three elements considered mad; the human monster, the individual to be corrected, and the onanist. These were abnormal and should be rectified (Ethics 51-53). In the episteme of the western world in the twenty-first century, in Modernity, the underlying patterns of thought in society no longer categorize these elements as abnormal. That which is considered normal or the norm in a specific period of time characterizes its episteme. Epistemes are derived from and connected to previous ones. The underlying patterns of thought concerning the aspects under scrutiny, for example, love, have changed, making the norm regarding that particular aspect different from the norm in the previous episteme. To illustrate the existence of a new episteme, this essay emphasizes the differences between epistemes rather than the similarities. The hybrid of power and knowledge studied by Foucault can be important in shaping the thought pattern of an episteme.

**Power and Knowledge**

In *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, there is an interview in which Foucault defines his view of power, “I call “power” everything that actually aims to immobilize and render sacrosanct what is given to us as real, true and good” (*About*). According to Foucault, one should beware of all kinds of power, not only that of a government over its citizens or a social class over another, but all relations of power between people (*About*). Foucault claims that man’s freedom consists of never accepting that things are holy or fixed (*About*). According to O'Farrell, Foucault changed his views on power during his career, but the main characteristic of his analysis
does not change, which is that power is not absolute. It is always created in relation to something else, and it “only exists when it is being exercised” (ch. 8). O'Farrell contrasts Foucault’s view of power to that of the Marxist view. O'Farrell claims that according to Marxism, power is something absolute that a person or a class can own (ch. 8). She further describes that in Foucault’s scenario, the capitalist class does not have any power until there is a working-class over which it is possible to exercise it. One can only exercise power over free individuals. Once a person is subjected to power and gives up her freedom, there is no longer any power (ch. 8). As Foucault puts it: “There is no power without potential refusal or revolt” (O’Farrell, ch. 8). From this follows that there is a built-in resistance in the notion of power.

According to O’Farrell, Foucault claims that it is not only the state that exercises power in a society. There are innumerable relations of power governing life (ch. 8). O’Farrell claims that Foucault remained firm in his belief that there are opposing forces within knowledge and power, making it possible for pure knowledge only to exist in opposition to the “machinations of power” (ch. 8). There cannot be any true knowledge if mechanisms of power manipulate the conditions for obtaining that knowledge, for example if a totalitarian state steers the work of science. According to O’Farrell, Foucault argues that relations of power are dangerous and that “today’s solution is tomorrow’s problem” (ch. 9). If power relations result in solutions and changes, the consequences of these must always be considered (O’Farrell, ch. 9). The practice of power can lead to the development of knowledge, a process Foucault calls the hybrid of power/knowledge (Oksala, ch. 5). The practice of imprisonment for example, led to the development of the science of criminology (Oksala, ch. 5). Felons were subjected to power and imprisoned. They were studied meticulously, and the studies were documented. Power and knowledge are intertwined when society uses prison as a practice of power and in that process develops the science of criminology (ch. 5). As
briefly mentioned previously, power can be executed not only by a state over its citizens, but also between people and over oneself as a subject. This latter process is shaped by a person’s ethics, which is the next term to be presented in this essay.

Ethics

Foucault does not give any reason why people should behave in a certain way or even that they should. He reasons about the subject of ethics and analyzes man’s behavior in relation to it but nothing else. He makes, as he says, “a general reflection” about the notion in the western world that: “one needs for his own salvation to know as exactly as possible who he is and also, which is something rather different, that he needs to tell it as explicitly as possible to some other people” (About). Foucault uses madness and religion as a starting point in exploring the “modern subject” (About). He claims that at a point in between the domination of others and the domination of the self, we find government (About). Foucault states that he focused too much on the domination of others early in his work, and that the domination of the self is more important than he previously claimed (About). In this discussion on government, he circles back to the concept of power and interpersonal power relations. He finds that the concept of confession in early Christian and monastic times has affected the genealogy of modern subjectivity. Foucault connects ethics with the government of self, “The contact point, where the way individuals are driven by others is driven by the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government” (About). In About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self, Foucault writes that the truth and the sacrifice of ourselves are deeply connected, and that a person will only reach the true self when they disappear or destroy themselves “as a real body or as a real existence” (About). Foucault connects the development of the self with speaking about oneself and the importance of
confession and truth. In connection to this, he introduces the concept of Parrhesia, the final term presented in this essay.

**Parrhesia**

Foucault studied the thoughts of the philosophers of ancient Greece and often used their terms in his analysis’. He was interested in the truth and, as he tells himself, had studied it for many years in connection with the view on madness and discipline (*Discourse*). One term frequently used in ancient Greek literature related to the subject of truth and utilized by Foucault is Parrhesia. According to Foucault, the word is mostly translated into English as “free speech” (*Discourse*), and he describes that etymologically it means “to tell everything”, and that there are three criteria to fill if the speech is to be characterized as Parrhesia. First, everything should be stated clearly so that there can be no misunderstanding of the meaning. Secondly, it should be perfectly clear that the utterance is the speaker’s own opinion (*Discourse*). The third characteristic of Parrhesia is the relation between the speaker and the listener, and whether there is a danger for the speaker to tell the truth. If there is no danger or threat to the speaker, there is no Parrhesia. Foucault illustrates the concept with an example of a philosopher who needs to critique his king but, when doing so, risks upsetting the monarch and therefore is putting his own life at risk. This paragraph on Parrhesia and truth concludes the introduction of Foucault’s theories in this essay. Through the following application of these theories on *Fahrenheit 451*, the essay will show that the novel is set in a new episteme from that of the episteme of Modernity in which Bradbury lived, and that it would be relevant to call this new episteme the episteme of Ignorance.
Analysis

As previously stated, instead of explaining society from a model, Foucault uses specific terms and concepts which he studies genealogically and traces through time. Such a study of *Fahrenheit 451* will show that the society’s goal in the novel is to have a happy and carefree population free from knowledge, introspection, and reflection, since these phenomena complicate life and hinder happiness. This happy state of ignorance is accomplished through speed, which leaves no time for introspection, and a constant input of impressions and sound, which leaves no room for reflection.

Foucault claims that studying one person's thoughts to understand a society is not enough to determine what is normal or abnormal in an episteme. It is not enough to study the beliefs of one character such as Guy Montag (who, it might be said, is himself conducting a Foucauldian analysis of sorts when he investigates and questions his society's norms). It is necessary to observe Montag's society's underlying system of thought and look at what the designated characteristics of his time are to understand what is considered normal in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*.

When using Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge, it is possible to dive down into the underlying layers of thought and see the undercurrents of and the basis for society’s norms at the time of Mildred, Guy, and the other characters in *Fahrenheit 451*. Using Foucault’s genealogy, it is possible to trace these thought patterns and observe their development. Although dystopic, the world in *Fahrenheit 451* is not entirely fictional. It is a futuristic tale, a possible development of America in the nineteen-fifties when Bradbury wrote the book. Once it is established approximately where in time the novel is set, it is possible to study the development of thought from its origin. Peter Sisario claims in his article from 1970 that *Fahrenheit 451* is set in an “imaginary world of the twenty-fourth century”, but there is no indication of that in the novel. Montag tells Mildred that, “We’ve started and won two atomic wars since 1960” (*F 451* 96) and
thus informs the reader that the story takes place after 1960. Faber gives another indication of when in time the novel is set when he tells Guy about the time he realized the end of people’s interest in knowledge, “I knew a man who printed our college paper half a century ago. That was the year I came to class at the start of the new semester and found only one student to sign up for Drama from Aeschylus to O’Neill” (115). The lack of interest in the intellectual subject of drama marked for Faber the end of an era of knowledge, and it is possible to establish that the novel is set in the first half of the twenty-first century. However, more important than pinpointing exactly when the story is set is to ascertain that it takes place in an imagined development of the nineteen-fifties and the episteme of Modernity to which the nineteen-fifties belong. Once it is determined that the society of Fahrenheit 451 is a prolongation of the North American society of the nineteen-fifties, it is possible to apply Foucault’s genealogical approach to study the development of the underlying current of thought and show what is considered normal in the episteme of Ignorance. In this essay, the archaeological study of a specific period of time will be done in connection with the genealogical study of the development of thought. The first term to be analysed in this endeavor is that of power.

State Power in the Episteme of Ignorance

All the previously mentioned relations of power are present in Fahrenheit 451, those between a state and its citizens, inter-personal relations of power and the power of governing oneself. According to O’Farrell, Foucault considers power to be non-absolute, and a relation does not constitute a relation of power unless there is an element of opposition: “Foucault assumes that people will always seek to modify the actions of others, in short, to exercise power, but he also assumes that people will at the same time resist such attempts” (ch. 9). Hence, there is no power relation with the state for all the Mildreds in the world of Fahrenheit 451, the loyal subjects who are not prone to any
opposition. Over a person like Guy, on the other hand, who has started to question the order of things in his society, the state executes a great deal of power, “At any moment, Beatty might rise and walk about him, touching, exploring his guilt and self-consciousness” (45). Guy feels guilty for realizing that he is unhappy, and for questioning the order of things and the norm of ignorance maintained by the state. He is afraid that Beatty, a representative of the state and executioner of its power, will discover his questioning and his doubt. When Guy starts to question the order of things he becomes abnormal because most people in the society of *Fahrenheit 451* are not questioning anything.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault narrates the development of how society, through its execution of power collected knowledge about the criminals. These data formed a body of knowledge that developed into the science of criminology. In the world of *Fahrenheit 451*, the gathering of knowledge led to a policy of ignorance. Faber tells Guy that, “I remember the newspapers dying like huge moths. No one wanted them back. No one missed them. And the Government, seeing how advantageous to have people reading only about passionate lips and the fist in the stomach, circled the situation with your fire-eaters” (*F 451* 115). The government has observed people and knows they want to be happy and entertained. It capitalizes on the people’s longing for entertainment and develops their disinterest in knowledge into active oppression of it. In the episteme of Modernity critique of the state and its power is accepted. The norm in *Fahrenheit 451* and the episteme of Ignorance is to fear the power of the state and its representatives. Another aspect that has changed between the two epistemes is the level of surveillance and control the citizens consider normal.
Interpersonal Power in the Episteme of Ignorance

Discipline and surveillance maintain a relationship of power, which Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish*. He describes how "He who is subject to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play simultaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation; in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (*Discipline* 202-3). Although the state in *Fahrenheit 451* does not have a concrete Panopticon building (the circular-shaped prison model designed by Bentham in the nineteenth century and described in *Discipline and Punish* (195-228), the principles of power are the same. Foucault claims that the surveillant power can "throw off its physical weight", become "non-corporeal" and the closer it comes to this state "the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects" (*Discipline* 203). The sought result from the government's point of view is that the people of *Fahrenheit 451* discipline themselves without the need for constant supervision. They follow the law, and before his opposition to the power grows too strong, so does Guy, "‘Do you ever read any of the books you burn?’” Clarice asks Guy, “‘He laughed. ‘That’s against the law’’" (*F 451* 15). Guy’s answer shows that no further supervision is necessary than him knowing it is forbidden. However, Mildred is more representative than Guy in illustrating how the supervision of the self has succeeded, “‘See what you’re doing? You’ll ruin us. Who’s more important, me or that bible?’” (100). She knows that books are forbidden and that when Guy chooses to keep the stolen bible, he puts them both at risk. Contrary to Guy, Mildred does not feel any need to rebel against the order of things. She is happy without books or knowledge. Foucault claims that the Panopticon creates, "a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (*Discipline* 201), entailing that even if one removes the supervisor, the
supervised have assumed the responsibility of the discipline, hence guarding themselves. Mildred and her friends see to it that Guy does not wander off from the right, ignorant path. When the turn has come to Guy’s house to be burnt down he asks Beatty, “‘Was it my wife turned in the alarm?’ Beatty nodded. ‘But her friends turned in an alarm earlier, that I let ride’” (F 451 152). In Fahrenheit 451, the state does not film the inhabitants in their homes. It does not need to because it has successfully induced such a sense of supervision that the citizens discipline themselves. Mildred is a guarantor for preserved ignorance in the Montag home. The accepted level of self-surveillance and ignorance has been altered so much that the view on these issues is completely different from that in the previous episteme, where knowledge and freedom were not only allowed but encouraged. For people to be satisfied with ignorance and the power directly and indirectly excercised by the government, the state manipulates social relations. In the following, Foucault’s terms will be tools in the discussion rather than subjects of it as in the previous paragraphs.

*Social Relations in the Episteme of Ignorance*

Another new norm in this episteme of Ignorance is the prevailing view on social relations. Deep social relations are seen as unnatural and social contact is reduced to shallow meetings, preferably in front of a TV-wall. From the state’s perspective, Mildred represents the ideal citizen, as her attitude illustrates the ignorant state of mind the government seeks in all its subjects. She drowns herself in noise and sound twenty-four hours a day, which leaves no room for reflection or thoughts of her own. She consumes so much entertainment that she remembers neither what she is watching nor the content as Guy discovers when he asks her, “‘What was on?’ ‘Programmes’. ‘What programmes?’ ‘Some of the best ever.’ ‘Who?’ ‘Oh, you know, the bunch’” (66). She cannot remember or distinguish what the programmes were about because the content is
not important, just the momentary entertainment. The TV – walls blast screams and sound all day, rendering conversation impossible and the interpersonal connection between Guy and his wife is effectively hindered.

The TV programs are also interactive, which means that the program's characters use Mildred's name to induce an impression and, more importantly, a feeling that they are communicating with her, “Montag turned and looked at his wife, who sat in the middle of the parlour talking to an announcer, who in turn was talking to her” (83). This feature lures her in and connects her to the TV's artificial, non-existing relatives, instead of Guy. As Peréz claims, “This great inclusiveness with the unreality intended by the creators of these TV shows deprives the spectators from developing relationships with actual people and, therefore, from acquiring feelings for them, preventing them from building their ‘human’ side and individuality” (4.3). TV-walls and architecture are not the only ways in which relations with others and oneself are hindered. When they are not watching TV, they can effectively use the so-called Seashells, in-ear phones that effectively hinder all introspection and communication when the TV is not on, “And in her ears the little Seashells, the thimble radios tamped tight, and an electronic ocean of sound, of music and talk and music and talk coming in, coming in on the shore of her unsleeping mind” (F 451 62). The tradition of repressing thought and social life is also shown in school in this new episteme of Ignorance, where the government has abolished all room for critical thinking.

In North America in the nineteen-fifties, in the episteme of Modernity, conversation and personal relations were still cherished but are now considered abnormal. According to Clarice, a characteristic of the view on socialization in this episteme of Ignorance is the design of houses, “My uncle says the architects got rid of the front porches because they didn’t look well. But my uncle says that was merely rationalizing it; the real reason, hidden underneath, might be they didn’t want people
sitting like that, doing nothing, rocking, talking; that was the wrong kind of social life. People talked too much. And they had time to think” (83). If people were allowed to socialize, they might have an intellectual exchange and develop dangerous ideas. In this episteme, the abnormals are the ones who keep the lights on for late night discussions, as Clarice’s family “Above all, their laughter was relaxed and hearty and not forced in any way, coming from the house that was so brightly lit this late at night while all the other houses were kept to themselves in darkness” (26). It is not normal in this episteme to stay up at night and talk, and the hearty socializing in Clarice’s household surprises Montag.

Clarice complains to Guy that there is no room for real socializing in school, the days are filled with so much information, activity, and impressions that no conversation or thinking is possible, “… but do you know, we never ask questions, or at least most don’t; they just run the answers at you, bing, bing, bing, and us sitting there for four more hours of film-teacher. That’s not social to me at all” (42). Beatty confirms to Guy that it is a deliberate strategy of the government to bombard the students with answers and impressions so that they do not have time to think for themselves, “With school turning out more runners, jumpers, racers, tinkerers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and imaginative creators, the word “intellectual”, of course, became the swear word it deserved to be (76). With this statement, Beatty illustrates the government’s effort of annihilating knowledge and for ignorance to become a norm. The episteme of Ignorance has completely changed the view on socialization from the previous episteme where relations between people were perceived as positive and intellectual reasoning as fruitful. Shallowness impregnates the episteme of Ignorance, and this affects the norm regarding love and respect between people.
Love, Respect and Speed in the Episteme of Ignorance

The lack of love and respect for life are other new norms that show there has been a break to a new episteme and in addition to an overload of impressions, speed is used as a tool to prevent from socializing and reflecting on life and the order of things. When Montag is distraught and torn, Mildred recommends him to take the car and blow some steam off, something she does whenever she feels bored or annoyed. It is an emotional outlet for Mildred if she hits an animal in the process, "It's fun out in the country. You hit rabbits, sometimes you hit dogs" (84). To kill an animal is not a terrible accident but something positive. Mildred drives fast because to drive slowly is abnormal in this society and to move as slowly as a pedestrian is sometimes prohibited as Clarice tells Guy, “My uncle was arrested another time – did I tell you? – for being a pedestrian. Oh, we’re most peculiar” (17). To walk is not fast enough, it might give time for reflection, and therefore Clarice’s uncle was arrested. Phenomena such as the suicides, the war, the children driving fast and killing each other are shrugged at and accepted as normal. All human relationships are void of feeling. The parents do not invest in their children, “I plunk the children in school nine days out of ten. I put up with them when they come home three days a month; it’s not bad at all” (125), as Mildred’s friend says. The husbands and wives do not have feelings for each other as Guy acknowledges when he reflects on his relationship with his wife, “Even if she dies, I realized a moment ago, I don’t think I’ll feel sad” (199), and when Clarice is killed, Mildred barely notices, “’But I think she’s dead.’ ‘You’re not sure of it!’ ‘No, not sure. Pretty sure.’ ‘Why didn’t you tell me sooner?’ ‘Forgot.’” (63). It is apparent that to Mildred it is of no consequence that the girl next door died. She even forgot to tell Guy. She has no compassion for the woman who burned along with her books and considers the punishment in alignment with the woman’s crime. The new norm is for people to take a cynical approach to the loss of life, “She’s nothing to me; she shouldn’t have had
books. It was her responsibility, she should have thought of that. I hate her” (66).

Mildred and her friends are aware that men die from suicide, but not from the wars, and mention this in a very casual way as if a person taking his own life was hardly worth noticing “Killed jumping off buildings, yes, like Gloria’s husband last week, but from wars? No”” (123). The women have no deeper relations to their husbands.

The children are reckless in their driving and Clarice is afraid of them. Montag suspects that the children might have killed her, “I wonder if they were the ones who killed Clarice?” (166). In the old episteme of Modernity it was very abnormal for children to kill each other. Clarice tells Guy that once upon a time, it was different, "My uncle says his grandfather remembered when children didn't kill each other. But that was a long time ago when they had things different" (42). She describes a time when people lived at a slower pace and could observe things and other people around them. When the norm was different and when reflection and emotions were allowed. Guy has the impression that Clarice lives according to these older values and that she sees him, "for how many people did you know that refracted your own light to you? (18). According to Guy, most people just blazed away like torches (18) and he reflects, “How rarely did other people’s faces take of you and throw back to you your own expression, your own innermost trembling thought?” (18). In this episteme it is not normal to have a deeper relationship.

As Beatty mentioned, it is essential in the new episteme that things move quickly. Clarice exemplifies her society’s need for speed with a driver who does not know what grass, or a flower looks like because they are passing so quickly. For drivers, the green and pink blur signify the grass and a rose. They would not be able to identify them as their essence if they did not see them in a speedy blur, "If you showed a driver a green blur, Oh yes! He'd say, that's grass! A pink blur? That's a rose-garden!” (16). This example shows that speed has affected people’s minds and patterns of
thought to the extent that even the essence of material objects is sometimes altered. The normal concept of a flower is now a speedy blur of pink.

After the above discussion of love, respect, and speed, the following distinct characteristic of the episteme of Ignorance to be discussed is that the society of *Fahrenheit 451* lacks the rule of law to protect its citizens.

The Rule of Law in the Episteme of Ignorance

In the episteme of Ignorance, no one expects something like a trial or a police investigation. In this new episteme, when the firemen find a book in someone's house, there is no need for a lengthy process of trials and convictions. Without further ado, they set the house on fire. When the search for Montag is afoot, there is no investigation or trial of him. When the authorities cannot catch him, they execute an innocent man, not accused of anything but who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, “The camera fell upon the victim, even as did the Hound. Both reached him simultaneously. The victim was seized by the Hound and camera in a great spidering, clenching grip” (191). Nobody expects a trial or an investigation of this incident. To expect a legal system in this world would be considered abnormal, a defining characteristic separating this episteme of Ignorance from that of Modernity.

Government of the Self in the Episteme of Ignorance

As assessed, the world of *Fahrenheit 451* succeeds the world of America in the nineteen-fifties. Hence, the genealogy of the subject and the theories of the self in this society are traceable back to the Christian monks and, further still, to the Roman and Greek philosophers. Therefore, it is appropriate to continue Foucault's thoughts on how the importance of speaking the truth about oneself has developed and what it looks like in the world of *Fahrenheit 451* and the episteme of Ignorance. Ironically, the
government’s wish to oppress the subject of the self shows its importance. According to Foucault, speaking the truth is the way to develop the self, and to be fully true, one must annihilate the self. The authorities in Fahrenheit 451 also wish for the population's annihilation of the self, but rather through repression of all thought than through speaking the truth and reflecting upon oneself, rather through extinguishing than enlightening. In previous epistemes, it was encouraged to evolve as a human being and develop and govern the self, but the government in Fahrenheit 451 wants the absolute opposite, namely docile citizens who do not question, reflect, or analyze anything, least of all themselves. To develop critical thinking and want to improve as a human being could be dangerous for a totalitarian state and lead to people wanting to change the order of things as Guy does, “My wife is dying! A friend of mine is already dead. Someone who may have been a friend was burnt less than twenty-four hours ago. You’re the only [one] I knew might help me. To see. To see…” (106). Guy has realized he does not like the order of things. He has examined himself and society and desires action. As Foucault puts it, "the primary material for scrutiny and for the examination of the self is an area anterior to action, of course, anterior to will also, even an area anterior to desires…” (About ). Dangerous things can happen to a totalitarian state if the citizens start to think before they act and reflect upon how they govern themselves.

The consequences of the annihilation of the self are easy to see in Fahrenheit 451. To Mildred, it is of no importance who Mildred and Guy are, “If we had a fourth wall, why it’d be like this room wasn’t ours at all, but all kind of exotic people’s room” (F 451, 30). To Mildred, their own lives are of no consequence. When being denied the reflections and thoughts that constitute a personality, there is a risk for depression. The novel illustrates this in many ways. One example is that Mildred, trying to fill the void inside, deafens her anxiety by fast driving and medicating. Repression of the self means repression of the truth without any truthful examination of yourself there will be no
development of the self. Mildred does not admit to having taken the pills when Guy asks her, “‘Oh, I wouldn’t do that.’ She said, surprised. ‘The bottle was empty.’ ‘I wouldn’t do a thing like that. Why would I do a thing like that?’ (29). Mildred does not want to admit that she might not be happy after all and suppresses her emotions. The importance placed on truth in the previous episteme, based in the practice of Christianity, has radically changed and in the Episteme of Ignorance the truth is something to be avoided. The normal is to not reflect upon the truth and the subjectivity of the self. However abnormal, some citizens cannot refrain from speaking the truth and, in doing so, need to use Parrhesia.

Parrhesia and Truth in the Episteme of Ignorance

The Greek word Parrhesia is used by Foucault as presented in the theory section of this essay. The character most prominently using Parrhesia in Fahrenheit 451 is Guy. He battles with his realizations of what life is and could be. He takes risks when discussing with Mildred and her friends, and Beatty means that in doing that, Guy showed his truth, “It was pretty silly, quoting poetry around free and easy like that. It was the act of a silly damn snob” (152). Faber, who also has some resistance to the power executed by the state, uses Parrhesia when he talks to Guy, “The front door opened slowly. Faber peered out, looking very old in the light and very fragile and very much afraid” (105). After all, Guy is a fireman and most probably would represent the authorities’ point of view. Clarice is another character using Parrhesia. She discusses freely with Guy, and others too, resulting one day in her death in the street. Faber, Guy, and Clarice all use Parrhesia. These three characters clearly speak their own truth, although it entails a great risk to their lives. Parrhesia has always existed to different degrees between people and often between people and their government. In North America, however, in the episteme of Modernity, admitting to being an intellectual or
having read a book of philosophy or fiction did not entail any mortal danger. That is new to the episteme of Ignorance.

*The Shift to the Episteme of Ignorance*

Clarice, Beatty, and Faber are the characters informing us about older times and what values were implicit during the previous episteme. According to Beatty, after forbidding newspapers and books, the government's measures to reach the jump to another episteme were for example, "School is shortened, discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped" (*F 451 73*). He describes that with an increasing speed of life, the question finally became, "Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts" (73). There was no longer need for any intellectual prowess. Beatty explains the development behind the shallow society void of knowledge, inhabited by Montag and his wife, "It didn't come from the government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no!" (76). According to Beatty, the people initiated the creation of this society void of intellectual vigour.

Foucault claimed that the discourse around madness formed the view upon it (*Ethics* 225), and similarly the discourse around knowledge in the world of *Fahrenheit 451* formed that society’s view on knowledge. Beatty describes that technology was one of the reasons behind Montag's possibility to, "stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read comics, the good old confessions, or trade-journals" (*F 451 76*). In other words, Beatty claims that originally people chose to abandon knowledge and education in favour of sports, speed, and light entertainment. He implies that Guy should be glad that he can stay happy. Beatty informs Guy that an educated person could be a threat to anyone, "who knows who might be the target of the well-read man" (77). According to Beatty an unknowledgeable man is less of a threat to himself and anyone else.
The ones set to guard this equalization process in ignorance were the firemen, who were unoccupied after the world's houses were made fireproof. Beatty explains, "They were given the new job, as custodians of our peace of mind, the focus of our understandable and rightful dread of being inferior" (77). According to Beatty, the fear of being inferior and the lust for simple solutions drove humanity to an annihilation of knowledge, "if you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one, or better yet, give him none" (80).

There were books, knowledge, and literature students in the old episteme. These phenomena do not exist in the episteme of Ignorance. The government manifests and secures the need for non-intellectual entertainment through the firemen. Faber regrets he did not protest in the beginning, before the structure of the firemen was set and it was too late, “I grunted a few times and subsided, for there were no others grunting or yelling with me, by then” (106). Possibly, the break to a new episteme could have been stopped if people like Faber had spoken up. Through the government’s use of power, its gathering of knowledge, and the policy of ignorance, the society from the episteme of Modernity, from North America in the nineteen-fifties and Bradbury’s time, has disappeared. Its values were not constant. In the relations between objects and people, there was a creation of something new, a switch to a new episteme, the episteme of Ignorance.

Conclusion

The government in Fahrenheit 451 is totalitarian and executes a great deal of power over those who dare to question its ways. Bradbury describes a world where the dominant state controls people’s lives and minds through mass media and has indoctrinated the population to the extent that they supervise each other, hence executing power over one another. He depicts a world where some of the values perceived as fundamental in the episteme of Modernity have changed considerably
because the citizens have not taken responsibility for their lives. They have not observed or reflected upon the development of society and where it was leading them. People once let their interest in shallow entertainment and ignorance outcompete knowledge and intellectuality. The government has used its knowledge of people’s preference for light entertainment to form a policy of ignorance. Social relations have changed fundamentally, and any love connection between citizens is avoided. There is no rule of law to protect their civil rights, and people are afraid to speak their truth. Faber is the primary link between the novel’s epistemes, and he regrets that he did not observe the development and act sooner.

In the spring of 2022, in our universe parallel to the world of Fahrenheit 451, in the seemingly real development of the nineteen-fifties, totalitarian and populist politicians are increasing their influence in the western world. Some of the features from Fahrenheit 451 no longer seem so far-fetched. The use of technology and the shallowness of society have increased since Bradbury wrote the novel. There might be something to learn from Fahrenheit 451 for citizens in democratic states. Is it possible that some truths should be considered eternal and unquestioned, or that the questioning should stay an intellectual game and not something that permeates society, to avoid losing these values? Or is it, on the contrary, necessary to continue to question and revalue? Today, one might argue that the postmodern questioning of the order of things has led to the rising of totalitarian and populist tendencies in western societies, and a longing for categorical answers.

The analysis in this essay is based on the thinking of the French philosopher/historian Michel Foucault, and his terms and concepts are applied to Bradbury’s novel. The analysis shows that the novel is set in a world with underlying currents of thought so different from those of America in the nineteen-fifties when Bradbury wrote the book that it is possible to claim that Fahrenheit 451 takes place in a
new episteme. An appropriate name for this episteme would be the Episteme of Ignorance. Society's fundamental values have changed so much that most people are no longer familiar with books or knowledge and have lost the habit of reflection and questioning the order of things. Things such as love, discussion, socializing on the front porch, exchanging ideas, and relying on a justice system for legal protection are gone. The switch to a new episteme is so definite that most people are unaware of these phenomena, and when they arise, they are considered abnormal. In this new episteme, it is the norm to drown oneself in entertainment to forget the need for reflection and development of the self.

Bradbury wrote his novel at the beginning of the Cold War and with the Second World War in recent memory. However, in the dystopic story of *Fahrenheit 451*, it is not the development of a socialist but a capitalist society that leads to a dystopic state. The authorities have changed the episteme through consumption, entertainment, and repression, making a totalitarian state void of concern for its citizens possible. Bradbury does not find this development positive. It might be interpreted that he finds knowledge to be an absolute good. According to Sisario, “Bradbury seems to be saying that the nature of life is cyclical, and we are currently at the bottom of an intellectual cycle. We must have faith and blindly hope for an upward swing of the cycle”. Bradbury hopes for the return to a more intellectual society and to a time when the absolute good of knowledge will be revealed.

To Foucault, nothing is absolute, not power, not knowledge, not the truth, and not what is good. These notions constantly need to be redefined, which means hard work, for it is impossible to trust that people will adhere to any permanent definition of the above concepts. According to Foucault, "The good comes from innovation. The good does not exist, just like that, in a timeless heaven, with people who would be like astrologers of the good, able to determine the favorable conjunctions of the stars. The
good is defined, practiced, invented. But this requires the work not just of some, but a collective work” (About ch. Interview). If the majority of a population believes that there exist universal truths and beliefs, for example the belief that democracy is a positive concept, that there exist values so self-evident that they do not need to be discussed or protected, these values might be taken for granted and not be guarded. If we do not reflect and question the order of things we might, as the characters in Fahrenheit 451, not notice the shift to a new episteme and suddenly find ourselves in an episteme of Ignorance, wishing we had learned from Faber and acted as a collective before it was too late.
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