

The Illustrating Man: The Screenplays of Ray Bradbury

By John C. Tibbetts

Although Ray Bradbury writes his stories on foolscap in the standard King's English, he would prefer to shape them into hieroglyphs, roll them up in scrolls, and fling them against tomb walls. He wants to stand them up on two legs and walk them around the world, whispering and singing to tomorrow's children.

In other words, he wants to make motion pictures.

Less heralded than his stories and novels, Bradbury's screenplays nonetheless provide profound insights into his life and work. He insists they constitute the inevitable next step in the evolutionary process begun in his prose works:

If you look at the average page of any of my novels or short stories, it's a shooting script. You can shoot the paragraphs—the close-ups, the long shots, what have you. This has to do with my background and seeing films and collecting comic strips, because *Buck Rogers*, *Flash Gordon*, *Tarzan*—those are all storyboards for films, aren't they? If you have a complete history of cartoons in your head, you're all set to make motion picture screenplays.¹

In the scripting process he deploys a multi-sensory vocabulary that blends the voice of Homer, the picture-words of Ramses, the acoustic universe of McLuhan, and the spectacle-plays of Cecil B. De Mille.

After almost fifty years of struggling to bring his works to the screen—years in which, against all odds, he has displayed the fortitude of Job and the patience of a saint; years in which he has seen some of his most cherished works mangled in the hands of other screenwriters²—he has gained the rare

privilege of script control over film and television projects. And so, new projects “keep a-comin’,” as Ma Joad says in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Disney's *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit* is now in release, and Mel Gibson's Icon Productions and Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks promise new versions of, respectively, *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Martian Chronicles*.

By his own admission, Bradbury was weaned on movies. “I came out of the womb a 10-month baby. I could *see* when I came forth. That's very unusual. The fact that I stayed in the womb an extra month caused all my senses to be heightened. My mind is full of stuff I poked into my eyeballs as a kid. I have an education in all the major films, starting with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* when I was three, *the Phantom of the Opera* when I was five. I snuck into the movie theaters all the time. I had no money (before the war my family was on relief, and I sold newspapers on the street corner). I put away all these images, along with all the metaphors I got from poetry and prose. Jesus, when you get all these things in your head, then you can begin to think about things. And you can learn certain techniques, certain shortcuts to being yourself, to explode every morning and pick up the pieces at noon.”³

However, prior to 1953 Bradbury stayed away from films because, as he admitted in an interview in *Take One* in 1972, he had been afraid of giving up his creative autonomy: “I'm a loner by instinct. . . Every time I get out in huge crowds of so-called ‘creative’ people I am really not happy. I have no respect for other people's opinions.

I wish I could say otherwise, but that's the way I am."⁴

Early Screen Projects

His first forays into movies came about almost by accident; yet they resulted in two seminal fantasy films, Ray Harryhausen's *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Warner Bros., 1953) and Jack Arnold's *It Came from Outer Space* (Universal, 1953). *Beast* established the oft-repeated formula of the rampaging monster (prehistoric and/or mutated) loosed upon the world by atomic testing.⁵ "*Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* was but the first cry of Nature in revolt," wrote commentator Dennis Saleh. "Reeling from the various invasions from outer space, humanity now faced the very planet it inhabited rising up in calamity. Science had pushed the Earth too far with the atom. It began pushing back."⁶

The movie was very loosely based on Bradbury's short story, "The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms" which had originally appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, 23 June 1951.⁷ Ray recalls: "My friend, Ray Harryhausen, was working on his first film for a producer named Hal Chester. Chester called me over to the studio to take a look at the script, thinking that I might doctor it up a bit. Well, I looked it over. To my surprise, some scenes resembled a story I'd done the year before. I told him and his jaw dropped and his wig spun around. He'd inadvertently offered it to the very writer he's stolen it from! It was embarrassing to everybody. The next day I got a telegram offering to buy the rights to my story! I was disappointed they kept only a few scenes—one of them, the scene with the creature and the lighthouse, lasted less than a minute on screen. But it was a beginning."⁸

It Came from Outer Space, along with later films like *Invaders from Mars* (1953) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956),

established the formula of what Vivian Sobchack has called the "invisible invasion" films, i.e., human beings are "taken over" by an alien intelligence. "What is so visually devastating and disturbing about the SF films' 'taken over' humans is the *small*, and therefore terrible, incongruence between the ordinariness of their form and the final extraordinariness of their behavior, however hard they try to remain undetected and 'normal.'"⁹

Harry Essex's shooting script was based on Bradbury's original 110-page screen treatment.¹⁰ Bradbury claims this treatment, for which he was paid \$3,000, was his first real screenplay. It was due to his inexperience, however, that Essex, a veteran of many crime and western programmers, was assigned to rewrite the final shooting script. Purportedly, Essex did little more than retype Bradbury's material into script form. "Despite all claims by everyone else to the contrary, the story and the best elements of *It Came from Outer Space* were written by Ray Bradbury, not by Harry Essex," asserts commentator Bill Warren. "Because of the many influences of this film, Ray Bradbury is therefore far more responsible for the look, the feel and the approach of 1950s science fiction movies than has ever been acknowledged or even suspected before."¹¹

Bradbury's three unpublished screen treatments provide our first glimpses into his method. While not rendered in a standard screenplay format, they are written in prose in the present tense with sporadic indications for specific shots and edits. The desert locations are carefully and concisely described. The viewpoint of the central character, Putnam, is established, interrupted by the occasional use of the point of view of the alien creature (the shimmering "bull's eye" effect was added by director Arnold). In the famous short sequence in which Putnam confronts two of the aliens,

Bradbury visualizes the action in convincingly cinematic terms:

We are in the dark shadows of a store front entrance. The entrance is at least ten feet deep, almost a tunnel. The CAMERA is back in this dark tunnel LOOKING OUT at the square of dusty light. From a distance, we hear the sound of running feet, the sound of Putnam gasping. The sound grows louder. The CAMERA MOVES slightly to the right, expectantly, listening, waiting. Putnam breaks into view, running. He glances suddenly aside and jolts to a halt and stands there, panting, looking to the dark entranceway, into camera, into tunnel.¹²

But here, as in most of his screenplays, there are moments when Bradbury's extravagant prose gets the better of him, defying the feeble translational abilities of the filmmaker. For example, this is his description of the appearance of the alien:

We get the merest glitter, a suggestion only, of something from a nightmare, something which suggests a spider, a lizard, a web blowing in the wind, a milk white nothingness, something dark and terrible, something like a jellyfish, something that glistens softly, like a snake.¹³

A few of the scenes later dropped in Essex' rewrite bespeak one of Bradbury's central themes, that of the loneliness shared in common by creatures of different types (and planets). Indeed, these aliens are neither benign nor hostile, but merely lost creatures sidetracked from their real mission to another world. In a short dialogue scene, cut by Essex, one of the aliens soliloquizes, "I'm very much alone. And the most important thing now is to go home, just to go home, that's all I want now, to go all the way home away from here."¹⁴

Moby Dick

There was a time when Bradbury was reluctant to talk about his first full-fledged

screenplay assignment, John Huston's *Moby Dick* (1956). During the seven months in Ireland it took the fledgling, 33-year old screenwriter to produce a final draft—it was completed in April 1954—his naivete and personal idiosyncracies (such as a fear of flying and of riding in fast cars) made him the butt of Huston's sadistic jokes and abuse. He was frequently humiliated before guests and associates. "Bradbury's a sweet man with the most marvelous imagination," remembered Jeanie Sims, Huston's production assistant on the project, "but he's very naive. He is basically a small-town American. And John was one of the great eccentrics, the last of the swashbucklers. Ray was exactly the opposite. It was very easy to prick the bubble of his pride. He has such a big ego, you had to keep pumping it up to work with him. And John wasn't about to do that. He was the one with the needle."¹⁵

Bradbury offers his own versions of the working relationship, of course. The most affectionate and exuberantly poetic of these accounts is his book-length memoir, *Green Shadows White Whale* (1992). The bitterest is his story, "The Banshee," which he adapted for *The Ray Bradbury Theater*. (Huston, re-named here "John Hampton" and played by Peter O'Toole, is portrayed as a cruel egomaniac and womanizer who falls victim to a vengeful female spirit.)

When he recounted his version of the Huston association to this writer, his voice slipped into a wicked parody of Huston's slow, growling drawl:

John was a man who wanted you around seven days a week, twelve hours a day. He was very possessive. I felt like I had to get permission even to see a movie or see my family. He was a living metaphor. He was outrageous, outsized, loud. A very strange man. Hard to figure out.

We corresponded several times in the early 1950s, while he was working

on *The African Queen*. When he came back home in August of 1953, he called me. I went over to his hotel. He put a drink in my hand, sat me down and said, “Well, Ray, what are you doing in the next year?” And I said, “Not much, Mr. Huston, not much.” He said, “Well, uh, kid, tell you what; how’d you like to come and live in Ireland and write the screenplay of *Moby Dick*? I said, “Gee, Mr. Huston, I’ve never been able to read the damned thing!” He’d never heard that before! And he said, “Tell you what, Ray, why don’t you go home tonight, read as much as you can, come back tomorrow and tell me if you will help me kill the White Whale.” So I went home that night and said to my wife, “Pray for me!” She asked why, and I told her I had to read that night and do a book report tomorrow. What I did was surf the book, I surfed for metaphors and discovered a similar soul to mine. I went back the next day and took the job. We went to Ireland, where I lived for almost a year. I’d never traveled, been away from home, never eaten in a good restaurant.

At one point, I asked Huston why he’d chosen me out of all the writers in the world. He said, “Well, it was that short story of yours, ‘The Fog Horn,’ the one about the dinosaur in love with a light house. I thought I smelled the ghost of Melville there.” I still don’t know what there was in that story that made him think I was Melville’s bastard son. Later I discovered that Melville had had the same midwives that I had, like the Old Testament and by Shakespeare, which he had never read until he was thirty years old. These were my midwives, growing up in the Baptist church and reading Shakespeare in high school. So, you can see if I’d given up on dinosaurs and the Old Testament and Shakespeare, I wouldn’t be here talking to you today!

Bradbury claims one of his most significant contributions to the script—and a

scene that is not in the book—was the idea of having Ahab die while lashed to the White Whale: “Then we see, ‘My God, these two should be together forever through eternity, shouldn’t they—Ahab and the white whale?’ It’s not in the book, but I do believe that Melville would have approved.”¹⁶ Otherwise, Ray eliminated a full third of Melville’s text dealing with whales and whaling, added scenes of a storm and of a near mutiny to enhance dramatic tension, and, in general, reshaped the narrative into a series of small climaxes building to a finale. According to commentators Willis E. McNelly and A. James Stupple, “*Moby Dick* may forever remain uncapturable in another medium, but Bradbury’s screenplay was generally accepted as being the best thing about an otherwise ordinary motion picture. John Huston’s vision may have been more confining than Ray Bradbury’s.”¹⁷

Something Wicked This Way Comes

It is perhaps not well known that the *Something Wicked This Way Comes* first saw the light of day as a screenplay, not a story or novel. The whole thing began in 1951, recalls Bradbury, when he saw a painting in a Beverly Hills gallery that would change his life. “It was a huge thing, which I now own, a kind of Renaissance train moving across a trestle with no beginning or end, a metaphorical train with jugglers and clowns and curious people. It touched so many things in my own imagination, I thought, ‘This man is reading my mind!’ It was painted by Joe Mugnaini, and we soon became great pals and worked together on many projects until his death, including a short film called ‘Icarus Montgolfier Wright,’ which was based on my story and his drawings.”¹⁸

“Later, I used Joe’s train, along with an old short story of mine, ‘The Black Ferris,’ for a screenplay for Gene Kelly, called *Dark*

Carnival. I carried out all the ideas I had been thinking about since high school, about this carnival train coming to town, with a carousel that ran backwards, and so forth. I wrote out a rough screenplay of 70-80 pages and gave it to Kelly. He loved it, and he took it to London and Paris to try to get financing. But a month later he came back and said, 'I'm sorry, Ray, nobody wanted to do it.' So, I sat down instead and expanded it into a novel, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962). So, you see, the screenplay became the novel, which later went on to become a screenplay again!"¹⁹

But that screenplay—his first treatments dated from the late 1960s—was a long way yet from reaching the screen. Among the first directors who read it—and rejected it—were Carol Reed, David Lean, and Mark Rydell. Another prospect was Robert Mulligan. "I gave Bob a chance to buy it fifteen years ago and instead he went and made that dreadful film about the children, the twins, *The Other*."

Then came Sam Peckinpah. Here surely is one of the most fascinating "might-have-beens" in film history. The year was 1972:

Sam Peckinpah promised to do it. I always thought he would have been ideal for it. There was a gentler, more sentimental side to him that you saw in things like *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*. Another reason I liked him was that *he* liked *my* screenplay! When I asked him how he was going to film it, he said, 'I'll just rip out the pages and shove them into the camera.' I said, 'Do you really mean that?' And he said, 'Yes, it's a screenplay already.' But, you know, he never moved a finger to option it. I said, 'Sam, give me twenty dollars and I'll give you the novel. And I'll sign a contract with you and work for you for free. Now you can't do better than that. I'll give you a free option period, but *option* it.' And he promised, 'Oh yeah, yeah, we'll do it next month.' Then two years go by and then he goes off to

Europe and doesn't write to me. Then I waited eight months more and sold it to Kirk Douglas and his son, Peter. Then Peckinpah has the nerve to write me and insult me, saying, 'I know now what a turncoat is and what kind of friend you are, etc.' He'd forgotten, of course, that he'd had first crack at it. It's just unfair. It's a paranoid business."²⁰

The Kirk Douglas connection eventually landed director Jack Clayton, whom Bradbury had first met during his tenure in London working with John Huston on *Moby Dick*. Bradbury condensed his screenplay down to 120 pages after daily sessions with Clayton. But political infighting between Paramount president Barry Diller and the film's financier, David Picker, savaged the project. Clayton returned to London. Enter Steven Spielberg. "He told me he had always loved my work, that he would never have made *Close Encounters* if he had not seen *It Came From Outer Space*. But then he disappeared. He didn't return calls. It's the story of my life! I have all these people's fingerprints on my body!"

Finally, Clayton returned to America to direct the film for Walt Disney. According to Bradbury, the following months wrought irreparable damage in their friendship. Not only did Clayton arbitrarily make many changes in the script, but the studio decided to add many special effects, which furthered altered the nature of the finished film.²¹

Other Movie Projects

Picasso Summer (1972), *The Halloween Tree* (1994), and *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1994) presented more object lessons in the minor triumphs and major pitfalls in the screenwriting process. For the first, writing under the pseudonym, "Douglas Spaulding," Bradbury adapted his story, "In a Season of Calm Weather."²² Against his better judgement, as he later admitted, he amplified his short story—hardly more than a vignette—to a

script of approximately an hour and a half length. Shot in 1969, the movie was released in America three years later as an original film made for television. Despite the appearance by Albert Finney and the exquisite Yvette Mimieux, and the incorporation of several animated sequences, Bradbury pronounces it one of the worst films he has ever been associated with.²³

The Halloween Tree and *Little Nemo* were animated short features. What passed for “screenplays” on both occasions was a series of notes and sketches (Bradbury has frequently illustrated his stories) that remind us of his boyhood fascination with comic strips:

Halloween Tree was a Hanna-Barbera film. It turned out fine, because they followed my script for a change. It all began with Chuck Jones years before. The day after Halloween, he asked me if I’d seen the Charlie Brown “Great Pumpkin” television show. I told him I hated it, that you can’t promise kids the Great Pumpkin and not have him arrive! You don’t know children if you do that to them. It’s bad enough what life does to most of us. It occurred to me that we might do our own Halloween story. I brought him a huge painting that I had done of a big tree with lots of pumpkins dangling from the branches. So for four or five weeks I worked on an outline and a screenplay. But at that point MGM closed down its animation studio and fired everybody. So we were out on the street. I said to hell with it. While I waited, I turned it into a book, *The Halloween Tree*, and got Joe Mugnaini to illustrate it.

Various studios optioned it over the next few years. A Japanese-American group owned it for six months, then another studio. All the time I hoped for Chuck to come back. But he could never get anyone interested in *The Halloween Tree*. I was doubtful at first of Hanna-Barbera, but I was convinced that when

Ted Turner took it over it would do a good job. I insisted they use my screenplay, and by God it’s a beautiful piece of work. It won an Emmy.²⁴

On the other hand, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, after a promising start, proved to be a frustrating experience:

It was based on the Winsor McCay comic strip. I spent a year on it and had a wonderful relationship with producer Gary Kurtz. And I worked with American and Japanese illustrators. I’d go in to the Hollywood studio twice a week with four or five pages of screenplay. And they’d give me back twenty or thirty drawings and watercolors. I could hardly wait to go over there. It was the happiest time I had at a studio in my life. At the end of the year I had solved the problem of establishing a continuity for what had been originally a series of self-contained strips. Six months went by, a year, and at the end of two years the Japanese had done only a few minutes of animation. I was afraid we had different ideas about creativity. When the film finally came out, they had ended up making a film for three-year olds. They sent me a video cassette. It’s nicely done, but my script was trampled to death. The titles credit me with the “concept.” But my concept is not in there. And they didn’t check with me before putting my name there. If I wanted to take it off, I couldn’t—it’d take too long in the courts.²⁵

Television

Meanwhile, Bradbury was beginning to adapt his work for the small screen. His first teleplays appeared on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Beginning with “Touched with Fire,” which was telecast 29 January 1956 under the title, “Shopping for Death,” he would do five story adaptations in all. Two more Hitchcock episodes, “The Jar” (telecast on 14 February 1964) and “And So Died Riabouchinska” (telecast on 12 February 1956), were adapted by others.

Hitchcock also produced Bradbury's original script for "The Jail" for *Alcoa Premiere*, 6 Feb 1962.²⁶

Ray's sole encounter with Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* was less fortunate. Bradbury had initially been regarded by Serling as a major contributor-to-be on the series. He was one of Serling's favorite fantasy writers, and the two shared a warm nostalgia for their respective idyllic, small-town boyhoods.²⁷ However, Serling's changes in Bradbury's original script, "I Sing the Body Electric" (telecast 8 May 1962), resulted in frictions between the two. It was the sort of thing Ray had encountered all too frequently in the movie studios: "All the major studios have a 'Truth Dentist,' he recalled sardonically in *Take One*. "[who] extracts all the good stuff from every script—just pulls it out by the bloody roots and throws it away. Every studio has a dentist, a dummy who says, 'Oh, this is slow. Let's rip that page out.'"28

Of all his television ventures, however, Ray is proudest of *The Ray Bradbury Theater*. The series first appeared on HBO in the summer of 1985 as a three-part anthology, "The Crowd," "Marionettes, Inc.," and "The Playground." It won three ACE awards (the National Academy of Cable Programming's equivalent of an Emmy). The second group of three stories—"The Town Where No One Got Off," "The Screaming Woman," and "The Banshee"—were shown together on HBO on 22 February 1986 as "Strange Tales of Ray Bradbury. These and subsequent episodes have been shown on the USA and Sci-Fi Channels. The last episode, "The Tombstone," was aired on 30 October 1992.

As an executive producer, Bradbury wrote all sixty-five of the scripts himself, had approval rights of the final edit, and appeared as the on-camera host. The half-hour format was ideally suited for his work. And Bradbury himself had by now adopted

a more realistic attitude about making changes in the process of adaptation. "That's right, I've learned a lot about writing since then. Your intuition thirty years later says, 'Well, why don't we turn a corner here instead of there and see what happens. . . ?' That's exactly what happened with all these scripts. You'll find many variations between them and the original stories."²⁹ In the opinion of commentator Ben Herndon, "They also represent a chance for an all too often ignored creative figure—the writer—to stand up and say, 'filmmaking is a collaborative craft but there wouldn't be any film to make if not for my story and my screenplay. Enjoy it.'"30

By now, according to Mary Beth Petrask McConnell's unpublished dissertation (1993), which rigorously examines two of Bradbury's short-story adaptations for *The Ray Bradbury Theater*, Ray was solving some of the problems always inherent in translating his stories to the screen. Years before, Rod Serling had described some of these difficulties:

Bradbury is much more effective on the page than he is on the proscenium. The lyrical quality of his work seems to lend itself to the printed page, rather than to spoken dialogue. . . . [T]he words that seem so beautiful in the story turned out archaic and wooden and somehow unbelievable when a person speaks them."³¹

And writing in *Film Quarterly* about the screen adaptation of *Fahrenheit 451*, George Bluestone commented, "What could be accepted as a literary fable in Bradbury seems a little absurd on the screen."³²

Chief among the obstacles in translation seem to be Bradbury's metaphor-laden prose—in the first few pages of *Martian Chronicles*, for example, he describes rocketships as "flowers of heat and color"; and arriving colonists on Mars as "small children, small seeds. . . to be sown in all the Martian climes"—and a tendency to present

static situations, introspective characters, and moralizing speeches.

While Bradbury's language is filtered through the reader's screen of conceptual apprehension, the motion picture image must come directly through perception. While literary metaphors, for example, may gain their power precisely from the fact that they are not to be taken literally, visual equivalents that translate them too closely can look ludicrous on screen. What may be lost is what George Bluestone calls a "connotative luxuriance," an aggregate of thousands of suggestions, of which the visual is only the most obvious.³³

Undaunted, Bradbury declares, "What the hell. I love my own style, and I have fun with it. My screenplays, like my stories, are a collection of all the metaphors I've absorbed all my life. Only I can know them and know how to use them and create from them."³⁴

McConnell agrees, noting that in his television scripts, particularly, Ray has successfully taken on the challenge of translating his prose metaphors into their aural-visual equivalents. These scripts demonstrate that "metaphors can be translated visually without trying to duplicate exactly the terms used in the written text." He creates *audio-visual* metaphors by combining "the audio elements of sound effects, voiceover and music with the cinematographic visual elements of lighting and camera techniques to create his audio-visual metaphors."³⁵

Conclusion

The challenges and/or problems in translating Bradbury to the screen may point to a truth hinted at in the first pages of this essay. Perhaps Bradbury's stories do not belong on television or in the movie theaters at all. Perhaps, his conceptual extravagances, multi-sensory images, and epic scope are better suited to a different

kind of medium—one that has swallowed movies and television whole, like the whale swallowing Jonah.

What is this medium? Call it more of a concept. Late in the 19th century opera composer Richard Wagner strove for a *gesamtkunstwerk* that would combine all the arts. At the turn of the century two visionaries, theatrical entrepreneur Percy MacKaye and composer Alexander Scriabin, predicted (if never realized) multi-media, environmental experiences—respectively, a "Spectatorium" and a "Mysterium"—that would subsume the traditional arts within new technological contexts. Beginning in the 1950s Walt Disney took these experiments to theme parks and, ultimately, EPCOT Center.

Bradbury, meanwhile, has already "written"—the word seems hardly adequate—for this unique medium. He has found the perfect venue for a writing style that, in essence, is highly audio-visual. "The logic of events always gives way to the logic of the senses," he explains. "The most improbable tales can be made believable, if your reader, through his senses, feels certain that he stands at the middle of events."³⁶ In the early 1980s he began working as an "imagineer" for Walt Disney's Glendale facility, devising the concepts for Walt Disney World's "Spaceship Earth." At that time, as he toured this writer through the facility, it seemed as if his idea of a living, audio-visual Martian library, first formulated in *The Martian Chronicles*, was finding its realization. "You leave here at night with some ideas scribbled down on paper and the next morning there are three watercolors waiting for you," he exclaimed. "I write the basic scenario and then come the paintings, sculptures, and animatronic robots." Room after room was panelled with enormous murals whose successive scenes merged into a continuous narrative. Here was the march of history in

wraparound—the caveman donning armor and riding off to St. Peter’s cathedral, the Star in the East melding into Explorer I. It was as if the dancing artist in his short story, “The Picasso Summer” had paid a visit here and left behind his cavalcade of satyrs and angels.

Bradbury conceived of history in cinematic terms, as an accelerated action, moving in reverse and then forward again. He showed me the model for the “Deep Past” chamber. “Here we put the audience into these pods and sink them down through the levels of time so that they see all the architectures of the Past as they sink down into the grave, as it were. We reverse everything. We take all the architectures apart and put them back into the ground. Then, the sun explodes and we move people forward. The dinosaurs appear and pyramids

rise up. As you pass through the Renaissance, Michelangelo reaches up and paints the whole Sistine Ceiling above you. Finally, at the end, we blast you into space. Da Vinci’s human figure—“ he points to Leonardo’s famous diagrammatic conception of the figure as a multiple-image design inscribed within a circle—“and spin it with force flying out of each finger, pointing at each member of the audience. We then fix *their* faces onto the ceiling. We spin the viewers in a centrifuge and send them OUT THE DOOR! And we tell them, GO OUT AND MAKE THE FUTURE. EACH OF YOU!” He laughs in the intoxication of the moment.³⁷

Bradbury may have found at last his true medium, a living metaphor that transcends the limitations of page, radio, stage, and screen.

Sidebar

The Martian Chronicles

The process of bringing *The Martian Chronicles* to the screen, like so many Bradbury projects, has been long, tortuous, and as-yet unsatisfactorily unrealized. Published in 1950, Bradbury’s most famous book contained fifteen short stories and several connective vignettes surrounding the general theme of man’s exploration and subsequent exploitation of Mars. Its loosely organized structure, extravagant metaphors, and allegorical nature hinted at problems in translation to another medium.

Ray’s first attempt came in 1955 under the title *Report from Space* for a projected television series of that name. It appeared in the form of a concept sketch in which an anonymous Narrator reports the fortunes of the first astronauts to Mars. It was optioned but never produced. In 1961 Ray wrote an expanded version for MGM. It in turn was revised in 1964 into a 178-page script for Robert Mulligan and Alan J. Pakula Productions. It also fell through. By the time man landed on the moon in mid-1969, and the Mariner photographs revealed Mars to be barren and lifeless, Bradbury’s vision of a romantic, oxygen-supported planet seemed doomed, too hopelessly outdated for screen adaptation.

That conclusion was seemingly verified when NBC aired a three-part, six-hour mini-series on 27-29 January 1980, directed by Michael Anderson and adapted by Bradbury’s friend, Richard

Matheson. It was, putting it mildly, a disaster. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times* Calendar section, J. Brown described it as a “lumpen, leaden bore in which the sum of its many disjointed parts wouldn’t add up to a good episode of *Star Trek*.”³⁸

Ironically, the fidelity of Richard Matheson’s script to the original book may have contributed to what was generally dismissed as a wordy, languid, shapeless, and utterly improbable film.³⁹ The use of an off-screen narrative voice behind the action simply underscored the obvious, creating an audio-visual pleonasm. Lengthy speeches by the characters of Spender and Wilder carried the weight—call it burden—of the sermonizing prose.

Bradbury himself fared much better when he adapted several of the stories—including “Mars Is Heaven” and “The Martian”—as free-standing episodes for the half-hour formats of *The Ray Bradbury Theater*. Recently, he has been commissioned by Steven Spielberg to write a new script of *The Martian Chronicles*. At this writing, the script, dated October 1997, is undergoing further revisions. No production schedule has been announced as yet.

A quick glance at Bradbury’s most recent screenplay provides some indications of what he’s up to.⁴⁰

The first page of the new *Chronicles* script replaces the metaphor-laden opening page of the book—descriptions of the thawing of Ohio winters by the “rocket summer” of spaceship thrusters—a flurry of specific audio and visual cues:

Dawn. Silence. The sky over Cape Canaveral. A few birds lifting up, soaring in the sound of the wind. Then—WHAM! A jet roars across the sky. Silence. The sun rises. WHAM! As a second jet fires the clouds. (1)

A time line is quickly established. Four Martian expeditions, captained by Wilder, York, Allen, and Black, are quickly, and simultaneously dispatched. Cross-cutting to Mars, we meet the Martians Yll and his wife, Ylla. Cutting back to the expeditions, their fates are quickly outlined: York’s crew is shot by Yll, Allen’s crew is incarcerated and later killed, and Black’s crew is murdered after being deceived by the Martians. When Wilder’s fourth expedition arrives, in a sequence expanding the story, “—And the Moon Be Still As Bright,” he discovers that earthly chicken pox has decimated most of the Martian population. In a confrontation with crew member, Spender, who has donned a Martian mask and gone mad under its spell, Wilder learns about the Martian history and culture.

Although Wilder disappears from the original story at this point, the screenplay retains him as a commentator/narrator as well as an occasional participant in subsequent events. Wilder’s voice-over against subsequent montages, provides many opportunities for

the deployment of Bradbury's famous tropes. Here is his description of the arriving emigrants from Earth:

"The rockets came like locusts swarming the sky. Their engines fired the dead seas of Mars, turned rock to lava, melted sand and lica into green glass that lay like shattered mirrors reflecting the invasion. . . ." (83)

A flurry of brief episodes come and go, like Driscoll's seeding the clouds to produce needed rain ("The Green Morning"), Wilder's meeting with the Martian Yll (an altered version of "Night Meeting"), Wilder's description of Earthly colonists establishing cities and towns ("The rocket fires burned the names away. . .", 96), etc.

For the most part the dialogue is crisp and spare; however, inevitably, the characters occasionally slip into the kind of rhapsodic speech-making so typical of the book. As a result, they tend to speak in Bradbury's voice rather their own. In this example, as astronaut Wilder prepares to take off for Mars, he delivers this address to the expectant crowds that have gathered for the liftoff:

"[S]omewhere in a billion year history, the eye was invented. We saw the stars and wanted them. This is the end of our wanting and start of our getting. What will we do out there, beyond? We will give ourselves as gifts to the Universe." (3)

On another occasion, Father Peregrine, a priest come to Mars in search of a new mission, makes a similar pronouncement:

"We are travelers, on our way to Eternity. Mars is but a way station to all Time and Space. We come like water and like wind we go. Our destination? Forever. Our occupation? To know the Universe. We are the Eyes of Time, born to witness and celebrate. We carry the gift of life to Mars and beyond. . . To be Immortal. To live forever." (124)

The final third of the script is taken up with the impending nuclear catastrophe back on Earth. This is first perceived by Wilder in a dream image of a house on whose walls is burnt "the imprint of human forms. . . . photographed by the atomic flash." (98) Intercut with these and subsequent visions are more episodes, abbreviated from the stories, "There Will Come Soft Rains," "The Fire Ballons," "Usher II," "The Martian," and "The Off Season." Sporadically, flash-cuts of a dying Earth continue to punctuate the action.

Occasionally, Bradbury can't resist cutting and shot descriptions with the sort of conceptual extravagance that is his trademark (and surely the bane of an erstwhile filmmaker!). Witness this montage description:

A series of explosions, atom-bomb lightnings and thunders, as we CUT FROM FACE TO FACE among the Earthmen population

of MARS, INTERCUT with scenes on EARTH, each scene representing a swift portion of that man or woman's life in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, landscapes, desert views, rivers, mountains. . . ." (128)

At the script's end, Wilder joins up with characters from the preceding stories—Driscoll, Parkhill (the hot dog man), and some children (*not* androids, after all, as they were in "The Long Years"). In a startling reversal of Bradbury's original book conception, Wilder reveals to his companions that there was no atomic war on earth, after all. It was all a kind of trick to get the Earthlings back to their planet and to leave Mars alone. If allowed to remain in the script, this will doubtless strike some viewers as a curious let-down, a distinct anti-climax to all the emphasis that has gone before on the nuclear devastation back home. At any rate, now Wilder's group is left alone on Mars. As in the book's concluding pages, they stare at their reflections in the water, realizing that they are now the new Martians.

It remains to be seen how much of this script will make its way onto the screen. Clearly, it is the work of a man who both understands the limitations of the screen, on the one hand, and is determined, on the other, to test, extend, and even defy them.

Endnotes

¹Quoted in Matthew R. Bradley, "Ray Bradbury," *Outre*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1995), 72. Bradbury made a similar pronouncement in Lawrence French, "Ray Bradbury on *Something Wicked This Way Comes*," *Fangoria*, Vol. 3, No. 27 (1983): "My stories are already screenplays. Just take the paragraphs and turn them into shots. . . ." (p. 63).

²For the record, Bradbury did *not* work on the screenplays for *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) and *The Illustrated Man* (1969). He refused Francois Truffaut's offer to write the screenplay for *Fahrenheit 451* (it was adapted by Truffaut and Jean-Louis Richard). Truffaut later claimed that, in spirit at least, half the movie belonged to Bradbury: "On the screen you will see only what was in our two heads, Bradbury's brand of lunacy and mine. . . ." See Francois Truffaut, "Journal of *Fahrenheit 451*," *Cahiers du Cinema*, February-March 1966), 11-13. For *The Illustrated Man*, Bradbury did prepare an outline and a screen treatment for producer Jerry Wald. But after ten years passed and nothing was done, the project went instead to Jack Smight. A totally new script was written by the producer, Howard B. Kreitsek. Bradbury was not consulted.

³Author's interview with Ray Bradbury, 5 October 1996, St. Louis.

⁴Quoted in Arnold R. Kunert, "Ray Bradbury on Hitchcock, Huston, and Other Magic of the Screen," *Take One*, May-June 1972, p. 16.

⁵Director Eugene Lourie, who had worked as a set designer for Jean Renoir on *The Rules of the Game*, went on to make two more dinosaur movies, *The Giant Behemoth* (1959) and *Gorgo* (1960).

⁶Dennis Saleh, *Science Fiction Gold* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), p. 109.

⁷It was later retitled "The Fog Horn" and reprinted in *The Golden Apples of the Sun* (1953).

⁸Author's interview with Ray Bradbury, 5 October 1996, St. Louis.

⁹Vivian Sobchack, *The Limits of Infinity* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1980), p. 121. It was also one of the first releases in wide screen (1 to 1.85 aspect ratio) and stereophonic sound.

¹⁰The title of Bradbury's original screen treatment has occasioned some dispute. Bradbury's bibliographer and long-time friend, William F. Nolan, claims it was titled "The Meteor." See William F. Nolan, *The Ray Bradbury Companion* (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1975), p. 242. This is disputed by William Warren, who, after examining Bradbury's files, contends that neither of the three extant Bradbury treatments bear that title; rather, the first two were called "Atomic Monster," and the third, "It Came From Outer Space." See Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies!* (Jefferson, North Carolina, 1982), p. 122. For a recent examination of the film's production history, see Stuart Galbraith IV, "It Came from Outer Space: Where IT Really Came From," *Filmfax*, No. 50 (May-June 1995), 51-57, 94-96.

¹¹Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies!*, p. 125.

¹²Quoted in Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies!*, p. 126.

¹³Quoted in Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies!*, p. 127.

¹⁴Quoted in Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies!*, p. 127.

¹⁵Quoted in Lawrence Grobel, *The Hustons* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), pp. 417-418.

¹⁶Author's interview with Ray Bradbury, 19 December 1990, Los Angeles.

¹⁷Willis E. McNelly and A. James Stuppel, "Two Views," in Martin Harry Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander, Eds., *Ray Bradbury* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 19-20. There is a controversy about the

screenwriting credits for *Moby Dick*, which lists Bradbury and Huston as co-writers. Bradbury has always flatly declared he wrote the script alone. When Huston declared his intentions to list himself on the credits as co-writer, Bradbury took the matter to arbitration to the Screen Writers Guild. The decision favored Bradbury. However, when Huston later appealed, the decision was reversed. See Arnold R. Kunert, "Ray Bradbury on Hitchcock, Huston, and Other Magic of the Screen," *Take One*, pp. 19-20. A differing view is offered by Huston's biographer, Lawrence Grobel, who writes that not only did Huston contribute scenes to the finished script, but that other writers—including John Godley—also worked on the final script. Huston's secretary, Lorrie Sherwood, declared: "John always worked with his writers. He rewrote *Moby Dick* as we went along." Another associate, Ernie Anderson, even went so far as to question Bradbury's contributions: "His name really shouldn't be on it. See Lawrence Grobel, *The Hustons*, pp. 418-423.

¹⁸"Icarus Montgolfier Wright" was first published in *the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, May 1956, and later collected in *A Medicine for Melancholy*. The Academy Award-nominated film version was released in 1962 by Format Films. Bradbury shared screenplay credit with George Clayton Johnson. In an interview with this writer, Joe Mugnaini remembered the project: "I did a movie with Ray, based on his short story. It was about a little boy who wanted to fly. And the boy dreamed he was Icarus and one of the Montgolfier Brothers and one of the Wright Brothers. Ray went to a film company, Format Films (which was then doing the "Chipmunks" series). James Whitmore donated his time as narrator. I did over a thousand storyboard sketches and hundreds of paintings in acrylic. By moving the camera across the surfaces of the drawings, and by means of editing, we were able to get a lot of dynamics—contrasts and overlaps—into the thing. There was a sense of motion all the way through. Although it didn't win an Oscar, it did win a Golden Eagle Award." Author's interview with Joe Mugnaini, 2 December 1990, Los Angeles.

¹⁹Author's interview with Ray Bradbury, 15 December 1995, Los Angeles.

²⁰Author's interview with Ray Bradbury, 15 December 1995, Los Angeles.

²¹In a 1995 interview in *Outre* magazine, Bradbury claims he and studio head, Ron Miller, worked without Clayton's assistance for almost two months after the film's disastrous first preview "re-doing a good part of the film." "In a way, he says, "the head of the studio and I re-directed the film." See Matthew R. Bradley, "Ray Bradbury," *Outre*, p. 73. For detailed accounts of the film's production, see the following: Lawrence French, "Ray Bradbury on *Something Wicked This Way Comes*," *Fangoria*, pp. 28-32, 63; Stephen Rebello, "*Something Wicked This Way Comes*," *Cinefantastique*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (June-July 1983), pp. 28-49; Brad Munson, "*Something Wicked This Way Comes*—Adding the Magic," *Cinefex*, pp. 4-27.

²²The story first appeared in *Playboy* in January 1957 and was later collected in *A Medicine for Melancholy* (1959).

²³For an account of the filming, see Wes Herschensohn, *The Making of "Picasso Summer,"* (Cranbury, NJ. A.S. Barnes, 1973).

²⁴Author's interview with Ray Bradbury, 5 October 1996, St. Louis.

²⁵Author's interview with Ray Bradbury, 5 October 1996, St. Louis.

²⁶Other Bradbury scripts for Hitchcock were "Design for Loving" (based on "Marionettes, Inc."), telecast 9 November 1958; "Special Delivery" (based on "Come into My Cellar"), telecast 29 November 1959) "The Faith of Aaron Menefee" (based on a story by Stanley Ellin), telecast 30 January 1962; and "The Life Work of Juan Diaz," telecast 26 October 1964.

²⁷Bradbury grew up in Waukegan, Illinois, and Serling in the small upstate-New York town of Binghamton. As a mark of Serling's esteem for Bradbury, he made references to him in two of his own original television scripts—naming a character "Dr. Bradbury" in the episode, "Walking Distance" (1959), and referring to "the Bradbury account" in "A Stop at Willoughby" (1960).

²⁸Quoted in Marc Scott Zicree, *The Twilight Zone Companion* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 21.

²⁹Quoted in Ben Herndon, "The Ray Bradbury Theater," *Cinefantastique*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (May 1986), p. 6. For a highly detailed examination of Bradbury's methods of script adaptation, see Mary Beth Petraski McConnell, *The Ray Bradbury Theater: A Case Study of The Adaptation Process from the Written Artifact to the Cinematic Text*, unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University, 1993.

³⁰Ben Herndon, "The Ray Bradbury Theater," *Cinefantastique*, pp. 7, 53.

³¹Steven Dimeo, "The Martian Chronicles: Classic SF Comes to TV without Class," *Cinefantastique*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer 1980), pp. 19-23.

³²George Bluestone, "The Fire and the Future," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. JXX, No. 4 (Summer 1967), p. 5.

³³George Bluestone, *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* (University of California Press, 1966), pp. 20-21.

³⁴Author's interview with Ray Bradbury, 5 October 1996, St. Louis.

³⁵See Mary Beth Petraski McConnell's analyses of two Bradbury screen adaptations, "The Murder" and "There Was an Old Woman," in her unpublished dissertation, *The Ray Bradbury Theater: A Case Study of the Adaptation Process from the Written Artifact to the Cinematic Text* (1993). Quotations are on p. 76.

³⁶Ray Bradbury, "How to Keep and Feed a Muse," in *Zen in the Art of Writing* (Santa Barbara CA: Capra Press, 1990), p. 38.

³⁷Quoted in John C. Tibbetts, "Riding the Spaceship Earth," *Motif*, June-July 1981, pp. 13-18.

³⁸For a sampling of this and other critical reactions, see Mary Beth Petraski McConnell, *The Ray Bradbury Theater: A Case Study of The Adaptation Process from the Written Artifact to the Cinematic Text*, unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University, 1993, pp. 16-17.

³⁹For a survey of critical reaction, see Steven Dimeo, "The Martian Chronicles: Classic SF Comes to TV Without Class," *Cinefantastique*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer 1980), 19-23.

⁴⁰All quotations by permission of Ray Bradbury.

The Illustrated Man is a 1951 collection of eighteen science fiction short stories by American writer Ray Bradbury. A recurring theme throughout the eighteen stories is the conflict of the cold mechanics of technology and the psychology of people. It was nominated for the International Fantasy Award in 1952. The unrelated stories are tied together by the frame device of "the Illustrated Man", a vagrant former member of a carnival freak show with an extensively tattooed body whom the unnamed narrator Copyright © 1994 Ray Bradbury Enterprises. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright. Conventions. Each of the men I have listed seized a bit of the quicksilver of life, froze it for all time and turned, in the blaze of their creativity, to point at it and cry, "Isn't this good!" And it was good. What has all this to do with writing the short story in our times?