Fahrenheit 351: Towards a Healthy World View

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Of what use is this knowledge to us? It eats away at our vision of the world as a place where good things can happen. More than anything, it eats away at our ability to trust, for in the face of this sensory avalanche of violence from around the world we feel ourselves small, unimportant, powerless. Before we had CNN bringing all the wars of the world into our private lives, we could choose whether to respond or not to the newsmakers on our block or in our home town. But who can fix the problems in Belfast? Can we save the Indians of Chiapas? What earthly good does it do us to come to class to learn that humanity has been violent for a long time; that evil sits at the corners of power; and, worst of all and most deadly, that there is no end in sight? What are the students of Humanities 351 supposed to do with this information: a) commit suicide b) blame the Jews c) increase their intake of alcohol on the weekends d) stop watching the news altogether e) all of the above f) none of the above? And if "none of the above," then what are we supposed to do with this overload, this avalanche, of frightening, paralyzing, deadly information, once we’ve handled it in ourquiz and gone home?

Nor do the lighter works in this course, films such as My Sweet Village, or novels such as Like Water for Chocolate, mitigate the overall messages of horror. Indeed, on the level where all things are equal, they can only make them more real and more absurd by comparison. For just as Bambi by the Sun frames its fearful betrayal with the sweetest kind of familial love, we would feel no surprise at all if the two members of the Soviet construction crew that go dancing off together at the end of My Sweet Village are blown to kingdom come just before the credits; or, conversely, if the film director in After the Rain were to rise from the ground, strip off his bloody shirt, and join his townsfolk in some ancient festival dance.

Fahrenheit 351: Towards a Healthy World View

Stephen Hopkins

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S o, why "healthy"? When in search of a world view, shouldn’t the criteria be "realistic?" Well, it would seem that "realistic" doesn’t do too much for us. The Russians who played ball with Stalin were being "realistic." The Jews who didn’t organize and fight back when the Nazis began rounding them up were being "realistic." The Hollywood screenwriters who played ball with Senator McCarthy in the 50s were being "realistic." The legislators in our own state who are pressing for new prisons are being "realistic." If we watch or listen to the news every day, we get more than enough "realism": the Oklahoma City bombing, the Unabomber, the mass graves in Bosnia, the gold hoarded by the Nazis in Switzerland; the latest victims of violence in Belfast and Hebron, plus all the rapes, murders, and horrific vehicle accidents within a three-state area. Do we really need to know more about war, about terrorism and genocide, about Hitler, Stalin, or Sklober Milosovic, than we already know? Then why are we studying these things in school?

There is a level of horror that when reached cannot be topped. When people reach that level, they must find relief somehow—through denial (denying the Holocaust didn’t happen). But alas, why only one? Why, out of all the books and movies and lectures, does only this one hero emerge? Why do we study Hitler and Stalin, and not Rasputin? Where are the stories of Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln, the statues of Joan of Arc, which used to decorate our public buildings? Why so much "realism"? Why so little "heroism?"

It is true that our culture is in a state of shock from events of the past hundred years or so, and that after the loss of faith in the "eternal" verities which followed these two world wars, we numbly followed Kafka, Hemingway, Becker, Cassius, Kerouac, Dlion, et al., into a sort of miserable prison-yard of existentialist, in which such notions as heroism are food for sarcastic jokes, in which the heroes of the past are seen as hypocrites, self-serv­ ing cynics (drunks, neurotics, libertines), or, Heaven help us, failures!

Are we really willing to pursue this existential nightmare into the final "realism," a Twilight of the Gods with no fish left in the oceans, where beaches mean skin cancer, and what wilderness there is left has become a place where the government maintains its secret munitions factories? Is it time for the intellectual establishment of the west to wake up, shake off its existential megrims, and get to work; as history clearly shows, if we only choose to read it to; as history clearly shows, if we only choose to read it. Did these defects affect in the slightest the roles they played in the life of our culture, or conversely, if the film director in After the Rain were to rise from the ground, strip off his bloody shirt, and join his townsfolk in some ancient festival dance.

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We have become numb to a media wherein reality and fiction, tragedy and comedy, are blended by film editors into an undifferentiated continuum of the absurdly horrible, the horrifically absurd.

It was good to read Vlacar Havel’s book, Disturbing the Peace, and, but still to hear his story, to know that this message was the real fruit of a real struggle; to meet, at least once during the semester, another brand of realism—a real hero, although Havel himself says that there are no heroes. Because Havel is good and brave and true to what he believes, we can believe that there are other heroes who are good, and true and brave. The Havel of this world is the antithesis to the Hitlers, the Stalins, and the Milosevics.

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Can we do this? Of course we can! Humans can do anything they must; anything they will set their minds to; anything they must; anything they will set their minds to read in this light.

We have made progress! We no longer boil people in oil—after cutting off their private parts and stuffing them in their mouths—for not being in perfect agreement with us on all points of religious doctrine; we no longer countenance slavery—the official level, at least—of either of our citizens, mothers and daughters; we no longer believe that kings are di-
vine; we no longer think it appropriate for children to work twelve-hour days.
Within our own time, we never thought the public would awaken to the truth about the Vietnam War; we never thought the world would awaken to the dangers of the arms race; we thought we’d never see an end to the Cold War; we never thought to see South Africa find a workable political balance; we never thought we’d see the Berlin Wall come down. But all these things have happened; and although not all have happened in a perfect way; and although the balance has shifted towards the dark side in some ways, in some very important ways the balance has shifted towards the light.
It may be that the world will simply always be half dark/half light, half good/half evil, and that our purpose here is to differentiate between the two, and then to choose the light, and to fight for it, knowing that dark will always follow in our wake. When Jesus said, “Get thee behind me, Satan,” what did he mean? Was it, perhaps, I cannot eliminate you from the world, Satan, but I can choose not to make you my focus. I can choose hope over despair, good over evil, heroes over villains. Get thee behind us, Satan. Get thee behind us, Hitler, Stalin, Slobovian Mäseove. As the old spiritual says, “I ain’t gonna study war no more.”

And now, Vaclav Havel, Raoul Wallenberg, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth Fry, get thee where I can see you, know you, be inspired by you, believe once again in the human race, believe in myself, believe that life is meant to be beautiful, and that it is not absurd, but, on the contrary, rich with meaning and with promise.

Famous in Russia
Jillian Meredith Olsen

On March 30, 1997, I embarked on a journey to another country to host an English Camp. I taught in classrooms and spread the word of God to people who had never been exposed to the writings or teachings of Jesus Christ. The months of learning a religious performance and various words and phrases in Russian did not nearly prepare me for the effect that trip had on my faith, my outlook on life, and my heart. I realized how spreading the word of God should be done through actions, not only by using words. I realized that sacrificing my time and anything I possibly hold onto the bar and manage to stand; the attitude. All of my experiences were important and meaningful, but the ones I have chosen to write about are the ones that stand out in my mind.

Until this particular incident, I had never fully realized how self-involved people could become without Jesus Christ in their lives. A group of us were sitting on the Metro on our way to Leningrad to teach classes on “reconciliation.” An elderly woman who could barely get onto the train by herself got onto the car. I looked around, and no one was offering a seat to her. The woman couldn’t possibly hold onto the bar and manage to stand; the jerking start of the vehicle would have made her fall over. I rose from my seat and motioned to her to take it. I couldn’t speak her language, nor she mine, yet she thanked me with her eyes. Her solemn face had turned into a smile for one brief and precious moment. I felt I had done a heroic thing, a chivalric deed, but all I did was give up my seat. I realized that showing how God works can be simple.

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2

Another Stubby Bomar
Christine Weiler

My hands are wide at the bottom
And narrow at the top.

“Musically inclined” is what my palmistry book says.
But small, chubby hands
That barely span the octave
And short, stubby fingers
Not willing to move through Mozart’s trills
Make me wonder.

After thirteen years, the left hand (traitor)
Still refuses to play viola with vibrato
Or shift to third position with any grace
And the fingers will not reach
Across the guitar’s five strings.
My mother must have known.
She taught me to sing.

Over and Under
Michael Schultz

The Promethean, Vol. 7 [1999], Iss. 1, Art. 27

2

Pam VanDenBroek

Over the lips, under the table,
I’m not able,
To speak a decent sentence,
To be a fool’s apprentice,
I just lie here in a stupor,
Feeling kind of super,
Feeling kind of low.

Am I here at all?

Over the table, up in the sky,
Don’t know why...
I feel like I’m small
Am I here at all?

Am I the tail of a comet,
Or someone soaked in vomit?
I just don’t know.