

A Review of Bruce McDonald's *Pontypool* (2008)

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Bruce McDonald's 2008 film *Pontypool* is an adaptation of one narrative strand in Tony Burgess's 1998 novel *Pontypool Changes Everything*. It tells the story of radio host Grant Mazzy (Stephen McHattie), his producer Sydney Briar (Lisa Houle) and their technical assistant Laurel Ann (Georgina Reilly). While recording the Valentine's Day edition of *Mazzy in the Morning* on Pontypool radio station CSLY, the principals begin to receive bizarre calls regarding widespread violence in the small central Ontario town. A virus transmitted through certain words, including terms of endearment widely promulgated on Valentine's Day, is infecting many local residents, who have become suicidal and homicidal as a result.

In addition to serving as an excellent horror film on its surface, *Pontypool* is an intriguing study of semiotics. The film's pedagogical outlook will be the primary focus of this review. *Pontypool's* status as a genre exercise can and should be examined

elsewhere. I will instead discuss two of the film's key lessons about the relationship between trauma, language and symbols: (1) violence is not the proper filmic representation of trauma and (2) words can create trauma (sometimes literally!)

Searching for Meaning in Pontypool

"The French philosopher Roland Barthes once described trauma as a news photo without a caption and that folks is what I think we have now" — Grant Mazzy following a call about inexplicable violence at the clinic of Dr. John Mendez

Despite the obvious relationship between McDonald's film and the realm of semiotics, the above line is the only reference to a thinker in that field. It is thus worth examining the film through a Barthesian lens. Given Barthes's status as a key figure in the study of the photographic image and the close relationship between photographs and motion pictures, Barthes's insights can be directly applied to the study of film. The quotation above appears to be an invitation to study *Pontypool* through said lens.

Barthes is relatively unhelpful in applying his theory to film, but one can easily form a Barthesian methodology for the study of film by recalling the relationship between pictures and their moving cousins. In his seminal book on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes is initially unable to separate photography from cinema. He writes, "I decided I liked Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I

nonetheless failed to separate it (Barthes 3).” Later, however, Barthes suggests that the cinema fails to wound the observer in the way that a photograph might. He asks:

Do I add images in the movies? I don't think so; I don't have time: in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity; a host of other qualities, but not *pensiveness*; whence, the interest, for me, of the photogram (55).

In attempting to distinguish between photograph and film, however, Barthes forgets how closely these media are linked. He forgets that the film frame is a photograph. Pressing pause allows one to study the film frame (admittedly, this is a luxury that contemporary cinephiles take for granted, but which Barthes would not have had access to, save stopping his film projector entirely). Thus, despite Barthes's suggestions to the contrary, his study of the photograph as simulacrum is therefore applicable to film.

For Barthes, photography is closer in kin to theatre than it is to painting. While photography appears closer in form to painting, it is closer in function to theatre. Barthes writes:

We know the original relation of the theatre and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead ... It is this same relation which I find in the Photograph; however 'lifelike' we strive to make it ... Photography is a kind of primitive

theatre ... a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead (31-32).

In ancient theatre, one was distinguished from the community by becoming a semblance of death. Photography creates a simulacrum of one's own image that produces an analogous semblance of death. Like ancient theatre, this distinction allows one to differentiate one's self from the community. It further allows one to distinguish one's self from one's identity. According to Barthes, "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity (12)." For this reason, photography is more than a 'primitive theatre', even if the two media share a function.

Like both theatrical performances and paintings, photographs are placed under constant scrutiny by observers. Observers seek the meaning of a given photograph. If this meaning is too clear, critics will ignore the photograph for its lack of tact. If the meaning is inaccessible, the photograph will seem trivial. Barthes suggests society "mistrusts pure meaning: It wants meaning, but at the same time it wants this meaning to be surrounded by a noise ... which will make it less acute." Critics want a photograph that is accessible by a single degree of separation. Meaning should lurk just below the surface such that one needs to look for it, but anyone can find it. The photograph whose meaning "is too impressive is quickly deflected; we consume it aesthetically, not politically (36)." It is like a pretty picture of a vase by a tenth-grade art student — mildly aesthetically pleasing without any real consequence. Such a photograph is too

accessible. It brings back the dead, but does not highlight their condition. It fails to “wound” the observer (21). It fails to bring death to the fore.

It is tempting to read *Pontypool* as a traditional zombie film. The film follows a three-act classical narrative structure and features many of the hallmarks of zombie films.¹ Furthermore, the source material uses the word “zombie” freely and quotes from George A. Romero’s 1968 classic *Night of the Living Dead* (Burgess, *Pontypool* 145). That being said, *Pontypool* is less explicitly about zombies than its source material (e.g. McDonald prefers to follow Danny Boyle’s lead in 2002’s *28 Days Later* by focusing on an infection instead of a clear rise of the dead.)² To read this film through its zombie movie tropes may provide a strong surface reading of its meaning. However, in doing so one sacrifices the more significant semiotic lessons that exist just below its surface.

Lesson #1: An Image of Violence is Not the Most Effective Symbol of Trauma

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes suggests that there are two essential parts of interesting photography: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is the result of “an average affect, almost from a certain training .” It is a cultural interest in any given

¹ I.e., the protagonist’s innocent early encounter with an infected individual, outside confirmation of a threat, friends turning against one another, the safe place eventually being overrun with the infected and even a romantic subplot.

² Whether the infected are ‘undead’ is cause for debate in both horror film and popular philosophy circles. See: Greene, Richard and K. Silem Mohammad. *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless*. (Chicago: Open Court, 2006: pp. xiv).

photograph or body of photographs (i.e. our learned interest in the images). The punctum, on the other hand, “will break (or punctuate) the studium (Barthes 26).” It is the detail “whose very presence changes my reading ... [such that] I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value (42).” This detail cuts through any cultural interests one may have in a photograph, uniquely affecting the observer in a way that is purely subjective. Often, it will not even be present when one is looking at a photograph and will strike the observer only in retrospect, when the observer is no longer an observer, but a 'recollector' (53). In short, the punctum “is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there* (55).” Ultimately, it is what highlights death within the photograph, making one's own mortality present.

Mazzy's invocation of Barthes may seem bizarre given the camera work used in the film's most dramatic sequences. Most of the call-in scenes are composed of medium close-ups of the main characters' faces and shoulders. While images of Sydney and Laurel Ann feature deeper focus to allow both characters to be in the scene, images of Mazzy are often shallow focus pictures with only Mazzy himself clearly distinguishable. How one is to find the punctum in such a scene is hard to imagine. One sees the image in its totality the very moment it is presented to the viewer. Perhaps there is a detail of Mazzy's face that will wound the viewer, but the images seem mostly used for narrative and empathetic functions (e.g. the viewer is expected to share in the feeling of shock expressed by a close-up of Mazzy's face).

On the other hand, this lack of detail is in keeping with Barthes's belief that photographic trauma is rare. Consider the photograph that causes Barthes's own trauma to come to fore, the Winter Garden Photograph. In Part Two of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the photograph that made his own mortality present. He began his search by looking through a box of photographs of his recently deceased mother. Beginning with photographs from shortly before his mother's death and moving backwards, Barthes finally finds the Winter Garden Photograph, a photograph of his mother as a child in which he found his mother "as into herself (71)." He does not reproduce or describe it since it touches him in a unique manner that would not touch his readers. "It would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of a thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'" for anyone but Barthes (73). Within that photograph, however, there is a punctum that touches him deeply. There seems to be an especially potent punctum in the photograph of the familiar. In the face of this photo, Barthes's mortality consumes him. After looking at the Winter Garden Photograph, it occurs to him that "from now on I could do nothing more than await my total, undialectical death (72)." This return of the dead brought Barthes's own oncoming death to the forefront. Barthes's trauma, then, cannot be shared. It cannot be articulated. He thus chooses not to show it. In like manner, McDonald chooses not to show real violence on the screen. There is only one onscreen death in the film, a suicide. There is another murder slightly off-screen, but McDonald chooses to focus on a Mazzy poster as we hear a zombie

killed mere metres away.³ Speech is not only the source of the virus in *Pontypool*; it is also our only sense of nearby trauma. Contrary to Mazzy's suggestion, perhaps it is only the caption that the viewer experiences in *Pontypool*. It is, after all, only descriptors that allow us to know about the violence in the town of *Pontypool*.

Lesson #2: Words Can Cause Trauma

The reference to Barthes is profilmic, and one could argue that its meaning is nothing more than superficial. Yet I prefer to think of the brief Barthes reference as a signpost towards a separate meaning, a more intriguing story of *Pontypool* buried beneath its basic plot. This is the story about the traumatic consequences of the breakdown of communication in contemporary society and its consequences. In *Pontypool*, meaningless words are the cause of violence not only against individuals, but against language itself and the society it helped hold together. I will not force meaning onto the film as one may argue Barthes forces meaning into the Winter Garden Photograph. Instead, I will suggest that this underlying story can be read by any individual watching the film. The fact that I am not the first individual to focus on

³ It is possible that this focus on the *Mazzy in the Morning* radio show during the act of violence is highlighting Mazzy's liability for the spread of the virus and its consequent violence. After all, the film begins with Mazzy's "Isn't It Ironic?" segment, which features a play on words verging on the brink of meaninglessness. Interestingly, that speech is symbolized by radio waves, suggesting that even meaningless symbols can be further symbolized. Where words have no meaning, they still produce a sound (in *Pontypool*, it is these words one should fear).

communications breakdowns and their relationships to trauma and violence suggests this reading is an accessible, albeit not completely transparent, one.

In her review of *Pontypool Changes Everything* and Burgess's 1999 follow-up *Caesarea*, Mary Barnes suggests that both novels share the common theme of a "breakdown in communication...[and] the incapacity of humans to speak in a meaningful way (Barnes 121)." Burgess's fascination with communication has been consistent throughout his career. For instance, consider the title of one of his short stories, "The Ampersand is Bleeding Too", which suggests a violence against language (Burgess, *Ampersand* 1). In Barnes words, "one wonders if the madness has begun for modern language is abrupt, violent and war-like. One also wonders if Burgess' rendition of a cannibalistic society also includes the cannibalism of language (Barnes 121)."

The idea that language has the capacity to commit violence is omnipresent in *Pontypool*. After finding his way to the radio station, Dr. Mendez explains that the virus is unembodied, and that it exists "not in or even on our bodies...It is in words. Not all words, not all speaking, but some words are infected and it spreads out when spoken." The virus does not exist on the tongue or in the eardrums, "it enters us when we hear the word and understand it...[The virus] covers us in its understanding."⁴ Remarkably, it is terms of endearment like "honey" and "sweetheart" that are the most dangerous. Arguably, these words do not represent the individuals they are talking to, but vague concepts loosely linked to emotional properties. They force individuals into a form

⁴ He also suggests that the disease begins as a perception, comes into language and eventually moves into reality. The meaning of this suggestion is too far removed from the words spoken for me to fully comprehend it.

psychosis wherein they kill themselves in a kamikaze attack on another individual. This ultimately leads to the end of the English language as individuals either become infected and speak gibberish or switch to French for survival's sake⁵. In the end it seems that language not only commits violence on human beings, but also on itself.

Likewise, in the novel the virus is related to the subconscious and usually infects people as they dream. Connotative language is a major source of the virus, while metalanguage is the most dangerous type (Burgess, *Pontypool* 168). Like in the film, words that do not signify material objects are to be feared. Unlike the film, however, the novel provides a description of what the virus looks like. It "looks a bit like a sunfish, brightly coloured, with spiky fins...[and] two long, pointy fangs... The mature virus resembles the figure of abjection (169)."⁶ The virus is not language proper, but instead uses words as its host. Here, language's parasite seems to commit violence on its host rather than language cannibalizing itself. Where Bames suggests that one 'wonders' about language's self-destruction in the novel, the embodiment of the violent actor in physical space makes language's culpability ambiguous.

Pontypool is not without its own ambiguities. For instance, Mazzy begins to talk nonsense early in the film, but it is never clear if he is infected. Near the end of the film,

⁵ I would be remiss if I did not mention that there are distinct political undertones to this film concerning both Quebecois nationalism and Anglo-Canadian entrenchment on French language rights. In the interest of space, I will not explore this issue in depth, but would be happy to read an analysis of the film's political message. On its surface, the film appears to downplay its political messages by having Mazzy clearly indicate that there is no indication that French protestors are causing the violence, but the Barthesian picture demands looking for meaning a degree away.

⁶ Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is useful for understanding what abjection looks like.

he searches for a cure to the virus. He asks, “How do you stop understanding?” and answers that you must make words strange. He recalls that as a child, the constant repetition of a word was enough to rob it of its meaning. Yet the infected repeat words without curing themselves. Consequently, Mazzy instead tries to kill words by giving them new meaning, and even seems to cure Briar by repeating the phrase “kiss is kill.” Interestingly, the phrase “kill isn’t kill” does not work, and Mazzy quickly realizes that negation does not lead to a lack of understanding, rather it instead serves to further clarify the sense of the word negated. Only a complete change in significance seems to effectively disinfect a word.

Just as he learns of this cure, however, its effectiveness is put in doubt by French military personnel warning Briar that Mazzy is sick. Changing the meaning of the words appears to be nonsense. Whether this is the cure for a virus steeped in understanding or another “symbol of the disorder” remains up for debate, as Mazzy and Briar are destroyed by the military. One is even left wondering what is sufficient to make a word’s meaning change in such a way that it lacks understanding. Mazzy suggests that “happy means sad” does not work, but what does work remains unclear. One needs to move another degree away from the film to untangle these ambiguities, and the film is all the stronger for it.

Mazzy hints at a Lacanian solution to combating disease. His insistence on not using words that are closely related to potentially infected words hints at the import of chains of signifiers and the contextual nature of signification. Put bluntly to the point of

risking being self-evident, words have meaning only in relation to other words. The signifying chain has been ruptured by empty signifiers, infecting the chain in its entirety. It must be merged with an unrelated healthy chain to succeed. Mazzy, however, invokes the existential qualifier “is”, thereby creating a new existential relationship, even if it is a metaphorical one. Mazzy thus adds to the chain rather than destroying it, and understanding is augmented, rather than dissipated.

Even if Mazzy is successful in curing Briar, himself, and their disease’s host language, his continued use of English words risks unleashing the final disease all over again. Effectively, the film leads us to conclude that English does violence on language (e.g. the French keep insisting that Mazzy not translate their words). Once English is established as a symbol of trauma, it becomes a political liability in Pontypool. The tagline on the cover of the film’s DVD even declares, “Shut up or die”! And so, even though it is unclear whether Mazzy’s lack of sense is a symbol of madness or a cure for it, his English words are nonetheless tangled in a problematic chain. We walk away from the film with a notion that English is a symbol of violence that sooner or later must be destroyed.

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