

# Zombies as barriers to communication in zombieland and pontypool research paper e...

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While many zombies in popular culture and film involve the deliberate waking of the dead whose purpose is to feast on your flesh and turn you into one of them, zombies also carry uniquely prescient intentions and purposes in their 21st century representations. Often, in the wake of 28 Days Later, these zombies are not the traditional Romero zombies, consisting of rotting flesh that inexplicably walks; In the 2009 Canadian film Pontypool, zombies are eventually found to be "infected" with words and language, with meaning itself becoming the vehicle for transmission of this violence and destructiveness inherent to their behavior. The result is a fascinating, innovative and minimalist film that discusses zombies as representative of the inherently violent nature of communication, as well as our increased distance from each other. In the wake of the technological age, where Facebook and Twitter become more prevalent forms of communication than face-to-face communication, this becomes the new way in which the zombie acts as the "social monster." The zombies in Pontypool embody the inherently alienating nature of language and communication, as well as its destructiveness.

Pontypool, starring Stephen McHattie as Grant Mazzy, a Don Imus-like shock jock who has recently been unceremoniously dumped from the heights of radio journalism to the radio announcer for the morning show of a radio station in small Pontypool, Ontario. The film is primarily set in the isolated radio station just outside of town, in the middle of a fierce storm that keeps them relatively cut off from the rest of the town's population. The only other staff being producer Sydney Briar and young Iraq vet/tech assistant Laurel-Ann, Grant's abrasive on-air persona is quickly interrupted by disturbing

reports from their "helicopter reporter" Ken Loney of increasingly odd and violent attacks happening within the town itself. Soon, they are again interrupted by a mysterious transmission in French, which Sydney translates; it instructs all listening to refrain from several uses of language, including terms of endearment, conflicting phrases, and eerily enough, as Grant repeats in horror: "the English language"

Soon, a ghastly horde of monsters show up at the now-barricaded door of the radio station, and the recently-arrived Doctor Mendez reveals his findings: a virus is being disseminated through language. In essence, certain types of words trigger the virus, particularly when combined with meaning. The infected then starts to repeat these words until they can no longer think, and lash out in violence. The infection quickly hits Laurel-Ann, who becomes a shambling mess as Grant, Sydney and Doctor Mendez hide in the DJ booth. Eventually, as they discuss the varying aspects of the virus (that it has only infected the English language thus far, certain words, emotionally felt, work more to infect one with the virus), Laurel-Ann vomits out her insides and drops dead, cementing that the infected die if they do not spread the virus.

Luring the mob away with their loudspeakers and the repeated phrase "Sydney Briar is alive," Grant and Sydney start speaking in French to avoid infection, and Sydney kills an infected girl when the recording fails. Mendez sacrifices himself to lead the infected away from the radio station, and Sydney finds herself repeating the phrase 'kill' over and over again, becoming infected. Grant successfully determines that words can be 'disinfected' from their meaning, urging her to make the word 'kill' mean

'kiss.' Successful in their 'disinfection' of Sydney, and renewed in their resolve, Sydney gets Grant back on the air, as they both start spouting contradictory and strange phrases to confuse the virus and scrub these words of their meaning. As this is happening, the government attempts to shut them down as they are bombing Pontypool. The film ends with the implication that everyone in Pontypool is destroyed by the bombing, including Grant and Sydney.

While Pontypool is not strictly a zombie film in the traditional sense, it features a variant of the new kind of zombie that has been introduced in films like *28 Days Later* and the remake of *The Crazies* - people who are not reanimated rotting flesh, but instead living humans who are turned into a vicious animal through a virus of some kind. That Pontypool's virus is aural in nature makes the film's portrayal of zombies relatively innovative, as their source is not biological in nature. In many zombie films, the fear comes from the danger of proximity to the zombie; you are killed/turn into a zombie when the infected bites you. This does not occur here, nor is it strictly the danger; while these zombies are certainly homicidal, they infect people through the act of communication itself.

The character of Grant Mazzy, played here with aged aloofness by Stephen McHattie, is the center of the film (along with the character's budding relationship with Sydney, played with determination and sensitivity by McHattie's real-life wife Lisa Houle), and his occupation and demeanor make him the ideal protagonist to address an infection of words and communication. Grant is at once a master of words and talking (he was a

famous shock jock) and one who is stubbornly unable to communicate (his personal snafus killed his career, leading to the job in Pontypool, where he continues to offend and grate). For the most part, however, this unlikable protagonist is our window into the majority of the events surrounding the zombie outbreak in Pontypool - one of the innovations of this film is that we receive the majority of our news of the outbreak through pure audio and nothing else. This leads to huge emphasis on reaction shots of Grant, slackjawed, his eyes searching for something, anything that will help him listen and understand - seeing his terror and confusion as the film moves on, using McHattie's expressive face as a conduit, is what helps convey the terror and the abstraction of this new type of aural virus.

Because of the virus' status as one being spread and 'transmitted' solely through sound, that the filmmakers chose to make their protagonist a radio announcer is very purposeful - from this vantage point, we get to hear the slow progression of the town's degeneration into madness, as well as let our imaginations fill in the blanks as to what is actually happening visually within the town. The film makes use of its (presumably) limited budget and resources by working with these restrictions and essentially taking a War of the Worlds-esque format to their zombie movie; we, like Grant, hear the real movie happening outside for a great deal of the proceedings. This turns the film, in essence, into a constant struggle between the image and the sound; where most horror films (and zombie films in particular) strive to provide visceral, gory thrills, Pontypool turns that on its head and focuses on language and audio to deliver the majority of the horror (Christiansen 5).

The infection being spread through language is meant, in the film, to embody our own anxieties about the nature of communication itself. In a 21st century society whose major social and communicative interactions now happen a great deal online or through social networking/email/instant messaging, the issue of communication becomes even more prevalent. Much of Pontypool's use of the zombie to personify our anxiety about communication is related to the theory of subjectivity, which personifies our need to record ourselves, listen to ourselves, and absorb invariable embodiments of our voices as a new type of identity: " Grounded by postcolonial contexts like cultural imperialism and neoliberal hegemony that overdetermine Canadian citizenship and sovereignty, the figure of the 'subject' articulates a complex problematic of identity and belonging in the context of cultural globalization" (McCutcheon 239).

This could be tied closely to the YouTube generation, in which anyone with a webcam and the energy can become an Internet sensation, and millions attempt to do so. This phenomenon is even presented as a problem early in the film, in the form of the only guests Grant's radio show has before they recognize the outbreak: a silly group of singers from a local theatre troupe, desperately advertising their community theatre show through a goofy song. Despite this being a radio interview, they are in their bright, garish costumes for the play, visually indicating their desire for attention by any means necessary. This attempt to communicate by instead using these methods of communication as our own pulpit, regurgitating what we hear and think for others to absorb, is reflected in the zombies of Pontypool. They, too,

regurgitate what they hear, and are simply so anxious to express themselves (spread the virus) that they literally die when they are robbed of that opportunity (as with Laurel-Ann).

The eventual solution to the zombie virus - that of switching the meanings of words and effectively scrambling our own efforts at communication - is a tactic of "productive disidentification," which is meant to free these words from their original meaning and the shackles of orthodoxy (Wallin, 2012). In essence, by making 'kill' into 'kiss,' Grant explicitly turns destruction into creation, negativity into positivity - this allows language to adapt and change. The zombies, in this particular instance, are 'infected' by the orthodox meanings of these words, trapped in their own common-sense indications of the word's meaning. Unlike many other zombie movies, in which zombies are the 'social monster' for our consumerism and AIDS anxieties, among others, Pontypool's zombies are ones that are unable to communicate with each other. The infection starts by a word repeating over and over again, which is a callback to the phenomenon, frequently cited, that once you repeat a word enough times it loses its meaning. This infection is that phenomenon taken to the nth degree - this frustration and lack of meaning causes the infected to lash out in violence, almost as if they were tearing people's lungs out to get to the new word.

This is the alternative to being a "subject" that the filmmakers give us - instead of forcing our own meanings on ourselves, and accepting wholesale the meanings of others, we must create new meanings for our language and avenues for communication in order to truly collaborate and free ourselves

of authoritative hegemony. By reaching across the microphone or the screen and using these tools as methods of mutual creation and communication instead of self-promotion, we can eliminate this anxiety to stand above the others in expression and communicate equally. This is what Grant learns by the end of the film; when he learns to create meaning with Sydney (both romantically and semantically), they both take the mic in order to deliver the message.

The spreading of this infection, of course, comes from the other's use of a certain infected word, like 'sample' or 'miss,' which holds a great deal of emotional resonance for them. This feeling is so strong that it consumes them, and they spread the word to others attempting to gain understanding from this word. Therefore, Grant's and Sydney's re-appropriation of the word 'kill' and the sounds that make it, in order to change the meaning to 'kiss', is a re-appropriation of the meanings of these words, and thus enables them to communicate once more.

In conclusion, Bruce McDonald's 2009 film *Pontypool* uses the zombie as a method of satirizing our inability to truly communicate with each other in the digital age. Essentially, people have become self-promoting 'dubjects,' desperate for attention and relevance, which they think makes them unique, but instead make them merely one of the horde. This communication is now relegated to the violent spread of ideas that infect and destroy our minds, with the only solution being working together on a personal level to create new meanings and associations for ourselves. Grant, the shock jock, learns this lesson by learning to create with Sydney, forming a small community



and giving up the 'Grant Mazzy' brand to spread the message to everyone else in his final moments.

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