

Speaking the Undead:

Uncanny Aurality in *Pontypool*

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Sound has rarely been dealt with in the horror genre, yet carries immense importance for the mood of the films. For one film in particular, the Canadian *Pontypool* (Bruce McDonald, 2009), sound has a central role to play, creating a divergence from other, contemporary horror films. The current style of horror cinema has for the past five years been dominated by the so-called torture porn films, emphasizing grisly and extremely visual depictions of torture, pain, dismemberment and death. The success of films such as *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) has spawned a host of imitators and sequels, in many ways reminiscent of the cycle of slasher films in the 1980s. However, there are signs that some horror films are currently moving away from this emphasis on visual terror and instead moving the monstrous and the terrifying back into off-screen space. One of these films is *Pontypool*, which follows William Burroughs's dictum that language is a virus. In *Pontypool*, however, it is only the English language which carries the virus, turning people first into echoes: beings who are only able to repeat the phrases they hear others say. In this way, the language of the affected people breaks down and finally they must kill to end the pain of utter lack of communication.

I will argue that *Pontypool* is not only an example of a change currently taking place in horror cinema, but is itself also critical of the recent cycle of horror films with an overemphasis on visceral images. In contrast, McDonald has chosen to scale back on the visual effects and have *Pontypool* remain a one-location film, set in a soundproof radio studio where reports of the virus and the attacks of the infected only come through via the radio waves. As such, it is a subtle film, locating the horrific infection in language and sound, rather than in onscreen space. In this way, terror is placed in what Michel Chion has referred to as the *acousmètre* (*The Voice in Cinema* 21), thus moving away from the primacy of the image and calling for a renewal of horror cinema emphasizing mood and suspense over graphic exploitation.

The explicit and graphic representations of violence and murder that have overtaken the box office for horror films are indicative of a shift in the visual style of Hollywood horror; a visual excess of gory images stringing together a threadbare narrative. For torture porn, image prevails over narrative in what Russell Manning refers to as the "aestheticization of the technical" ("Taking Baudrillard to the Movies [To Talk About Death]"). The visual impact of

the image is what structures these films and as such, they are symptomatic of what Linda Williams refers to as “the frenzy of the visible” in her 1989 study *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*. Indeed, the pleasure that we take from the torture porn films, is “neither an aberration nor an excess; rather, it is a logical outcome of a variety of discourses of sexuality that converge in, and help further to produce, technologies of the visible” (36). Rather than discourses of sexuality, torture porn employs discourses of violence and horror as a system for structuring the world. Following Manning, then, we can see how the technologies of the visible obscure any narrative or cultural significance. This is the argument which Brenda Cromb makes in her article “Gorno: Violence, Shock and Com-

everything” (Tony Burgess, 1998). While it is language rather than technology which carries the virus, most of the horror and tension of *Pontypool* emerges from the presence of radio technology, both in terms of holding back much of the information typically shown in other contemporary horror films and from the realization that technology helps spread the language virus.

Pontypool’s major contribution to a renewal of horror cinema thus lies in deliberately resisting the image as the locus of the horrific and instead placing the horrific in sound, the source of which is kept off-screen for most of the film’s duration. The language virus of the film participates in the peculiar relationship of sound and image which Chion terms the *acousmètre*. In *The Voice in Cinema*, Chion

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edy,” that torture porn films have been criticized for not being “about something” other than violence (21). Cromb’s article, from which mine extends, further describes the origin, context and cinematic devices of the cycle.

The current cycle of torture porn then wishes us to consider horror as a visual genre, one which oversteps boundaries of what is acceptable to portray on-screen and demands that we squirm in our seats as the blood and intestines flow. To the extent that horror often deals with cultural anxieties, the torture porn cycle suggests that we are currently afraid of the visual, while at the same time deeply fascinated with it, which might explain its commercial success. Certainly it seems that there is another cycle in horror where technology and media are cast as horrific monsters; consider *Pulse* (Jim Sonzero, 2006, original Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001), *White Noise* (Geoffrey Sax, 2005), *Cell* (Stephen King, 2006), *The Signal* (David Bruckner, Dan Bush, Jacob Gentry, 2007) and, of course *Pontypool*, based on a novel titled *Pontypool Changes Ev-*

describes how the *acousmètre* is at the same time inside and outside the filmic image. It is not inside, because the source of sound is not visible; it remains off-screen, only described by people calling the radio station. Nor is it outside, since it is not clearly positioned off-screen in an imaginary ‘wing,’ like a master of ceremonies or a witness, and it is implicated in the action, constantly about to be part of it (*Audio-Vision* 129).

Here, the presence of the main character Grant Mazzy (Stephen McHattie) complicates film’s use of sound. As the radio disc jockey, we constantly see Mazzy’s face and mouth as a central focal point, in many ways making him the film’s master of ceremonies (something which becomes significant at the end of both the film and this analysis). Furthermore, Mazzy quotes Roland Barthes’ argument from *Camera Lucida* that trauma is a news photo without a caption, yet we might argue that *Pontypool* gives us the caption (in spoken language, not written) but no photo (no visual information about the events is

provided). This is why *Pontypool* is so effective; because we are literally kept in the dark, the experience becomes more traumatic.

The acousmêtric voices of *Pontypool* do not originate from simply one person but many—people who call the radio station, the weatherman Ken Loney (Rick Roberts), and eventually those who become infected with the language virus. Yet what is shared between all these different voices, even as the bodies of the voices start emerging into the frame of the film, is that they originate within a peculiar ambiguous space lingering somewhere between the filmic stage and the proscenium, a place we do not have a name for, but that is always brought into play by the cinema (*The Voice in Cinema* 24). It is this space of the heard but unseen which *Pontypool* activates and where it locates its horror. The voices, ever encroaching on the image until they emerge as abject beings, are what generate horror in *Pontypool*, a very different kind of horror than that offered by torture porn.

Voices hold a special position in a film's soundtrack. As Chion points out that "the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it" (*The Voice in Cinema* 5). This is another reason why *Pontypool* is so frightening, because it is impossible to close your ears or 'hear away.' Sound envelops us as we hear the infected voices, which means we are also in danger of being infected by them, since voices are such a central part of our communication. We are unable to choose not to hear the voices, because they are always at the centre of our acoustic space, which is why the language virus is so infectious and dangerous.

Even the absence of voices becomes frightening, as in the scene when the technician Laurel-Ann (Georgina Reilly) has been turned into a zombie (ironically referred to as 'conversationalists' by director Bruce McDonald) by the language virus but is trapped outside the isolation booth. Attempting to smash her way into the booth but ultimately failing, we see her writhing and shaking, desperately trying to reproduce the sound of a voice, but there are no voices for her to echo. Met with only complete silence, she spews forth a mass of blood on the window of the booth and dies. In other words, the zombie conversationalists only exist as echoes of what is already there; silence will inevitably destroy them.

Interestingly, we find an unusual absence in the film—we barely see any of the infected, but instead only hear about the spread of the virus and the violent riots which erupt all over Pontypool. Our only information about the infected comes from sounds and voices, and this is where the weatherman, Ken Loney, plays an important role in

relaying information. His voice is the most prominent in terms of making us—the spectators and the characters in the isolation booth—imagine what is happening around the town of Pontypool. Significantly, Ken is constantly referred to and refers to himself as 'sitting in the sunshine helicopter,' until Mazzy is told that Ken is in fact simply sitting in his Dodge Dart on top of a hill overlooking Pontypool. As Sydney points out to Mazzy, Ken even plays sound effects in order to appear more convincing, further adding to the argument that sound is all-important for the people of Pontypool. Yet, everyone seems content to play along with this fiction, in order to have a news helicopter in this small, rural town. Sound, especially voices, are thus given primary authority in this case, giving us an indication of the importance of voices for the film.

This is the innovative move of *Pontypool*—it privileges aural over visual and through this aesthetic device it activates Chion's nameless space, which is what Jeffrey Sconce would call a haunted space: an electronic presence which runs through the entire film, constantly generating anxiety over what is heard but not seen (4). It is this *acousmètre* of the sound-not-seen which is the primary horrific device in the film. Voices take on uncanny properties, unsettling us as we never know if they will infect us or if they already belong to the infected, such as in the scene where Dr. Mendez is sitting in the sound booth with Sydney and Mazzy. First Mendez starts repeating "breathe... breathe..." then starts speaking in another language, which makes Syd and Mazzy suspicious. The tension builds as they realize he may be infected and turn to speaking in French in order to communicate without spreading the infection. Sydney and Mazzy leave Mendez alone in the sound booth, yet it is unclear if he is truly infected or not. The mark of the virus is the onset of babbling, of communicative breakdown where the infected cannot break free from the feedback loop in which they are caught. The zombie conversationalists are, in effect, recorders trapped in an infinite loop, thus becoming, for lack of a better word, pieces of technology, emphasized by Mendez's statement about Ken Loney: "That's it. He's gone. This is what he is now [a conversationalist]. He's just a crude radio signal. He's seeking."

What haunts *Pontypool's* screen is this proliferation of voices which the image constantly attempts to cage, to control and force meaning upon, yet it remains impossible. There is a satirical scene in which BBC World's Nigel Healing (a fictional character) goes live on TV with Mazzy on the line, trying to confirm whether or not the riots are in fact Canadian separatist terror attacks. Mazzy refuses to agree with Healing, yet is forced to acknowledge that no one knows what is actually

happening, allowing Healing to put his own spin on the events. The sensationalist Healing attempts to cage and control Mazzy's voice, but Healing's attempts are undercut for us as spectators by producer Briar, as she exclaims that Healing "knows nothing." Again we witness *Pontypool's* insistence on the authority of the spoken word over that of the visual spectacle. There is a certain visual colonialism going on here, through an attempt to determine the meaning of words and to subordinate them to the visual. This colonial line of inquiry might be taken further, since it is only the English language which carries the virus, for

nity, to him generating a 'talking cure' for the infection. He cures Sydney from the language virus by de-semanticizing the meaning of words, effectively creating a language of silence (in the way that a language which does not communicate anything might as well be silent) which kills the infection. Yet there seems to be a very fine line between this de-semanticization and the echo-babble of the zombie conversationalists, emphasized by the Canadian military who order Sydney to stop broadcasting, thinking Mazzy is one of the infected. In the end, Sydney refuses, and as she rushes to kiss Mazzy we hear the military's countdown finish.



reasons we never learn. However, considering the propensity of Canadian films to comment on the interaction of English and French languages, we might argue that *Pontypool's* infection device enforces the English language as a kind of colonial mimicry. The zombie conversationalists are a blasphemous version of Homi Bhabha's argument about mimicry's power in his book *The Location of Culture*. We can see how authority becomes displaced aurally and how the colonial subject is disciplined by what Bhabha refers to as the metonymy of presence (128); yet, here we are dealing with the far more insidious strategic function of colonial power through sound and (by extension) language.

What is significant is that in *Pontypool* the image revolves around the origin of the embodied voice. We are constantly confronted with frames where Mazzy's head is the main focus and his mouth is central on screen, usually close to the microphone. Mazzy is given the highest authority of all the voices in the film, starting with his confrontational, 'full disclosure' news coverage about the dangers of pot growers in the local commu-

Just as we hear the building tension of what we can only assume to be an explosion, the screen goes black. The end comes not in the form of silence but instead in the darkness of the screen; when the image disappears and the credits scroll, we hear a news anchor relate how "French-Canadian riot police have successfully contained the violent uprising in the small town in Ontario, Canada, Pontypool... Pontypool... Pontypool... Pontypool...", indicating that the infection has not been successfully stopped. After the credits, we see a high-contrast black-and-white version of Mazzy and Sydney at a Japanese-style bar, with stylized snow falling outside, where they discuss where they will run now, since Mazzy cannot "live under the establishment rules any longer." The end comes with Mazzy pointing his gun at the viewer, cutting to a black screen with the red words "Fin", thus ending the film with the French language instead of English.

So, *Pontypool* moves away from the *gornographic* visualization of horror, and instead creates a tension between the seen and unseen, continually allowing

spectators to visualize the horrors outside the radio studio in their own minds, thus allowing them to make present the horror through their auditory imagination. While there are gruesome scenes in the film, *Pontypool* never emphasizes the visual spectacle of the horror genre; instead, it intelligently plays with the haunted space between onscreen and off-screen sound, and so stages an apocalypse just beyond sight of the spectators. The majority of the events taking place are never visualized, nor do we see the aftermath of these events. Generically, *Pontypool* reconfigures the place of the image in horror cinema and provides an example of how aural may contribute directly to the genre and how horror can be reconfigured from its present state of a frenzy of the visible.

Not only are the technologies of the visible downplayed by keeping the action almost solely within one location, but there are few visual effects shots. At the same time, technologies of the aural are emphasized and brought to the foreground by locating many of the classical scenes of zombie cinema in the haunted space between onscreen and off-screen; never seen but always heard. The ambiguous use of sound and vision is a revitalization of earlier horror films, mainly from the late 1960s and 1970s, where we as spectators are left in a hesitant position, never entirely sure of what is happening. It is a subtle film which opposes the blunt, flat aesthetics of visuality from the current cycle of horror films. Separating horror films along an aural versus visual axis also allows us to pay particular attention to how the horrific effect is created, whether it is through Bernard Herrmann's shrieking violins in *Psycho*

(Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) or the brutal imagery of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). For the last five years, the frenzy of the visible has dominated the screen. It remains to be seen if a frenzy of the aural will replace it.

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