

## **Broadcasting Death: Radio, Media History and Zombies in Bruce McDonald's *Pontypool***

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The Canadian film *Pontypool* (McDonald 2008) revolves around the emergence of infected zombie-like creatures in the small Canadian town of Pontypool, Ontario.<sup>1</sup> These creatures are characterised as ‘conversationalists’, as they become infected by diseased spoken words. As a result of the infection, they lose their comprehension of language, and as another consequence they seek human victims and their healthy flesh. *Pontypool* shows an intense affinity with radio broadcasting. The film’s plot is (apart from the opening sequence) entirely located within the ‘Beacon Radio’ station. It concentrates on the radio announcer Grant Mazzy (Stephen McHattie), the station manager Sydney Briar (Lisa Houle), and the technical assistant Laurel-Ann Drummond (Georgina Reilly), and on how they experience the town’s destruction from the isolated point of view within the station. The protagonists only learn about the events in Pontypool via information that is relayed by telecommunication media, especially the telephone and radio signal, which means that they and, for that matter, we as the audience while watching them, have to ‘tune in’ as (radio) listeners of the events happening outside of the station. This radio-station setting is important for the film’s plot, as well as for the argument presented within this article. It is not only that the voice of Grant Mazzy, as well as wireless technology and radio signals, will become one of the crucial tools of the virus-induced apocalypse; it is also that the radio can function as the primary medium through which the film and its ‘conversationalists’ are to be understood. This reading of the film is supported by considering the history of broadcasting and the media history of the recording and the transmission of the voice, providing insight into spiritualist and media historic discourses about (blasphemous) alterations of communication, ‘media zombies’, and the radio signal that becomes the carrier of an apocalypse in *Pontypool*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pontypool*, dir. by Bruce McDonald (Maple Pictures/Ponty Up Pictures/Shadow Shows, 2008) [on DVD]. The movie was adapted from Tony Burgess’s book *Pontypool Changes Everything: A Novel* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1998), who also wrote the screenplay.

### Eavesdropping on the Apocalypse

From the outset, the film cements its dependence on vocal, sonic and technologically mediated communication, and makes clear that the story will be based around radio technology. Radio ‘is a *blind* medium’ [emphasis in original], as Andrew Crisell notes. He goes on: ‘We cannot see its messages, they consist only of noise and silence, and it is from the sole fact of its blindness that all radio’s other distinctive qualities — the nature of its language, its jokes, the way in which the audiences use it — ultimately derive.’<sup>2</sup> *Pontypool*’s opening sequence utilises this striking significance of the radio in its own unique way: the film begins with the static noise of a radio and a deep voice, while all we see is a black screen and a blue sound-wave diagram that both matches and accentuates the spoken words. The voice juggles with English and French words, telling a bewildering story about a Mrs French’s missing cat, Honey. The cat was missing until a woman, named Colette Piscine, had nearly hit Honey with her car on a bridge called Pont de Flaque. Just as we start to wonder what this story is about, the voice explains: ‘Colette’ sounds similar to the French word ‘culotte’ which means ‘panty’ (among other things), while the French words ‘piscine’ and ‘flaque’ can both be translated as ‘pool’. The voice goes on, explaining the result of the pun: ‘Colette Piscine’ equals ‘Panty Pool’ and ‘Pont de Flaque’ equals ‘Pont de Pool’ and thus Panty Pool resembles Pont de Pool, which in turn resembles Pontypool.

Already these few sentences (although at this early point the audience is lost about their meaning) make clear that language and spoken words will be crucial in terms of what will happen in *Pontypool*; and, equally importantly, that radio-transmitted speech will be central. Furthermore, it calls attention to the auditory sense and urges the audience to listen carefully to details, sounds, names, words, verbalisations, and languages, as they will become significant for the coming events. On another level, this story is an instant reminder of the bilingualism of Ontario, Canada, and, at the same time, points to the slipperiness and arbitrariness of language as well as the randomness of word meanings, and hints at the inaccuracy of both translated and spoken language. ‘Panty Pool’, ‘Pont de Pool’ and Pontypool have different meanings, but sound rather similar when either pronounced imprecisely (for example by non-native speakers) or listened to by an inattentive ear (of, for example, a radio listener), or when they are broadcast and the transmission signals encounter interference. The meaning of words is created when signs are interpreted. Words (signifiers)

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Crisell, *Understanding Radio* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

— as conceptualised in Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics<sup>3</sup> — hint at concepts they represent (the signified); in association, they provide a meaning to the sign. Words, also conventionalised as sound patterns or sound images, provoke flawed or completely new meanings and crack open ‘the symmetrical unity between signifier and one signified’, as Terry Eagleton notes, especially when they are spoken.<sup>4</sup> Pontypool, Panty Pool and Pant de Pool may be different signs with different signifiers and signifieds; however, their sound patterns tend to be easily mixed up. The meaning of signifiers is created by ‘fending off’ similar signifiers, and thus, meaning ‘is the result of a process of division or articulations, of signs being themselves only because they are not some other signs’.<sup>5</sup> And, beyond this, a sign is repeatable *and* can be reproduced, which means that reproducing it in different contexts changes its meaning; a detail that will become of central interest at a later point of both the film and this article.<sup>6</sup>

The second part of the opening sequence adds another facet in terms of signs, symbols and meaning, as the voice goes on to talk about Norman Mailer’s book *Oswald’s Tale: An American Mystery* (1995), which deals with the events in the aftermath of John F. Kennedy’s assassination. The voice explains that Mailer shows how seemingly unrelated things like street names, middle names, birthdates and so on strangely coincide, and form an overall picture (or meaning) of an event when they are arranged in the correct context with each other; only, however, if someone listens carefully enough and is willing to link the signifiers and the signified, does it become possible to understand the meaning of the signs.

Up to this point, the audience’s receptive situation more closely resembles that of a radio programme (or even more a radio play) than a film, and interestingly, a *Pontypool* radio play was produced by the BBC World Service at the same time as the film, and begins with the same sequence.<sup>7</sup> However, while the radio naturally relies fully on purely acoustic means, the film at this point starts to embrace visual stylistic devices, dissolving radio’s ‘blindness’: while the tale closes with the voice asking, ‘So, what does it mean?’, the blue sound waves on the screen change, turn into the shape of a talking mouth, then subsequently transform into a

<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Owen, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> Eagleton, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Eagleton, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> This play is available at the BBC World Service website, <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2009/06/090617\\_pontypool\\_audio.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2009/06/090617_pontypool_audio.shtml)> [accessed 25 May 2012].

black circle in which letter by letter the word ‘PONTYPOOL’ appears right at the moment the voice ends, stating ‘Well, it means, something is going to happen, something *big*’.<sup>8</sup>

This beginning puts an extremely heavy weight on not only the voice as an autonomous stylistic and linguistic element, but also on the (transmitted) voice as a signal (referenced as sound waves) and the separation of sight and sound, of body and voice, of sender and receiver, and instantly calls the attention to (radiophonic) media technology that generates this separation. Samuel Weber describes this separation and its effects when he states that by ‘separating sound from sight, radio delocalizes and disembodies the relation to the world’. When sound is deprived of its ‘visual accompaniment’, Weber explains, its ‘power and scope’ is heightened ‘by liberating it from the constraints of a visually determinate situation’.<sup>9</sup> As this implies, the audio-visual separation strengthens the aural sensation as it sensitises the listener’s aural sense. Crisell explains that radio ‘offers sound-only instead of sound and vision’ and thus compels the listener ‘to “supply” the visual data for himself’. And, as he furthermore states, ‘as we all know, the scope of the imagination is virtually limitless: we may picture not only lifelike objects but the fantastical, impossible scenes of an experimental play’, or of an unfathomable apocalypse.<sup>10</sup> Sounds whose source we cannot see are thus not only the reason why horror radio plays are a popular genre; they are also a stylistic device that is often used in horror or ghost-hunting films and TV programmes, as they are sounds ‘from beyond the edges of the frame’, from ‘outside the current setting, which then assume the character of sounds from beyond and from the deceased’, as Richard Coyne states. He goes on:

The idea of disembodied sound has long connoted access to ethereal otherness — sounds from without. According to [Douglas] Kahn, the earliest days of the electronic recording and transmission of sound were accompanied by the notion that listeners could now hear the voices of the deceased. Detecting such subtle sounds from without requires tuning in to the glitches, crackles, and blips in the environment, and those occurring outside of the frame.<sup>11</sup>

These ‘glitches, crackles and blips’ are of particular interest in radio transmission as well as the discussed film, as transmission technology plays a key role for *Pontypool*’s apocalypse

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<sup>8</sup> McDonald, 00:01:28.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Crisell, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Coyne, ‘Noise’, in *Sound Studies: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Michael Bull (Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), pp. 13–35 (pp. 15–16). Coyne refers to Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 214.

and as its virus is closely linked to glitches, crackles and blips in human speech and articulation.

The introduction of the invasion happens in a familiar radio format, processed by the staff of the ‘Beacon Radio’ station, Grant Mazzy functioning as its anchor-man. Accordingly, apart from one short encounter with a ‘conversationalist’ in the scene that follows the opening sequence and precedes the events inside of the ‘Beacon Radio’ station, the first half of the film shows neither the apocalypse nor the ‘conversationalists’, but narrates it through phone calls with eyewitnesses, through intercepted police radiograms, and mainly through live transmission reports from the station’s roving reporter Ken Loney, that disrupt the regular live programme whose production process we watch ‘live’.<sup>12</sup> In this way we hear about a ‘hostage situation’ in Pontypool,<sup>13</sup> about an ‘unruly’ group consisting of hundreds of people attacking Dr Mendez’s clinic in Pontypool, about military helicopters fighting and bombing these groups of people,<sup>14</sup> about disoriented, nonsense-babbling people walking around in herds behaving like bugs,<sup>15</sup> ‘cannibals’, ‘man-eaters’ or ‘piranhas’ that attack people, drag bodies away, bite people and crawl into them, trying to eat their way inside their human prey.<sup>16</sup> This unsettling information starts to come in while Mazzy broadcasts his morning show on Valentine’s Day, a talk-radio programme in which he reports on regional news, chats with callers on the phone, and mocks them by expressing his deliberately offensive and provocative opinions in a shock-jock manner. His accounts of Honey, the cat, and his loose way of chatting away with callers as well as with Ken Loney, establish a unique tone that keeps us in suspense and creates an intense, unsettling anticipation that ‘something big’ will happen. Our imagination adds the pictures we are lacking by only listening: the idea of a zombie-apocalypse is triggered by the keywords ‘disoriented’, ‘herds’, ‘man-eater’ and ‘cannibals’, the main characteristics of recent zombie stories like, for example, *28 Days Later*, *Shaun of the Dead* or *The Walking Dead*, and a prevalent filmic narrative.<sup>17</sup>

The increasingly creepy atmosphere is created solely via sonic information, and recalls Orson Welles’s infamous radio play *The War of the Worlds* (1938), which is an adaptation of H. G. Wells’s science-fiction novel of the same name (1898) about an alien

<sup>12</sup> In this scene (McDonald, 00:01:37-00:03:04), Grant Mazzy encounters a disoriented, mumbling woman when he has to stop his car while driving through the blizzard on his way to the radio station.

<sup>13</sup> McDonald, 00:14:58.

<sup>14</sup> McDonald, 00:20:28.

<sup>15</sup> McDonald, 00:28:23–00:32:02.

<sup>16</sup> McDonald, 00:34:38–00:38:33.

<sup>17</sup> *28 Days Later*, dir. by Danny Boyle (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox/DNA Films, 2002) [on DVD]; *Shaun of the Dead*, dir. by Edgar Wright (Universal Pictures/StudioCanal/Working Title/Big Talk Productions, 2004) [on DVD]; *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–present).

invasion.<sup>18</sup> What was innovative about Welles's play was that it sounded like a regular radio programme, interrupted by news flashes and reports about the attacks. Legend relates that listeners, who had missed the beginning of the play, panicked and mistook the broadcast for the report of a real invasion. Although fictional, Welles's radio programme sounded authentic, closely mimicking genuine coverage, recruiting the radio listener as an unwitting earwitness, as it were, of the invasion.<sup>19</sup> *Pontypool* follows the narrative style of Welles's play and uses radio technology to develop its zombie-invasion plot. Mazzy's voice functions as an authoritative speaker/narrator, and the 'Beacon Radio' as the distributing centre that guides the listener through the apocalypse by collecting, structuring and diffusing all available information. At the same time, however, the chaotic mixture of Breaking News, reports, and the Beacon Radio staff's attempts to keep track of all the incoming incomplete and unsubstantiated information, as well as radio's blindness, arouse suspense and an overall eerie atmosphere, while the source of the mayhem remains invisible, immaterial, and unidentifiable.<sup>20</sup>

This 'blindness' and barrier to eyewitnessing what we earwitness raises the plot's crucial question: what is happening outside the station? Mazzy is unwilling to believe in the reports and rejects the possibility of a real menace. The immaterial nature of the acoustic stimuli forces him to verify that he has not fallen victim to a bad joke and that he is not being deceived by what he hears, that the other staff of the radio station aren't playing 'some kind of stunt' using his own shock-jock practices against him.<sup>21</sup> Even a phone call and the corresponding live TV-transmission by the BBC World Service reporter Nigel Healing cannot convince him.<sup>22</sup> Healing enquires into the events and gives an account of the French-Canadian Riot Police who are building up road blocks to prevent people from leaving Pontypool; finally he brings up the question of whether the specific situation of Ontario — the French/English divide — is the reason for the events, and asks if separatist terrorist

<sup>18</sup> Orson Welles, *The War of the Worlds*, CBS Radio, 30 October 1938.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to numerous contemporary newspaper articles, Hadley Cantril's study *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (1940) in particular, which discusses the reasons for the panic that the play — supposedly — had caused, gave initial grounding to the legend. See Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2005). In October 2013, on the occasion of the play's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the topic was picked up again and such accounts of the 'panic' repeatedly revised. See, for example: Jefferson Pooley and Michael J. Socolow, 'The Myth of *The War of the Worlds* Panic', *Slate.com*, 28 October 2013, <[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/10/orson\\_welles\\_war\\_of\\_the\\_worlds\\_panic\\_myth\\_the\\_infamous\\_radio\\_broadcast\\_did.2.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/10/orson_welles_war_of_the_worlds_panic_myth_the_infamous_radio_broadcast_did.2.html)> [accessed 13 July 2014].

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Macho, 'Stimmen ohne Körper: Anmerkungen zur Technikgeschichte der Stimme', in *Stimme: Annäherung an ein Phänomen*, ed. by Doris Kolesch and Sybille Krämer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), pp. 130–46 (pp. 130–31).

<sup>21</sup> McDonald, 00:44:40.

<sup>22</sup> McDonald, 00:32:03.

groups are causing the riots. Although the BBC, as a respectable source and authority on the worldwide media and especially the news sector, reports about the strange and unsettling events, Mazzy sticks to his disbelief and scepticism, still suspecting he is being mocked.<sup>23</sup> Mazzy plays tricks on his listeners on a daily basis in his programmes, and knows that deliberate confusion is a well-established narrative strategy of radio programmes, especially of scary radio plays like the aforementioned *The War of the Worlds*. Only minutes before, Sydney confessed to him that Ken Loney, said to be reporting from a helicopter, is actually located in a car on a hill and his calls are enhanced with a fake helicopter sound-track.<sup>24</sup> This technique is typical of a radio play or a radio prank in which misleading sound effects are an easily produced and common technique to create apparently authentic sounds and to fuel the listener's imagination. Aware as he is of such aural tricks, Mazzy needs to categorise and understand what he hears by seeing it, hurrying outside the station where he finally gets the chance to realise that there is really something going on ('I gotta take a look out there. I need to see what's going on'): the 'unruly group' of people, or the 'enemy' as Laurel-Ann puts it, has arrived at the 'Beacon', banging at the door and now turning into a real menace.<sup>25</sup>

### **Dead Air: 'I Transmit; Therefore I Am'**

Radio is a sound medium; silence, nevertheless, is one of its important elements, as 'the *absence* of sound can also be heard' [emphasis in original]. Andrew Crisell explains, 'It is therefore important to consider silence as a form of signification. It has both negative and positive functions which seem to be indexical.'<sup>26</sup> While the positive functions ('to signify that something is happening which for one reason or another cannot be expressed in noise') are negligible in this context, the negative functions resulting in 'dead air' are interesting.<sup>27</sup> Mazzy's absence from the microphone when going outside has a twofold importance. On the one hand, the absence of the announcer, and especially of the host of a talk-radio programme, means that the station's identity has gone missing. Crisell explains that the continuity announcer's perseverative voice 'will give a kind of composite unity to its [the radio station's] various programmes, set the tone or style of the whole network'.<sup>28</sup> Crisell continues, 'A voice may be interpreted merely as the index of a human presence; or on another level as the index of a personality [...]; or on a third level as the index of a

<sup>23</sup> McDonald, 00:44:55.

<sup>24</sup> McDonald, 00:18:17.

<sup>25</sup> McDonald, 00:46:37 and 00:47:07.

<sup>26</sup> Crisell, p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> Crisell, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Crisell, p. 43.

programme, broadcasting institution or entire nation.<sup>29</sup> This is also how we can read Sydney's cry when Mazzy leaves the microphone: 'Don't walk out on me, Grant! Please, I need you!'<sup>30</sup> She needs him to broadcast, to keep speaking, to keep the station running, to keep it 'alive' and to prevent everyone from going silent. On the other hand, silence's

negative function is to signify that for the moment at least nothing is happening on the medium: there is a void, what broadcasters sometimes refer to as 'dead air'. In this function silence can resemble noise (that is, sounds, words and music) in acting as a framing mechanism, for it can signify the integrity of a programme or item by making a space around it. But if the silence persists for more than a few seconds it signifies the dysfunction or non-functioning of the medium: either transmitter or receiver has broken down or switched off.<sup>31</sup>

To prevent dead air, Laurel-Ann interestingly enough has chosen Mazzy's pre-recorded show about Honey, the cat (a Norman Mailer-esque, aural nod towards the key to understanding the virus later on).<sup>32</sup> This way, she keeps the station running and makes sure that Mazzy's voice will still be on air, and thus keeps Mazzy 'alive', as a radio announcer *needs* to speak, or he or she metaphorically dies. Walter Benjamin experienced this 'death' in the late 1920s, when he gave his first talk on the radio. He describes his experience in his essay 'On the Minute' ('Auf die Minute'), which was first published in 1934. He recalls how much care he took to watch the clock, but, nevertheless, he misjudged the time and ended four minutes too early. Waiting for the announcer to enter the studio, the essay describes how he suddenly realises his mistake and is surrounded by nothing but dread silence. Listening to himself, he hears nothing but his own silence, and recognises it as the silence of death, which in that very moment was snatching him away in thousands of ears and thousands of homes simultaneously.<sup>33</sup> When Benjamin managed to talk on and finish his programme, he effectively escaped death.

After Mazzy returns to his post, we learn about the menace, bit by bit and mainly through the insights of Dr Mendez, whose hospital was the first building in Pontypool to be attacked by the 'conversationalists'. He takes shelter in the radio station, and is the first one to understand the character of the invasion and now serves as co-moderator of 'Beacon

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<sup>29</sup> Crisell, pp. 43–44.

<sup>30</sup> McDonald, 00:46:43.

<sup>31</sup> Crisell, pp. 52–53.

<sup>32</sup> McDonald, 00:45:25.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin 'On the Minute [1934]', in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass., London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), pp.407–09 (p. 408).

Radio’, explaining what has caused these people, who are now standing outside the station trying to get in, to begin attacking and killing their fellow townspeople. They have been infected with a virus; not a biological virus, however, but one that infests the human mind and language, and is passed on by the *spoken* word. Hence, the virus is not transferred by the usual path of physical contact, but is transmitted (or rather *broadcast*) when infected words are spoken. But, just as it is not sufficient simply to receive the sent signal but also to be able to decode its message, the contaminated words of Pontypool’s virus do not have the ability to enter the human consciousness merely by being heard. Dr Mendez explains, ‘It is when the word is *understood* that the virus takes hold and it copies itself in our understanding!’<sup>34</sup> The virus kills the human mind, not the human body. The director of the film, Bruce McDonald, describes the virus in an interview with Ryan Turek:

There are three stages to this virus. The first stage is you might begin to repeat a word. Something gets stuck. And usually it’s words that are terms of endearment, like sweetheart or honey. The second stage is your language becomes scrambled and you can’t express yourself properly. The third stage is that you become so distraught at your condition that the only way out of the situation you feel, as an infected person, is to try and chew your way through the mouth of another person.<sup>35</sup>

Aalya Ahmad, basing her analysis mainly on the book *Pontypool Changes Everything*, remarks, ‘Burgess’ zombie virus is [...] a literary malformation, a tongue-in-cheek amalgam of influential semiotic theories. Like Baudrillard’s simulacra, the virus is endlessly copying itself.’<sup>36</sup> The virus copies itself with the aim of multiplying its scope while the multiplication materialises in two ways: everyone speaking communicates the virus through face-to-face contact, and the ‘Beacon Radio’ station disseminates the virus over the airwaves. The tale about Honey, the cat, is a constantly recurring motif throughout the plot (even BBC World takes up the story) and can be classified as a vocal soundtrack of the film.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the word ‘honey’, as one of the main carriers of the virus, is permanently repeated and broadcast by Mazzy’s voice — and probably indefinitely often uttered in every English-speaking part of the world (as a term of endearment) on this day: Valentine’s Day. With the help of the

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<sup>34</sup> McDonald, 01:01:19.

<sup>35</sup> Ryan Turek, ‘McDonald Describes Pontypool’s “Infected”’, *shocktillyoudrop.com*, 26 August 2008 <<http://www.shocktillyoudrop.com/news/7454-mcdonald-describes-pontypools-infected/>> [accessed 4 July 2014].

<sup>36</sup> Ahmad, ‘Gray Is the New Black: Race, Class, and Zombies’, in *Generation Zombie*, ed. by Stephenie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), pp. 130–46 (p. 140).

<sup>37</sup> McDonald, 00:42:48.

radio, however, the spoken word is freed from the speaking body, freed from limitations, addressing an infinite number of listeners and sending out the virus to the whole world.

Today the idea of viral dissemination is more closely linked to the internet than to media like the radio; the World Wide Web seems to be *the* global network, connecting most parts and most inhabitants of the earth — a false conclusion, however, as in 2014 still only about 2.923 million people have access to the web.<sup>38</sup> This shows that the radio is the medium of choice for the virus in *Pontypool* for good reasons, incorporating qualities the internet doesn't. Also, radio is by no means the outmoded medium it is often called; statistics show that even in 2012, Canadians spent more time listening to the radio (29% of time spent with media) than using the internet (20%); radio and television together account for a noteworthy 76%.<sup>39</sup> The wireless can be received nearly everywhere, even in the most remote, rural places, connecting its listeners with the rest of the world via DX. Also, as an acoustic medium, based upon the three basic elements of words, sounds, and music, the radio is the perfect means to transmit a virus that ravages speech.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the media history of storing and transmitting the voice, intertwined with the radio's media history, provides useful contexts that can help in understanding the unique suitability of the radio for *Pontypool's* story, as will be explained later in this essay.

The virus of *Pontypool* can be characterised as a memetic virus, in reference to the theory of the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. In his book *The Selfish Gene*, first published in 1976, Dawkins states that human evolution is not only based on genes, but also on memes, which are responsible for cultural development. A meme operates like an idea or a perception, which can be transferred to fellow human beings and, like genes, is subject to natural selection and mutation.<sup>41</sup> The same applies for the virus of *Pontypool*, to which we are *listening*. Attacking the human mind, it is transmitted without the necessity of any physical contact. The voice is the carrier of the virus and the infection can be understood as mind-to-mind communication. In the film, the 'conversationalists' fall silent only with death. From this point of view, talking equals living, but conversely, talking also threatens mankind, as talking means infecting. Mazzy asks the crucial question: 'Should we talk about it? Should

<sup>38</sup> The Statistics Portal, 'Number of worldwide internet users from 2000 to 2014 (in millions)', *statista.com*, 2014, <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/273018/number-of-internet-users-worldwide/>> [accessed 28 July 2014].

<sup>39</sup> The Statistics Portal, 'Distribution of weekly time spent with media in Canada in 2001 and 2012, by medium', *statista.com*, 2014, <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/261804/distribution-of-time-spent-with-media-in-canada-by-medium/>> [accessed 28 July 2014].

<sup>40</sup> For further reading, see, for example Crisell, pp. 42–63 (Chapter 3: Radio Signs and Codes).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (1976; repr. London: Paladin, 1978). On the theory of memes and its challenges, see Susan J. Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) or Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2011).

we be talking *at all*?' Dr Mendez confirms that 'Well, to be safe — no. Probably not. Talking is risky. And well, talk radio is high risk. So, eh, we should stop.' Mazzy, however, sticks to the fundamental assignment of radio work: 'But, eh, we need to tell people about this, people need to know, we have to get this out!'<sup>42</sup> Radio needs to inform and to transmit to prevent dead air. Accordingly, a radio announcer has to speak, or he loses his consciousness of self, his 'indexical mark of existence'. Or, as Jeffrey Sconce puts it, 'I transmit; therefore I am.'<sup>43</sup> Mazzy has to speak, regardless of Dr Mendez's warning about possible consequences: 'Well, it's your call, Mr Mazzy. Let's just hope that what you are getting out there isn't going to destroy your world.'<sup>44</sup> According to the biblical paradigm, speaking means living, as God created the world with words ('For He spoke, and it came to be'), while Pontypool's virus intends to end the world with words.<sup>45</sup>

The way in which Dr Mendez explains Pontypool's virus live on air, follows a similar level of comprehension and meaning:

It's viral. That much is clear. But not of the blood; not blood, not in the air, not on or even in our bodies. It is *here* [...]. It is in words. Not all words, not all speaking, but in *some*. Some words are infected, and it spreads out when the contaminated word is spoken. Ohhhh. We are witnessing the emergence of a new arrangement for life and our language is its host! It could have sprung spontaneously out of a perception. If it found its way into language it could leap into reality itself, changing everything! It may be boundless, it may be a god bug.<sup>46</sup>

The notion of a 'god bug' coincides with the 'often mystical dialogue over the emerging wonders of wireless technologies' of the 1880s to 1920s that 'took place during a period of unprecedented cultural transformation in the United States and Europe', as Jeffrey Sconce puts it in his book *Haunted Media*.<sup>47</sup> Wireless technology, on the one hand, for the first time fully overcame spatiotemporal limitations and allowed long-distance communication; but, on the other hand, it 'also served as a reminder of the individual listener's separation and even alienation from this larger social world'. Furthermore, its 'uncanny liberation of the body in time and space seemed not only alienating, but also absolutely blasphemous', as it (seemingly) allowed paranormal conversations via telepathy, for example, and even with the

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<sup>42</sup> McDonald, 01:01:39.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence From Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> McDonald, 01:02:12.

<sup>45</sup> Psalm 33. 9.

<sup>46</sup> McDonald, 00:59:34.

<sup>47</sup> Sconce, p. 64.

dead.<sup>48</sup> The wireless technology broke open traditional and conventional dimensions of communication, crossed god-given human limitations and thus, so to speak, changed everything (in, or rather through, mediated communication). Here, the virus or ‘god bug’ as Dr Mendez terms it, turns the aforementioned biblical paradigm around, using voice, speech and words to destroy mankind by destroying the social structure of language, causing an apocalyptic outbreak of alienation and misunderstanding that uses communication as its weapon. The virus and the invasion appears like a god-sent biblical plague, like a divine revenge, which amplifies its impact by exploiting the ‘Beacon Radio’ that fittingly is located in an erstwhile church.

### **Radio Signals: Communication as an Aetherial Menace**

Much media history is interlinked with the history of spiritualist communication. John Durham Peters notes that together with the intellectual reception of media technology, spiritualism

and its later scientizing offshoot psychical research, is a chief vehicle for the formation of ideas about communication in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The word, voice, or image of a person dead or distant channeling [*sic*] through a delicate medium: this is the project common to electronic media and spiritualist communication. Indeed, all mediated communication is in a sense communication with the dead, insofar as media can store ‘phantasms of the living’ for playback after bodily death. In sum, the new media of the nineteenth century gave new life to the older dream of angelic contact by claiming the bonds of distance and death.<sup>49</sup>

Emerging communications media like the telephone, invented by Philip Reis (1861) and Alexander Graham Bell (1876), and storage media like Thomas Alva Edison’s phonograph (1877) and Emil Berliner’s gramophone (1892), revoked spatiotemporal limits and changed the conditions of human communication.<sup>50</sup> John Durham Peters explains that media like photography, telegraphy, phonography, or electroencephalography (and some decades later the radio) continued what the ability of writing had begun: ‘The far could now speak to the near, and the dead could now speak to the living.’<sup>51</sup> Peters asserts that media ‘of transmission allow crosscuts through space, but recording media allow jump cuts through time. The

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<sup>48</sup> Sconce, p. 81.

<sup>49</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 142.

<sup>50</sup> Macho, p. 137–38.

<sup>51</sup> Peters, p. 138.

sentence for death of sound, image, and experience had been commuted. Speech and action could live beyond their human origins.<sup>52</sup> Neither death nor spatiotemporal limitations stood as natural borders for communication anymore and, as Jussi Parikka remarks, '[f]ragments of people in terms of voices and images were having an afterlife now through storage media.' Storage media made speech and the voices of the dead immortal; the idea of 'media zombies' was born.<sup>53</sup> Through media, we now all can have some sort of afterlife, can mock death by storing, for example, our voices, disembodied them and thus keep some parts of us 'alive', turning us into mediated, technologised transgressors of life and death via communication media. Transmission media, especially the radio, is the logical and historical continuation of these discourses and adds another level: the airwaves and radio signals. These are of special importance for the understanding of *Pontypool*. On the one hand, the virus 'frantically' tries to 'keep its host', and thus the infected human being, 'alive', as Dr Mendez explains,<sup>54</sup> which is why the 'conversationalists' need to find victims by 'rooting voices'.<sup>55</sup> However, on the other hand, the recording or transmission of the virus operating in spoken words separates it from the person speaking. The disembodied, infectious vocalised words lose their ephemerality and the virus itself turns into some kind of media zombie, nesting in recorded or transmitted voices, living on without its human source, capable of infecting people without the necessity of face-to-face communication. Accordingly, the radio, operating on invisible airwaves, serves as a media weapon of mass destruction, disseminating the deadly menace via media technology, turning people into 'conversationalists'.

In turn, the 'conversationalists' serve as a medium or a media-based carrier of the virus when transmitting the infected words, and are positioned as functioning identically to the radio signal, as one utterance by Dr Mendez demonstrates. Before Mendez elucidates that the source for the mayhem is a memetic virus, Ken Loney calls to report about herds of people, who walk by and chant sentences like 'Look out for u-boats'.<sup>56</sup> Loney understands this as a 'symbol of the disorder',<sup>57</sup> but he becomes disoriented, mixes up the words 'symbol', 'sample' and 'simple', and starts to loop them. Obviously all these words (signs) do have different meanings, but their similar sound patterns mean that they are easily

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<sup>52</sup> Peters, p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Oxford: Polity, 2012), pp. 60–61.

<sup>54</sup> McDonald, 01:04:03.

<sup>55</sup> McDonald, 00:54:15. When a conversationalist fails to find a victim, he or she dies, as the example of Laurel-Ann Drummond shows. Once infected, she becomes confused and starts to repeat words. Unable to find a victim, she vomits a large amount of blood, slumps down and dies.

<sup>56</sup> McDonald, 00:55:33.

<sup>57</sup> McDonald, 00:55:49.

confused with one another. Loney (now more of a ‘loony’) is infected and we listen to his transformation. Dr Mendez comments, ‘That’s what he is now. He’s just a crude radio signal. He is seeking. [...] He’s gone. I mean ... he’s gone *somewhere*.’<sup>58</sup> At this point, another little detail suddenly starts to make sense in Mailer-esque terms. During Loney’s first detailed accounts of the ‘conversationalists’, as he watches some of them from nearby and describes them extensively, his voice is visually underlined with sound waves depicting his transmitted voice’s radio signal, which we see on a laptop monitor used for the production process of the morning show, in a way that foreshadows the eventual links between Loney, the ‘conversationalists’, and the radio signal.<sup>59</sup>

The radio signal is more than just a technical reality; it also bears a historical spiritualist dimension, as Peters explains:

The radio signal is surely one of the strangest things we know; little wonder its ability to spirit intelligence through space elicited immediate comparisons to telepathy, séances, and angelic visitations. At any point on the earth’s surface in the twentieth century, silent streams of radio voices, music, sound effects, and distress signals fill every corner of space. In any place you are reading this, messages surround and fly past you, infinitely inconspicuous, like the cicadas in the *Phaedrus*, who sing of things we cannot hear with our unaided ears. The remarkable property of the radio signal [...] is its inherent publicity. Electromagnetic signals radiate ‘to whom it may concern’; they are no respecters of persons, and they rain on the just and the unjust.<sup>60</sup>

The understanding of the infected as radio signals is a crucial point and marks the main link between the idea of conversationalists and the history of oral and radiophonic media technologies. In this sense, the virus, which is transmitted via multiplied physical and media communication channels all over Pontypool, is addressed to every human, regardless of class, race, nationality, gender, or age. This recalls the idea of the aether, a theoretical substance within the field of physics that was, amongst many other properties, believed to be an omnipresent, transparent, weightless, and undetectable elastic solid.<sup>61</sup> Introduced by Aristotle as the fifth element, the *quinta essentia*, to understand and explain the nature of the cosmic order, aether was rediscovered in the seventeenth century to explain the propagation of light to avoid both action-at-a-distance and void (*horror vacui*), and to explain reflections and

<sup>58</sup> McDonald, 00:56:56.

<sup>59</sup> McDonald, 00:35:32–00:38:31.

<sup>60</sup> Peters, p. 206.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, James Clerk Maxwell, ‘Ether, or Æther’, in *Encyclopædia Britannica Ninth Edition*, 1875–89 <<http://www.1902encyclopedia.com/E/ETH/ether.html>> [accessed 4 July 2014].

refractions of the light.<sup>62</sup> In the nineteenth century, aether became an integral part of physics and, together with new developments in the field of electromagnetism, it was needed to explain the transmission of electromagnetic waves. Furthermore, it became an important part of the scientific exploration of natural phenomena, and of spiritualism and occultism. It was not only believed to be omnipresent but also conducive of telepathy, telekinesis, and communication with the dead, caused by a mythical action-at-a-distance — a common belief in this time as the rapid progress of physics and the invention of innumerable machines and technological instruments were witnessed.<sup>63</sup>

Electromagnetic waves are the basis of wireless technology, which is why the development of the radio is intertwined with the understanding of the aether. In *Pontypool*, communication is crucial for the emergence of the ‘conversationalists’. By communicating with infected words, the virus is transmitted radiophonically. The airwaves allow the connection of minds without any ‘physical presence or personal acquaintance’.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the vision of an omnipresent and omnipotent aether seems to be fulfilled in *Pontypool*. When the virus is not only transmitted on a face-to-face level, but also disseminated via airwaves, its range is multiplied and it can reach an infinite number of listeners, enabling a global apocalypse. As Peters puts it, ‘those who have ears to hear, will hear’.<sup>65</sup>

### **Symbol is Sample: (Mis)understanding the Virus**

Wireless technology does not know about geographical or political boundaries, which is why the broadcast virus of *Pontypool* won’t stay in *Pontypool*. Wireless technology also does not acknowledge psychical, social or cultural boundaries, and enters the human body via the ears of everyone within the operating range. In *Pontypool*, however, there is one fundamental exception, which restricts the infinite range of the virus as a media zombie, and thus of the radio signal. In keeping with the memetic virus, which relies on cultural conditions, a trigger word and its cultural denotation needs to be understood; the recipient’s mind or soul needs to be affected. Only they will ‘hear’, who also understand what they hear; only those who can *understand* the English language will be infected, as only English is diseased. Being a non-native speaker, however, does not prevent someone from being infected, a fact we also learn from Dr Mendez who becomes infected despite having another mother tongue. The film

<sup>62</sup> Károly Simonyi, *Kulturgeschichte der Physik: Von den Anfängen bis heute* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsch, 2004), p. 85; and Simonyi, p. 282.

<sup>63</sup> For further reading on nineteenth-century spiritualism and media technology, see Peters, p. 89ff.

<sup>64</sup> Peters, p. 211.

<sup>65</sup> Peters, p. 63.

provides no answer, as to what this might mean. Aalya Ahmad reads it as a reminder of the social and political situation of Canada:

The devastating conclusion of the film is a grim reminder of the wars in which Canada is currently engaged, which flourish on nothing so much as breakdowns of understanding, erasures of difference and spectacular failures of empathy. The arrival of such monsters in Canadian cultural productions ought to serve as a warning that no national identity can remain fixed and complacent in the globalized world that is mirrored so darkly in our zombie tales.<sup>66</sup>

Not only does Canada stand within the top ten countries with the highest rate of immigrants (20.7% in 2013),<sup>67</sup> but the special bilingual situation of Ontario, with two official languages and a ‘century-old controversy’ caused by its multi-ethnicity and bilingualism, if not multilingualism,<sup>68</sup> also surely offers a rich and diverse linguistic landscape. This may generate cultural diversity, but at the same time it also raises potential issues of (cultural and linguistic) misunderstanding and arbitrariness. A language is, in Saussure’s words, ‘both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty.’ Whereas speech ‘straddl[es] several areas simultaneously — physical, physiological, and psychological —’ and belongs ‘both to the individual and to society’, language is ‘a self-contained whole and principle of classification’.<sup>69</sup> When too many languages and too many classifications clash, misunderstanding and alienation from each other seems unavoidable. Interestingly, Pontypool is a place name that actually is neither English nor French but Welsh (‘pont’ meaning ‘bridge’), and derives from the Welsh town Pontypool (*Pont-y-pŵl*) placed at the edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park. The name Pontypool in itself thus signifies multiple places and adds another level of historical and cultural background, and potential misinterpretation.

Speech enables the virus to operate in the first place. Not only do the words need to be spoken, but speech also adds the individual aspect to language: ‘Speaking [...] is an individual act. It is wilful and intellectual.’<sup>70</sup> Whereas ‘language [...] is homogeneous’ and a ‘system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images,

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<sup>66</sup> Ahmad, p. 143.

<sup>67</sup> Alexander E. M. Hess and Thomas C. Frohlich, ‘Countries with the Most Immigrants’, *247wallst.com*, 2014, <<http://247wallst.com/special-report/2013/09/25/countries-with-the-most-immigrants/2/>> [accessed 29 July 2014].

<sup>68</sup> Donald G. Cartwright and Colin H. Williams, ‘Bilingual Districts as an Instrument in Canadian Language Policy’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 7.4 (1982), 474–93 (p. 474).

<sup>69</sup> Saussure, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Saussure, p. 14.

and in which both parts are psychological', speech, as Saussure notes, 'is heterogeneous'.<sup>71</sup> The virus of Pontypool affects the will and intellect of the infected, destroys the comprehension and understanding of cultural codes, and causes the misinterpretation of signs. Again, (talk) radio functions extremely well as a means to reinforce this. Andrew Crisell explains, 'Since words are signs which do not resemble what they represent (we may represent a canine quadruped by the word "dog" but we may equally refer to it as "*chien*", "*hund*" or "*cur*" or even invent a private word of our own), they are symbolic in character' [italics in original]. This is of special importance for radio, as the word's 'symbolism is the basis of radio's imaginative appeal [...], for if the word-sign does not resemble its object the listener must visualize, picture or *imagine* that object' [emphasis in original]. Thus, every listener might imagine different things. And finally, Crisell adds the crucial point: 'words on the radio are always and unavoidably *spoken*' [emphasis in original].<sup>72</sup>

This coincides with what Jonathan Sterne calls the '*audiovisual litany*', a 'set of presumed and somewhat clichéd attributes' that are historically associated with seeing and hearing. Sterne notes that these clichés include attributes such as 'hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective', 'sound comes to us, but vision travels to its object', 'hearing places you inside an event, seeing gives you perspective on the event', or 'hearing tends towards subjectivity, vision tends towards objectivity'.<sup>73</sup> Although scholars engaged with sound work on overcoming this 'audiovisual litany' of commonplace assumptions, these associations are still closely linked to sound and hearing, particularly the idea that sound inevitably penetrates us and enters our minds (we can close our eyes but never our ears). The same applies to the virus transmitted via spoken words: you cannot help hearing it.

Interestingly, in *Pontypool*, spoken words are curse and cure at the same time. This occurs to Mazzy with the help of the BBC reporter Nigel Healing who brings healing in a Mailer-esque way. While trapped inside the station, Mazzy listens to the recording of the earlier phone call from Healing and begins to understand that the virus can be stopped when the link of comprehension is broken, asking the crucial question: 'How do you stop understanding? [...] How do you make it *strange*?'<sup>74</sup> Sydney Briar responds, 'You kill the word that's killing you'.<sup>75</sup> The cure for Pontypool's crisis of language is to destroy the meaning of the words, and to break the hermeneutic circle of symbolic (mis-)understanding.

<sup>71</sup> Saussure, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> Crisell, pp. 42–43.

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Sterne, 'Sonic Imaginations', in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. by Jonathan Sterne (London, New York: Routledge, 2012) pp. 1–17 (p. 9).

<sup>74</sup> McDonald, 01:19:18.

<sup>75</sup> McDonald, 01:20:20.

When Sydney gets infected by the word ‘kill’, Mazzy succeeds in disinfecting it by renewing its meaning to ‘kiss’, shouting ‘kill is kiss’ at Sydney in a loop. And, apparently, ‘kill’ not only means ‘kiss’ to her now, but also the other way round.<sup>76</sup> Finally, the pun from the beginning of the film makes sense: Pontypool is Pont de Pool is Panty Pool. You have to change the meaning of the words and give them new ones to stop the virus. In this sense, talking operates as a *pharmakon* that is both cure and poison; it can infect the listener with the memetic virus, but it can also restore them.

### **Pontypool Changes**

The ending of *Pontypool* finally brings together all of the jigsaw pieces that were important for the film, as well as this article’s argument. Having solved the mystery of Pontypool’s infection, Mazzy does one last radio programme, intending to cure Pontypool. Sticking to the belief of ‘I transmit; therefore I am’, he tries to disinfect the English language by shouting phrases like ‘kill is kiss’ or ‘sample is stable’ into the microphone. Simultaneously, the French Canadian Riot Police arrive at the station, indicated by recognisable helicopter and military sounds, and a male French voice transmitted via loudspeakers demanding that the transmission be stopped; at least we are made to believe that it is the Riot Police, as (helicopter) sounds can be faked easily. Given that it is the Riot Police, the officials seem to have understood that broadcasting multiplies the threat, that airwaves, radio signals and Mazzy’s mediated radio voice carry a unique significance, as described throughout this article. While the surroundings of the station are bombarded, Mazzy carries on regardless. When he finally falls silent, the loudspeaker-voice is heard again, counting down from ten. Upon reaching zero, the movie ends with a black screen. The station has been wiped out and the core source of the epidemic’s infection apparently exterminated. Not ultimately, however, as the virus lives on as a media zombie, disembodied from its original sources, as it is broadcast by other stations that cover the Pontypool incident, and infects an increasing number of people within and outside of Pontypool. The newly transformed ‘conversationalists’ then again operate as radio signals that transmit the virus further. The end titles signal this with crude radio static, underlined with the typical sound of flipping through radio channels: we hear snippets from reports about the Pontypool Valentine’s Day massacre.<sup>77</sup> These are mixed with excerpts from reports about random and everyday topics, but also with fragments from reports about an increasing crime rate, about people repeating

<sup>76</sup> McDonald, 01:21:17–01:22:28.

<sup>77</sup> McDonald, 01:29:42–01:31:43.

words, or about an inexplicable and mysterious disease, which fills hospitals with patients. We also hear about churches filling up with people escaping the virus, thinking that it was transmitted via blasphemous communication media that seemed to mock God by living on despite being dead and speaking to absent people in partially stored or transmitted fragments of themselves (their voices). Apparently, however, the spread of the virus continues undiluted via the airwaves. Not only has Mazzy failed to stop the virus, as it lives on in the media, but his broadcasts have in fact worsened — or maybe even caused — the epidemic; soon the infected words will be looped on myriad channels, sending out an epidemic plague with infinite reach.

The very last sequence leaves the audience with another riddle: having apparently survived the station's bombardment, Mazzy and Sydney sit at a bar chatting about their new lives, discussing how to go on now.<sup>78</sup> The bar seems to be located in a very different cultural setting; this is indicated by the completely different look of the now black-and-white images, the changed *mise en scène*, and the way Sydney and Mazzy are dressed. What the film presents here might be an outlook on the new 'arrangement for life' that Dr Mendez had predicted. They seem to have transcended into a new sphere of life without any 'establishing rules'. The 'god bug' presumably has 'changed everything'. We might learn about this in the second film of the planned trilogy, called *Pontypool Changes*. This sequel might clarify some of the unresolved issues as the film's teaser poster promotes the slogan, 'You've HEARD it all before, but you ain't seen nothing yet!', which suggests that this time, the audience will turn from 'earwitnesses' into eyewitnesses of the apocalypse.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> McDonald, 01:31:44.

<sup>79</sup> Originally, the sequel was said to be scheduled for release in 2013 but is still classified as 'in development' at the time of writing. See Unknown, 'Pontypool Changes', in *upcominghorrormovies.com*, <<http://www.upcominghorrormovies.com/movie/pontypool-changes>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

Bruce McDonald's "Pontypool" (2008) is a zombie film like no other. Set in the small community of Pontypool, Ontario, radio host and reformed shock jock Grant Mazzy (Stephen McHattie) is broadcasting from inside the studio when the outbreak begins. Ken Loney, the station's helicopter reporter, announces a violent riot outside a doctor's office, growing increasingly panicked as he describes people who appear to be eating their way inside of others.