Aimee Hinds, "Entry on: Pompeii by Bastille ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1053. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Bastille

Pompeii

United Kingdom (2013)

TAGS: Eruption of Vesuvius Pompeii Roman History





Logo used for the album cover. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed: January 11, 2022).

General information	
Title of the work	Pompeii
Title of the Album(s)	Bad Blood
Studio/Production Company	Virgin Records / Mark Crew & Dan Smith
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2013
First Edition Details	Bastille, *Bad Blood: Pompeii*. Virgin Records / Mark Crew & Dan Smith, 2013, 3.34 min.
Running time	3.34 min
Format	CD / MP3 / Vinyl / Digital
Official Website	bastillebastille.com (accessed: June 27, 2020).
Available Onllne	Spotify (accessed: June 27, 2020).
Awards	2014 – Nominated for British Single of the Year at the Brit Awards; 2014 – Nominated for Alternative Rock Song of the Year at the iHeart Radio Music Awards.
Genre	Narrative songs
Target Audience	Young adults

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Creators



Bastille, photographed by Ren Hekkonens on November 6, 2013 (accessed: June 27, 2020). The file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike.

Bastille (Music Band)

Bastille are a British band formed in 2010, originally a solo project led by frontman Dan Smith (b. 1986); the name 'Bastille' comes from Bastille Day, which is Smith's birthday. Smith wanted to be a filmmaker, gaining a degree in English Literature and Language from Leeds University, before turning back to music which he had taken up at fifteen. By 2013 Smith was joined in the band by Will Farquarson (b. 1983), Chris Wood (b. 1985), and Kyle Simmons (b. 1988), all of whom he had known previously. The band have produced three albums to date.

Source:

Biography at allmusic.com (accessed: August 4, 2020).

Bio prepared by Aimee Hinds, University of Roehampton, aimee.hinds89@gmail.com

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Additional information

Adaptations

The song was covered by the band Pompeii in 2013.

Summary

The song describes the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD and its aftermath from the perspective of the inhabitants of nearby Pompeii, although this inferred only from the title and not referenced directly in the song. The lyrics are imagined as a conversation between two people who were victims of the eruption. The song is mostly formed of repetitions of the following refrain and chorus, the first part which directly references the eruption and the second part of which reflects the idea of the conversation:

And the walls kept tumbling down in the city that we love

Grey clouds roll over the hills bringing darkness from above

* * *

But if you close your eyes

Does it almost feel like nothing changed at all?

And if you close your eyes

Does it almost feel like you've been here before?

The accompanying video follows frontman Dan Smith around an eerily deserted Los Angeles at night, with the few people he encounters (including the two girls in the arcade pictured on the CD cover) all having entirely black eyes. Smith flees in a car, running into the hills in the morning after the car has broken down. At the end of the video he turns to reveal that his eyes have also become entirely black. The video does not reference Pompeii or the disaster, unlike the video for Siouxsie and the Banshees' *Cities in Dust*, also surveyed on this database.

Analysis

Songwriter and frontman Dan Smith has said the song was inspired by an image of the plaster casts of the dead from the ancient city, and his

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imagining what two people stuck next to each other in that way for so long would say to each other. There are a few clues to the idea that this is a conversation between people trapped in time, such as the line "many days fell away with nothing to show". This is an interesting reception in that it takes the story entirely from the point of view of everyday people. Smith's description of the victims he imagines in conversation never includes the idea that they are dead, only stuck in place, which removes the trauma of the event and almost makes it sound mundane. There are no direct references to death or dying, nor are they referred to in the lyrics as being plaster casts, which makes the song sound as though it could refer to survivors rather than victims of the catastrophe:

> But if you close your eyes
>
> Does it almost feel like nothing changed at all?
>
> But if you close your eyes
>
> Does it almost feel like you've been here before?
>
> How am I gonna be an optimist about this?

The idea of the speakers having to close their eyes to feel like everything is the same is significant, given that Pompeii has become synonymous with something that has been frozen in time; clearly, the characters here are aware of the passing of time and how much things have changed. This undermines the idea behind many receptions of Pompeii, that often focus on the romantic possibilities of the idea that things are both ruined and unchanged, or that one can access the past while being denied access to that past by the disruption of the eruption (Hales & Paul, 2011: 5-6).

Despite this, the lyrics of the song reference very literally the destruction of Pompeii. Like the Siouxie and the Banshee's song *Cities in Dust*, there are vague references to vice and sin – none of which are explained - which implies accountability on the part of the inhabitants, which is perhaps a reflection of the stereotype of moral depravity and decadence which is endemic in many receptions of Roman Italy:

> We were caught up and lost in all of our vices
>
> In your pose as the dust settled around us

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While Pompeii was walled, the image of them tumbling down brings to mind other famous classical cities, such as Troy, and perhaps was used by the songwriter as a way of tapping into classical imagery:

> And the walls kept tumbling down in the city that we love
>
> Great clouds roll over the hills bringing darkness from above

Again, the idea of time passing is clear (through the settling dust), but it is through this timelessness that the trauma of the eruption is bypassed, as it is not presented as an ultimately fatal disruptive event. The characters discuss events as though it is just a big mess to be cleaned up:

> Where do we begin, the rubble or our sins?

The focus on individual response makes the events that destroyed/preserved the city seem if not trivial, then at least not as serious as they were; this is because the song ignores the concept of death for these people, with the conversation taking place as though the speakers had survived, and thus the extent of the fatalities is not revealed. Throughout the song backing singers repeat *eheu* (alas in Latin), which is the only real hint at the extent of the destruction.

The lyrics can be interpreted without this context as a song in which the destruction is metaphorical, but with context the lyrics read as a conversation in which two of the inhabitants of Pompeii discuss the eruption of Vesuvius and its aftermath, and their helplessness during the eruption and since. This individual focus conjures Pompeii on a domestic level, paralleling modern approaches to the city (for example, the *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* exhibition at the British Museum in 2013 and its accompanying book by Paul Roberts) in contrast to the romantic preoccupation with the city as ruins (see, for example, the receptions in Hales and Paul 2011). As the lyrics work on both levels, there is no need for prior historical knowledge. The album also features a song based on the myth of Icarus and one based on the biblical tale of Daniel in the lion's den, both of which lyrically reference their inspirations but can also be read another way like *Pompeii*. *Pompeii* is also lyrically very similar to another song, *Things We Lost In The Fire,* which is not classical reception, and illustrates that the listener need not know anything about Pompeii. The light treatment of the disaster – lacking mention of death or mortality – makes it suitable for younger listeners, while the

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	video, which does not directly reference Pompeii (except perhaps in allegory) will not alienate the listener/watcher unfamiliar with the story.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Eruption of Vesuvius Pompeii Roman History
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Death Environment Loss
Further Reading	Hales, Shelley and Joanna Paul, eds., *Pompeii in the Public Imagination from its Rediscovery to Today,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Roberts, Paul, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, London: The British Museum Press, 2013. Interview: Dan Smith on Radio X (accessed: June 27, 2020).
Addenda	Translations: Latin (translated and performed by Helen Uytterhoeven; accessed: June 27, 2020).

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