

Speaking Between the Lines: Telephones, Voices, and Affect in Screen Representation

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Call for Papers

- 1 Since the days of silent film, the telephone and its extensions/alternatives (answering machines, laptops, etc.), have served as the primary mediated technology of communication between present and non-present characters in film and television (Pustay 2007; Ruston 2008). Certain genres, especially the film-noir detective thriller and horror (but also drama), have relied on the phone call as a turning point within a cinematic narrative (e.g. *Sorry Wrong Number*, *Dial M for Murder*, or *Scream*, or Italian *gialli* of the 1960-1970s). Such moments of telephony implicate human vocality for the sender/receiver over a device that figures both as a material object and an intermediating technology (Varade 2021), or as Jones Very presciently observed in 1877, “the human voice [that] speaks through the electric wire” (Very 1886, 519).
- 2 The cultural meanings embedded in the telephone and its voices have inspired reflection by such notable figures as Freud, Derrida, Kittler, Cixous, Barthes, and Baudrillard, all of whom recognize the complex, unstable range of relationships that the technology and its embodied messages have introduced into human society. In particular, the telephone on screen “unsettles notions of proximity and distance, presence and absence, and self and other” (Jackson 2023, 2). Thus the telephone voice can serve as a “token of separation..., [a] mark of an

impossible presence” through the “uncanny nature of the acousmatic voice” (Dolar 2006), but also as “an opportunity for intimacy not otherwise available in the soundtrack” (Fleeger 2017, 41). *The Twilight Zone* episode “Long Distance Call” (1961) well illustrates such paradoxes, where a toy telephone links a boy with his recently deceased, beloved grandmother. Other stories centrally implicate telephony as a spatial marker of place and displacement (the laptop in *Past Lives*) or as a means to confuse personal identity (the telephone in *BlackKlansman*). Moreover, the genres of horror and mystery rely on scenes with phone calls to introduce uncertainty over the non-visible conversant or the acousmètre “at the other end of the line” (Chion 1999, 64).

- 3 The telephone voice likewise invites us to consider the materiality of sound and of human vocality in an especially concentrated form within the realm of audiovisual media. While recent studies have addressed the corporeality and sensorial impacts of vocalities (Tiainen 2013; Eidsheim 2015; Feldman and Zeitlin 2019), their application in audiovisual scenarios remains undertheorized, even though technology-enabled interpersonal communications have engaged screen audiences since the advent of sound-on-film and have led to well-worn tropes. For instance, the de-acousmatization of the killer-caller has preoccupied filmmakers since the influential early slasher film *Black Christmas* of 1974 (Thomsen 2021). But also the phone’s ability to connect the bodies of friends and associates in a pairing or network of “audile immediacy” (Sterne 2003, 168) has figured in fictional screen narratives like *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014, with multiple phone calls from members of the Society of the Crossed Keys), or the four-way phone call in *Mean Girls* (2004). However, the human voices and vocalities exchanged via devices can themselves be regarded as material traces, for as Derrida’s arguments about film’s spectrality can be reframed, “The voice, too... underlines life’s spectral dimensions with its transient incarnations and fleeting embodiments” (Wright 2017, 249).
- 4 This spectral uncertainty carries over into the realm of identity—in her seminal text *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, Avital Ronell notes how the telephone is “unsure of its identity” and “destabilizes the identity of self and other, subject and thing” (Ronell 1989, 9). In the context of phone calls on screen, the

dissociation of voices from bodies—whatever the configuration of participants—can function as “a site for the unmooring of fixed identities” (Thomsen 2021, 26), which becomes pathological in a case such as that of Travis Bickle’s telephone conversations in *Taxi Driver* (1976). As an audience, we expect to “hear the voice integrated with the body” (Meizel 2011, 272), according to conventions of gender binarism, heteronormativity, and able mindedness, and yet telephone voices (and non-voices) on screen upset established identity categories through the paradoxes they embody (Thomsen 2021).

- 5 In the end, telephone voices on screen may be said to represent a heightened form of dialogue that exceeds the capabilities of normative, “in-person” conversations between characters. Yet, despite its ubiquity across cinema and television, the materiality and mediality of the phone and its voices seem to have eluded the eye (and ear) of scholars, which is the justification for the current thematic issue that explores the interrelationships of communication technologies, human vocality, and markers of identity in screen representation. This thematic issue of *Émergences. Son, musique et médias audiovisuels* plans to initiate a (hopefully) growing conversation about telephone voices in diverse audiovisual media.

Topics

- 6 **Telephone as part of the narrative in audiovisual media:**
- Telephone conversations as generators of the main narrative (*Phone Booth*, *Den skyldige* [*The Guilty*]);
 - Telephone conversations as turning points in audiovisual narratives, whether expressing shock, delight, or threat (among others);
 - Telephone calls/ringing as an interrupter of the narrative;
 - The mise-en-scène of phone conversations (we see and hear both parties; we only see and hear one participant of a phone call).
- 7 **Telephone as a syntactic device for storytelling in audiovisual media:**
- The phone call as a vehicle for persuasion and deception (*Telemarketers*, *BlackKlansman*, the *Scream* franchise);
 - The contexts for and meanings of phone silence in film and television (*Dial M for Murder*, *Breaking Bad*).

8 **Depiction of the telephone as a technical device in audiovisual media:**

- Connections between telephone and cinema as leading technologies in the 20th century;
- Phone types and technologies on screen (operator-assisted, rotary dial, touch tone, cell phones, burner phones, smart phones, walkie-talkies);
- Switchboards as nodes of networks (*Telephone Operator*, *The Vast of Night*);
- Paratextual phone devices and their sounds (answering machines, ring tones);
- Audiovisuality and the smart phone (*Scream 4*).

9 **Telephone, otherness, and the supernatural:**

- Queering the telephone in audiovisual media;
- The relationship between screen telephony and telepathy, telephony and ventriloquism;
- Communications devices in Sci-Fi or fantasy films and TV series.

10 **Telephone and human voice in audiovisual media:**

- The gendering of telephone voices on screen;
- The acousmatic voice on the other end of the line (*The Ring*; *The Babadook*);
- The telephone and vocal affect (anger, sweetness);
- Vocal disturbances, impairments, and alterations (hoarseness, drunkenness, whispering);
- Special applications of telephone voices (9-1-1, phone sex);
- Telephone and disability in audiovisual media (*Wait Until Dark*).

11 **Technical manipulation of telephone voice:**

- Post-production modifications of voices over the phone and other communication devices.

Submission for proposals

- 12 Proposals should include a **title and abstract (500 words)**, plus a **biographical note (100 words)**. The review committees will be particularly attentive to proposals that include a problematic and forward-looking development. Abstracts may be accompanied by an

indicative references of works or articles consulted. Proposals are collected by the issue editors, anonymized and forwarded to the editorial board for evaluation. Proposals should be sent to Michael Baumgartner (m.baumgartner29[at]csuohio.edu), James Deaville (jdeavill[at]gmail.com), Chloé Huvet (chloe.huvet[at]univ-evry.fr) and Jérémy Michot (jeremy.michot[at]univ-tours.fr).

Calendar

- September 30, 2024: Submission deadline
- October 15, 2024: Response to authors
- February 15, 2025: Submission of articles
- February 15 – March 15, 2025: Article review
- March 15 – July 15, 2025: Last revisions between authors, reviewers, and editorial board
- July 15, 2025: Final version
- September 30, 2025: Online publication

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