

# A VESSEL IN THE ETHERIC OCEAN: THE UNCANNY TELEPHONES IN FILMS

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**Abstract:** Telephones have been an important aspect of everyday lives since their invention, with their unquestionable contribution to the modern society: they have transformed people lives. But telephones also bear the possibility of being a burden to people. This paper investigates the uncanny aspects of the telephone technology presented in films. I have used Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media* as the departing point for this study. Although telephones have become an inseparable of our lives, promising a great ease in modern times, they are also instruments that threatens our freedom in a way.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Films, Telephones, Uncanny Media.

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Since its questionably "invention" in 1876, the telephone has always served mankind as one of the most important, and without a doubt the most common apparatus of communication. Unlike the former transmitting devices, like telegraph, the telephone was affordable, even in its earliest forms and it did not required any kind of esoteric knowledge. Here I would briefly try to study the effects of this invention, focusing on the uncanny experiences mainly, in the society. I will not look at the ever-developing industry of new cell phones, called "smart phones", because with their processors and outrageous abilities, I think they are more computers than telephones.

The telephone does not function like the wireless. It is a duplex communications medium, meaning its basic principle is point-to-point voice transmitting. Thus, unlike the wireless technology it does not participate in creation of an etheric ocean, at least not directly. Gary Backhaus tried to formulate the relation between the telephone and environmental space (Backhaus 1997). According to him, a telephone conversation can thematize, (a) a shared environment (the conversation between a construction worker on a higher level and a contractor on ground level), (b) the environmental space of one of the conversants (a student describing her or his campus to a friend somewhere else), (c) face-to-face environment (an inmate speaking with someone behind the glass), (d) a space separate from both of the conversants (a conversation about a future holiday abroad), (e) a conversation that does not thematize an environment (a conversation about a math problem), (f) separate environments for each conversant (a conversation about an event that evokes similar feelings coming from separate experiences).

Thus, unlike radio or television, telephone does not take people to an electronic elsewhere, but always takes them to somewhere. It does not fill the etheric ocean, but rather floats on it. It is aware of the ether and ether is aware of the telephone. A spectator can participate in live television transmission by telephone, but cannot participate in any other means than acoustic. If we ignore the glamorous part, it is not different from having a regular phone conversation.

So, what can be uncanny about these devices? They allow a mother hearing the voice of her child, who is doing his military service in another country, instantly from miles away. It allows people to call ambulances and firefighters. It allows a businessman to buy or sell stocks instantly. The list of this invention's benefits can be prolonged infinitely. At the same time, it can be used by a commander to inform a recently killed soldier's family in the mainland to notify them

about the incident. It can be used to tell people their houses are burnt to the ground or their relatives were passed away on an operating table. It can be used by a broker to inform a businessman about his bankruptcy. It can be used to transmit orders to launch thousands of nukes instantly. It can be used (or tapped) by a president candidate to secure his glory in upcoming elections...

The invention of this technology has also been really problematic. The term "Telephony" was first used by Johann Philipp Reis in 1861, as he presented his telephone to Physical Society of Frankfurt (Reis 1859). Then in USA, Antonio Meucci applies for a patent for his Sound Telegraphy in 1871, but because he does not renew his application, his efforts get ignored. The same thing happens to Elisha Gray in 1876 (Prescott 1879).

The biggest mistake of those scientists was focusing on their work rather than getting lost in Kafkaesque labyrinths of the patent offices. Two particular North Americans were not really reluctant to do so. Alexander Graham Bell has got the patent of telephone in 7 March 1876 and thus he becomes the inventor of telephone, combining the various aspects of the former efforts<sup>1</sup>. The second important patent of this technology is taken by the greatest patent collector of all times, Thomas Edison. He takes the patent of the carbon transmitter, which makes the transmission better, after fifteen years of struggle, in 1892<sup>2</sup>.

Whatever efforts have been made in the name of the telephone, the efforts to transmit sound electronically via cables date back to 1665, 172 years before Samuel Morse's telegraph (Brainard 1887). Doctor Robert Hook has published a book called *Micrographia* (1665), in which he investigated possibilities of transmitting sounds across great distances. The basic theory was magnifying the sounds with the help of an apparatus that benefits from optical instruments as well as acoustic ones.

Leaving the issues about the real inventor of this technology, I would like to speak briefly about the transformations in society, caused by it. George Maynard, an electrician in Washington, has undertaken the distribution of this new technology in 1877. At first he was presenting the device by knocking people's doors. He was getting rejected by many professionals and government offices because they needed written data instead of spoken orders. One successful installment changed the whole situation in the fall of 1877. Chief Signal Officer General Albert Myer gave Maynard an order to connect the downtown Signal Corps office with Fort Whipple. The result was a huge success and the new requests, starting with the White House started raining. In a short while, almost every space became equipped with this technology. As the telephone became widely accepted, the size of the device became smaller (Loomis 2000).

In the beginning the telephone was used to transmit between two precise devices only. For example, the house device was connected to the store device, allowing the owner controlling his business from home. After the invention of a Hungarian Scientist, Tivadar Puskas entered the arena, the whole situation has changed. His invention was switchboard, allowing a device making connections to various others<sup>3</sup>. The next and one of the most important steps taken for further individualization of telephone is the rotary dial. This invention by Armond Brown Stowger dates back to 1891 and was an extremely important step for rendering switchboard operators unnecessary, allowing individuals to make necessary connections themselves<sup>4</sup>.

With this innovation, women are also rendered as the first victims of this new technology. Although Stowger's invention made the switchboard operators, who were being chosen among the single young women, unnecessary, it was also important to keep young women under the control of males. This made the Bell Company and other service providers insisting on the existing system. The witches of the telegraphy have then become simple switches for a long time. All the "womanly" qualities that have rendered them as the perfect vessels to contact the "elsewhere"s in the former telegraphy technology, such as their sensitiveness and passiveness made them the best workers for the switchboards (Sconce 2000). Thus, as they participate in the public sphere, contributing with their work, they also remained under the control of men, as all the engineers were males (Lipartito 1994), (Martin, Michèle 1988).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.google.com/patents?vid=174465> [accessed 04.06.2018]

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.google.com/patents?vid=203016> [accessed 04.06.2018]

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.omikk.bme.hu/archivum/angol/htm/puskas\\_t.htm](http://www.omikk.bme.hu/archivum/angol/htm/puskas_t.htm) [accessed 04.06.2018]

<sup>4</sup> Fiber Optics Weekly Update, <http://books.google.com/books?id=ge6lxBb0vakC&pg=PA87#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 04.06.2018]

Unfortunately this was not the only damage of telephone to women. Almost every quantitative research shows that domestic telephones are used mainly by women (Smoreda, Licoppe 2000). There are a number of reasons for this fact. Having more social characters than men, telephone was the main instrument for women to socialize, as their true places were their homes, as told by the dominant male ideology of the time. Early advertisements of telephone suggested that the device would free women from their suffocating house works. I cannot agree with their case. Telephone looks like just another technology to keep women at home, allowing them to socialize without setting a foot on the public sphere. Women also used telephone to arrange all kinds of activities (Fischer 1988).

The knowledge of thousands of women being 'available' in front of their telephones has created a path to a new activity for males: assault by telephone. A 1998 film by Todd Solondz, *Happiness*, involves such an act:

**Helen Jordan:** [answering the phone] Hello?

**Allen:** I know who you are and you are nothing. You think you are fucking something, but you are fucking nothing. You are empty. You are a zero. You are a black hole, and I'm gonna fuck you so bad you'll be coming out of your ears.

Later in the film, Helen meets Allen and asks him to have sex with her for real. He says that he does not think that he would be able to. Also in the *Scream* series (1996-2011), various killers first call their victims and render them more vulnerable.

A research conducted by Michael Smith and Norman Morra in 1992 shows that 83.2% of the 1990 interviewed women have received an assaulting call from men (Smith, Morra 1994). Sociologist Kate Millet states that the reason of such acts is a psychological gesture of ascendancy (Millet 2016). Telephone is also being used as an instrument for demonstrating power and male dominance and women are not free of this domination even when they are sitting in their homes.

But why dealing with certain individuals while you can disrupt the course of much greater events using the telephone? As I mentioned before, telephone is an instrument that transmits voices from one point to another. The history is full of events that suggest there may be more than two points involved. Tapping telephones, or wiretapping, allows third parties to passively join and record the telephone conversations of individuals. During the Watergate Scandal, some wiretapping incidents were exposed to public, creating a great insecurity against the government and against the telephone technology. Nonetheless wiretapping by government was secured. If a secret federal court issues a warrant, individual's phone conversations will be tapped by government agencies, the most important being NSA (Stevens, Doyle 2009). There are many important examples of this phenomenon in various media, *The Conversation* (1974) being an outstanding one.

This situation fits perfectly to Michel Foucault's panopticon metaphor. In his theory many are constantly being under surveillance by few. With the knowledge of being constantly watched, masses start to regulate their behaviors and act accordingly with state's ideology. This also causes the internalization of authority (Foucault 1984).

*The Lives of Others*, a 2006 film by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, stands for a good example of this situation. The film takes place in the East Berlin, before the fall of the Iron Curtain. The film depicts the struggles and forcefully oriented lives of people who are constantly being watched by Stasi, The East Germany Intelligence. Majority do not dare to step outside the boundaries formed by the state, knowing that they may be under surveillance.

Whether we are being stalked by perverts or the government, the point is we all are within the reach. I believe the uncanniest effect of the telephone is making people 'available'. After purchasing and setting up this affordable technology, in their homes or offices, people become 'within the reach' of everybody else owning the equipment. And after the cell phones are introduced to the society, everybody became available, anywhere.

In a 2004 film by notorious director Takashi Miike, *One Missed Call*, we constantly see masses moving slowly on the streets of Tokyo. This motif do not contribute to the film's story development. But keeping the extreme levels of the Japanese people's cellphone usage in mind (Ito et al. 2005), it constantly reminds us that all of those passersby can be reached anytime, anywhere. The film is about a university student who is haunted by a grieving ghost. This ghost picks a name from the cellphone of her latest victim, calls her or him and makes them listen their last words, with a voicemail from the future. At the exact moment of the future call, in the present time, the ghost strikes, kills and picks a new victim. So everybody who has a cellphone can become the next victim. This situation points the unease of being within the reach, all the time.

The telephone companies are constantly working to make their clients “available”, even in remote areas. The advertisements are yelling that we will be within the reach in the middle of the ocean or on a mountaintop. So this suffocation, caused by technology, is not limited with the cities. Escaping from technology, if one chooses, is becoming increasingly difficult. Even if you do not carry a device to capture the invisible waves, they are still there, passing through people.

Jim Sonzero’s 2006 film, *Pulse*<sup>5</sup>, depicts an environment and its dangers. In the movie, large numbers of metaphysical beings arrive to our world by an accident. These beings can only exist in the areas that are covered by electromagnetic waves. Only a couple of university students managed to escape those beings in the film. After the film has been made, technologies such as 3G and 4G were introduced to the world. Today, facing the same situation, the students would not even have that chance.

Actually, two sequels have been made after the first *Pulse*. *Pulse 2: Afterlife* and *Pulse 3* (both are directed by Joel Soisson, distributed by Dimension Extreme, in 2008), both films were distributed directly for the home use. These sequels focus on the altered humans’ behaviors, instead of the invading electronic presences, and their threats directed against the American nuclear family. My personal opinion about the sequels is that, they simply look like remakes of George Romero’s *Dead Series* (1968-2009).

Another Japanese film, *Ring* (1998) also hints the uncanniness of being available: The film is again about a vengeful spirit who haunts people using the audiovisual media: when a person watches an experimental film, his or her telephone rings and the being on the other side of the line informs the person that s/he has only seven more days to live. What happens if that person watches the film without the presence of a phone is a mystery. We do not know if Sadako (or Samarra, in American version) would be able to haunt people if they do not get the phone call immediately after watching the short film. This aspect is significant because it implies that we, the modern folks, are always available through new technologies.

In summary, although we are experiencing the great benefits of telephone, it somehow makes us vulnerable to being controlled by putting us under surveillance or making unwanted individuals or companies gain sound in our personal spaces. The telephone limits our freedom in a way. The communication technologies can render some aspects of life much faster, but they also strip our voluntary solitude. Smart phones may be great devices when we want to meet with people, get a bar suggestion or increase our popularity but they also render us under reach when our bosses are about to bombard us with some drudgery (or when vengeful spirits doing their thing). The liberation that new technologies provide, unfortunately comes with some burden.

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