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Cell Phones from Hell

Jill Johnson wasn't always a naughty girl. When we first met her in 1979 as the heroine of *When a Stranger Calls* (dir. Fred Walton), she was a responsible teenager with good babysitting references, a quick wit, and enough maternal instinct to guarantee that she be rewarded with a loving husband and healthy children at the movie's end. By 2006, though, things have changed. In the film's remake (dir. Simon West), Jill is a cell phone addict in the midst of a pedestrian romantic crisis. Having broken up with her boyfriend Bobby, Jill needs to talk to him and to her girlfriends ad infinitum about how the relationship is over. In so doing she exceeds her cell phone time allotment by some 800 minutes. Her father sentences her to one month without mobile phone or car, and she is forced to babysit to pay down her debts to Pa Johnson and Ma Bell. By removing the cell phone, her primary instrument for communicating with her object of desire, Daddy will teach her a lesson in responsibility and focus—in making “sacrifices . . . even when it's hard.” By 2006, the Name of the Father has gone digital and, with it, America's Oedipal landscape has changed, both in crimes and in punishments. Cellular technology has put Jill in the middle of the woods to be the prey of a mur-

derer, and cellular technology is the means of her torture: the stranger himself repeatedly calls Jill from a cell phone, evidenced by the fact that he can talk to her from anywhere inside or outside the house. If the 1970s telephonic stranger was terrifying because he had invaded the domestic space to become that ominous shadow at the top of the stairs, the twenty-first-century murderer is terrifying precisely because he is not fixed. He is free to roam with his digital phallus firmly clutched in his sweaty palm.

Jill Johnson is not the only young woman to be harassed by cell phones in the first decade of the new millennium. She is joined by the sorority girls of *Black X-mas*,¹ also released in 2006 (dir. Glen Morgan), also a remake of a 1970s telephone terror movie. They, too, receive threatening calls from a murderer lurking upstairs in the girls' suburban house—a murderer who, like Jill Johnson's stranger, is also no longer fixed to a landline as he was in the original *Black Christmas* (dir. Bob Clark, 1974); like the 2006 stranger, he uses his victims' cells to beleaguer the survivors until he picks them off one by one. Then there is the *One Missed Call* series (dir. Takashi Miike, 2003), which originated in Japan and has replicated itself in an American remake (dir. Eric Valette, 2008). This group of films depicts the horrors of cell phone use but with the bonus of eliminating the lethal middleman. In these films the cell phones do the actual killing. Your phone rings, you answer, and it plays you the sound of your own death throes, sounds you will then make for real at the appointed future time of the call. And don't think that *not* owning a cell phone can keep you off the hit list: Stephen King's 2006 novel *Cell* tells the story of America laid waste by a mysterious pulse that has spread through cell phone networks, frying the brains of those who use them, who then kill those who may not.² Fusing the fear that cell phones cause brain cancer with that of "smart mobs" and telephonically organized terrorism post-9/11, King places cell phones at ground zero of a contemporary American Armageddon in which mobile users go mad and ravage the entire nation. Babysitters and sorority girls are prime victims (because prime users), but they are also synecdoches for a global practice of networking.

Safety in Numbers

These cell phones from hell, obviously, are the twenty-first century up-to-date with a vengeance. As communications analysts remind us, "A turning point in the history of telecommunications was marked in 2002 in that the number of mobile subscribers overtook the number of fixed-line sub-

scribers on a global scale: mobiles thus became the dominant technology for voice communications.”³ According to the *New York Times*, in 2000 there were an estimated 77 million cell phones in the United States alone, “with more than 37,500 people signing up for wireless phone service each day.”⁴ And most of these users are young adults: “At the end of 2001, 80 percent of those aged 15 to 24 used [mobile phones] regularly in EU countries,” and “a third of the Finnish population aged 7 to 10 had their own cellphone.”⁵ Elsewhere, “the proportion of Japanese girls owning mobile phones under the age of 18 has reached almost 100%.”⁶ Part prosthetic device, part fashion statement, the cell phone has come to occupy the paradoxical status of a cultural fetish that guarantees one’s individuality and prestige. The most popular girl in school is no longer the prom queen with the largest bosom and most beautiful pre-engagement ring but the *American Idol* wannabe with the biggest address book and the most attractive ringtones.

Given the harassment that Jill Johnson and her cohorts endure, it’s no small irony that sociologists should agree on the single most important reason for young people to own cell phones and for parents to prescribe them: safety. In a study conducted in Spain, “no less than 59 percent of new users were of the opinion that they were safer than when they had access only to a land-line. This ‘passion for security’ is also reflected in the study . . . carried out with a US population that had just acquired its first cellphone. When the phone had not been bought especially for organizing a specific situation or event, the commonest reason for buying it was precisely safety and security.”⁷ In this context, safety and security extend beyond the personal and into the geographical and global. As José García-Montes and his colleagues put it,

There thus emerges a new frontier that is no longer political, but technological: that of areas without coverage. However far-flung or out-of-the-way a village may be, it belongs to the “safe world” if it has coverage. With mobile phone capability we are connected, and, in the worst of cases, we can always call an emergency service. On the other hand, beyond the limits of coverage begin isolation and danger. Indeed, for those accustomed to living with the mobile phone, traveling without it may truly be a risk.⁸

This cellular mapping presents a logic by which connectivity equals safety in that cell phones create a phantasm of protection, a visual and audial sense that the person to whom one is connected can respond effectively and immediately to any crisis one might be in. This phantasm of *connectivity* authorizes the 2006 Jill not only to phone the police when the creepy

calls begin—she does this in 1979 as well—but also to phone her father; her girlfriend Scarlett; the solicitous mother Mrs. Mandrakis, who has left her no fewer than two cell phone numbers where she can be reached in case of emergency; and the Mandrakises' son, Todd, who may be staying at the nearby guesthouse. Telephones have got Jill into this mess and phones are the continued *modus operandi* of terror, but they are also the connection to safety and to the parent figures who might come running. Or almost. Mr. Johnson is not at home, Scarlett is out of range, the police are a good twenty minutes away, Mrs. M. has turned off her cell, and Todd is off at college. When the chips are down, so are the phones. In the telephone terror movies of the 1970s, calling for help brought the cops on the run to protect (albeit poorly) our distressed damsels. In the films of recent years, however, 911 will probably tell you that while your call is important, your service provider is experiencing a heavier than normal volume right now and your call has been placed in sequence until an operator can attend to you. Eventually you'll learn that geographical distance or weather conditions make it impossible for the police to reach you for hours, but don't worry, you have your cell and are welcome to phone back with updates to your situation. So much for safety, cellular or otherwise.

No matter whether the other person answers the phone, cellular technology is remarkable for the way it proliferates the metaphoric sites of *desire*, and particularly *the desire of the other*, that Avital Ronell suggests have been contained in the telephone since its invention. As she points out, the telephone evolved through Alexander Graham Bell's overdetermined desire to reconnect to his deaf mother and deaf wife and to revivify his dead brother;⁹ in other words, the telephone was the fulfillment of Bell's wish to communicate with the otherwise incommunicable, to create across the lines and through technology the phantasm of himself and the other as thoroughly connected subjects, and ultimately to heal a fractured *familial* network through the healing connections of a prosthetic machine.¹⁰ Thus for Ronell, the telephone's inaugural line of communication—"Watson, come here! I want you!"—is a statement of desire:

By all evidence, "I want you" suggests that desire is on the line. . . . It emerges from what is not present-at-hand; thus, "I want you" phantomizes you. I want that which I do not possess, I do not have you, I lack you, I miss you: Come here, Watson, I want you. . . . Where the call as such suggests a commanding force, the caller, masked by the power apparatus, may in fact be weak, suffering, panicked, putting through a call for help.¹¹

Whether this is Bell calling the mother, Freud calling the Mother (“Freud situates the telephone . . . as the perfectibility of the womb [one of ‘man’s’ preferred organs]”),¹² or Jill Johnson calling her parents, the telephone creates a phantom of the person who is not there and then bridges the gap signified by this phantasm. Which makes it not a long distance from “Watson, . . . I want you” to the stranger’s horrific utterance to Jill in both versions of *When a Stranger Calls*. Asking the Freudian question “What do you want?” the Jills receive the reply, “I want your blood—all over me.” Like Bell, the stranger is entirely devoted to human contact; like Bell, he wants to reach out and touch someone. At least in the 1979 version, the stranger desires a full communication where he can be understood by others, by *all* others, through simple human companionship, sexual conquest, or murder—all physically embodied acts. Cast in telephonic terms, he wants *connection* in a world that is constantly forcing him to *disconnect*.

But this reaching out and touching, this wanting connectivity, is very different in the world of today’s telephone horror movies than it was in its 1970s analogues. If the new millennium’s telephone movies imagine proliferated sites of connective desire, new ways of remaining bound to parents, families, and loved ones across vast distances, these films also proliferate the sites of terror. Or more to the point of my argument, they eliminate the idea of “site” altogether. When someone phones you from his or her landline phone, as was necessarily the case in the 1970s, you imagine that person in a clearly demarcated space; you “place” him or her at home, in the office, or wherever you know there to be a phone. This is what rendered 1970s phone films so terrifying: murderers Curt Duncan of *When a Stranger Calls* and Billy of *Black Christmas* were both locatable in a certain space—the shadow at the top of the stairs, the attic, the housemother’s bedroom. Both hero and villain were imagined as singular, autonomous beings locatable in space. As long as our heroines were talking on their fixed-line telephones to murderers on other fixed-line phones, as long as they were “alone” at their landline talking to someone else alone on his landline, we knew them to be safe from lethal clutches; we knew that the murderer was distantly placed at his phone as well. Cell phones make no such promises, since the murderer can be right behind you, and often *is*. The cell phone ups the ante by changing the *phantasmatic* quality of the interlocutor’s existence or imagined presence. Cell telephony always exploits the ability to move, not to be placed, not to be fixed: the ability to be a phantasm but at the same time *to be deracinated as phantasm*. Moreover, whereas the terrorism of fixed-line telephones rendered the home of the 1970s an unsafe

place, contemporary cell phone narratives allow the danger to radiate outward, like waves from a cell tower. In the archive of twenty-first-century telephone terror films, cell phones cut the domestic cord: terror spreads to cars, guesthouses, parks, hospitals, into other people's cell phones and computers, and eventually into other states and countries. Murder has become viral and self-replicating, claiming as its ultimate victim the speaking—or telephoning—subject.

Is This the Party to Whom I Am Speaking?

For Jean Baudrillard, this deracination of the phantasm of the other—a deracination produced by technological proliferation—has resulted in what he calls the “transparency of evil.” He argues that the increased connectivity offered by digital technology has merely produced the compulsion to produce and to participate in the absolutely uninhibited exchange of particles between systems and within systems, an exchange that rejects any notion of otherness or the foreign.¹³ Thus, the “masses . . . no longer speak, they . . . chat” (*Transparency*, 78). Or they text. Or Facebook. Or tweet. The result, claims Baudrillard, is that we have dissolved the very structure that predicates communication with an “other,” for we have eroded the possibility of signification itself; there is no longer any distance between a sign and the thing it might signify or the self and the other to which it might address itself. As he puts it, “the realm of the screen, of interfaces and duplication, of contiguity and networks” (54) now “form[s] an integrated circuit with me. . . . [These digital machines] are so many transparent prostheses, integrated into the body to the point of being almost part of its genetic make-up” (58). He concludes:

At one time the body was a metaphor for the soul, then [during the sexual revolution of the 1960s] it became a metaphor for sex. Today it is no longer a metaphor for anything at all, merely the locus of metastasis, of the machine-like connections between all its processes, of an endless programming devoid of any symbolic organization or overarching purpose: the body is thus given over to the pure promiscuity of its relationship to itself—the same promiscuity that characterizes networks and integrated circuits. (7)

A bracing rejoinder to the sociological theory of safety in cell phones, Baudrillard's analysis places us in a promiscuous network that is the result of signs with no referent or meaning beyond themselves, signs that do not connect, signs not of subjects who communicate but of users who net-

work. Like those gothic telephoners in our midst, we are deracinated phantasms all.

For those of us wearied by the constant cellular blather around us, Baudrillard's jeremiad has a certain appeal. Compare the two versions of *When a Stranger Calls*, for example, and one has a real respect for the 1979 Jill (Carol Kane), when she sits stone-faced on the stairs listening to the telephone ring and refusing—for the only time in the film—to answer it, because she knows who is on the other end. Contrast this to the up-to-date Jill (Camilla Belle; is this surname a Hollywood joke?), who continually answers the phone, despite knowing what she'll hear. And in case we miss the point, director Simon West interjects a scene in which Jill's friend Tiffany wisely suggests that Jill let the phone ring; the Mandrakises' voice mail can pick up the message. This suggestion Jill refuses because she's expecting a call from Bobby, the very boyfriend to whom she has talked endlessly in order to “end this thing, once and for all,” the very boyfriend whose connectivity with Jill has put her in the woods in the first place. Ellis Hanson suggests, “If you're in a movie, don't answer the phone.”¹⁴ I would say that if you're in a movie, at least a movie about teenagers in the new millennium, and the phone rings, you have no choice. You have to answer it; you simply can't help yourself. The new gothic monster may in the first instance be the cellular murderer, but the Baudrillardian compulsion to answer that phone call is the murderer's chief accomplice.

While Baudrillard nicely frames for us the gothic heroine's tragic flaw of going where she should not, his scathing dismissal of digital technology may be missing some crucial connections of its own, for it too quickly voids “promiscuous networks” of any meaningful communication. If we are indeed compelled to participate in “the absolutely uninhibited exchange of particles” that we watch terrorized teenagers experience in cell phone movies, then what might be made of that very *compulsion* to exchange, to participate? What ends does it serve, and how do those ends figure in a world of digital communications? I propose that we consider the problems of telephone connectivity and its gothic terrors through a place where telephones are *not*: in Georges Bataille's *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. In his introduction, Bataille boldly claims that eroticism's “dominant element” is in the relationship between continuity and discontinuity—what I have been reading as “connectivity” and “disconnection” in interpersonal relations conducted through the telephone. According to Bataille, “We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find

the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is.”¹⁵ Our primary response to that “obsession with a primal continuity” is, for Bataille, sexual reproduction: by reproducing ourselves sexually, we forge a tangible link between ourselves and our offspring (not to mention our sexual partners), and ourselves and the “future.” Through the child, we live on in a place that we will otherwise not be. Yet, sexual reproduction also implicitly (or explicitly) announces our discontinuousness, because an other, separate partner is necessary for us to mate, and the being produced in that mating will be separate from both parents, a part of them yet totally alienated from them. Thus the inescapable contradiction that Bataille calls “eroticism”: “we yearn for our lost continuity,” but in that yearning we are confronted with the realization that only violence and death can “wrench” us from our state of discontinuity. Continuity as salvation from physical death can be achieved only through a kind of ontological death, just as the discontinuity that guarantees our status as singular beings is that which must be sacrificed in the fantasy of immortality. Like death itself, “Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea” (*Eroticism*, 22). No more a single-cell organism than the girls who network in telephone terror movies, “What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain” (19).

Such a desire to bring continuity to a discontinuous world drives the narrative of *When a Stranger Calls* in both its 1979 and 2006 incarnations. We have already seen Jill’s compulsive attempts at continuity through telephonic connection, attempts that the film parodies by replication in the murderous speaker’s own desire to connect with her by phone and by blood. We have also already seen Jill’s attempts at *discontinuity*, her use of the phone to broker a release from the repeated attentions of the stranger and to achieve the kind of isolating safety from him that only a connection to others can bring. But the 1979 version of the film thematizes this problem much more fully than mere sensationalism may suggest. After the first—and most famous—twenty minutes of babysitter terrorizing,¹⁶ the film takes us into the personal life of the murderer, Curt Duncan (Tony Beckley), and his desire to connect with other people. The horror of his desired connection to Jill through the dead children and through her blood gives way in the second part of the film to a pathetic, even touching, depiction

of Curt's attempt to befriend a woman named Tracy (Colleen Dewhurst). He approaches her in a bar, has his unwanted advances interrupted by a chivalrous local who beats him up, and then he follows Tracy home. She takes pity on him, seeing in him something tender and vulnerable, until he enters her apartment uninvited. (He intrudes as she leaves the apartment door open to go inside and — you guessed it — answer the ringing telephone.) After repeated rejections and after being hunted by a private detective (Charles Durning) who had worked the case of the Mandrakis child murders and who is trying to kill Duncan, he ends up in a dumpster tragically chanting, "No one can see me anymore. Nobody can hear me. No one touches me. I'm not here. I don't exist. I was never born." Thus the film situates this telephonic murderer within the conflicting desires to connect to the other and to disconnect from all others, to sublimate the self into sex and the sexual self into death, to be and not to be at the same time. The paradox is perfectly articulated when, near the film's end, he returns to terrorize Jill one last time. Having knocked her husband unconscious and replaced him in her bed (unbeknownst to her, of course), he utters, "You can't see me. But I had to come back. Don't you know why?" This utterance warrants our attention. Its first sentence—"You can't see me"—connects the lethal Duncan to the one we saw in the film moments earlier, the one fantasizing his own dissolution; it is a continuation of his drive toward non-being, toward his own discontinuity with his unbearable world. Yet the rest of the speech is a call to continuity with Jill: "I had to come back" to enter your bed/to kill you, and "Don't you know why?" invites you into my mental and emotional space to imagine my motives. To engage and to kill, to be continuous and to assure discontinuity: these are the problems that the telephone raised in the first twenty minutes of the film and that complete the film's lucubrations on telephonic desire and telephonic terror. A discontinuous self needs continuity with the other in order to confirm that self; yet it also needs to chafe against the draw to connect with the other, as that connection would violently, even suicidally, confirm its being in the world.

This power—and terror—of Duncan's role as telephoner/sexual subject turns on his transformation from disembodied telephonic voice to a body unable to complete any of its attempted calls. For Mladen Dolar, the second part of the 1979 *Stranger* renders Duncan "a trivial, broken and desperate creature the moment he ceases to be the threatening presence surmised on the other end of the line, and we see words coming out of his mouth."¹⁷ In his emphasis on our seeing Duncan speak, Dolar is following on the work of film theorist Michel Chion and his concept of the "acous-

matic,” a human voice that emanates from a source we cannot see or an origin we cannot identify.¹⁸ For Chion, the acousmatic destabilizes the listener’s very sense of where she is in space, for the *acousmètre*—the phantasmatic producer of the sound—is both inside her head and out (*Audio-Vision*, 129). Acousmatic sound raises the question not of what the sound is or even “where” it is—it’s everywhere—but rather where it comes from (69). Crucial for Dolar is Chion’s sense that power resides in the penetrating *voix*, which is homologous to but replaces the panoptic *eye*: “The power manifests itself vividly in stories of the harassing phone caller whose ‘voice’ sees everything” (130). Duncan loses that power, Dolar argues, because “when the voice gets attached to the body, it loses its omnipotent charismatic character—it turns out to be banal, as in *The Wizard of Oz*. The aura crumbles, the voice, once located, loses its fascination and power, it has something like castrating effects on its bearer, who could wield or brandish his or her phonic phallus as long as its attachment to a body remained hidden.”¹⁹ This “de-acousmatizing,” this (re)attachment of voice to body, performs the same problem that I have presented in terms of the continuous and discontinuous: for Duncan to seek continuity with another is to vocalize, through the telephone, the demand for intimacy, a demand that the telephone both enables and forecloses. Likewise for film viewers, who see in the suturing of Duncan’s (threatening) voice to his (pathetic) body the continuities of thwarted desire, at the same time they need to disavow any sympathy with that desire. Fixed within his discontinuous body and in the midst of his “incomprehensible adventure” (*Erotism*, 15), Duncan enacts for us and for himself the irresolvable tension of eroticism.

So what happens when we take Duncan out of the land of fixed, rotary phones and bring him into the digital age? According to Dolar, the de-acousmatizing of Duncan, the embodying of this telephoning subject, produces a banal, castrated, and broken figure worthy of the film critic’s dismissal. While we might question with the cast of the 1979 *Stranger* whether Duncan ever really “ceases to be a threatening presence,” it is remarkable that the 2006 remake of *When a Stranger Calls* does not humanize the murderer in any way; it does not inscribe in him any sort of narrative that might make continuous to us his thwarted social and familial relations and his murderous impulses. He has no name, no context, no psychological condition, no history or subjectivity that would explain, mitigate, or even adumbrate his pathology.²⁰ And what is even more striking cinematically is that this unnamed stranger is never de-acousmatized. He never speaks in a way that the camera records. We *hear* him through the tele-

phone, we *see* him violently act, but we never *watch* him *speak*. (Nor could we. While the stranger is played by actor Tommy Flanagan, the stranger's voice is provided by Lance Henriksen, an actor we do not otherwise see.) As a speaking/sexual/violent subject, this stranger may be as caught up as his predecessor Duncan in negotiating the vagaries of continuity and discontinuity with the other, but this version of the film doesn't let us know that. Rather, the stranger presents to us that networked, bottomed-out, deracinated other about which Baudrillard so bitterly complained. The cellular *voice* in this film remains as unfixed and deracinated as the cellular user, unable to be placed or located within the confined space of the body. In this version of the cellular landscape, it is not simply persons that are displaced—rendered discontinuous—from one another; rather, selves are also displaced from their own vocalized meaning-productions.

If the 2006 stranger is a killing machine incapable of feeling the human tension of continuity and discontinuity, that machine is brilliantly metaphorized in the cellular phone. Remember that the fixed-line phone, as we saw in 1979, mediated its subjects in ways so that connection and disconnection meant something specific: connection with the murderer meant safety from his clutches (that is, it assured *discontinuity*), and a *disconnected* phone or prolonged busy signal would indicate to a caller that something is wrong on the other end. (Jill's dead phone near the 1979 film's end brings the private eye to her house, where he then shoots and kills Duncan.) But in 2006, phones do not (dis)connect to subjects because there are no "subjects"—conventionally imagined—to (dis)connect. The stranger is not, like Duncan, seeking connection to others in a way that blood and phones might provide. At the beginning of the film, he calls Alice, but when Stacy answers the phone instead, she is substituted for the stranger's intended victim. Later in the film the stranger may indeed want Jill's blood all over him, as he did in 1979, but the Simon West version writes out all the other strategies Duncan used for making interpersonal connection. The later stranger does *not* murder the sleeping children or bathe himself in their blood, even though he has the chance. The two victims we do get to see—the housemaid Maria and Jill's friend Tiffany—are left physically intact on their deaths. Indeed, any human connection that either woman may have provided for Jill during her trials is displaced onto their cell phones: we get a long scene in which Jill repeatedly dials Maria's cell in order to locate her, but all Jill can eventually turn up is Maria's abandoned phone. This situation repeats itself with Tiffany but ups the ante. Jill eventually finds Tiffany's dead but otherwise intact body lying next to



Figure 1. A dead Tiffany by her cell phone. Film still, *When a Stranger Calls*, dir. Simon West, 2006

its mobile (see figure 1) but not before Jill has received a call from the stranger on Tiffany's cell. The stranger has murdered Tiffany *for her phone*, and the "caller ID" function that would name the subject on the other end of the (nonexistent) line is now nothing but a postmodern joke. Nothing but death is on the other end, an absence that deracinates all subjects and dissolves them into a network of continually discontinuous persecutions.

Whereas mobile phones have moved us from a position of asking "Who are you?" to "Where are you?" *When a Stranger Calls* moves us from wondering "Who is there?" and "Where is he?" to "*Where is there?*" Eventually, we find that no one is "there" because there is no there there; he is no one and nowhere in particular. The *Black Christmas* series will do much the same thing, only with a change in tone. In this narrative, a murderous character named Billy inhabits the attic of a university sorority house that used to be his childhood home and where, at least in the 2006 version, he murdered or maimed other members of his family at Christmas. As the sorority girls prepare for the holidays with varying degrees of Yuletide spirit (all relating to the kind of connections they have with their families), the murderer kills them one by one. The remaining residents then receive calls on the house phone downstairs, calls that barrage them with voices both menacing and vulnerable—voices that channel Billy's parents and his childhood self as well as voices that threaten the young women with various forms of violation. In the 1974 original, the police trace the calls to find they are coming from the housemother's phone upstairs; in the 2006 remake, calls are eventually traced through *69, the automatic call-back function (the same one Jill used to find what was left of Tiffany). And whereas the 1974 *Black Christmas* assures us that there is only one caller—all the other voices are being condensed and ventriloquized by Billy—the 2006 version



Figure 2. The sorority house phone. Film still, *Black Christmas*, dir. Bob Clark, 1974

introduces a sister, Agnes, who had been cryptically named in the original movie but who now joins in on the terrorizing. Whereas the singular caller and receiver of *When a Stranger Calls* have led us to see how the self frays in a network of connectivity, *Black Christmas* places us already in a network of multiple callers, multiple receivers, multiple desirers, multiple killers. Cell telephony in *Stranger* may have suggested that there was no “there” where a self could inhabit the space-time of subjectivity, but *Black Christmas* leads us to conclude that there are too many theres to lend the concept of “there” any interpretive sense.

The interpersonal and familial networks of the 1974 *Black Christmas* make the telephone the perfect metaphor for the subject’s will to continuity in a discontinuous world. Distinct voices and discontinuous subjectivities from Billy’s past are gathered together in his head and larynx from which they are transmitted across a single phone line to the receiver of the downstairs telephone, around which the (distinct, discontinuous) sorority sisters gather to listen (see figure 2). The telephone’s *formal* connectivity of discontinuous subjects is paralleled in the *content* of the voices on the phone, which range from expressions of desire to have sex with and/or kill the sorority sisters to a wailing for family unity. “What your mother and I must know,” intones a voice that must be the father’s, “is, where did you put the baby, Billy? Where did you put Agnes?” Director Bob Clark offers no *Psycho*-like explanation for Billy’s condition (we would not get that until 2006), but it is clear that Billy is driven—and riven—by the desire to bring his childhood self, his sister, and his parents together into some sort of whole. As Bataille would have it, though, that continuous whole is as terri-

fying as its alternative: at one point midway through the film, the hysterically polyphonic voices give way to a sonically clear and univocal plea, “Help me. Please stop. Oh God, please. Help me.” Like Duncan, Billy agonizes over the desire to connect and the desire to be discontinuous: to paraphrase Duncan, he doesn’t exist, but he still has to come back.

Billy’s uncanny practice of drawing together multiple, discontinuous voices and monologizing them through the telephone is heightened by the fact that in 1974 the murderer remains acousmatized. We never see him speak and can only trust the other characters’ perception that he “does” all the voices.²¹ In 2006, we do get a de-acousmatizing, but with a difference: we see *Agnes* repeatedly speak, and we see *Agnes* repeatedly murder, but what we *don’t* see, curiously, is either Billy or *Agnes* talking on the phone. We hear Billy’s voice only once in the film (or once that we can be sure of), in the flashback to that fateful, remarkable *unmerry* Christmas in which he avenges himself on his dreadful mother. Billy phones her to echo back to her what she said to him about baby *Agnes*: “She’s my family now.” Knowing something is terribly wrong, the mother races through the house until she finds Billy attacking *Agnes* and eating one of her eyeballs. Moments later, he kills both mother and stepfather, turns his mother’s flesh into Christmas cookies, and bakes and eats her. Fifteen years later he returns from prison, mysteriously joined by *Agnes*, who has also been institutionalized all this time, and the phone calls and murders begin again. However, while many of the murders are clearly performed by *Agnes*, the phone caller remains unidentifiable. It may be Billy or *Agnes*, both or neither. And the content of the calls does little to help. Amid the vocal rattling and threatening, screaming and ventriloquizing, the phone calls repeatedly intone that someone is “my family now.” “My family”—that which is connected to and phantasmatically continuous with me, *Ma Bell*, *Bell’s Watson*—is spoken in the film not only by child Billy to nasty mommy, but nasty mommy to baby *Agnes*, sorority sister to sorority sister, boyfriends to girlfriends, girlfriends to other sisters’ family members, housemothers to students, and on and on throughout the film. If there is a de-acousmatizing going on in this movie, it takes place across a totally promiscuous network of villains and victims alike. *Pace* Mladen Dolar, attaching a voice to a body has nothing to do with weakening and castration; rather, it is the uncanny effect of an obsessive drive to continuity that networks and demolishes at the same time.

Cinematically, then, the *Black Christmas* series replaces Chion’s “voice that sees” with an “eye that hears.” In the 1974 version of the movie,



Figure 3. Agnes eats an eyeball. Film still, *Black X-mas*, dir. Glen Morgan, 2006



Figure 4. Flying eyeball screen saver. Film still, *Black X-mas*, dir. Glen Morgan, 2006

a character named Peter tries to stop his girlfriend Jess (the film's heroine, played by Olivia Hussey) from aborting their child: he chides her that she speaks of an abortion as if it were "like having a wart removed." Jess then hears the phrase again, lobbed at her over the phone during one of the murderer's calls, which emphasizes the *sonic* nature of gothic terrorism.²² If the Jill Johnsons of *When a Stranger Calls* were plagued by the idea that the stranger could see them—even though, in the fixed-line telephone version we know better—the college students of *Black Christmas* believe that they can be *heard*. They sure can, but not in the way that early telephone terror films would make the party line or the telephone extension the medium by which one could eavesdrop (think Barbara Stanwyck in *Sorry, Wrong Number*): the 2006 *Black X-mas* is littered with shots of eyeballs looking out of posters, through holes in walls, up from displaced floor tiles, into and out of prison-door peepholes, even within screen savers (see figures 3 and 4). Seeing and hearing fuse as sorority sisters are murdered equally for their cell phones and their eyeballs, the former to phone the survivors, the latter

to provide Agnes with a snack before she festoons her Christmas tree with eyeless heads (accompanied by observations such as “He’s my family now” and “Everyone should be home for Christmas”). The point here, I think, is to replace the traditional, foreboding sense of surveillance by the panoptic eye with the new sense that, in our cellular culture, we are always under a kind of *sonic* surveillance, that our speech, our sound, and our acts of *sounding* are now the object of the gaze.²³ Although cell phones cannot be on party lines, overheard through extensions, or easily traced to a precise locale, our ability to generate telephonic speech everywhere and anywhere to someone anywhere and everywhere has brought the all-seeing eye to the ear. Our telephonic continuities are the perfect uninterrupted spectacle. As Guy Rosolato has argued, the subject lives within a “sonorous envelope” because the ear cannot streamline the stimulation it receives.²⁴ The eye sees hemispherically, but the ear perceives what is behind it as well. At the same time, though, the ear cannot match the eye for the *distance* across which it can perceive and understand sensory data. The cell phonic eye-that-hears does both.

Babysitter, Don’t You See I’m Burning?

Let’s return one last time to the cultural statistics on cell phone use. In spite of Baudrillard’s claim that digital networks are “devoid of any symbolic organization or overarching purpose” (*Transparency*, 76), the cell phone *as a thing* has an enormous symbolic function. José García-Montes, Domingo Caballero-Muñoz, and Marino Pérez-Álvarez argue that the feeling of safety guaranteed by cellular connectivity does not actually depend on there being someone else to talk to. Rather, given that the idea of cell phone security is more prevalent among women than among men, “it has been found that approximately 60 percent of women display their mobile phone when alone in the public (a much higher proportion than the 47 percent of men in the same situation). This statistic reflects the experience of many women, who claim that the cellphone is an instrument for deterring undesired attention.”²⁵ In the United States, this display of digital weaponry goes one step further to create a phantasmatic other to whom one is connected: technology analyst James E. Katz has found that one in four people surveyed have “*pretended* to talk on the mobile phone when there was actually no one on the other end of the line.”²⁶ What I find interesting here is not simply that the cell phone signals to others that one is armed and ready for battle, nor am I most taken with the opposite implication, that

the mobile encourages a *receding* from public space—what Erving Goffman calls “civil inattention”²⁷—that is as likely to make a caller walk out in front of a bus as it is to protect her from stalkers. Rather, I find fascinating the ways in which cell phone users *manufacture* a ghostly, dematerialized presence as an interlocutor. One becomes a ghost talking to a ghost or a schizophrenic wired to the wireless. Judging from these studies, cell telephony has not signaled the end of metaphor, as Baudrillard suggested in my discussion above, but has created new metaphors for the networking subject: while we may no longer be fixed in space to communicate, across distance, with an other, we now inhabit an amorphous plane somewhere between connectedness to the world at large and social insularity, and between the embodiedness of speaking subjects and their discorporeality. Our being-in-the-world has become something of a not-being-while-on-the-phone, as the desire we have for another radiates outward to form nothing more than a desirous relation toward our selves, a relation both confirmed and cut off by our own sonorous envelopes.

Telephone terror movies have understood this “call as death sentence” since their popularity in the 1970s.²⁸ When Jill Johnson repeatedly receives the ominous call to check the children, when she is continually being summoned to the place of their death and dismemberment, she—and we—join in the fantasy of that famous mourning father in Freud, the father whose dead dream-child visits him to ask, “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?”²⁹ The children, already dead, call out to be recognized in their deaths, just as the now-dead Lenz family call out through Billy’s telephonic ventriloquism so that they, too, speak from beyond the grave. And it is a fantasy in which we are all eager to participate: we flock to cell phone terror movie remakes of the new millennium to check the children once more to ensure that they aren’t burning (or to ensure that they are); we repeatedly, obsessively place and answer digital calls even though (or because) all evidence suggests that the call will end in disconnection, loss of service, unavailable parties, dead agents; we bury our loved ones with their cell phones should they need or want to call us from beyond the grave.³⁰ When a stranger calls on his cell phone (or yours), it may then be to metaphorize telephony itself in the contemporary age, to mirror acoustically the rhizomic deracinations of the phantasmatic subject in a world of digital desire. When a stranger calls on his cell phone (or yours), it may be to present through the voice that sees or the eye that hears what we do when we repeatedly, obsessively turn to the phone. When a stranger calls, it may be to take us beyond the pleasure principle to the discommunicating space where the Freudian child throws out

the line and reels it back in to find what he wants on the other end, which is the end itself—the end of the line, the end of communication, the end of any desire that might be satisfied.

Notes

- 1 Morgan's remake changes the title of the original to *Black X-mas*. I retain that spelling throughout. However, for the sake of clarity, I will also insert the year of release whenever it seems helpful. Since the remake of *When a Stranger Calls* retains the original title, I will also refer to both films by year of release as well as by title.
- 2 Stephen King, *Cell* (New York: Scribner, 2006).
- 3 Lara Srivastava, "Mobile Phones and the Evolution of Social Behaviour," *Behaviour and Information Technology* 24.2 (2005): 111.
- 4 *New York Times* cited in George Myerson, *Heidegger, Habermas, and the Mobile Phone* (Reading, UK: Cox and Wyman, 2001), 8–9.
- 5 José M. García-Montes, Domingo Caballero-Muñoz, and Marino Pérez-Álvarez, "Changes in the Self Resulting from the Use of Mobile Phones," *Media, Culture and Society* 28.1 (2006): 67.
- 6 Srivastava, "Mobile Phones," 120.
- 7 García-Montes, Caballero-Muñoz, and Pérez-Álvarez, "Changes in the Self," 77.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 9 Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology—Schizophrenia—Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 324.
- 10 For a more complete discussion of the telephone's phantasmatic qualities, see Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). Sconce argues that spectral dematerialization was made all the more pronounced early in the twentieth century with the invention of wireless technology. Situating the discourse of wireless communication within late nineteenth-century American spiritualism, Sconce detects "an entirely new metaphor of liquidity in telecommunications by replacing the concept of the individuated 'stream' [of consciousness, but also of dyadic communication] with that of a vast etheric ocean" (*ibid.*, 14), what we might call in the twenty-first century a "network." This increasing idea of "abandoned bodies and dispersed consciousness," Sconce argues, produced in the telecommunicating subject a sense of melancholia that, in its extreme versions, became fear and paranoia; some citizens saw "an eerie and even sinister undercurrent to the new electronic worlds forged by wireless" (62). Spiritualist communication with the dead, the resurrecting of the voices of history, the speaking of a subject who could be anywhere and everywhere—all this, Sconce says, "provided a giddy sense of liberation for some, [but] also threatened the security and stability of an older social order in which body and mind had been for the most part coterminous" (63). Thus wireless technology presented a paradox that I want to suggest laid crucial ground for twenty-first-century cell phone terror movies: "alone at their crystal sets and radios, listeners felt a kinship with an invisible, scattered audience, and yet they were also acutely aware of the incredible distances involved in this form of communication that ultimately reaffirmed the individual listener's anonymity and isolation" (62).
- 11 Ronell, *Telephone*, 228.

- 12 Ibid., 87.
- 13 Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (New York: Verso, 1993), 68. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Transparency*.
- 14 Ellis Hanson, "The Telephone and Its Queerness," in *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 45.
- 15 Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 15. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Erotism*.
- 16 While *When a Stranger Calls* is the most famous of babysitting horror movies, the craze actually began the year before, with John Carpenter's 1978 *Halloween*.
- 17 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 68.
- 18 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Audio-Vision*.
- 19 Dolar, *A Voice*, 67. Dolar's point is an application to *When a Stranger Calls* of Chion's original insight, "An inherent quality of the acousmètre," he suggests, "is that it can be instantly dispossessed of its mysterious powers . . . when it is *de-acousmatized*, when the film reveals the face that is the source of the voice" (Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 130).
- 20 Here director Simon West departs from the contemporary cultural obsession with explaining why villains are as they are, what makes them tick. One need think only of Thomas Harris's *Hannibal* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1999), Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992), or the 2006 remake of *Black X-mas* to see the compulsion we have for providing our evildoers with tragic backstories.
- 21 Interestingly, this *concordia discors* develops gradually over the film's plot. The university students initially believe there are numerous callers, but they tacitly come to agree with Lieutenant Fuller (John Saxon)'s notion that there is only one killer speaking in many voices. This has a delightful resonance with *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973), where Father Merrin corrects Father Kerris's observations that Regan seems to have manifested three different personalities. Says Merrin, "There is only one."
- 22 It is worth observing here that blocking character Peter's crisis in the 1974 film has to do with abortion and longevity, the very stuff of Bataille's ideas on continuity, discontinuity, and death. Peter as antagonist is displaced in 2006 into Kyle, whose means of pestering his girlfriend Kelli is not to make her choose between life and death but to be exposed through his nasty habit of filming women while he's having sex with them, films that then show up on the Internet. As I have argued throughout this essay, 1970s fixed-line phone movies are obsessed with the vicissitudes of the individual subject within questions of life and death; 2006 digitally inflected movies are obsessed with the ways in which characters become "networked out" into multiple sites. Desires and their representations proliferate endlessly because digitally.
- 23 For a full discussion of the paranoia of the telephone in its conventional, fixed-line form, see Hanson, "The Telephone and Its Queerness."
- 24 Guy Rosolato, "La Voix: entre corps et langage," *Revue française de psychanalyse* 38.1 (1974): 79.
- 25 García-Montes, Caballero-Muñoz, and Pérez-Álvarez, "Changes," 77.

- 26 James E. Katz, "Mobile Communications and the Transformation of Daily Life: The Next Phase of Research on Mobiles," *Knowledge, Technology, and Policy* 19.1 (2006): 68, my emphasis.
- 27 Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: Free Press, 1963).
- 28 Ronell, *Telephone*, 6.
- 29 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5, *Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1958), 509.
- 30 Katz, "Mobile Communications," 69.