

The Social Imaginary of Telephony

Fictional Dispositives in Albert Robida's *Le Vingtième Siècle* and the Archeology of "Talking Cinema"

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What I propose to do here, within a perspective involving both epistemology and the archaeology of media, is to approach "talking cinema" through the examination of discourses produced in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, that is, almost fifty years prior to the generalization of talkies and the institutionalization of practices related to sound in the domain of cinema.² Beyond this specific medium, I will examine the series of machines of audiovisual representation, one of whose many actualizations was "talking cinema" (which is why quotation marks are fitting here, with regard to "cinema" as well as "talking"). Among the many inventions from which various experimentations with "talking cinema" may be said to derive, I will emphasize the technique of telephony. Indeed, its study presents the advantage of encompassing a number of auditive or audiovisual dispositives that are often much more difficult to reduce to their place in the genealogy of (institutionalized) cinema than viewing dispositives. On a methodological level, de-centering the point of view is precisely what appears productive to me, as the discussion of the place given to the voice within various audio(visual) dispositives constitutes the theoretical horizon of my observations.³

1 Translator's note: the French expression "cinéma parlant" (literally, "talking cinema") is usually translated as "sound cinema" in English, but given the focus of this chapter and the existence of the term "talkies" in English, it is translated as "talking cinema" here.

2 The attention given to "talkies before (the institutionalization of) talkies" should be placed in the context of recent research on "the archaeology" of the pairing between moving images and synchronized sound. On this point, see Edouard Arnoldy, *Pour une histoire culturelle du cinéma. Au-devant de "scènes filmées", de "films chantants et parlants" et de comédies musicales* (Liège: Céfal, 2004) as well as the contributions published in *Le Muet a la parole. Cinéma et performance à l'aube du XXe siècle*, Giusy Pisano and Valérie Pozner, eds. (Paris: AFRHC, 2005).

3 This reflection, one dimension of which is being considered here, started in other places, in particular in *Du bonimenteur à la voix-over. Voix-attraction et voix-narration au cinéma* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2007); and in "The lecturer, the image, the machine and the audio-spectator. The voice as a component part of audio-visual dispositives" and "On the particular status of the human voice. *Tomorrow's Eve* and the cultural series of talking machines," both published in *Cinema Beyond Film: Media Epistemology in the Modern Era* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 215-31 and 233-51, respectively.

It seems rather improbable that the telephone, considered today as belonging in the sphere of telecommunications, and whose invention is usually credited to Alexander Graham Bell (who registered a patent for it in February 1876⁴), would cross paths with the series of moving images, even when these come with recorded sounds. Some differences touching on the relations established between representation and addressee of the vocal (or audiovisual) message would at the very least cast doubts on the possibility. These differences may be spelled out thanks to the following, necessarily basic classification, whose oppositional pairs should not be seen as hermetically separate, at least if the hybridity of phenomena tied to the emergence and constitution of the media in question is to be taken into account:⁵

Telephone	Cinematograph
Listeners-Users	Spectators
Domestic space, individual use	Public space, collective participation
Simultaneous interactive communication	Unidirectional, deferred transmission
Reversibility of the poles of communication: listener/speaker	Reversibility of the Lumière appliance: recording/projection ⁶

When considering these different features and the traditional and monolithic conception of the two media they assume, the unidirectional communication with a collective *audience* (projection) implied in the film show proves very different from the dominant use of the telephone, which consists in an interactive communication carried out by a *user* in a private space. However, just as the “cinema” met with very heterogeneous conditions of exhibition,⁶ the telephone – especially when combined with other

4 Elisha Gray or Antonio Meucci have also been credited with the invention, and this disputed paternity is indicative of the more general relation between research on the electric distance transmission of a voice and the spirit of an era, when similar experiments were being carried out concurrently.

5 On this account, I could make the following observation my own: “Classifications, it seems to us, appear tenuous when their aim is to define media out of univocal functions, at all costs, even if it means overshadowing both their hybrid nature and their uses, and precluding thinking on their intersections, their geneses, and their developments.” François Albera and Maria Tortajada, “Prolégomènes à une critique des ‘télé-dispositifs,’” in *La Télévision, du téléphonoscope à YouTube. Pour une archéologie de l’audiovision*, Mireille Berton and Anne-Katrin Weber, eds. (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2009) 39.

6 All the more so when considering, as Rick Altman does, the changeable character of experiments with sonorization. See *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York, London: Routledge, 1992).

devices – gave rise to a wide variety of distinct uses and dispositives which may not be reduced solely to the parameters mentioned above. A convincing example could be the first Kinetophone, commercialized by Edison in 1895, which resulted from a combination of the Phonograph and the Kinetoscope previously exploited in the same parlors⁷ (if in a totally independent manner: customers would listen to music on one side, watch animated views on the other). These places of mass entertainment thus housed separately two techniques meant for specific uses, and which were later combined in a single system thanks to the synchronization of the Phonograph's cylinder and the film running in the Kinetoscope. Like the telephone booth, then, the Kinetophone required the user to handle an audio receiver in a public space. This type of convergence highlights the importance of diachronic variations affecting different cultural series in which a given technology may find a place (successively or simultaneously).⁸

Thinking About the Way Uses Were Thought Up

Telephony had various applications in its history, and according to the situation, these brought about distinct dispositives.⁹ Inscribed in the spectacular context of the presentation of a technical “attraction,” Bell and Watson's historic call between New York and Malden on October 9, 1876, chronicled in the March 17, 1877 issue of *La Nature*, epitomizes the diversity of uses for the telephone, which were to lead to specific dispositives later. Indeed, besides the individual conversation, the following contents succeeded one another as part of the same demonstration:¹⁰ information on the stock exchange, already one of the main uses of the telegraph¹¹ (in fact, the piece in *La Nature* refers to the telephone as a “talking telegraph”);

7 See the illustration reproduced in Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma*, vol. 1 (Paris: Denoël, 1946) 268.

8 The notion of “cultural series” is borrowed from André Gaudreault, and notably his “Les vues cinématographiques selon Georges Méliès, ou: comment Mitry et Sadoul avaient peut-être raison d'avoir tort (même si c'est surtout Deslandes qu'il faut lire et relire)...” in *Georges Méliès, l'illusionniste fin de siècle?* Jacques Malthête and Michel Marie, eds. (Paris: Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1997).

9 “Dispositive” here refers to a set of interactions between the poles of machinery, representation and spectator. On this conception, see Maria Tortajada and François Albera, “L'Epistémè '1900',” in *Le Cinématographe, nouvelle technologie du XXe siècle*, André Gaudreault, Catherine Russell and Pierre Véronneau, eds. (Lausanne: Payot, 2004).

10 “Le télégraphe parlant,” *La Nature* 198 (17 Mar. 1877): 251.

11 For a narrative use of this kind of application, see Alexandre Dumas's *Le Comte de Monte-Christo* (vol. II, chapters LX to LXVI).

the reading of daily newspapers, prefiguring news reports on the radio and on television; questions addressed to the interlocutor by dumbfounded observers, evoking the context of conjuring or séances (surprisingly, one person did in fact ask the interlocutor to predict the future!); finally, the transmission of music, “as if we had been in a concert hall.” This precision by the writer echoes the function Philippe Reiss (Germany) had foreseen for the telephone, and which was assumed by photographic technique, precisely. In his praise of talking pictures, a form of filmed speech that introduced the series of the first Vitaphone Shorts, William Hays also considered that the primary function of sound cinema lay in a wider access to classical music.¹² These different media had clearly been devised for similar uses, even as other directions more specific to each of them later developed.

The diversity of uses considered for the telephone in the 1870s and the 1880s points to an intermedial phase in Rick Altman’s definition of the term, that is, as a temporary “crisis of mediality” later resolved in the autonomy gained by the media. Altman significantly brings up this situation of intermediality in relation to the period when sound cinema became widespread, which he distinguishes from the two previous decades, more stable in that respect: “From the 1910s on, cinema appeared as such in the great book of media, next to the telephone, the phonograph, and the radio.”¹³ The mention of the telephone is interesting since there was no clear-cut separation between the uses of telephony and those of the cinematographic spectacle over the period 1895-1910. Indeed, as Patrice Carré has underlined, the applications of this invention remained to be

12 On Hays’s oral performance in this film projected on August 6, 1926 in New York, see Alain Boillat, *Du bonimenteur à la voix-over* 296-98. A transcription of the speech may be found in *The Dawn of Sound*, ed. Mary-Lea Bandy (New York: Museum for Modern Art, 1989) 17. Here I am referring more particularly to the following passage: “In the presentation of these pictures, music plays an invaluable part. The motion picture is a most potent factor in the development of a national appreciation of good music. That service will now be extended as the Vitaphone shall carry symphony orchestras to the townhalls of the hamlets.” The films following this introduction did in fact include only instrumental performances or opera singers. The choice matched the substance of Hays’s address, since the president of the MPPDA never touched on the *talking* cinema he was then “actualizing” through his recorded speech, only evoking the possibility of reproducing the performance of great music. On the Vitaphone Shorts, see Edouard Arnoldy, *Pour une histoire culturelle du cinéma* 63-73. As to Albert Robida, he pointed out in his fiction *Le Vingtième Siècle*: “The spectator is not just one in a restricted Paris or Brussels audience; all viewers, even in the comfort of their own home, are part of the great international public.” See Albert Robida, *The Twentieth Century* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004) 54.

13 Rick Altman, “Technologie et textualité de l’intermédialité,” *Sociétés & représentations* 9 (2000): 12.

defined, and as Ithiel de Sola Pool has shown, countless predictions were made in the nineteenth century about telephony and the possible changes it would involve for society¹⁴ – many largely determined by the social space of reception: “In the late nineteenth century, it was still unclear to what use the telephone should be put. An auxiliary to the telegraph, a complement to the phonograph? Consumers were to make the decision.”¹⁵

The combination of the telephone and the phonograph may seem unusual if these technologies are considered only from the standpoint of their autonomy as media: indeed, the telephone has been limited to direct communication, while the phonograph was intended for keeping a record of sounds. Still, this conception of an interaction between devices, which was in fact recurrent at the time, reveals the lack of a strict division between functions that later tended to be classified in distinct or even opposite paradigms. According to James Lastra, the two major criteria governing the reception of technologies since the nineteenth century and feeding the social imaginary they generate (and which in return generates them) have been *inscription* – the record of an (audio)visual manifestation on a medium – and *simulation* (in the sense of the production of a representation that serves as a simulacrum).¹⁶ Properly speaking, the telephone does not involve either in the dominant uses of it that became established in the early twentieth century, since it mainly belonged in a third paradigm, *communication*.¹⁷ However, to demonstrate the extent to which categories allowing us to think about a technology at a given moment of its history have an effect on the uses of that same technology, James Lastra brings up the example of telephony,¹⁸ precisely, and more specifically, two ways in which it was apprehended. On the one hand, the telephone was considered as an extension of the ear, as a device mostly devoted to listening to a concert or *actualités* in a program (a use similar to that of the recording of sounds, put

14 Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Forecasting the Telephone: A Retrospective Technology Assessment* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1983).

15 Patrice Carré, *Le Téléphone. Le Monde à portée de voix* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) 33. On the use of the phonograph as a component in the telephonic system, see de Sola Pool, *Forecasting the Telephone* 31-35.

16 James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema. Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2000).

17 On the pair simulation/communication, see my article “Faire pour la vue ce que le téléphone fait pour l’ouïe. Rencontres entre l’image et la voix dans quelques anticipations de la télévision,” in *La Télévision, du téléphonoscope à Youtube*, Berton and Weber, eds., 80, 88-90.

18 Lastra borrows this example from Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 222-31.

in the service of entertainment in the form of a show).¹⁹ On the other hand, it was viewed as an interpersonal means of communication substituting for the physical co-presence of two interlocutors, which means that it was inscribed in the paradigm of the simulation of the human.²⁰ Lastra's comment points to the need to take into consideration what Patrice Flichy, a sociologist of technologies of communication, calls the *frame of reference* of a technological innovation:

At the roots of a socio-technical context we find a whole series of imagined technological possibilities which seem to warrant investigation, not as the initial matrix of a new technology, but rather as one of the resources mobilized by the actors to construct a frame of reference.²¹

In the phase when uses specific to a media become defined, a whole set of conditions of possibility is thus determined by what Flichy considers – within a perspective akin to epistemology, though he does not openly claim this influence – as an ensemble of “technical imaginaries.” One of the privileged sites of this type of discursive formations happens to be novelistic fiction, which can afford to integrate hypothetical devices and uses in the counter-factual world it proposes. One of the objects of study recommended by Flichy lies in what François Albera has tentatively called “projected cinema”²² – the *projection*, in the form of technical extrapolations in literary (or para-literary) texts of a cinema to come, or more largely, as I suggest here, of a dispositive featuring a machinery as one of its components. As such, one of the works by French novelist and draftsman Albert Robida, *The Twentieth Century* (1883), constitutes a good object to approach the “frames of reference” prevalent at the time telephony appeared, and which shaped discourses and practices. Admittedly, the reference to this work has become a topos in discourses on the archaeology of media because it

19 One could say that the aspects mentioned by Lastra are tied to a more general conception of technology as a *prosthetic development* of the human. This conception already held true for the telegraph, as the following citation (dated 1860) illustrates: “[You only need] to repeat this movement in Strasbourg, absolutely as though the hand of the person located in Paris could stretch as far as Strasbourg to set in motion directly the sounder of the receiver.” *Le Magasin pittoresque* (1860), quoted in Carré, *Télégraphes. Innovations techniques et société au 19e siècle* 41.

20 Lastra, *Sound Technology and The American Cinema* 21.

21 Patrice Flichy, *Understanding Technological Innovation: A Socio-Technical Approach* (Glos, U.K., Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007) 120.

22 François Albera, “Le cinéma ‘projeté’ et les périodisations de l’histoire technique du cinéma,” in *Le Età del Cinema/The Ages of Cinema*, Enrico Biasin, Roy Menerani and Federico Zecca, eds. (Udine: DAMS Gorizia, 2008) 393-400.

features an imaginary device, the telephonoscope, which in the novel makes it possible to add the image of the interlocutor in telephone conversations (a function later actualized with the videophone or videoconferences over the Internet through software like Skype). Still, commentators most often content themselves with the mention of the novel in passing, even though it would deserve a more careful examination. Accordingly, it will serve as the focus for my case study and the thread in my argument.

A Reticular Conception

In Robida's fantasy, the telephonoscope – like the Internet today – is clearly designed as an extension of the telephone, whose network it inherits²³ (the telephone was still rare in France in 1883, when *The Twentieth Century* was published²⁴). As Patrice Carré has shown in several texts and books (notably on Robida's fictions), the generalization of the telegraph and later of the telephone contributed to familiarize users with a new way of approaching interpersonal communication based on the concept of “network,” from that point on. Alternating shots on the frightened telegraphist wiring a distress signal with images of the engine driver coming to her rescue at full speed, D. W. Griffith's 1911 *THE LONEDALE OPERATOR* relates the two main factors of a renewed apprehension of speed, whether resulting from the physical movement of a mobile on the railroad network or from the communication of information through the telegraphic network.²⁵ In *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern has shown how these technological inventions produced a new apprehension of time, notably in terms of capturing the

23 “Subscribers ordering the new service could have the apparatus adapted to their telephones for an extra monthly fee.” Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 51.

24 According to Joseph Libois, the first devices appeared in France in 1881 and numbered no more than 3,500 units for the whole country in 1883. See Libois, *Genèse et croissance des télécommunications* (Paris: Masson, 1983). The statistical table is reprinted in Perriault, *La Logique de l'usage* 174.

25 A comparative study remains to be done on discourses on telephonic audition and visual stimuli experienced in train travel in the first years of the twentieth century. On train travel, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (1977; Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986); Livio Belloï, *Regard retourné. Aspect du cinéma des premiers temps* (Québec/Paris: Nota Bene/Méridiens Klincksieck, 2001); Mireille Berton, “Train, cinéma, modernité: entre hystérie et hypnose,” *Décadrages* 6: 8-21.

present moment in a world taken over by speed and simultaneity.²⁶ It is not by chance, then, that the first invention characters marvel at in *The Twentieth Century* is that of a means of transportation run by electricity and called “the tube,” which supplants the railroad after the railroad itself has supplanted the stagecoach.²⁷ Robida’s description of the urban landscape has the city governed by a generalized organization in networks: telephone wires “crisscross[ed] in all directions, at all levels, in front of houses, over rooftops, creating a dense network of patterns over both buildings and sky,” while objects are transported thanks to an underground tube that “silently collects and distributes all sorts of packages, boxes, bundles, merchandise, and various items, through thousands of arteries buried beneath the streets.”²⁸

A possible hypothesis is that, in the minds of late nineteenth-century users, the reticular conception of telephony was modeled after more rudimentary, tangible systems such as running water²⁹ and central heating, these other factors of domestic comfort in an urban setting whose functioning relied on the interconnection of different places (through pipes, in this instance). Some expressions appearing in the novelist’s prose do in fact show that he conceived telephony similarly to these techniques. The musical pieces to which telephonoscope subscribers listen at home are “kept in *tubes* until the stage’s prompter *turns on the valve* in his box,”³⁰ and incidents occur when the mouthpiece has not quite been shut off. Incidentally, in 1878 Henri Giffard, a friend of Robida’s and the author of publications illustrated by him, imagined a futuristic application of telephony which he explicitly compared to the system of the stove:

We like to think that in the year 2000 the telephone will have the magnitude of the much more simple invention that is the stove. This is the most humble example that may be used. Let’s say that the large-size generating telephone is in the Théâtre français for instance, near the footlights. Through a hundred or a hundred and twenty wires it conveys everything being uttered at the theater to a hundred or a hundred and twenty telephone mouthpieces laid out in apartments like our current

26 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983).

27 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 3-14.

28 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 48, 50.

29 Due to the need for refueling points for steam engines, the development of running water was partly tied to that of the railroad.

30 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 55n (my emphasis).

hot-air vents. In these private apartments, the telephone's mouthpiece is placed near a piece of furniture, not far from the mantelpiece.³¹

Giffard exposes a specific frame of reference here: the intention is not to develop the practice of a "point to point" conversation, but to connect an emitting exchange to a number of addressees. Interpersonal communication is thus not dissociated from a multidirectional emission out of a center, as both uses are performed through a similar system.

Besides, even in a more complex inception – as with the addition of the moving image by Robida – telephony gives rise to a dispositif that becomes integrated in the furniture and the domestic sphere, like the radio and the television set later, when manufacturers tried to bring much care to the design so these devices could constitute elements of interior decoration. This is why, even though it is not explicitly correlated with the telephonoscope, the episode narrated in *The Twentieth Century*, in which the apartment of a subscriber to the food company is flooded after a pipe dysfunction, represents a "concrete," literal variation of the representation of the telephone network: subscribers receive their food as they do their information, from a distance (Fig. 1). Distance communication as contemplated by Robida was therefore much less interactive than it was to become over the twentieth century: like Giffard in his treatise, Robida saw it as guided by the unidirectional principle of a tool for home delivery. The absence of emphasis on the properly conversational dimension, obvious in the novel as a whole, tends to establish a parallel between the use of the telephone and spectacular practices. However, the domestic dimension of telephony represents a considerable difference from the uses of cinema, which was meant for a collective audience (if one excludes non-professional projection devices sold to private individuals, whose use was close to that of the magic lantern and more generally of optical toys).

Telephony as Intrusion into the Domestic Space

When Robida imagines the telephone as a means of transmission for news or *actualités*, its informational function is presented as an intrusion into the private sphere of one of the heroines, Hélène, who discovers the invention at the same time as the reader. On the first night she spends in the house

31 Henri Giffard, *Le Téléphone expliqué à tout le monde* (1878), quoted in Alec Mellor, *La Fabuleuse Aventure du téléphone* (Paris: Montparnasse, 1975) 12.



Fig.1. Albert Robida, *Le Vingtième siècle* (1883).

of her guardian, the young woman is woken by ringing. Frightened, she looks for the source of the bothersome sounds and understands that these come from a telephone receiver hidden under her pillow (Fig. 2). Later on, Hélène will constantly be woken by the unrequested news reaching her through telephone transmission. The novelist takes advantage of the supposed incompetence of the novice user to explain the various functions of the device to the contemporary reader. Despite his repeated expressions of admiration for the various applications of the telephone, in these particular instances Robida stresses the intrusive dimension of the sudden appearance of the Other in the private sphere.

The representation of telephony in these pages of Robida's novel involves a technophobic dimension that may be considered as recurrent throughout the twentieth century in narratives whose structure is based on scenes of phone conversations,³² particularly in film. I am therefore taking the liberty

32 This type of verbal interaction starts with the phone call, which linguist Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni does not hesitate to characterize as a "territorial violation" and a "sound assault." See C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, "Théorie des faces et analyse conversationnelle," in *Le Parler frais d'Erving Goffman*, ed. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (Paris: Minuit, 1989) 158.



Fig. 2. Albert Robida, *Le Vingtième siècle* (detail).

of a detour through later figurations, which in my view epitomize some constants in the imaginary associated with the uses of the technology in question. When telephony elicits doubts, two major trends may be noted: either the technological mediation interferes with an affective relationship, in a comedic mode with Sacha Guitry's light comedy (1916) and film (1936) *FAISONS UN RÊVE*, in a dramatic mode with Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* (1930) and its film and television adaptations;³³ or it becomes the vehicle for an assault verging on rape on a female character, as in horror thrillers of the slasher type in which, from Fred Walton's 1979 *WHEN A STRANGER CALLS* through Simon West's 2006 remake to Wes Craven's *SCREAM* trilogy (1996-2000), a baby-sitter is verbally assaulted over the phone (or horrified by the phone ringing repeatedly), before a physical assault takes place. Filmmaker Wes Craven has in fact used the telephonic threat in an obsessive manner, for instance with the sudden appearance of a phallic tongue (Fig. 3a-3c) in *WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE* (1994),³⁴ in which the telephone is later

33 These are *AMORE* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948) and *THE HUMAN VOICE* (Ted Kotcheff, 1966). I would like to mention a few sentences in this one-act monolog by Cocteau, in which the conditional is the last protection in the face of despair and where the life of the female protagonist, brokenhearted by a separation, hangs by a thread, the wire of the telephone and the last contact with her lover: "If you did not love me and were shrewd, the phone would become a frightening weapon. A weapon that leaves no trace, a silent weapon..." Farther on: "This phone call became like a real blow you were dealing me and I fell; or a neck, a neck being strangled, or [...] I was connected to you through a breathing device and I implored you not to cut it off [...]." Jean Cocteau, *La Voix humaine*, in *Romans, poésies, œuvres diverses* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1995) 1104, 1108. Translator's note: the original French text plays on words and their homophony in a way that gets lost in English: "coup de fil" means "phone call," "coup" means "blow," while "cou" is "neck."

34 In a way, this is a literal application of Avital Ronell's remarks on the schizophrenic dimension of the "tongue" in the Heideggerian sense, where it becomes one and the same with this

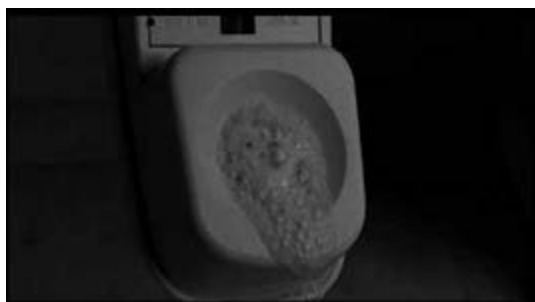


Fig. 3a-3c. WES CRAVEN'S NIGHTMARE (Wes Craven, 1994) © New Line Cinema.

relayed by the television set as the vehicle for a passage from the real world to the world of nightmares. In that respect, it should be noted that Robida also has the young woman woken from a deep sleep by the device hidden under her pillow. After being frightened by a flood of tragic wire stories, Hélène “started to wonder whether she was dreaming or awake.”³⁵ Tom

other human prosthesis that is the telephone. Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book. Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln, NE, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) 168.

³⁵ Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 28. The dream provides access to a *beyond* – the baleful creature created by Wes Craven is in fact dead in the “real” world – which makes a sequence

Gunning has shown that the positive representation of technology in D.W. Griffith's 1909 *LONELY VILLA*,³⁶ a famous instance of last-minute rescue made possible by a telephone communication, is haunted by a technophobic subtext, like many other films of the period. A contemporary French Grand Guignol play, De Lorde's *Au téléphone* (1902, adapted for film by Pathé in 1906 under the title *TERRIBLE ANGOISSE*),³⁷ actualizes this subtext: in the play the patriarch, far from restoring order as he does in Griffith's film, is unable to prevent the assassination of his family and hears their cries over the telephone receiver. Even if, in the social imaginary, the telephone is associated with the comfort resulting from technological progress, it involves a threatening component and, for fiction writers, dramatic potential. As Claude S. Fischer points out, telephony has been considered in an ambivalent manner by sociologists, some associating it with a situation of alertness and tension, others taking it as essential to a feeling of safety.³⁸ In that respect, the film *LONELY VILLA* belongs in a reassuring discourse characteristic of promotional campaigns for the telephone set in the United States. The phone was, for instance, presented as a means of making homes located in rural areas safer, as illustrated in an advertisement for the Illinois Telephone Association in the 1930s (Fig. 4).³⁹ However, fiction writers generally appear to have exacerbated, if not the harmful, at least the dangerous effects of the phone on the psyche.

In *The Twentieth Century*, young Héléne struggles with an anthropomorphic telephone and attempts (in vain) to section the rubber pipe of the device with a pair of scissors.⁴⁰ In Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 *DIAL M FOR MURDER*, a similar situation echoes this passage in Robida's novel, evoking castration. In the film, the woman assaulted at home manages to wriggle out of her assailant's grip as the man, hired by her husband, tries to strangle her with the telephone wire. She stabs him in the back with a pair of scissors, killing him. Still, with Hitchcock this turnaround in the situation is meant to surprise and plays with a horizon of expectation defined by the domi-

such as this one evoke the spiritualist imaginary of the electric transmission of a voice, further reinforced with the generalization of wireless telephony. On this aspect, see Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

36 Tom Gunning, "Heard over the phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the De Lorde tradition of the terrors of technology," *Screen* 32.2 (1991): 184-96.

37 André De Lorde and Charles Foley, *Au téléphone* (1902; Paris: Librairie Molière, 1909).

38 Claude S. Fischer, *America Calling. A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992) 25.

39 Quoted in Fischer, *America Calling* 165.

40 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 31.

nant archetype of the phallic aggression carried out with a technological instrument (in the film, its mechanical dimension is underlined through shots of an automated telephone exchange). With Robida, as in some Hollywood films, the telephone does constitute an interference, a violation of the private sphere. The same holds at a later stage of *The Twentieth Century*, when Mr. Ponto takes the liberty of checking through the telephonoscope that his son Philippe is indeed in his bedroom and not at the opera, where he thought he had spotted him on his screen. Since audiovision based on the telephonic model is reversible, communication may also turn into distance surveillance unbeknownst to the user; but for Robida, this constitutes a marginal use and it is presented as deviant. I should still point out that the novelist takes care to mention that this involves human errors (the maid responsible for cleaning up Hélène's room forgot to turn off the telephone completely, just as Philippe omitted to deactivate his telephonoscope), which lessens the impression of technophobia detected thus far.

This kind of situation, characterized by the voyeurism⁴¹ of a protagonist (or the pleasure of eavesdropping), emphasizes the degree to which desire was an integral part of the telephonic imaginary of the late nineteenth century – no less than in the twentieth century, when McLuhan noted that “no more unexpected social result of the telephone has been observed than its elimination of the red-light district and its creation of the call-girl.”⁴² Robida kept this function under control, seeing the telephone as an effective means to maintain the moral order by shielding young women from the ardor of their suitors.⁴³ By contrast, *Le Téléphone* (1889), a saucy story by Marc de Montifaud (a pseudonym for Marie-Aurélié Chartroule), openly links the telephone conversation with the sexual act – and the appliance with the phallus – as it tells the tale of a naive young woman warned by her aunt against the dangers to virtue represented by “modern inventions” (and particularly the telephone, “which could be used for reprehensible conversations”).⁴⁴ In the same breath she refuses to own a telephone set and to be possessed by the man she recently married; her husband has to

41 In another passage in the story, Mr. Ponto tells how, because of the mistake of a clerk at the central office, he was able to catch a young woman as she was getting out of bed. Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 66.

42 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1968; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994) 266.

43 In the French edition, the caption to plate n°31 (a full-page color drawing) reads, “Morality, tranquillity, felicity. – Telephone courtship.”

44 Marc de Montifaud, “Le Téléphone,” *Nouvelles drolatiques* (Paris: B. Simon et C^{ie}, 1889) 933.

Your Home
DESERVES PROTECTION

A telephone on a farm is the greatest obstacle to rural thieves. A telephone can head off the theft of your chickens, hogs, harness and gasoline---and warn folks down the road of the crooked peddler and the vicious tramp. The farm without a telephone is isolated from outside assistance. Quick reporting of crime demands a telephone to save precious minutes. You need your telephone to give your family and property protection they deserve.

(INSERT NAME OF YOUR COMPANY)

THE MODERN FARM HOME NEEDS A TELEPHONE

Fig. 4. Advertisement, 1930s (Illinois Telephone Association).

resort to the metaphor of the telephone to achieve his ends.⁴⁵ The telephone is associated with private secrets and intimate interpersonal conversation – this relation of desire between two disembodied voices runs through Duras's *NAVIRE NIGHT* (1979) – and therefore pertains to an imaginary quite removed from the cinematographic spectacle, destined for a large audience gathered in the same space.⁴⁶ While some developments of the telephone

45 To his wife, who fears she may have “to learn how to use [it] the hard way,” the husband answers, “No, your role could perfectly consist in listening to me; I will... speak to you first; you will then answer me using the same method; and you will see, we will get along as though we had done it our entire life.” De Montifaud, “Le téléphone,” *Nouvelles drolatiques* 959.

46 McLuhan stressed – failing to take into account the context of the period, defined as “strange,” as though institutional uses were self-evident – how telephony was oriented toward other uses than those contemplated at the end of the nineteenth century because of the relation of intimacy it establishes with the user: “Curiously, the newspaper of that time saw the telephone as a rival to the press as a P.A. system, such as radio was in fact to be fifty years later. But the

were specifically tied to the commerce of eroticism (the sex chat lines with the Minitel and the computer-telephone integration, for instance), a better equivalent of this private use would be the home consumption of films. Jacques Perriault indicates that in 1980, 75% of the VHS tapes sold in France were pornographic. This type of production decisively contributed to the creation of a video market, which quickly became diversified afterwards.⁴⁷ Films such as *VIDEODROME* (David Cronenberg, 1982), *NEXT OF KIN* (Atom Egoyan, 1984), *SEX, LIES AND VIDEOTAPE* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989), or more recently *LOST HIGHWAY* (David Lynch, 1997), have problematized this resolutely intimate aspect of the VCR, comparable in that respect to the telephone.

Audition and Audiovision of Theatrical Spectacles

The visual dimension of the telephonoscope, a device primarily considered as a provider of audiovisual spectacles in *The Twentieth Century*, may appear to occupy a prime, central place for the novelist, since the extrapolation with respect to the system of telephony lies there. However, even as the “audio-visualization” of the speaker by the media is emphasized by Robida as the height of technological advances of the coming century, the transmission of speech constitutes the main function of his telephonoscope, as the first mention of the system in the book suggests: the author indicates that the character of Mr. Pronto, “sacrificing the one or two acts of French, German, or Italian opera on the telephonoscope [...] dozed off in his armchair [...]”⁴⁸ The *vision* which this device, still unknown to the reader, gives access to is not mentioned explicitly, so that at this stage it may be taken to be an equivalent of the Théâtrophone, an invention that undoubtedly served as a model to the novelist. Presented by Clément Ader at the 1881 World Fair, two years before the novel was published, this system strongly contributed to legitimizing the applications of telephonic technology in the late nineteenth century by offering a specific use: the transmission of the sounds of stage performances to the home. The frame of reference of telephony was thus

telephone, intimate and personal, is the most removed of any medium from the P.A. form. Thus wire-tapping seems even more odious than the reading of other people's letters.” McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 269.

47 Perriault, *La Logique de l'usage* 167.

48 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 11. Translator's note: the word “audition,” emphasized by the author in Robida's original text in French, is omitted in the English translation.

associated – like that of the cinematograph – to the sphere of entertainment, spectacle and the recording of artistic practices.

The precedence given by Robida to audition is not only the consequence of a genealogical perspective that would have the invention of sound transmission come before “television.” The fact that most commentators have tended to neglect the dimension of sound in the telephonoscope certainly has to do with the presence of illustrations by the author of *The Twentieth Century* in which the visual representation provided by the “crystal screens” of the device is emphasized. Still, staying clear of teleologism requires a departure from the preconception that as an invention, audiovisual communication (or representation) should unavoidably come after strictly visual and auditory technologies and be more complex than these, owing to the mere fact that it combines both dimensions. The rendering or the transmission of speech may indeed very well constitute the main use assigned to some machines at a given moment in the history of the technologies in question. In an article on *La Guerre au vingtième siècle* in the periodical devoted to Robida, *Le Téléphonoscope*, André Lange phrased the issue as follows:

The absence of the “telephonoscope” in *La Guerre au vingtième siècle* (1887) may surprise, as it had previously appeared in *The Twentieth Century*, published in 1883. Two inventions from *The Twentieth Century* are still present here, the “telephonic gazette” and the “telephonograph.” But no telephonoscope to be found...⁴⁹

Lange’s surprise at the absence of the telephonoscope in *La Guerre au vingtième siècle* stems from the assumption that this later novel should feature an invention deemed more advanced than the “telephonic gazette.” Yet if the telephonoscope is taken as one possible development of telephonic technique, Robida could understandably limit himself to strictly auditory technologies of communication four years later, with the image an optional component⁵⁰ mainly considered in relation to the home transmission of theatrical performances in *The Twentieth Century*.

Outside the period outlined by the epistemological undertaking proper, the frame of reference of Robida’s novel and that of the first decade of the twentieth century may also be compared. The primacy of the dimension of sound then appears to become less marked in futuristic texts, in which an

49 André Lange, “En attendant la guerre des ondes, les technologies de communication dans les anticipations militaires d’Albert Robida,” *Le Téléphonoscope* 11 (May 2004): 8–10.

50 See my study “Faire pour la vue ce que le téléphone fait pour l’ouïe,” more particularly 84–88.

imaginary more strongly influenced by the model of “television” emerges. In that respect, a significant lexical change may be noted in *La Guerre infernale* by Pierre Giffard, a novelist who was also the author of popular scientific works. In this novel, published in 1908 and illustrated by Albert Robida, the appliance corresponding to the telephonoscope of *The Twentieth Century* is called the “telephotograph,” a term whose Greek etymology does not refer to sounds at all. One hypothesis is that the generalization of moving images with the cinematograph contributed to shift the frame of reference for extrapolations of telephony toward a more visual model, which until then dominated only in representations associated with the exteriorization of mental images⁵¹ or the visualization of ghosts, especially in the vogue of spiritualism.⁵²

To deal with the different frames of reference of these technologies, I propose three main lines, often interdependent, but distinguished to analytical ends here: *communication*, *inscription*, and *simulation*.⁵³ While the subjects transmitted through the telephonoscope are diverse in Robida’s novel (the attack of the Tuaregs filmed by a reporter is often cited as a forerunner of television news, for example), the frame of reference in which the novelist conceives this technology pertains to both communication and simulation. The latter comes “first,” if only because of the order and the number of times applications of the telephonoscope come up in the narrative. The Théâtrophone, which inspired Robida with the dominant use of the telephonoscope, does not so much fall within the paradigm of what

51 See the short story *L’Encéphaloscope* (*Der Gehirnspiegel*, 1900) by Kurd Lasswitz, trans. Stefania Maffei, in *La Télévision, du téléphonoscope à Youtube* 99-106.

52 On the subject, see Henri Azam’s essay “Télégraphie sans fil et médiumnité,” published monthly between March 1925 and December 1926 as a series of articles in *La Revue spirite*, and whose first text was presented by the editors as follows: “With the breakthroughs of science in the domain of radio-telegraphy, heeding the scientists specializing in this area becomes highly interesting, as does – when they are also spiritualists – *the study of the parallelism, the analogy of physical and psychological worlds.*” *La Revue spirite. Journal d’études psychologiques et de spiritualisme expérimental*, Paris (Feb. 1925): 66 (my emphasis). Allan Kardec, the founder of *La Revue spirite* in 1858, explained what the relation with the invisible world of spirits consisted in, comparing it with what the transatlantic electric wire could have taught Europeans about Amerindian peoples before the discovery of America. See Allan Kardec, *Qu’est-ce que le spiritisme? Introduction à la connaissance du monde invisible par les manifestations des esprits* (1859; Paris: Editions Vermet, 2005) 51. On the relations between spiritualism and telephony, see my study of Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s novel *Tomorrow’s Eve*, “On the particular status of the human voice. *Tomorrow’s Eve* and the cultural series of talking machines,” *Cinema Beyond Film* 240-42, and more generally Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*.

53 These appear in increasing order of potential intersections with related systems of talking cinema.

was later to be called “telecommunications” as within that of simulation, audition being associated with a “virtual” image (actualized in Robida’s fiction). Giusy Pisano notes that with the Théâtrophone, the principle of two transmitters (one for each ear) made possible a lateralization of sounds, prefiguring stereophony, thanks to the variations in sound intensity brought about by the distribution left/right and which activated a mental representation of the space and the movements of performers on stage for the listener. This partial acoustic reproduction of the original space underscores the representational dimension of this type of system.

The nodal presence of this cultural referent – the first telephonic message is the account of a show at the Comédie-Française – is not surprising if one recalls the intense theatrical activity in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s as well as Robida’s implication in that area. Indeed, one of his favorite subjects as a caricaturist (for *Le Journal amusant*, *La Vie parisienne* and later *La Caricature*)⁵⁴ was the chronicle of Parisian stage life at the time. In that respect, it seems important to me to take into account the type of spectacles Robida refers to in *The Twentieth Century*, where descriptions are often satirical. The futuristic character of the telephonoscope does not lie only in the dispositive it mobilizes, but also in the very nature of the transmitted spectacle. A correlation may in fact be established between these two aspects around the notion of “attraction” as defined by theoreticians of early cinema:⁵⁵ a “technological attraction,” to be sure, because of the enthusiasm shown by the narrator and characters for the wonders of the telephonoscope (it is a “novelty period”⁵⁶ only for the focal character of the narrative, as other characters are used to handling the system); but a “stage attraction” as well, since Robida takes care to mention that “modern” directors would add attractions to classical plays, and Antonio Salieri’s 1786 *Les Horaces* becomes, for instance, a “tragedy in five acts and five attractions.” Each of the thrilling interludes is meant to arouse the attention of an audience bored by “old plays” – Robida constantly points out the lack of interest in literary culture on the part of a society prizing speed and sciences. An interlude consists, for instance, in a ballet, a *tableau*

54 See Sandrine Doré, “Albert Robida, critique en image de l’actualité théâtrale des années 1870-1880,” in *Albert Robida, du passé au futur*, ed. Daniel Compère (Paris: Belles-Lettres, 2006).

55 See Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions. Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” *Wide Angle* 8.3-4 (1986): 63-70.

56 The term was proposed by Tom Gunning to refer to a first phase in the use of the cinematographic dispositive. See Tom Gunning, “The Scene of Speaking: Two Decades of Discovering the Film Lecturer,” *Iris* 27 (1999): 67-79.

vivant or an “equestrian and pedestrian dramatic pantomime,”⁵⁷ which the public of the future, as the author calls it with irony, honors as the height of theatrical art. The heroine attends “a circus pantomime with a great entrance of clowns”⁵⁸ from her place and the telephonic account surprising her in the middle of the night has as its subject the premiere of a play featuring a “lion-tamer”⁵⁹ at the Comédie-Française. The novelist emphasizes the changeable and heterogeneous dimension of programming in theaters, which constantly have to renew their “attractions”: “Theater halls are no longer exclusively devoted to one genre like they used to be; they must offer variety to keep audiences interested. [...] It [a theater] must then transform itself, switch genres, renew its personnel, and find *new attractions* to stay afloat financially.”⁶⁰ In the novel, no explicit connection is made between this new type of play and distance audiovision, but both involve the representation of a mass spectacle, as some subheadings indicate in the fifth chapter. Transmitted by the telephonoscope, the plays imagined by Robida therefore present some similarities with most of the subjects chosen by the pioneers of talking cinema and subsequently over the first years of the talkies, at the time of the so-called “talking and singing” films.⁶¹

Communication Within the “Machinery”

A singular manifestation of Robida’s reticular conception appears in *The Twentieth Century* when the novelist explains the resort to orchestras for the audiovisual transmission of theatrical plays:

[...] other theaters have worked out an agreement whereby they share a common orchestra, located in a special room designed according to scientific principles and linked to all theaters through telephonic wires. Each evening, the central orchestra plays four pieces transmitted through the cables to subscribing venues.⁶²

The telephone link not only makes it possible to connect subscribers to the place of the show: it also connects two institutions internal to the produc-

57 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 60.

58 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 206.

59 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 35.

60 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 195 (my emphasis).

61 See my *Du bonimenteur à la voix-over*, chapter V.

62 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 155.



Fig. 5. Advertisement from the company Pathé frères.

tion space of the audiovisual representation, the different theater halls and the “auditorium” where the orchestra is located. This was one of the major preoccupations of the pioneers of sound cinema, as they sought to establish the synchronization between the visual and auditory components associated with separate spaces. In the early 1920s these attempts led to the use of systems such as Charles Delacommunes’s Ciné-Pupitre,⁶³ but even in *spoken* early cinema, lecturers for magic lantern shows⁶⁴ or for the cinematograph needed to be connected to the projectionist, sometimes even using semi-mechanical systems.⁶⁵ The explanation provided by Robida in this passage restricted to the margins of the narrative – a footnote – may well support Giusy Pisano’s hypothesis on the Théâtrophone, namely that this system “must have encouraged [...] the pioneers of synchronism, who

63 See Laurent Guido, *L’Âge du rythme* (Lausanne: Payot, 2007) 404-408; and Boillat, *Du bonimenteur à la voix-over* 92, n162.

64 A 1909 column on a specific projection system thus highlighted the interest of “bringing the lecturer and the lantern projectionist closer” and “the ease for them to communicate during the performance.” “Projections dactylographiques,” in *Ciné-Journal* 37 (29 Apr. - 5 May 1909).

65 “In front of the lecturer was a row of small knobs and a mysterious and silent dialogue existed between the booth and him, a dialogue punctuated with red, white, green or blue lights. These meant, ‘Show a still view, start the film.’ Or they indicated that the orchestra should stop, start again, change the score.” See Rodolphe-Maurice Arlaud, *Cinéma Bouffe* (Paris: Editions Jacques Melot, 1945) 79 (my emphasis).

saw in its success the possibility of combining the cinematograph and the phonograph through a telephone wire.”⁶⁶

In these experiences of projection of moving images with sound, transmission does not occur between the representation and the audience – that axis is still governed by the paradigm of simulation (of a diegetic world) – but rather between two agents in the space of production of the representation. This type of system was available at Pathé when the company commercialized its Ciné-Phono around 1906: interestingly, one of the advertising posters for this kind of spectacle (Fig. 5)⁶⁷ features an egg-shaped projected image (as in Robida’s illustrations of the telephonoscope, but in this instance most certainly to refer to the firm’s logo, a medallion featuring a rooster). The projection seems to result from a beam of light issuing from the phonograph’s horn, as though sound came first (and in fact, the slogan puts “to hear” before “to see”). The distinction proposed by François Albera and André Gaudreault between the *bonimenteur* and the *conférencier* in early cinema,⁶⁸ displaced onto this context, suggests an interpretation of this image as a *phonographic audition accompanied with images* rather than a cinematographic projection with sound. Another contemporary illustration, reproduced without commentary in Giusy Pisano’s book, features the Pathé device designed for the projection of “cine-phonographic scenes” (Fig. 6).⁶⁹ It clearly shows that this system of live synchronization, akin to the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre presented by Clément-Maurice in 1900, allowed a connection to the projection booth and the phonograph located in the spectatorial space, thanks to a telephone receiver. The projectionist set the projection speed to the sounds produced by the cylinder of the phonograph. This representation of a film show in a 1905 Pathé catalog is unusual in that it does not seem to be a public projection site but a screening for a limited number of spectators. This is suggested by the paintings and the chandelier, which, like the dress and the posture of spectators, point to a bourgeois home or the privacy of a curio cabinet, and contrast quite a lot with the commercial presence of the cinematograph in fairs. Since amplification constituted a major problem for sound cinema at the time, it is not surprising that the show would be imagined in a relatively cramped space. An operator stands in each of the spaces; the person in charge of the

66 Giusy Pisano, *Une archéologie du cinéma sonore* (Paris: CNRS, 2004) 159.

67 The poster is reprinted in Jacques Kermabon, *Pathé, premier Empire du cinéma* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1994) 22.

68 See François Albera, André Gaudreault, “Apparition, disparition et escamotage du ‘bonimenteur’ dans l’historiographie française du cinéma,” *Le Muet à la parole* 169-70.

69 Giusy Pisano, *Une archéologie du cinéma sonore* 267.



Fig. 6. Excerpt from the Pathé catalog, 1905.

phonograph becomes idle after the machine starts but may conceivably intervene as a lecturer, or *bonimenteur*, in the absence of a phonographic recording. A partition separates the place where the projectionist stands from the space of reception, probably so that the noise of the projector does not drown out the sounds emitted by the phonograph.⁷⁰ Here the telephone is reduced to a unidirectional transmission not addressed at the spectators of the audiovisual representation, but used instead backstage to coordinate the two sides of the machinery. This is to be distinguished from a system such as the Phonorama (invented by Berthon, Dussaud and Jaubert in 1898), which had spectators place a telephone receiver on one of their ears to be able to listen to the sound accompanying the projected image and literally integrated telephony into the cinematographic spectacle. Finally, on the subject of these “Scènes Ciné-Phonographiques,” I should note that one of the films commercialized by Pathé and mentioned by Giusy Pisano takes on a particular signification, compared with the techniques involved in this system. Titled *AU TÉLÉPHONE* and made in 1904, it showed and allowed one to hear a monologue by music-hall artist Félix Galipaux. In this instance, as

70 Martin Barnier has noted that projection booths were common in early cinema and that mechanical noise could have become a nuisance only as motorized projectors became widespread during the First World War, not at the time when the projectionist turned a crank, as is the case here. See Martin Barnier, *Bruits, cris, musiques de films. Les projections avant 1914* (Rennes: PUR, 2010) 144-45. The issue of projector noise repeatedly comes up in discourses on “silent” cinema: see Boillat, *Du bonimenteur à la voix-over* 130-48.

in filmic examples punctuating this discussion, what is represented echoes the machinery needed for the very production of the representation.

The Paradigm of Inscription: Telephony and Phonography

In Robida's futuristic story, oral transmission over the telephone replaces writing, and more generally all mediums used to record speech, forestalling Paul Zumthor's comment in the era of sound media that "primitive orality is making a strong comeback," or rather, that "its continuity [...] is suddenly resurfacing after centuries of predominance of modes of written communication."⁷¹ Robida's technological extrapolations attest to a will to depict, in a dystopian mode, the total conversion of writing to oral modes of expression. Letters are no longer written in *The Twentieth Century*: instead, oral messages are recorded on the cylinder of a phonograph. Newspapers editors do jot down their text on paper, but they transmit it orally only, as "the articles sound spicier when read by their own authors. Through varied inflexions and skillful intonations, they can add dimension to innuendos and thus imply to subscribers what is not quite spelled out."⁷² Given the primacy of orality, whose *immediacy* contributes to play down the *medium*, it comes as no surprise that here and there Robida's illustrations include balloons that were to become widespread some fifteen years later in comic strips. Thierry Smolderen has demonstrated how radically different they were from their predecessors ("phylacteries") in that they resulted from a new conception of speech as a sound phenomenon, a movement of air.⁷³ Like the phonograph, which appeared two years before it, the telephone constituted the site of an exacerbation of speech as an acoustic phenomenon.

One might think that phonography, unlike the telephone, is not associated with the notion of simultaneity, but in fact the distinction between

71 Paul Zumthor, "Le geste et la voix," *Hors-cadre* 3 (1985) 73.

72 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 187.

73 The sequence of images by draughtsman R. F. Outcault, *The Yellow Kid and His New Phonograph* (*New York Journal*, 25 Oct. 1896), which in Smolderen's view marked a paradigmatic shift, uses precisely this phonographic technique – even if counterfeited, displaced onto a living being, since a parrot is hiding in the body of the appliance. The first four "vignettes," which are not framed with a line, belong in the paradigm of writing (the text uttered by the character of the "Yellow Kid" appears on his nightshirt), whereas the last one, in which the child's surprise is expressed in a balloon, marks the passage towards what Smolderen calls "the phonographic paradigm of the speech balloon." See Thierry Smolderen, "Of labels, loops, and bubbles. Solving the historical puzzle of the speech balloon," *Comic Art* 8 (Summer 2006). From the same author, see also *Naissances de la bande dessinée* (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2009) 119–27.

inscription and communication was not clear-cut at the time. Significantly, combining the telephone with the phonograph was often contemplated, as early as Edison, who noted in his memoirs (1878):

At the moment, the telephone necessarily has a limited role because exchanged messages, not being recorded, are reduced to a mere conversation which does not present the needed guarantees. [...] With the telephone combined with the phonograph, things would be different for preliminary discussions would be recorded and the textual reproduction of everything agreed upon would be available.⁷⁴

Since the usefulness of the “mere conversation” had not yet been acknowledged, Edison thought of an association with the phonograph with a view to a professional use of telephony, in particular in the domain of finance, where the new device could play a role similar to that of the telegraph. Robida himself imagined some combinations of these two techniques. Despite the term used, his “telephonograph” has no relation to the recording of sound, since the phonograph is limited to the function of a megaphone: sound amplification simply allows the interlocutor to do without a pipe connected to the device. It is a sort of “hands-free” system, as the expression goes today with respect to cellular phone capabilities (it is one of the profiles for the Bluetooth standard). In other places, the novelist turns the phonograph into a means of communication: for instance, after a shipwreck, the captain throws six phonographs out to sea, with a distress message recorded on each of them.⁷⁵ The phonographic recording thus mitigates spatial distance, compensating it with a delayed transmission. In this case, the recording of voices is subject to an objective, communicating information, and thus appears in devices akin to voice mail or the Dictaphone. Robida is rather critical of this semblance of communication, for several times he emphasizes the lack experienced due to the absence of an interlocutor in the flesh and the possibly deceptive simulation produced by techniques

74 Cited in French translation in Théodore Du Moncel, *Le Téléphone, le microphone et le phonographe* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1879) 302-3. Translator’s note: the quotation given here is a translation from this French source, not from the original text where it could not be found. See Frederick J. Garbit, *The Phonograph and Its Inventor, Thomas Alva Edison. Being a Description of the Invention and A Memoir of Its Inventor* (Boston: Gunn, Bliss, and Co., 1878), available at <http://archive.org/stream/phonographanditoogarboog#page/n1/mode/2up>, last accessed on July 23, 2012.

75 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 334.

of inscription and transmission of sounds.⁷⁶ Indeed, phonography and telephony, despite the immediacy they institute with sound occurrences, whether fixed or transmitted, give rise to *representations*:⁷⁷ the interlocutor is fundamentally absent for the addressee of the message when it is delivered, either because the expression took place *beforehand* or is taking place from *elsewhere*. As Jacques Perriault emphasizes, “It is not the voice that is being heard over the phone but a more or less faithful reconstitution, without the gestures accompanying it, moreover.”⁷⁸ Even if the telephone does not provide the image of gestures, it aims to create a simulacrum of presence by reproducing, on the side of reception, the variations of sound waves produced on the side of emission. This question leads us directly to the third paradigm, which will be considered succinctly,⁷⁹ that of simulation (of a human presence).

Simulation: The False Presence of the Other

The author of *The Twentieth Century* underlines the deterioration of interpersonal relations in a technological society where “close” relatives are contacted only “from a distance” – what Freud later stigmatized in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). At the beginning of the novel, Robida thus cynically describes the attitude of parents for whom “telephonographic” messages have as their function to substitute for their actual presence by their children’s side. When they come back home to Paris after eight years in a provincial high school, Barbe and Barnabette are

76 Robida admittedly evokes the positive effects of the telephonoscope, since he mentions that the device makes it possible to suppress absence. Nevertheless, that is an incidental comment by a candid Hélène, which the narrative tends to contradict through the multiplication of negative effects linked to the use of telecommunications. In fact, when Hélène brings up the fact that “the telephonoscope reunites faraway loved ones,” the more experienced Mr. Ponto replies, “Almost.” Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 65.

77 The representational nature of sound is rarely taken into account in media theories, probably due to its less manifest character (except in the case of technical problems, which reveal it, precisely), and in any case less than the representational nature of the image, two-dimensional even when monochrome. On the subject, see Alan Williams, “Is Sound Recording Like a Language?” *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980); and Boillat, *Du Bonimenteur à la voix-over* 396-420.

78 Perriault, *La Logique de l’usage* 53.

79 For a more in-depth examination of this question, I refer the reader to my comments on the “Android” in the novel *Tomorrow’s Eve*, “*LEve future* et la série culturelle des ‘machines parlantes.’ Le statut singulier de la voix humaine au sein d’un dispositif audiovisuel,” in *Cinémas* 17.1 (Fall 2006): 10-34; as for the links between “tele-vision” and “talking portraits,” see Boillat, “Faire pour la vue ce que le téléphone fait pour l’ouïe”: 78-84.

not “welcomed with open arms and anxious hearts by their father and mother,”⁸⁰ as imagined by H  l  ne, the orphan accompanying them. On the contrary, they are “surprised that neither their father nor their mother was there to greet them”⁸¹ and learn coldly from a concierge speaking through a telephonograph that their parents are not home yet. The father, who is busy at the stock exchange, joins them later; to find out where his wife is, he asks a servant to bring him “Mrs. Ponto’s phono.” The “dialogue” between the young women and the recorded voice of their mother unfolds as follows:

- Remember to change the flowers in the living room, said the telephonograph.
- That’s Mama’s voice, exclaimed Barnabette, always the same.
- Go to the Trocadero for their samples of R  gence satin and their noodles from Colmar... Change the water in the aquarium... I’ll be back around eleven...
- Ah! exclaimed Barbe and Barnabette.
- ... I am having lunch at the English Caf   with a few political lady friends. The telephonograph stopped.
- That’s all? asked Barnabette. Nothing for us?⁸²

The first sentence, whose grammatical subject is the machine, not the individual uttering the words, produces a dehumanization that reinforces the feeling of an absence of the mother, busy with other tasks. In a society that has seen the emancipation of women, the wife of the rich banker, depicted with a degree of misogyny by Robida, is very active politically. The dashes signal that characters speak in turns, even though no genuine conversation is initiated, since the mother’s recorded speech does not allow for any interaction. In fact, the lines of the young women act as commentaries, allowing the novelist to signify their disappointment. While Barnabette does find some pleasure in the recognition of her mother’s voice, which brings a human dimension – the inalienable features of the voice’s texture make it possible to reconstruct the presence of the speaker in part – she is dumbfounded that no declaration is addressed to her, excluding her defini-

80 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 6.

81 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 9.

82 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 10.

tively from any relation of communication.⁸³ Communication technologies involving sound alone are the only ones that fail to make distance irrelevant between beings⁸⁴ – unlike the telephonoscope, whose visual component ensures a gain in presence.⁸⁵ Robida even specifies that with this device, “the illusion is complete, absolute.”⁸⁶ Sound plays a part in the creation of this “telephonoscopic” representation of a stage performance, however, since the novelist also imagines a “chamber theater” in which actors play merely by having their voices heard over the telephone.⁸⁷ Indeed, telephony and phonography both result from a set of anthropocentric and demiurgic attempts to reproduce the human through “speaking machines”: as Jacques Perriault has noted, “what communication machines have to offer [is] the circulation of simulacra, or ‘effigies,’ when it comes to individuals.”⁸⁸ The disembodied voices that reach us through the telephone receiver are often vested with a power of presentification. *Presence* requires the *present* of simultaneity, which is why phonography, postponing as it does the transmission of the message, partly fails to meet the compensatory role assigned to “regulatory machines,” to borrow Jacques Perriault’s term.⁸⁹ In the De Lorde play previously mentioned, the husband goes as far as to forget the distance separating him from his wife – until dramatic facts remind him of it, before a definitive, deadly separation. Indeed, audition over the telephone makes his interlocutor as present to him as is possible: “Do you not think it so admirable: you are close to me... I can sense the least inflections of your voice... of your gestures... I can almost see you... Yes, I can see you, my love... My dear love... (He kisses her over the phone).”⁹⁰ With the mental image produced by the recognition of the voice, this passage is reminiscent of Robida’s characters and their outpourings over the telephonoscope (Fig. 7). Each scientific or

83 I want to point out that epistolary correspondence in *The Twentieth Century* also goes through the phonograph, following a use that Du Moncel had contemplated. See Du Moncel, *Le Téléphone, le microphone et le phonographe* 299-300.

84 The phonograph also provides quite a pathetic trace of the unfaithful Mr. Montgiscard to his spouse-to-be, who in his absence has the device repeat the pledges of love he has recorded with it. Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 217.

85 As to the phone conversation, it turns out to be a deception in the case of Jules Montgiscard’s proposal, as if the absence of the interlocutor’s image enabled him to conceal his dishonesty. Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 213-16.

86 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 53.

87 Robida, *The Twentieth Century* 66.

88 Perriault, *La Logique de l’usage* 55.

89 “The project of realization [of an invention] is linked to the perception of an imbalance [...] [which] may be a lack of information, absence, loneliness, war, disability or handicap.” Perriault, *La Logique de l’usage* 62.

90 De Lorde and Foley, *Au téléphone* 30.



Fig. 7. Albert Robida, *Le Vingtième siècle*.

theoretical discourse, each discourse of imagination negotiates in its own way the ambivalent status of the *presence-absence* of the interlocutor on the telephone: to mention but a few examples, which should be put in a specific context of discursive production, it seems that many texts like the passage from De Lorde give the voice a very strong power of presence, but they coexist with the field of media theory, where Marshall McLuhan asserts that the user of the telephone is unable to effect an act of visualization⁹¹ and Jean-François Lyotard stigmatizes the disembodiment telecommunications entail.⁹²

It does not come as a surprise, then, that cinema frequently seized on the motif of the telephone,⁹³ as early as the “silent” era or, as it is called in French, the “mute” era – a period in which cinema called for virtual speech,⁹⁴

91 McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 267-68.

92 Jean-François Lyotard, “Something Like: ‘Communication... without Communication,’” in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1991).

93 See Ned Schantz, “Telephonic Film,” *Film Quarterly* 56.4 (2003) 23-35.

94 See Rick Altman’s theses, “Quelques idées reçues sur le son du cinéma muet qu’on ne saurait plus tenir,” *Le Muet a la parole* 81-99, some of which notably apply to films representing a phone conversation.

or speech actualized by the lecturer during the screening,⁹⁵ in fact. Cinema then took advantage of its “ability to involve all of them [technical media] by representing or using them within itself,”⁹⁶ according to François Albera, thereby producing a discourse on these media: for Tom Gunning, “[i]f the telephone had not existed, film would have had to invent it.”⁹⁷ In return, the figuration of the telephonic medium and its uses, related to the removal of any spatial limit and the institution of simultaneity, was not without effect on film language and film narration,⁹⁸ particularly with regard to the practice of crosscutting.⁹⁹ A recent example could be 24 (Robert Cochran, Joel Surnow and Howard Gordon, 2001-2010), one of the most famous television series of the decade: its narrative premises depend on the generalization of cellular telephony, which appears in various applications throughout the episodes (distance conversation, teleconference, geolocation, microphone, remote control, etc.). Indeed, some choices, both formal (multiplication of split screens) and narrative (supposed equivalence between time of the plot and time of the story), are founded on the omnipresence of cellular phones in the diegesis.

In fact, the interest of the present study in the links between moving images and telephony in the late nineteenth century is inevitably informed by the contemporary context. As Maurizio Ferraris has shown with regard to mobile telephony,¹⁰⁰ we find ourselves again in a hybrid era, between orality and record, an era of intermediality characterized by a permeability of practices in telecommunications and recording technologies. This is why

95 See Martin Sopocy's comments on James Williamson's *Are You Here*: Martin Sopocy, “Un cinéma avec narrateur. Les premiers films narratifs de James A. Williamson,” *Les Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* 29 (Perpignan, 1979): 108-25.

96 François Albera, “Le cinéma ‘projeté’ et les périodisations de l’histoire technique du cinéma,” *Cinema Beyond Film* 393. In a note, the author brings up the example of the “role of the telephone in film narrative.”

97 Tom Gunning, “Fritz Lang Calling: The Telephone and the Circuits of Modernity,” in *Allegories of Communication. Intermedial concerns from cinema to digital*, John Fullerton and Jan Olsson, eds. (Rome: John Libbey, 2004) 23.

98 See Eileen Bowser, “Le coup de téléphone dans les primitifs du cinéma,” in *Les Premiers Ans du cinéma français*, ed. Pierre Guibbert (Perpignan: Institut Jean Vigo, 1985); Jan Olsson, “Calling the Shots: Communication, Transportation and Motion Picture Technologies in the Teens,” in *Le Cinématographe* 273-81; by the same author, on the technique of the split screen, see “Framing Silent Calls: Coming to Cinematographic Terms with Telephony,” in *Allegories of Communication* 157-92.

99 See Philippe Gauthier, *Le Montage alterné avant Griffith. Le cas Pathé* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008) 113-15.

100 Maurizio Ferraris, *T'es où? Ontologie du téléphone mobile* (2005; Paris: Albin Michel, 2006), part I.



Fig. 8. *The movie theater comes with the telephone.* ©Etienne Lavallée.

I have occasionally given myself license, in a perspective inspired at times by Friedrich Kittler,¹⁰¹ not to limit this research to discourses from the late nineteenth century. I also wanted, on the sidelines of this archaeological enterprise, to use its frame of reference to weave together connections between several distinct periods. The aim was to propose a comparative study that could widen the scope of observations on an archaeology of sound cinema and start a reflection on their fruitfulness in the form of ways into a few specific aspects. Nowadays cellular technology is not used only for communication, but also to look up a schedule or a list of contacts, to write messages, to go on the Internet, to take pictures or shoot videos, to view these images, etc. The improbable machine created by Canadian computer graphics artist Etienne Lavallée, which appears on the cover of the 2001 edition of *Understanding Media* in the “Bibliothèque québécoise” (Fig. 8), thus says something of the reversal that seems to have occurred. In this hybrid machine, the movie theater is included in the form of a black-and-white image in a circular screen replacing the dial of an old telephone, as if to remind us that, on an epistemological level, (talking) “cinema” is perhaps not (or no longer) necessarily the entity encompassing other media, even if its centrality as a dispositive remains a measuring stick when thinking about them.

101 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1999).