CELL PHONES AND CINEMA: FILMIC REPRESENTATIONS OF MOBILE PHONE TECHNOLOGY AND NEW AGENCY

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Steven J. Pustay

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by

STEVEN J. PUSTAY

has been approved for
the School of Film
and the College of Fine Arts by

___________________________

Adam J. Knee
Assistant Professor of Film

___________________________

Charles McWeeny
Dean, College of Fine Arts
Abstract

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CELL PHONES AND CINEMA: FILMIC REPRESENTATIONS OF MOBILE PHONE TECHNOLOGY AND NEW AGENCY (73 pp.)

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This work observes representations of telephony in film, examining the shifts occurring in such representations since the advent of mobile telephony. The text will argue that the most important change between past images of land-line telephony and new images of mobile telephony is the shift from impotence to agency. Where once the land-line telephone caused narrative impotence in which a character was unable to affect the outcome of events occurring on the other end of their telephonic connection, new representations of mobile telephony provide agency for the user to accomplish this and other tasks. In addition, it will be theorized that future cinematic characters will inherently possess greater agency than their past counterparts thanks to the mobile phones they will be expected to carry.

Approved: ______________________________

Adam J. Knee

Assistant Professor of Film
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Introduction:

From Impotency to Agency

In Michael Apted’s 2002 revenge drama *Enough*, Jennifer Lopez portrays a woman who finds herself in an abusive relationship, yet she maintains the strength of will not only to leave her abuser but also to train herself for a physical confrontation with him in order to protect herself and her daughter. The film’s climax features a night-time attack where she breaks into his home, disables his security devices (including cutting the telephone line), and waits to catch him off guard. Upon his arrival, she confronts him about his past abuse, laughing off his attempt to call for help using his home phone. Suddenly, however, he pulls a small cellular phone out of his pocket and tries to call again, but she informs him that she has purchased a cellular signal jammer that is blocking his call, trapping him in the home without any form of communication to the outside world. Watching the film upon its release, I was struck by screenwriter Nicholas Kazan’s decision to use valuable screen time during this final sequence to explain both how and why Lopez’s character chose to disable her abuser’s cell phone, a choice that, for me, emphasized the impact that mobile phones were beginning to have on social life. Interested, I began to notice the increasingly frequent use of mobile phones within cinematic narratives, and started to sense a difference in the relatively new technology’s role within those narratives versus the older images of land-line telephony. Examining the representations of both land-line telephony and modern mobile telephony, it becomes clear that a shift has occurred in which past representations of narrative impotency caused
by land-line telephones have been replaced with representations of agency granted by mobile phones, and that modern cinematic characters are thus now expected to have greater inherent agency than their past counterparts thanks to the mobile phones they possess.

The impact of the mobile phone on society has not gone unnoticed by cultural scholars. James E. Katz has written and edited several texts that deal with the social aspects of mobile communication in both private and public spaces. Rich Ling, in works like *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone’s Impact on Society*, categorizes the social codes that are associated with mobile telephony as well as examines the impact the technology has on the planning of everyday events. Elsewhere, as in the collection edited by Anadam Kavoori and Noah Arceneaux, the mobile phone’s connection to other media forms, including video and the internet, is observed and theorized. The types of changes in American society discussed within these texts often bleed into the representations of that society within fictionalized worlds, yet very infrequently do these texts comment upon the representations of mobile phones within popular culture.

Throughout this text, I will therefore attempt to reposition the narrative function of telephony within modern American cinema from a device that causes impotency to one that grants agency, a shift brought about by the widespread adoption of the modern mobile phone. The representations of land-line telephony throughout early and mid-twentieth century cinema have been dominated by images of narrative impotence caused by the telephone’s lack of mobility, yet the mobile phone’s portability erases this impotence, instead allowing these new cinematic telephones to actually grant the user
agency to accomplish his or her goals. For the purposes of this work, I am defining agency as the ability for fictional characters to accomplish a given task or goal, with the mobile phones in the examples cited becoming the means by which they are able to access this agency, and without these phones their tasks would be either impossible or exponentially more difficult.

The structure of this text will therefore serve to contrast the various cinematic representations of telephony since the roughly concurrent inventions of motion pictures and telephony in the late nineteenth century. The first chapter will discuss prominent theories about land-line telephony’s function in cinema prior to the advent of the mobile phone, citing the work of such scholars as Tom Gunning, David Crane, Michael Chion, and J.P. Telotte. Examining the commonalities among these theories, I will display the manner in which cinematic telephones have (in direct opposition to the public perception of the telephone as a safety device) been used to cause narrative impotence within the characters who utilize them, by which these characters are connected mentally with those on the other end but cannot physically affect the outcome of events occurring there. In the second chapter, I will look towards the new images of the mobile telephone in film, establishing the newfound agency that is granted by its mobility in two filmic texts that heavily incorporate the technology. Here, I will argue that the mobile phone now allows its user to affect the outcome of events on the other end of the connection in a direct, physical manner, an ability allowed by not only the instantaneous mobile communication it provides but also the secondary functions of today’s mobile phones, such as video and text messaging and global positioning services. Finally, the third chapter will further
demonstrate this new agency by examining sequels and remakes that incorporate mobile telephony into existing narrative worlds, observing how the addition of the mobile phone affects the abilities of the characters within these texts.

Communication discourses relating to new technologies are constantly in flux, and although these chapters focus mainly on the changes in cinematic representations of telephony brought about by the mobile phone, it is important to stress the relationship between invention and representation. James Watson, writing about the power of media, states that “media have never been either separate from or independent of the forces which create them and which in turn they shape and influence,” a statement that reflects the circular nature of cinematic representations of technological devices, in which they influence further development by pointing to both strengths and weaknesses of a given technology while also shifting towards new images at the advent of new technologies or the supplementation of old ones.4 Regarding these new images of telephony, I will contend that the invention of the mobile phone directly caused this shift in cinematic representations, and that new discourses are thus informed by the nature of these images. Although mobile phones affect both society and cinema on several different levels, this text will argue that the most significant change brought about in the representations of telephony in film by the mobile phone is the shift from images of impotence to images of agency, with examples clearly illustrating this shift.
To fully understand the impact of mobile phone technology on modern cinematic narratives, as well as to formulate the changes such technology brings about, it is imperative to first understand the manner in which land-line telephones have been represented in film. Therefore, I will use this chapter to examine various theories about the roles and representations that telephonic technology has had throughout the early decades of the cinema, attempting to find intersections in these theories as well as points of digression. The telephone is first and foremost a tool for long-distance communication, yet like any technology developed for a specific purpose or use, its impact on everyday life often exceeds this original intent. Likewise, the function of such technologies in film may seem, at first glance, to simply serve as narrative tools to further a given plot, but in fact they often comment on and enhance the nature of the characters within these technologized worlds.

For centuries the standard for long-distance exchange was the letter, but the turn of the twentieth century brought the telegraph and, more prominently, the telephone to the forefront of communication. Films were, in similar fashion and at the same historical moment, gaining momentum as a popular source of narrative entertainment versus the novel and stage play. The fact that the two new technologies would quickly interact should come as no surprise given the nature of the letter as a popular narrative device in pre-twentieth century literature, and, as Ned Schantz asks, “if the telephone replaced the
letter and became the ubiquitous modern instrument for pursuing business or pleasure at a distance, and film replaced literature as the dominant narrative form, what would it mean to think of cinema as an epoch of the telephone system?”

It would thus seem obvious that the telephone would claim the same primary narrative use that the letter had served in literature, but creative artists would always find a way to utilize the device for other purposes. For example, Francis Ford Coppola discerned that a scene with the telephone handset covering a subject’s mouth could be shot during principle photography, allowing for new dialog to be added in post-production in case of gaps in the plot or storyline. “I would always put a telephone conversation in any film,” he once stated. “I would have put one in Land of the Pharaohs. Why not? It’s a small anachronism compared with the way all that ancient stuff is being filmed in Cinemascope.”

Yet while the individual uses for the telephone are greatly varied, specific trends were beginning to be identified as early as the silent era thanks to the frequency of interaction between cinema and the telephone.

Indeed, the creators of both emerging technologies found each other fairly useful, often simultaneously as promotion and proof of legitimacy. Tom Gunning’s work has pointed to the idea that early filmmakers chose to utilize up-and-coming technologies such as the telephone to express the medium’s modernity and, as he puts it, its “power to move through time and space.”

Yet the telephone industry also saw potential in the cinema’s ability to visualize the usefulness of instant long-distance exchange. A 1916 issue of Telephone Engineer, a journal positioned at the forefront of telecommunications, published a list of films displaying the new technology titled “The Telephone in the
Movies.” According to the article, the use of telephones in films like “The Supreme Test,” “Bobbie of the Ballet,” “A Fight for Love,” and “The Phone Message” proved not only that the device “is indispensable in modern everyday life” but that “it is not used on the screen as a makeshift only, but it also plays an important role and adds verisimilitude to bald and unconvincing narratives.” Even with the manufacturers of the technology assessing the usefulness of telephones as a narrative device, it was up to filmmakers themselves to choose the function and role of phones in the cinema, a role that David Crane positions quite differently from the publishers of Telephone Engineer.

In his article “Projections and Intersections: Paranoid Textuality in Sorry, Wrong Number,” Crane discusses the manner in which Hollywood films have used telephones to arouse paranoia within their characters, causing the technology to effectively become an agent for that paranoia. Throughout his essay, Crane is able to successfully juxtapose the real-life purpose and intent of telephone communication versus its narrative role in Hollywood fiction. To demonstrate the original intentions of the telephone as a product/service, Crane quotes telephone historian Ellen Lupton’s description of AT&T operator recruitment ads of the 1930’s through the 1950’s, ads that lead a search for young, cheerful girls to be “the Voice with a Smile.” Crane notes that the ads reflect the idea of the telephone providing safety and comfort for its customers (and in particular for women), while examples of films from the era simultaneously demonstrate how the opposite image was being utilized for the telephone in cinema, effectively causing the device to “slip from a signifier of comfort to a harbinger of doom.” In fact, these paranoid images would persist in Hollywood until the advent of the mobile phone, which
would finally present the types of positive representations that the telephone industry sought to create.

Crane’s most effective analysis comes from the 1948 film *Sorry, Wrong Number*, starring Barbara Stanwyck as a bed-ridden wife who, while attempting to contact her husband at work, overhears a phone conversation about a murder plot, of which she begins to suspect she is to be the victim. By numbering and sequencing the phone calls that occur within the film, a total of sixteen, Crane reveals how the telephone itself turns from being an tool of communication and safety (the early calls) to that of investigation (the middle calls) to finally becoming the agent of paranoia and fear itself (the final calls). Without the telephone by her side as communication device (and thus serving its intended purpose displayed in the AT&T ads) Stanwyck would not have been able to discover the plot on her life, but as she continues to use the phone its narrative significance continues to develop, with the phone itself gaining an active role in the story whereby it no longer serves her needs but instead acts as a signal for ill news and symbol for impotence in action.

What interests me most about Crane’s study is his notion of the telephone as an implicit tool of paranoia; its ability to help the characters communicate is merely a side-effect of its ability to cause a psychological response within the audience themselves. As the film plays out each of the sixteen phone calls becomes more jarring in its effect to the viewer, until the final rings cause the audience as much panic as Stanwyck’s on-screen heroine. Although she is able to use the phone to discover that her husband is behind the plot, his attempts to call off the killer by using the phone (and thus Crane’s paranoid
agent itself) are futile, resulting only in the killer picking up the other end after suffocating Stanwyck and replying “sorry, wrong number.” Ultimately, this inability of a character to affect the outcome of events occurring on the opposite end of the telephone connection is a central motif in many films utilizing the device, and although Crane’s work focuses mainly on one film, his argument about paranoid representations is strengthened elsewhere in the work of other scholars like Sheldon Hall and Tom Gunning.

For Hall, the paranoid agent appears most prominently in a minor work from Alfred Hitchcock, well known for his work in the suspense genre. In his essay “Dial ‘M’ for Murder,” Hall discusses the filmmaking techniques used in Hitchcock’s film by the same name, and in particular focuses on a lengthy sequence in which the film’s female protagonist, played by the auteur’s favorite blond, Grace Kelly, fends off a would-be assassin. Hall’s description of the events leading up to the foiled murder illustrates two key theories behind the use of the telephone in the film, one in which the device is again seen as an agent for paranoia (particularly for the audience) and a second that is the author’s main focus, the audience’s split identification that is made possible through the use of the telephone.9

Although not stated explicitly, it is easy to see how David Crane’s theory applies to the film, as Hitchcock devises a sequence in which the audience is aware of a plot where a man will attack Grace Kelly upon receiving a signal in the form of a phone call from her husband, who is in fact behind the murder attempt. Aware of the audience’s anxiety and, of course, paranoia over the eventual phone call, Hitchcock stretches time by
inserting a now-famous extreme close up of the husband’s finger dialing the numbers of the rotary pay phone, implicating the telephone as a third party in the murder plot and thus emphasizing its inherent guilt in participating with the husband’s plan. Furthermore, an insert shot appears of the telephone exchange physically making the connection between the two phones, a shot that Hall sees as “needed here only, it would seem, to emphasize the appropriateness of ‘mechanism,’” again explicitly announcing to the audience the role that the technology is playing in the attack. Unfortunately, Hall’s insight into the positioning of the telephone as a pseudo-weapon ends here as he moves on to discuss the nature of the attacker himself, but Hall does use the scene to make one other important point about the nature of the telephone in a cinematic context.

During the events leading up to the murder attempt, Hitchcock intercuts multiple lines of action, one in which Kelly is preparing to go to bed while her attacker secretly enters the apartment, and a second where her husband waits for the right time to place his phone call while chatting with associates at a dinner party. Hall points to a very complex use of split identification for the audience between Kelly as the victim and her husband as the perpetrator, tied together by the telephone itself due the audience’s awareness that a phone call will eventually connect them. During the sequence, we witness the husband constantly checking his watch, waiting for the appropriate time to place his phone call. Suddenly, both he and the audience simultaneously realize that the watch has stopped moving and is twenty minutes behind, and thus the audience feels empathy with him in the form of anxiety over his ability to make the call, heightened by the fact that another man is already using the public phone when the husband rushes to place it.
Yet, as quickly as Hitchcock has tricked the audience into identifying with the husband, we cut to see Kelly’s character preparing to go to sleep, and suddenly we are back to identifying with her situation as a potential victim. In this way, the viewer feels an actual immediate physical consequence awaits her based on every move and decision of her husband despite the distance separating the two, which is achieved not through editing alone but also because of the telephone’s ability for instant interaction and connection despite spatial separation. In fact, the knowledge that the technology behind the phone can instantly signal the killer on the other end is what makes these two lines of action connect in such a powerful way, and although the cinema has an inherent ability to display parallel action, the telephone is used to help strengthen the connection between these disparate places and achieve that “power to move through time and space” that Tom Gunning has referred to.\(^\text{12}\)

The unique spatial and temporal relationship set up by the telephone, in which characters can communicate between discrete spaces instantaneously, is at the heart of Gunning’s 1990 essay “Heard Over the Phone: The Lonely Villa and the de Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology.” In particular, Gunning notes how the new technologies invented during the early era of cinema affected the structures of modern life in much the same way as they allowed for more complex structures in fiction.\(^\text{13}\) In addition, Gunning examines the dual impact that the telephone and other technologies had on their users to both connect and separate people in various ways, and how the cinema interpreted this dichotomy. Utilizing a quote by Freud in which he questions the benefits of the day’s latest technological advances, Gunning points to the fact the while
technology is constantly finding a way to bring people closer despite spatial distance, it is also technology that spreads us farther apart. Thus Freud’s example states that we may not have needed telephonic technology to contact a distant friend if that friend hadn’t been moved away by the technology of the railway, an example that closely resembles the dilemma facing the protagonists in Gunning’s filmic examples.

Gunning begins his exploration of the telephone’s role in early cinema with D.W. Griffith’s 1909 one-reeler *The Lonely Villa*. Examining its plot of a traveler who calls home only to discover that burglars are breaking into his house while his wife and child helplessly defend themselves, Gunning discovered that several other films of the period utilized a similar structure and that, in fact, the basis for all of these adaptations was a 1901 play by the central playwright of the Grand Guignol theater in Paris, André de Lorde.14 Yet subtle changes in the plot of each adaptation, and the ability of the telephonic technology to operate properly in each case, lead to major differences in the telephone’s function as a narrative device. In the original de Lorde play, titled *Au Téléphone* (At the Telephone), the protagonist, André Marex, is heading to Paris on business and stops by a friend’s home to rest for the evening. Although his own home is located in the remote countryside, the wealthy Marex has had a telephone installed for business purposes. When his male servant is forced to leave Marex’s wife and child alone for the evening, the frightened wife calls for her husband. At first he reassures her that everything will be okay, but suddenly he hears the sounds of a break-in and he is forced to listen painfully as burglars murder his family. Gunning points to the resulting narrative impotence of Marex as the consequence of the telephone itself, an impotence in
which Marex is connected to his wife psychologically but not physically. “Electronic sound can pass to and fro instantly,” Gunning describes, “but the flesh and blood husband and father remains fixed and humiliated.”

Griffith, on the other hand, is not so dark with his interpretation of the material, choosing to allow the husband (who had, in this case, phoned home due to an automobile breakdown) to race home and narrowly rescue his family from the hands of the burglars. Gunning points to one major difference between *Au Téléphone* and *The Lonely Villa* aside from the fate of the protagonist’s family, an alteration in the success of the telephone itself in establishing a connection between the men and their wives. Whereas Marex listens helplessly as his wife and child are murdered, Griffith’s hero is interrupted in his conversation when one of the burglars cuts the phone line, causing *The Lonely Villa*’s most extreme moment of panic and frustration. In both cases the fathers are “rendered hysterical by silence” as Gunning states, but where once the “competence of the technological connection” caused panic and fear at the realization of the death of the family, a little under a decade later it was the malfunction of this technology that seemingly causes this same terror. Gunning even sets up a parallel for this anxiety with the railway that Freud pointed to, whereby passengers were originally frightened by the mere idea of traveling at such high speeds on a functioning locomotive, but were later alarmed by the possibility of technological malfunction resulting in a train wreck.

Although it would seem that de Lorde’s original treatment better reinforces David Crane’s notion of the telephone as a device for paranoia, through which the hero is left, as *The New York Dramatic Mirror* described in their original review, “maddened by the
thought of his impotency,” Griffith’s piece also reveals this notion in a more subtle way, one that seems to escape even Gunning himself.\textsuperscript{17} Au Téléphone’s protagonist is left impotent precisely because of his telephonic connection to his wife, a connection he is afraid to sever and which physically roots him to his colleague’s home. The patriarch in The Lonely Villa, on the other hand, has his connection cut by a third party, freeing him to attempt to physically reunite with his wife and thus allowing for the dramatic last-second rescue. While Gunning sees this loss of connection as merely a point of anxiety and frustration, the actual destruction of the ‘agent of paranoia’ becomes the motivation for the rescue, suggesting that the telephone itself is in many ways accountable for and implicit in the death of Marex’s family, much in the same way it is used later in Dial ’M’ for Murder. Even so, it is quite literally questions about the validity of Gunning’s argument for most films in the latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century that drives Ned Schantz in his essay “Telephonic Film.”\textsuperscript{18}

Writing earlier in the “Heard Over the Phone” essay, Gunning refers to the viewer’s position when watching the cross-cutting in films like The Lonely Villa as being a “switchboard operator of narrative messages.”\textsuperscript{19} For Schantz, this assertion is of particular interest in relation to the breadth of popular film theory in which, according to Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the viewer is positioned as a male spectator.\textsuperscript{20} However, as we have already seen in David Crane’s example of the AT&T recruitment ads, the switchboard operator has often been an inherently feminine role, particularly during the height of the job’s usefulness in the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, and when the operator’s role is combined with a second feminine position of the
office secretary, the text reveals that “an anonymous female network is at the very heart of male telephone traffic.” Although Schantz uses this concept to assert that telephonic film should be of interest for feminist film theory, he seems to lose track of this noteworthy hypothesis and instead moves forward with a second objective: to define and categorize the classic representation of the telephone in Hollywood cinema.

Schantz opens the bulk of his essay with a quote from Claude S. Fisher which reads “few Americans found the telephone dramatic beyond about 1910.” Considering Fisher’s estimate is only one year after *The Lonely Villa* was produced, it is clear why Schantz feels a need to reposition the role of the telephone for the middle 20th century. In fact, given the nature of the variety of cinematic mediums used today as well as the ever-increasing role of telephones in modern society, Schantz sees the middle 20th century as being the most stable period for both the cinema and the telephone, a time when “movies were movies, and phones were phones.” Therefore, if a true “Classical Hollywood Cinema” exists, he contends, then so too must there be a “Classical Hollywood Telephone,” a representation that dominates the screen during this time of technological stability. This representation, he finds, is not so different than the quotidian reality of the object itself, in which speakers can present an idealized version of themselves, especially when compared to exchanges that involve both speech and the physicality of the body, a physicality that can betray unwanted truths about an individual and which, in turn, can be repressed through the use of the telephone. However, it is almost always understood that this idealized self is in part a lie, and for Schantz “an assertion of the speaker’s control of discourse at the expense of the listener’s knowledge.”
To demonstrate the filmic representation of this give and take between the speaker and the listener, Schantz uses several films as examples, including Howard Hawk’s 1946 adaptation of Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. When Lauren Bacall first comes to see Humphrey Bogart’s detective Marlowe with a case of blackmail, he asks why she hasn’t gone to the police, a question which compels her to pick up his phone and begin to explain herself to the officer on duty. Realizing her desperate nature, Bogart snatches away the phone, begins to make up a story about his mother, and when he passes the phone back to Bacall she carries on his bluff. As such, the nature of the telephone allows Bogart to present an alternate, and, in this case, useful version of himself that would not be possible if they were with the officer in person. Added to this, Bacall’s choice to play along with his story allies them for the rest of the film through their mutual understanding of the ‘game’ that they have played. Yet even though the telephone was so integral to their ruse, it ultimately remains a background element in the scene, a final contention for Schantz about the nature of telephonic film.

The ideal “Classical Hollywood Phone,” it seems, is an object that can convey essential information about the nature of the characters and world that surround it without calling direct attention to the apparatus itself. In this way the telephone becomes a useful tool for filmmakers who wish to reveal key information about the inner nature of the characters they are portraying without drawing attention to their means of cinematic discourse. Schantz sees this information as dealing most often with themes of love and death, and therefore the telephone is “well-suited to genres that deliver those messages as a matter of course.”
J.P. Telotte seems to agree, as his examination of telephonic representations in the film noir genre clearly conveys these themes. For Telotte, the telephone in cinema represents many dualities, most of which he pinpoints through examples from film noir. His article, “The Call of Desire and The Film Noir,” uses the genre to discuss what he sees as an “endemic alienation” within individuals in our society, an alienation that we attempt to resolve through the long-distance connections made possible by the telephone. Yet even as we combat this alienation our use of the telephone itself demonstrates an inherent inability to satisfy our desire in a normal fashion through actual human interaction. In this way the visual representation of the telephone can play both a positive and negative role in film, the former of which allows characters to both express their desire and attempt to attain it while the latter stems from the resulting frustration they feel when the technology cannot fully achieve that desire.

This duality of desire and frustration is clearly seen in Telotte’s first example, the 1946 film Detour. Detour establishes its main character’s desire to reunite with his long-distance girlfriend through a phone call and a subsequent cross-country journey punctuated by several shots of the very telephone wires that connected the two lovers to begin the film. Telotte contends, however, that these wires represent not only that connection but also a “potentially destructive web of constraints” signified by the visual image of the criss-crossing wires juxtaposed with the obstacle that blocks the protagonist from realizing his desire, namely a woman who blackmails him into participating in a complex con. This classic femme fatale threatens to expose the protagonist’s false identity (which he stole while hitchhiking from a stranger who died of a heart attack)
through yet another phone call, only this time to the police. Calling her bluff, the protagonist dares her to make the call, but when she locks herself in a room with the phone he angrily attempts to pull the phone cord out from under the door, inadvertently strangling her when it coils around her neck. In mere moments the telephone shifts from an image of potential connection for the main character to a “sign of [his] irreversible human isolation,” and thus, as Telotte illustrates, “the very mechanism that symbolizes his longing surely seals his fate.”

After using *Sorry, Wrong Number* to point to many of the same themes that David Crane sees in the film, Telotte moves on to Fritz Lang’s *The Blue Gardenia*, another tale of false identities and murder all revolving around the telephone exchange. When a telephone operator mistakenly answers a call intended for her roommate, she agrees to go out with the man on the other end. After a night of drinking, she is taken back to his apartment where a struggle breaks out between the two, but after learning of the man’s murder the next day she cannot recall if she was the woman who killed him. Wanting to confess her guilt, she places another call to a newspaper reporter looking for the killer, but the two discover together that she is in fact not the murderer after all. Throughout the film, phone calls are placed in an attempt to possess the desired, whether it be a sexual conquest or a guilty confession. As Telotte has previously pointed out, the use of the telephone here reveals both “the impulse to acquire, possess, or control other people or things, and (paradoxically) that sense of how much we are ourselves already acquired, possessed, or controlled by the very nature of desire.”
Interestingly, the manner in which the lead female character of *The Blue Gardenia* uses the telephone to mask her true identity, at first with the murdered man and secondly through her anonymous confession to the reporter, also serves to demonstrate the main hypothesis about telephonic exchange made by Michel Chion in his text “The Voice in Cinema.” Chion analyzes the various technical forms that telephonic conversation can take in cinema. Depending on the filmmaker’s choices as to which sides of an exchange they depict visually versus whom will be heard aurally, the viewer will form various identifications with the fictitious characters. Especially interesting for Chion is the ability of the phone to create suspense by either denying the audience the ability to identify a speaker on the other end of a particular telephonic conversation or, as with *The Blue Gardenia*, to inform the audience when a character is presenting a false identity. Chion notes that suspense is often the result of parallel editing, one of the key figures in cinematic suspense according to Pascal Bonitzer, but which can also form out of the audience’s desire to identify a non-localized voice. In fact, suspense is often built through the denial of crosscutting when the viewer remains with one character (whom Chion labels the *tele-locutor*) during a telephone call but can only hear the opposite character (the *proxi-locutor*).\(^{32}\) In these cases, the viewer develops a particularly strong identification with the on-screen character as they attempt, just as the character themselves attempt, to localize and identify the voice on the other end. Chion points to the film *When a Stranger Calls* as an example here, a film that I will discuss in greater detail later. In the film the viewer is positioned with the protagonist as she is harassed by an anonymous caller, and suspense arises as both she and the audience attempt to locate
the voice. In many ways, Chion finds, a non-localized voice gains great power in the cinema, as an audience’s ability to separate truth from fiction disintegrates when they are unable to identify the source of a claim or statement.

Likewise, in a situation where the viewer stays with one character but cannot see or hear the person on the other end, it would seem that again a strong bond would form with the on-screen character. However, in these cases the audience often simply becomes an observer, especially when a character we already identify with is presented as a third party within the context of the scene. For example, Chion points to the telephone conversation in *Psycho* when the sheriff calls Norman Bates from his home while Sam and Lila stand by. Our identification becomes skewed as we wish to understand what the sheriff is hearing but are frustrated in such an attempt, and therefore we remain little more than a third party or, as Chion labels it, a “visitor.” Yet even as Chion breaks down the rules of cinematic exchange, he cautions that creating an entire typology of such events would be fruitless insomuch as you can never predict with one-hundred percent accuracy how the audience will identify in every case. To prove this, he points to the trope of the voice emanating from the speaker of a phone next to a recently deceased body, a situation where, unlike the paranoia that develops from the silence in *Au Téléphone* and *The Lonely Villa*, it is the voice that the viewer hears that the body cannot that signifies death.

Ultimately, the telephone in cinema has taken on many representations, from a paranoid agent to a technology of narrative impotence to a dual symbol for desire and frustration. Yet all of these images are the result of a simple tool that allows two people,
rooted in two separate concrete physical spaces, to interact through speech; a tool that is now in a period of transition in which users are not only no longer tied to their physical location but also freed of the constraints of a single style of communication. It is also a tool that is taking on many new forms and functions, ever-increasing its role in our everyday lives. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how representations of telephony in film have shifted away from those of paranoia and impotence thanks to the new mobility of long-distance communication made possible by the mobile phone.
In the last chapter we looked at various theories pertaining to representations of telephones in the early and middle periods of 20th century American cinema, in particular noting the paranoid images of narrative impotence caused by the immobile telephonic connection. As we move into the 21st century, questions arise about the validity of these theories in regards to modern telephony, especially in light of the increasingly available and widely adopted mobile telephone. This chapter will examine the representations of mobile telephony in modern American cinema through close textual analysis of two films whose narratives heavily implement the technology, attempting to find intersections between past theories and these new representations as well as (and perhaps more importantly) discovering how new aspects of narrative immediacy granted by telephonic technology have been adopted by the mainstream cinema to grant characters a greater sense of agency.

The need to recontextualize the role of telephonic technology in film comes as a response to three factors revolving around the mobile phone, all of which will be discussed in more detail later. The first of these factors involves the vary nature of mobile telephony: the ability of the user to be freed of the constraints of a land-line telephone and communicate not only in new and varied spaces but also while traversing these spaces. The second factor deals with the increasingly multi-functional nature of the mobile phone, used not only for long-distance vocal communication but also for pictures,
video, games, accurate time-keeping, global positioning and directions, as well as various other forms of non-verbal communication. Finally, the third factor deals with the adoption of the technology as a common, everyday device used by many strata of the American public. While the former two factors are important when dissecting and defining the role of mobile telephony in American cinema, the latter helps to validate not only the widespread use of mobile phones in modern narratives but also the need to examine the technology’s role within those narratives.

An article published in *TWICE: This Week in Consumer Electronics*, a trade publication dealing with consumer grade technologies, in October of 2006 revealed that nearly three out of four Americans now carry cellular telephones, with a subscriber-base of 219.4 million individual users.\(^1\) According to a combination of data from the Census Bureau and the CTIA (a leading association for the wireless telecommunications industry), the average penetration rate of cellular phones in U.S. was at 57.7 percent in June of 2004, rising to 65.6 the following year before peaking again in 2006 with 73.4 percent of all Americans owning and using a mobile telephone.\(^2\) This widespread adoption in American culture, which itself is bested by the penetration rates of many other countries throughout the world, demonstrates the appearance of the mobile phone as not only a common private communication tool similar to the land-line telephone, but also one used increasingly in public spaces. Rich Ling, a research scientist for a large European telecommunications company (as well as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Udine, Italy), refers to this as “the intrusive nature of mobile telephony” and contends that a mobile call made in a public space contains several clear steps
including “the production of social partitions,” “management of the local situation,” and finally the “reemergence into the local setting.”

Ling’s work is relevant here as it examines the use of mobile telephony in society (a role that is mimicked and reshaped for the fictional worlds of the cinema), and just as the mobile phone plays a specific (and ever-intrusive) role in reality, it also fills a specific role in cinema. Nevertheless, cell phones are increasingly becoming part of the fabric of American culture and as such are justified in their frequent appearance in the modern American cinema that both replicates that culture and influences it.

To understand the impact that the mobility and multi-functionality of mobile phones have had on representations of telephony in film, I will now use close textual analysis of two recent films that not only utilize mobile phones as plot devices but also comment on the impact they have on the individuals within modern society who use them. First, I will look at David R. Ellis’s 2004 film Cellular followed by an examination of Martin Scorsese’s 2006 Academy Award-winning feature The Departed. Both films will serve to demonstrate the changes brought about in the role of telephony in film thanks to the advances in mobile technology; each clearly emphasizing the ability to negotiate space granted by mobile communication while simultaneously focusing on separate aspects of the emergence of the cellular phone as a multi-function device. Rather than causing the narrative impotence seen in past telephonic films, these factors will come together to grant the users of mobile telephony agency to accomplish goals in ways that would not have been possible before its conception.
When researching past theories about telephonic representations in the cinema, it became clear that one film was seen as the standard for telephonic film itself. The 1948 film *Sorry, Wrong Number*, directed by Anatole Litvak from a screenplay by Lucille Fletcher, was referenced time and again by various authors in regards to its use of the telephone. At times the film could be the main focus of an author’s article or essay as we saw with David Crane’s example of an agent of paranoia, while other writers could not resist applying their ideas to the film as a sort of virtual litmus test. David R. Ellis’s *Cellular* is in many ways a very similar film to *Sorry, Wrong Number*. Both clearly identify the telephonic nature of their narratives within their titles, both exist as studio B-movies with a bit of star-power attached, and both emphasize the ability of accidental communication, set in motion by the telephone, to change the course of a person’s life. Yet while the narrative of *Cellular* more clearly parallels the plot of other telephonic films, it is perhaps the singular focus on the possibilities inherent in telephonic communication that ties the film most prominently to *Sorry, Wrong Number* and thus warrants its inclusion in any discussion about the cinematic representations of mobile telephony.

Despite the thematic relationship shared between *Sorry, Wrong Number* and *Cellular*, on a narrative level it is hard to miss the similarities between the latter film and the various adaptations of André de Lorde’s *Au Téléphone*. As discussed earlier, *Au Téléphone*’s plot revolves around a man who is forced to listen over a telephone while his wife and children are attacked at their home, while *Cellular* is likewise the story of a man who listens over a telephone to a kidnapped woman as she struggles with her kidnapper.
The key difference here (and one that sets up the first major change brought about by mobile telephony) is that the protagonist of *Au Téléphone* uses a land-line telephone connection and is therefore rooted to his present physical space, whereas the protagonist of *Cellular* has a mobile phone at his disposal and thus can navigate between different spaces. Examining the narrative of *Cellular*, the difference in function between its protagonist and that of the earlier film adaptations is clearly the result of his use of mobile telephone technology.

*Cellular* opens with the kidnapping of Jessica Martin, an upper middle-class high school teacher and mother portrayed by Kim Basinger. Blindfolded, she is taken to an unknown location and placed in an attic, where her kidnapper (played by Jason Statham) seemingly destroys her only link to the outside world: an aging rotary telephone mounted to the wall. Jessica is inventive, however, and as soon as Statham leaves she begins to cross various wires contained within the shattered remains of the phone in the hopes of gaining a random connection to a nearby phone number. With a fair bit of luck, the phone dials out, and soon she is connected to the cellular phone of the film’s main protagonist, Ryan, played by Chris Evans. Ryan is a college-aged California surfer, who, after some convincing as to the validity of Jessica’s predicament, sets off to find her some help. Within moments of receiving her call, Ryan begins to demonstrate the first fundamental difference between the representations of mobile phone technology in cinema versus the older role of land-line telephony, namely the ability for a constant mobile connection.
For Tom Gunning, the use of the telephone by André Marex in *Au Téléphone* directly results in the character’s narrative impotence, whereby he is unable to affect the outcome of the actions occurring on the other end of the line because the immobility of the land-line connection roots him to his physical space. Ryan, on the other hand, has no such connection to his physical location, and in fact is already in motion between various physical spaces as he is driving when Jessica’s call comes through. It is this ability to negotiate space even while connected to another character over the telephone that grants Ryan agency to change the outcome of events on the other end of that connection, an agency never granted to de Lorde’s Marex or most other characters from past telephonic films. As a result, Ryan is free to attempt to change a great number of incidents in ways that simply would not have been possible before the advent of mobile telephony. For example, while Marex may have wanted to alert the authorities about his family’s situation, he was not willing to sever his connection to his wife and was thus unable to do so. Ryan’s first action, on the other hand, is to drive straight to a police station in an attempt to explain Jessica’s situation, but yet while doing so an even more telling event occurs.

Before Ryan can completely relate the severity of the kidnapping to the police, Jessica learns that her kidnappers are planning to go to her son’s school to abduct him as well. Thanks to their telephonic connection, she informs Ryan and he sets off immediately for the school in an attempt to intersect the boy first. His narrative agency, thus displayed through a rescue attempt that *Au Téléphone*’s Marex could not have possibly considered, is the direct result of the cellular telephone he possesses, whose
mobility allowed him to not only learn of the new abduction plot but also attempt to directly resolve the crisis himself while simultaneously maintaining the type of connection that was so important for Marex. The work of J.P. Telotte clarifies this shift in narrative ability as displayed by characters possessing mobile rather than land-line telephones; where he claims they once were given the opportunity to express their desires through telephonic conversation but were frustrated in their inability to act upon or resolve those desires, I would argue that they now are given the opportunity to immediately act upon those desires, regardless of any spatial constraints.  

This notion is also important in the work of Rich Ling. Ryan’s ability to make immediate changes to his planned rescue in the face of new dangers, and thus instantaneously act upon his desires, is not at all dissimilar to Ling’s concept of “midcourse adjustment” in which a person shifts their course of action when new insights about their task at hand are ascertained through a mobile phone exchange. Because Ling’s work deals with real-world situations, his examples are slightly more down-to-earth than the frantic kidnapping intervention seen in Cellular, detailing how a mother who becomes free to pick up her son after school thus calls the father and redirects him to pick up some milk instead, but the concept remains the same. Other connections can also be made here, such as with Ling’s notion of the “softening of schedules” where the precise nature of time-based agreements can be negotiated in the case of unplanned circumstances. Ryan’s situation is much the same, where his time constraints (in the form of needing to accomplish certain tasks in a set amount of time) are constantly shifted as new situations arise; yet even still Ryan is always updated, ready, and able to
react accordingly thanks to his constant mobile connection to Jessica, a connection that grants him that specific narrative agency. However, *Cellular* is often just as interested in the downside of mobile communication as it is with its ability to grant narrative agency.

In several situations throughout the film, Ryan’s connection to Jessica is threatened by the limitations of the very object that grants it to him. Clear connections are once again established with earlier telephonic films, namely Griffith’s adaptation of *Au Téléphone, The Lonely Villa*. Through that film, we saw not only the panic caused by the destruction of the wires that connected the protagonist to his wife but also how that destruction granted him the ability to act upon his desire to save her. Yet even if the fracture of his telephonic connection granted *The Lonely Villa*’s protagonist the agency needed to mount a rescue attempt, Ryan already possesses an agency to negotiate space thanks to the mobility of his connection. Therefore, it appears that a shift has occurred in which the previous depictions of land-line telephony, which relied on the destruction or cancellation of the telephonic connection to occur in order to grant narrative agency, have been replaced by new representations of mobile telephony in which the characters are deprived of their agency in the face of a severed mobile connection. Thus, in an attempt to offset the agency granted by its mobility, *Cellular*’s modern depiction of telephony features several situations in which its mobile connection can be damaged or disrupted in order to strip Ryan of his agency.

The first of these situations arises when Ryan attempts to inform the police of Jessica’s plight. The officer on duty redirects Ryan to the detective unit located on a higher floor, but as he ascends the stairs he notices a loss of signal strength. *Cellular*
telephones, unlike land-lines, rely on the handset’s ability to receive a satellite signal in the air, a signal that can be blocked by various objects including buildings. Knowing that he needs to keep the connection alive in order to find Jessica, Ryan faces a predicament native to the mobile telephone alone, the negation of mobile connections in certain spaces due to the deficiency of signal. In this case Ryan is given the choice to sever the telephonic connection himself in order to gain assistance but at the cost of losing his own personal agency. At this moment, however, Jessica, and thus Ryan by proxy, learns of her son’s kidnapping plot, a discovery that reinforces for Ryan the importance of maintaining his connection to Jessica in case of more developments.

The next possibility for Ryan to lose his connection occurs when he discovers that his phone’s battery is dying. With the traditional handset land-line telephone (as seen in nearly every example in the previous chapter) power is derived through the same wires that serve to connect two disparate spaces, but with the mobile phone an independent power source is needed. Once again attempting to offset a moment of agency for Ryan, in which he is tracking down the kidnappers in a high speed freeway chase, the film forces Ryan to divert from his plan (another moment of “midcourse adjustment”) to find a charging unit to plug in his dying phone. Interestingly, the mobility of a cellular phone may seemingly increase its safety value (with scholars like Ling pointing to their use during events like the September 11th attacks), but it again comes at the cost potentially losing connection due to the failure of its portable power source.8

Finally, the third moment for a possible loss of connection between Ryan and Jessica occurs when their signal becomes crossed with that of another nearby cell phone
user, causing their separate private conversations to become mixed. This intrusion into the privacy of a telephonic conversation, caused by the malfunction of the technology itself, nearly strips Ryan of his agency and ability to track Jessica down, causing Ryan to experience that same moment of paranoia and panic seen in the original *Au Téléphone*, when the loss of signal seemingly signifies death on the other end. Luckily, in the very moment of technological malfunction he is able to discern which of the nearby cell phone users has now picked up his connection (through a visual confirmation of that person speaking the same words that Ryan is hearing on his end) and by stealing that man’s phone he is able to reconnect to Jessica across their spatial divide. Each of these three instances is interesting because they simultaneously point to the ability of the mobile phone to grant agency to the characters who use them while also displaying the inherent weaknesses of the technology. Yet *Cellular* is also strongly concerned with another aspect of the modern mobile phone aside from its mobility and potential weaknesses: its new role as a multi-function device.

Early on in the film, *Cellular* establishes that the mobile phone carried by the main character is not limited to mobile communication alone. When we first meet Ryan, he and a friend are walking down a California boardwalk in search of Ryan’s ex-girlfriend. His friend has apparently borrowed Ryan’s cell phone and is admiring its features along with something else. “I am videotaping hot chicks walking in their bikinis,” he says to himself, “man, this is the greatest cell phone ever!” The first use of the cell phone’s video capabilities is to serve the male gaze, acting as a surrogate for the film’s camera itself. Indeed, we find that the phone enables Ryan and anyone possessing
it to direct the eyes of the viewer; we see what they choose to capture on video. So even when we fail to see the actual footage that Ryan’s friend is shooting of the scantily-clad women, the film’s camera acknowledges his gaze by swinging to look at them. However, the friend’s next action demonstrates a far greater ability for any character who controls the phone.

“Hold on a second, I’m emailing this to my computer…” the friend excitedly states, “it’s gonna be my new screen-saver.” The inherent mobility of Ryan’s cellular phone has already granted him a unique sense of narrative agency where he is able to receive and relate information from great distances while still maintaining his ability to negotiate space, but this new function of the phone as a mobile video capture device and broadcaster extends this agency even further. Where once the telephone was able to transfer aural signals from one concrete space to another, the modern mobile phone can now instantaneously pass visual information as well, and thus the images that Ryan chooses to capture are not shared with the audience alone but can be seen by any other characters with capable technology regardless of their physical location. Of course, the first uses of the technology in the film downplay the importance of this ability, as we see with the friend spying on women or Ryan jokingly video-taping his ex-girlfriend while she scolds him, but soon enough it becomes an essential part of Ryan’s success at finding Jessica and capturing her kidnappers.

As the film continues, Ryan and Jessica begin to piece together clues to discover that her husband had inadvertently witnessed and video-taped the murder of several gang members by corrupt police officers and that Jessica’s kidnapping was the resulting
attempt by the officers to get the evidence from her husband. For a brief amount of time, Ryan comes into possession of the video camera and its footage, but when cornered by the officers he has no choice but to hand it over. In a film prior to mobile telephony, his next action would most likely be an endeavor to recover the footage before it could be destroyed, but his possession of new technologies grants him an alternate possibility. Using some quick thinking, Ryan secretly filmed the small screen of the video camera with his own capture device, his cellular phone. The multi-function nature of the cell phone itself not only allowed Ryan to make a duplicate of the evidence, but also one that is overlooked by the criminals due to its primary nature as a communications tool. Added to this, Ryan emails the footage to the police and as such is able to immediately relate not only vocal information but also visual information instantaneously the moment that he discovers it, an agency granted to him solely by the cell phone he carries. This secret and hidden communication made possible by the modern mobile phone ultimately saves Jessica and her family, and comes to fruition even more so in Martin Scorsese’s 2006 film The Departed.

Although mobile phones in The Departed do not have the prominent role in the film that they possessed in Cellular, their impact upon the narrative and the characters who inhabit it is no less profound. Throughout the film, nearly every capability of modern mobile telephony not used in Cellular is exploited in some fashion, and the film’s tale of hidden agendas and undercover agents on both sides of the law relies heavily on its lead characters’ capabilities to lead double lives, the direct result of their use of these mobile phone technologies. In fact, what sets The Departed apart from other
“undercover agent” genre films is the ease in which its characters can negotiate not only space but also their own dual-personalities while still being connected to others through their mobile phones. Nowhere is this more obvious than with the two lead characters.

*The Departed* is the story of two undercover agents, each working on an opposite side of the same battle over Boston’s criminal underground. The first of these is Billy Costigan, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, who is recruited into the Boston Police Department’s undercover operation, thanks in part to his tough background, in an attempt to infiltrate the Irish mafia headed by Frank Costello, portrayed by Jack Nicholson. Costello, it turns out, has his own mole in the form of Colin Sullivan, played by Matt Damon, who he nurtured as a youth to become his own personal spy working within the Boston police. Throughout the film, these two men work secretly in an attempt to discover each other’s identities, a cat and mouse game made all the more difficult by the cell phones they constantly carry which allow them to remain in continuous mobile contact with both sides of the conflict. Ultimately, the function of cell phones within the film is to bestow the main characters with a unique duality to be two people at once, to occupy two roles within the same physical space.

For Billy Costigan, this duality comes in the form of dual cell phones. At all times Billy carries a phone through which he stays connected to the crime lord that he spies upon as well as a second phone which connects him to the only two men who know that he is an undercover agent. In fact, the conflicting purposes of each phone are even represented visually as the former is encased in a blood-red plastic to remind Billy of the violence that surrounds him every day while the other has a cool blue and grey exterior
reminiscent of the clean and efficient nature of the police department itself. The simple act of carrying two phones allows Billy to stay connected to his reality regardless of his present space and company, an ability that helps him to maintain his sanity despite the stress associated with his position. To illustrate this point, let’s compare Billy’s role to that of another cinematic undercover agent, Donnie Brasco.

The title character of Mike Newell’s *Donnie Brasco*, played by Johnny Depp, is, like Billy Costigan, an undercover agent infiltrating a powerful and dangerous mob organization in a large, urban city. Yet the film, made in 1997 and taking place in the late 1970’s, predates the use of mobile phone devices, and as such Donnie is denied the ability to easily transition between his dual personalities. Donnie can therefore only occupy one personality at any given moment, at least without risking the discovery of his secret identity, and that personality is usually dependent on his tangible physical space. For example, throughout the day he must maintain his demeanor as a small-time thief when in the company of his mafia associates in their favorite meeting place, and only at night can he let his guard down enough to reveal his true identity. To do so, he even relies on a standard land-line telephone connection (a local phone-booth) through which he calls his tired wife and settles for the simple act of listening to her sleep in order to remind himself of his other life. Yet the true story of *Donnie Brasco* is his inability to maintain a balance between the undercover agent and the criminal, and eventually the stress of being another person all day causes Donnie to forget his true self and become the very man he was pretending to be. Billy Costigan, however, is a modern day Donnie Brasco whose use of mobile telephony grants him the ability to maintain his own duality,
as we see at several points throughout the film, due to the constant reminders of his true identity granted by his mobile connection to the Boston Police Department.

One instance in which Billy’s duality becomes clear is during a stolen goods deal in which the Irish mob are attempting to sell micro-processors to a group of Chinese militants. Billy has informed the police of the time and location of the deal, but lacks knowledge about the specifics of the transaction. Therefore, he secretly uses his cell phone during the meeting to communicate back to the police, an action which reaffirms his true nature as an officer of the law despite his present situation, all made possible by mobile telephony. On the other hand, during a scene in which Donnie Brasco witnesses a brutal triple-homicide, he must maintain the illusion of complacency and help dispose of the bodies with no opportunity to immediately relate the information back to his superiors and thus reassure himself of his status as a law-abiding citizen. Without the assistance of mobile telephony, Billy Costigan could collapse under the weight of his alter ego in much the same way as Donnie Brasco, but thanks to the technology he is able to narrowly grasp his sanity and avoid becoming the man he masquerades as.

Colin Sullivan, the other double agent of *The Departed*, also relies on cellular technology to carry out his imitation of a hard-working police officer, despite his true nature as a criminal informant. Rather than carrying two cell phones with him, the slightly more intelligent Colin uses technological hacking to mask his conversations on his private mobile phone, quickly switching out the phone’s data card when he needs to reach his boss Costello. Colin even uses a variation on Rich Ling’s previously mentioned steps for public telephony to disguise his true intent, where Ling suggests “the production
of social partitions” Colin chooses to refer to Costello as “mom;” saying things like “sorry mom, I won’t be home for dinner tonight” to explain that a criminal activity has been discovered. By subtly giving any public listeners (in this case other police officers) the wrong information about the content of his call, Colin is able to subvert expectations as to the use of his mobile phone and keep in constant connection with his criminal boss even when in the company of other officers. Yet not every situation can be resolved using public telephony, and as such Colin and the other characters of *The Departed* often rely on a secondary aspect of mobile telephonic technology, its capability for private, silent, and secretive communication through SMS text messaging.

Short message service, also known as text messaging, is a now common feature in today’s mobile telephone market. Using SMS, customers can type out and send brief text messages to one another, often for a small per-text fee or a flat monthly amount. The system has been particularly adopted by teens and young adults, who see it as a cheap and private form of communication that can be used even when voice telephony is prohibited, such as during school or at night. For the characters of *The Departed*, SMS texting serves the same basic function, although the stakes are often much higher than a slap on the wrist from a teacher or parent. In the cinematic world of undercover agents, it is often imperative to communicate secretly and silently, causing SMS to be the correspondence of choice during several intense situations. I have already discussed one such situation, in which Billy Costigan finds himself in the middle of a stolen goods deal in a remote, abandoned harbor warehouse yet still needs to quickly but silently contact his superiors with timely information. Knowing that no arrests can be made until money
is exchanged for the stolen items, Billy waits with his phone hidden behind a support beam and at the exact moment of purchase silently types a message that is short and to the point: “$.” Once again the mobile phone has bestowed a character with immediate agency, in this case the ability to exchange vital, secretive, and time-sensitive information immediately regardless of physical location. In fact, text messaging relies on both parties to be using mobile phones with SMS capability, and therefore the sender of the text can disregard not only their own personal space but the location of the receiver as well. Thus, Billy is confident that no matter where his superior officers are when he sends the message, it will be received and understood. Yet despite the silent nature of the text Billy sends, it would have still been possible for a visual confirmation to give away his use of SMS, a risk that Colin Sullivan is not always willing to take.

While Billy Costigan, surrounded by the very criminals he is secretly spying on, awaits the transfer of money during the stolen goods exchange, Colin finds himself in a very similar situation among a myriad of police officers, detectives, and FBI and CIA agents; all of whom are spying on the criminal exchange from a nearby location, waiting for a chance to take down Costello’s crew. And, much like Billy, Colin has time-sensitive information that needs to be relayed to Costello immediately, but he is unable to find a moment to sneak away to tip Costello off. Yet thanks to the compact nature of modern mobile telephones, Colin is still able to send a text to his boss despite his surroundings. Scorsese’s camera pans down as Colin subtly slides his hand into his coat pocket, and a fade reveals the hidden interior where Colin slowly types his urgent message into his tiny clamshell telephone. Nervously glancing around to make certain
that no one detects his secret activity, Colin pushes one last button and his message is sent, giving Costello and his crew the upper hand. Most of *The Departed* hinges around this dramatic sequence, and yet nearly every aspect of it would be impossible without the use of mobile telephony, including Colin’s message which deals with yet another aspect of modern mobile telephony: its ability for global positioning.

GPS, or global positioning system, allows satellites to pinpoint the exact physical location of any incoming signals, including cell phones signals relayed from signal towers. The ramifications for American cinematic narratives are quite large, given the fact that so many Americans now carry mobile phones and are thus easily traceable. For example, how can a character become lost if they have a GPS device on hand? The use of GPS in *The Departed*, however, serves a different but also plausible role, that of a tracking device used by federal agents. Upon arriving at the police warehouse before the stolen processor deal is to occur, Colin is informed that the FBI are tracking every cell phone signal within a certain radius of the crime scene in order to pin down the location of the mafia members. Fully aware that their capture could lead to either his own discovery as a double agent or the disintegration of his criminal payoffs, Colin enacts his plan to warn the crew using hidden SMS texts. “No phones,” he slowly spells out, which, upon sending, causes Costello to inform his crew to all turn off their telephones. Scorsese cuts to a close-up of an FBI monitor, where each phone is represented visually as a tiny red dot superimposed on a satellite image of the area surrounding the warehouse, displaying for the audience the disappearance of traceable cellular signals in the building as the dots suddenly disappear. Frustrated, an FBI agent declares that there are eight
hundred and seven phones live within the vicinity of the crime scene, yet they cannot pinpoint a cluster coming from within their target building. Even without the use of hidden cameras, the FBI would have been able to track the movements of the mafia members by using the built in global positioning function of their cell phones against them, but thanks to another feature of mobile telephony the criminals are tipped off by a spy within the police ranks. Yet the FBI do detect one live signal, coming from the secondary phone of Billy Costigan, who, like Colin, is able to use its SMS to tip off the police. Once again, the sequence relies on mobile telephony for long distance, secretive, mobile communication between its characters while simultaneously commenting on the widespread adoption and thus negation of the device as an advantage for either side.

Even with the frequent use of SMS and GPS throughout The Departed, it is another, far simpler feature of the modern mobile telephone that causes the climatic collision between the two lead characters. Throughout the film, Billy and Colin lead extensive searches to discover one another’s identity, but upon the death of Billy’s superior, that man’s cellular telephone comes into Colin’s possession. The solution to Colin’s problem is at first almost too obvious and thus goes overlooked, but suddenly Colin realizes the way to contact and thus find Billy. Every modern cell phone contains a call log, a simple record of incoming, outgoing, and missed calls. Searching through the data contained on the newly acquired phone, Colin discovers an unfamiliar number and presses ‘send.’ On the other end of the call, Billy suspiciously and silently answers, knowing (thanks to caller ID) that the call is coming from a dead man’s phone. In one of the film’s most intense moments, the two men sit silently, listening to hear any response
on the other end, listening to each other breathing, before Billy finally hangs up. Ironically, two men exhaustively searching for one another find a sudden, instant connection through their mobile phones, a unique link that could only be made possible through mobile telephony. Firstly, the impetus of this connection results from Billy’s investigation of the cell phone’s call log. Secondly, the connection is primarily intellectual as the two men cannot see one another, cannot touch, do not speak, yet they both (as well as the audience) can sense that they have become temporarily connected. Finally, spatial ambiguity (a concept that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter) occurs, with both men aware of the momentary connection, yet neither able to pinpoint the location of the other thanks to the inherent mobility of their telephones. Without the agency provided by these devices this unlikely connection could not have been made.

Both *Cellular* and *The Departed* can been seen as modern examples of the telephonic film, and when viewing them in the context of theories about past telephonic representations in film, it becomes clear that the work of scholars like Tom Gunning, David Crane, J.P. Telotte, and Michael Chion are not invalid, but rather that the representations have shifted. Examining the differences between past and present representations of telephony, its modern cinematic nature can be uncovered, in which the mobile phone eschews previous narrative impotence and instead grants its users with agency by which they can accomplish goals using instantaneous communication without spatial limitations. To further examine this idea, the next chapter will investigate several
sequels and remakes to discover how mobile phones have been incorporated into existing fictional worlds.
Chapter Three:

*Originals and Revisions: Narrative Shifts and Mobile Phones*

In the last chapter we looked towards new representations of mobile phone technology in modern cinematic narratives, closely examining two films which heavily incorporate mobile telephony in order to grant new agency for the characters who use it, but thanks to the previously discussed multi-function nature of this new technology, the mobile phone can be used to grant agency even when featured in minor roles. To uncover more uses for mobile telephony in film, I will now observe its utility in recent film remakes and sequels whose prior incarnations were made before the advent or widespread adoption of mobile telephony, examining the differences between their narratives with and without mobile phones to further demonstrate the shift in narrative function that modern telephony has established.

Due to the variety of cinematic sources to be used, the structure of this chapter will move between topics and films loosely connected by either format or theme. To begin, I will look towards three recent Hollywood trilogy conclusions which use mobile telephony to bypass narrative roadblocks seen in their previous installments, ending with a film whose sequence of events takes us to Japan, where I will further demonstrate the function of mobile telephony in American films by investigating the American portrayal of mobile telephony in Japanese culture. Finally, I will look towards the remake of a past telephonic film, the 1979 American horror classic *When a Stranger Calls*, to examine how the use of telephony is shifted and commented upon in its 2006 remake.
Big budget trilogies have become increasingly abundant in Hollywood throughout the last decade, to the point where nearly every successful film comes with a fast-tracked pair of sequels. Often, the focal point of such special effects blockbusters becomes the latest advances in technology which allow for grander, more fantastical worlds and creatures to be imagined through computer generated imagery. Yet just as the technology used by special effects wizards advances, so too do the consumer technologies used by the people who watch the films. Inevitably, these everyday devices become part of the fabric of society, thereby being similarly incorporated into the latest installment of any Hollywood franchise. When Steven Spielberg first took us to *Jurassic Park* in 1993, mobile phones in the United States were still a commodity for businessmen or the social elite, and the return trip in 1997, titled *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, was still too early for the public to believe that mobile technology could work effectively in the remote island locations that house the films. Yet by the release of *Jurassic Park III* in 2001, the American public was growing increasingly accustomed to the use of mobile telephony, so much so that its inclusion in the latest romp through the dinosaur infested jungle was not wholly unexpected.

Cellular technology, however, has its limits, and as we have previously established with *Cellular*, a weak signal can quickly rob a character of their mobile connection and agency. Yet in the jungles of an isolated, uninhabited island, any signal proves impossible as cellular phones require terrestrial signal towers to hand off the signals that provide a steady mobile connection. In order for a mobile phone to work in a remote location, it would need to bypass these signal towers and communicate directly
with the satellites that transmit cellular signals. Given these circumstances, the characters of *Jurassic Park III*, unlike their predecessors, have thought ahead and brought just such a device, an appropriately named satellite phone. Essentially playing the role of the ultimate mobile phone, the satellite phone’s very presence on the island substantially shifts the sequence of events in comparison to the earlier films in the series.

As is the case with all the *Jurassic Park* films, the goal for the protagonists of part III is to find their way off an island inhabited by deadly carnivorous dinosaurs, yet their means to do so is changed dramatically thanks to the inclusion of the satellite phone. In the first installment, the rich owner of the compromised theme park possesses a helicopter standing by to escape from the island, yet he must wait as his niece and nephew find their way back to him after being trapped in the interior of the park. The protagonists of *The Lost World* inadvertently destroy their communication with the mainland and instead must work their way into the dangerous interior of the island to find a base camp where rescue helicopters will know to look for them. The adventurers of *Jurassic Park III*, however, have trespassed illegally onto the forbidden island and thus must find a way to communicate that they are trapped, with the satellite phone clearly becoming their only option to do so. Therefore, the goal of the protagonists, rather than simply physically traversing the island to find safety or transportation, instead becomes the recovery of the lost satellite phone with which they can gain the agency to recruit help through long-distance communication.

Early on in the film, the significance of the satellite phone is established not only through dialogue but also through several insert shots that remind the audience of its
location during the intense plane crash that strands the characters on the island. At the same time these shots point out its unique physical characteristics, including its large body, antenna, and bright yellow color that clearly differentiate it from an average cellular phone. The audience is thus acutely aware that one of the pilots was carrying the phone when he is hastily eaten by the terrifying “spinosaurus,” in essence the main antagonist among the dinosaurs, thereby seemingly robbing the protagonists of the agency they need to call for help. However, a short while into the film they quickly learn not only of the continued existence of the satellite phone but also of the difficulties they will have in recovering it when they hear its distinctive ring. Turning towards the source of the sound, they discover that the ringtone is emanating from (where else?) the stomach of the very angry spinosaurus. Narrowly escaping him a second time, but without obtaining the phone, the protagonists must wait for nature to do what they cannot, and thus the next time they hear the phone ring it is coming not from within the dinosaur as they initially fear, but instead from within a large pile of his feces. Gingerly digging out the phone, its owner explains that the battery will only last through one call, but where there’s dinosaur droppings a dinosaur must not be far off, thus bringing us to the film’s most climactic telephonic moment.

Just when the main protagonist, Dr. Alan Grant, decides whom he should call (an old friend from the first film in the series), the spinosaurus attacks again, attempting to sink the small boat the characters have stumbled upon. In the past *Jurassic Park* films, the singular focus of any dinosaur attack was merely the escape or survival of the human characters, yet this sequence features two simultaneous lines of action. In the first, three
of the four surviving characters fight off the continued attacks of the spinosaurus, whereas the second line of action features Grant attempting to call his friend for help using the satellite phone, an action made all the more difficult by the dinosaur attempting to eat him. Added to this, the film features a comedic use of parallel editing in which the friend’s young son picks up the phone on the other end and is distracted from handing it to his mother by an episode of *Barney*, the children’s television program featuring a friendly purple dinosaur. The scene repeatedly emphasizes that the agency granted by the use of the mobile phone is so great that Grant is willing to risk his life to obtain it, and even when he is trapped in a cage aboard the sinking boat his first instinct is to grab the phone and use it to call for help rather than immediately escaping the cage. His prediction as to the usefulness of the phone call proves quite accurate when, despite the fact that he was only able to squeak out a few words about their predicament before the satellite phone was rendered ineffective by rising waters, help arrives several scenes later in the form of U.S. Navy troops. As we have previously seen with *Cellular* and *The Departed*, the agency granted by the use of the mobile phone is in direct opposition with past representations of narrative impotency caused by land-line telephony, and thus the inclusion of the satellite phone in *Jurassic Park III* serves as the direct catalyst for the survival and rescue for its protagonists, much as it does in another trilogy’s conclusion.

For Ethan Hunt, the super-spy at the heart of the *Mission: Impossible* film franchise, utilizing state of the art technology to track down and capture international criminals is all in a day’s work. However, at the tail end of the latest film in the series, the J.J. Abrams directed 2006 film *Mission: Impossible III*, Hunt finds himself stranded
in an unknown location with only a common cellular phone, a far cry from his usual arsenal of high-tech gadgets, to help him find his kidnapped fiancée. Despite his knowledge that she is being held captive somewhere nearby, Hunt is alone and unaware of his precise location, and he needs to get to her quickly before her kidnappers kill her. Yet his use of the mobile phone, which thanks to the agency that it provides for him becomes almost a pseudo-weapon, is ultimately enough to help him track her down and save the day.

Dating back to the original *Mission: Impossible* television series, which ran from 1966 to 1973, the franchise has long been associated with advanced intelligence technology. The use of such ‘gadgets’ (often disguised as common objects but with secret and advanced capabilities) was an essential part of successfully completing any of the “impossible” missions that the spy teams would be regularly assigned. This notion carried through into the film series where complex plans often revolve around intricate operations performed with such devices, including the opening rescue of a secret agent at the start of *Mission: Impossible III*. In this sequence, for example, we find a group of agents attempting to infiltrate an abandoned warehouse filled with armed terrorists, yet they have several helpful devices at their disposal such as unmanned automated weapons, satellite imagery of the area, heat-sensitive goggles, and magnetic explosives. By the film’s conclusion, however, Hunt finds himself trapped without his team or any such extraordinary ‘gadgets’ to help him out, and therefore he must rely on the agency provided by his mobile phone alone to help him find and recover his fiancée.
Hunt’s rescue attempt relies on three important factors. First, he is aware that he and his fiancée both are carrying cellular phones. Secondly, both phones feature the same GPS tracking capabilities as previously discussed with *The Departed*. Thirdly, Hunt can use his phone to communicate with a source capable of tracking those GPS signals. Therefore, within seconds of escaping his confines he has already used mobile telephony to contact this source, who immediately tells him that his phone signal is coming from Shanghai. After quickly relating his fiancée’s telephone number, Hunt receives word of her exact location as well, a mere mile from his own position. But the agency provided by the mobile phone does not end here, as Hunt sets off to find her without even asking for directions, instead allowing his source (who is located half the world away in the U.S.) to track his moves based on the cell phone’s GPS and give him instantaneous vocal directions the moment he needs them. “Good, good. That’s right. Keep going, keep going...,” the source advises as Hunt frantically dashes past the waterways of Shanghai, “...make your next left and then the next one, and then follow that down 1,000 yards.” These instantaneous and pinpoint-accurate directions allow for an immediate agency to be bestowed upon Hunt to trace the location of his fiancée even without the typical high-tech “gadgets” he usually possesses, and when added to the phone’s ability to allow mobile communication to occur instantly from across the world we can see why the filmmakers chose to grant him only a mere cell phone for this climactic rescue attempt. Yet, as we will see with the final trilogy conclusion example, the film’s protagonists are not the only people granted agency by mobile telephony, and
at times even the viewer gains the ability to witness the action in a way that they could not have before its invention.

Much like the *Mission: Impossible* series, the *Fast and the Furious* franchise has also focused on advanced technology, only in this case that technology is often based in the world of high-speed automobiles. Although the first two films in the series followed the adventures of undercover agent Brian O’Conner as he infiltrated the world of illegal street racing, the third film’s leap to Japan to follow high school student and occasional criminal Sean Boswell’s attempts to compete in these races demonstrates who the real stars of the films are: the cars. Likewise, the use of high-tech racing gear and automobile supplements like nitrous oxide, a gas which is injected into the engine to cause short bursts of high-speed acceleration, often draws more focus in a *Fast and the Furious* film than any form of character development. Therefore, the use of cellular phone technology at the end of the latest film, *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*, is not included to grant the main characters agency to complete a task that they could not have performed in one of the previous films, but instead allows for a far more complex street race to be seen by the audience, both the diegetic characters witnessing the race on-screen and the viewer watching the film.

Although many films have featured prolonged, complex, and dangerous car chases that occur on long and winding stretches of road, the *Fast and the Furious* series spotlights illegal street races attended by the same sorts of teenagers and car-enthusiasts that make up the film’s target audience. These audiences are an essential part of a *Fast and the Furious* race, providing not only the financial backing for the winner but also
explicating the cultural context that these races exist in, a world in which the pride gained from beating a competitor in front of a large audience is in every way as important as the monetary prize involved. As such, previous races were often short sprints that started and ended within viewing distance for those in attendance, forcing the filmmakers to draw out the pre-race preparations and elongate narrative time to turn a ten-second race into a five-minute sequence. Under Justin Lin’s direction, however, Tokyo Drift culminates with a race through the winding streets in the hills overlooking Tokyo, a contest that could not have been easily viewed by impromptu spectators in the past filmic incarnations and thus narratively would not have worked for a Fast and the Furious film. Lin, however, decided to incorporate cellular telephony into the narrative to grant the spectators (and thus the film’s viewers as well) the agency to witness such a complicated race.

The sequence opens with a sweeping shot of the course that Boswell will navigate during the race, full of tight twists and turns and ascending from the top of a mountain down to its base. Suspiciously absent are the very spectators that one comes to expect in these films, yet Lin soon reveals the manner in which they are observing the race: a complicated network of telephonically connected spectators, located at various points throughout the course, who transmit video signals of their point of view to allow others a complete perspective of the entire race. Among a group of close-ups of all the key characters waiting at the finish line, Lin inserts a shot of an anonymous youth and his friends looking down at his cell phone. The camera swings sideways to reveal “Twinkie,” the local tech expert who also has his phone out and speaks quickly into it in Japanese. Suddenly, the camera speeds forward towards his phone’s digital screen
(which displays an image of the course Boswell will soon navigate), and with a digitized wipe we are taken inside the screen, where the camera speeds along the darkened, moonlit street before coming upon another group of teenage spectators waiting around a bend in the road. Without cutting, the camera pulls back out to reveal this image as now being displayed on one of these spectator’s phones (as if he is shooting it with the phone’s built-in video camera), and a quick pan reveals several others also holding out their phones, their cameras also ready to shoot the action as the cars zip along the course. Again without cutting we zoom into another screen and follow a further section of the course to find more teenagers shooting the action from another location high above the starting line. This set up not only explains how the race will be seen by the key characters at the finish line, but also serves to familiarize the filmic viewer with the race itself.

Throughout the entirety of the six-minute race several cuts reveal large groups of spectators cheering and groaning as they watch mobile phone footage of the drivers navigating the race high above them, with the agency granted by their phones working on several levels. First and most directly, it gives these teenagers the ability to observe the complete race, regardless of their spatial relationship to the course. Then, on a narrative level, it allows Boswell, the main protagonist, to compete in a race that could not have been previously featured in a Fast and the Furious film due to the lack of spectators within eyesight. Finally, it provides a method with which to associate the filmic viewer with the spectators within the film’s narrative, allowing for a more complex sense of identification between the real and imagined audience. All of these operations are
ultimately made possible through the use of the secondary function of modern mobile telephony as a video capture and broadcast device, much as we have seen with *Cellular*, but *Tokyo Drift* takes this idea further with instantaneous video conferencing. Interestingly, few entirely American films include this form of instant mobile video messaging, as the feature is largely if not completely unavailable in the United States, and therefore it has become common for an American-produced film to display such technologies occurring in other technologically advanced countries (and specifically Japan).

Regardless of the degree to which Japanese cellular technology is advanced beyond its American counterpart, American films appear to continually perpetuate the notion that Japan and other Asian countries are several years ahead of the U.S. with their mobile communication devices. Aside from *Tokyo Drift*, video messaging figures prominently in another American-produced film that takes place around the globe, Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Babel*, also from 2006. One of the film’s many narratives involves a young deaf Japanese girl named Chieko whose independence seems to be partially the result of her mobile phone. Chieko interacts with a small group of similarly deaf students with whom she navigates the city in an attempt to find sexual partners. Yet in several instances Chieko physically separates herself from her friends but manages to stay in communication with them through her mobile phone. Without the ability for direct vocal communication, the girls use video messaging to sign to one another, allowing for visual communication to happen instantly across spatial divides. Thus the technology allows Chieko to overcome her natural disability, to use mobile telephony to
communicate visually as effortlessly as another person would communicate vocally. The phone also gives Chieko agency to communicate without being bound to her friends physically as she would have been in the past, all while using the same technological advancement as the spectators of the race in *Tokyo Drift*.

So far I have examined the role of mobile telephony in sequels whose prior films were either produced before the widespread adoption of the technology or simply failed to address it. I will now move into a similar yet more revealing territory by taking an in-depth look at a remake of a popular telephonic film and examining how the addition of mobile telephony changes its narrative. The original *When a Stranger Calls*, released in 1979, is a classic example of the terrors of land-line telephony in film. The film’s first (and most notable) act involves a young babysitter named Jill Johnson who, after placing the children to sleep, settles into the living room where she receives a series of strange phone calls.

“Have you checked the children?” the voice on the other end asks during several equally disturbing phone calls. After peaking in and finding them asleep, Jill nervously does what she can from her position in the living room, closing the curtains, locking the doors, and finally calling the police. They inform her that there is little they can do due to the non-threatening statements of the caller and his lack of concrete action, but they do instead offer to trace the calls. Finally, after attempting to keep the caller talking long enough for a trace, Jill receives one last call from the police, who inform her that the calls are coming from a secondary line inside the house, causing her to sprint to the front door for a quick visual shock of a police officer already waiting on the other side to help her. I
have previously mentioned Michael Chion’s analysis of this sequence’s staging, in which Jill is shown talking on the phone but the male voice on the other end is never visualized or localized until he is discovered by the police, thus granting him significant power over Jill.\(^1\) Added to this, however, the reveal of the location of the caller is shocking thanks in part to the assumption that, as Allison Whitney points out, the caller on the opposite end of any telephonic connection is usually in “a fixed and distant location,” yet clearly in this case the voice is suddenly localized within the same house as Jill herself.\(^2\) Yet one could still correctly assume that the speaker was at least in a fixed location as Whitney states, and therefore, although Jill was afraid of his potential actions, she knew that when she was speaking to him that he would at least be fixed in another location. Both this and any other assumptions about spatial locality as it relates to land-line telephony are rendered invalid by mobile telephony, so what would occur if the killer possessed a mobile phone?

Simon West’s 2006 remake of *When a Stranger Calls* wisely eschews the latter two-thirds of the original film (in which a detective tracks down the killer years after the initial event) and instead focuses entirely on the nightmarish events suffered by Jill during her evening of babysitting. Yet bringing this narrative into a modern setting requires the inclusion of mobile telephony, and thus both Jill and the killer are afforded telephones with varying degrees of mobility. Interestingly, in most of the examples discussed so far the agency granted by mobile telephony is afforded to the protagonists of the narrative, yet much of the terror in any traditional horror film is the result of the antagonist obtaining or maintaining a constant power over the protagonist. Accordingly,
West’s version of *When a Stranger Calls* explicitly demonstrates to the audience that the killer’s phone affords him a greater amount of mobility than Jill’s, and he thus possesses greater agency to attack than she has to defend. In fact, West and screenwriter Jake Wade Wall take the time to establish both why and how a teenager like Jill would not be carrying a common mobile phone.

The new version of *When a Stranger Calls* begins with Jill discussing her frequent use of mobile telephony. She and her boyfriend apparently have had a falling out, and when he pleads that they need to talk, she not only knows that they have been talking quite a lot lately, but, thanks to the call timer that is a common feature in any modern mobile phone, she knows the exact amount of time. “We’ve talked...,” she states matter-of-factly, “…seventy-four minutes yesterday, 124 the day before, and 256 the day before that.” That many minutes add up, and soon we learn from her father that he has grounded her for going 800 minutes over her allotted phone plan, with three important punishments. First, she must baby-sit to make up for the money she cost her father by going over her minutes, which is, of course, the set-up for her upcoming night of terror. He then takes away her car, effectively stranding her in the secluded lakeside home of the wealthy Mandrakis family whom she is babysitting for. Finally, and most importantly, he has taken away her cell phone, effectively robbing her of her agency during her upcoming conversations with the killer.

Later that evening, once the family have left and the children are put to bed, the calls begin, with Jill’s use of the Mandrakis’s home phones serving as a commentary upon the hierarchy of agency granted by the various forms of telephony. During the
initial calls, Jill answers the living room land-line phone, and later, she begins to utilize the family’s portable telephone. Yet neither of these options give her the same mobility as the killer’s cellular phone, thus granting him greater agency than Jill. During those early conversations, Jill frequently looks towards the giant picture windows that circle the room to see if anyone across the lake is spying on her, but thanks to the cord connecting the phone to its base, she lacks even the simply agency to get up and shut the curtains or take a closer look. Once Jill becomes aware that the phone calls are not going to stop, she heads into the kitchen to obtain the family’s portable phone, a handset that sends a weak signal to the corded base station and which allows her the freedom to move about the house without losing a signal.

Simultaneous with Jill’s acquisition of the portable phone, however, the film displays the killer’s outdoor attack on Jill’s best friend, who has come by to visit her. Soon after, the caller I.D. function of the Mandrakis’s portable phone begins to show the calls coming from her friend’s mobile phone, implying that the killer now indisputably possesses a mobile phone, granting him freedom to harass Jill from any location, and causing a far more frightening sense of spatial ambiguity than the 1979 killer was afforded. Therefore, during any of the frequent telephonic communications between Jill and the killer, the viewer is aware that Jill must remain fixed within the home, whereas the killer is free to move both within and outside its boundaries. Although Jill could take the children and leave if she gave up her connection to the killer (which she is obviously more than willing to do) she would also thereby lose her connection to the police and any other help she could communicate with through the use of telephony, a potential loss that
effectively traps her within the confines of the house itself. Allison Whitney’s analysis of
the original film points to Jill’s attempt to keep the killer out by locking the doors and
shutting all the windows as working against her when she discovers that the killer is in
the house, turning her safe haven into a trap. However, once she locates the killer she is
free to leave the home, whereas the updated version of Jill is trapped not only by the
home’s more secluded nature, but also by the limited mobility of the telephonic
connections she needs to maintain in order to recruit help. Eventually, the police she
contacts are able to track the killer’s calls (again using the GPS function seen in other
films) and inform her that they are coming from within the home, at which point the film
breaks down into a twenty-minute chase scene throughout the various rooms of the
house.

The updated version of When a Stranger Calls is noteworthy not for its thrills or
scares (it is sorely lacking in its ability to generate genuine tension or fear) but instead for
its inclusion of both older representations of the impotence caused by land-line telephony
as well as new representations of the agency granted by mobile telephony. Jill’s early
conversations using the land-line phone recall not only the earlier Stranger film, but also
films such as Au Téléphone and Sorry, Wrong Number, in which the protagonists are
unable to affect the outcome of events on the other end of their connection because its
cords physically root them to their present space. The killer’s use of mobile telephony,
on the other hand, grants him the ability to impact Jill because of the agency granted
through its mobility, not unlike Ryan’s agency in Cellular or that of Billy Costigan in The
Departed. Likewise, despite the fact that the film reverses the typical role of the cellular
phone as a pseudo-weapon for use by the film’s protagonist, it stills grants the antagonist the same agency as the protagonist would have received.

Sequels and remakes provide an interesting look at the formulation of narratives both with and without the use of mobile telephony. Searching through these examples, we find that mobile telephony functions as a shortcut for providing agency, shifting focus away from the particulars of information gathering and instead allowing characters to charge ahead into action, knowing that their mobile connection to others will provide them with the knowledge necessary to complete a task. Likewise, on occasion their newfound ability to cope with tricky circumstances allows the film’s viewer to see situations that could not have occurred prior to the adoption of mobile phones as a common device. Either way, mobile telephones have clearly caused a shift within the representations of telephony in American film, one that I will now theorize will lead to greater agency on the whole for cinematic characters.

As we have established, land-line telephony in film has often been the cause of narrative impotence whereas mobile telephony is now granting characters agency to accomplish their goals. Yet in the past it was easy to relegate the telephone to specific spaces (such as the home or office) and therefore specifically choose when and where to cause impotency for a character. At present, however, modern situations in which telephony is not a factor are becoming increasing less plausible, with the audience expecting the characters onscreen to, like themselves, possess mobile telephones. Many of the conventions of cinematic narratives, such as the classic feminine victim impotent to save herself from the plots of the villain, are now rendered improbable by mobile
telephony. Indeed, that victim now has (or is expected to have) the ability to call for help, despite any potential dislocation or isolation, through the use of her mobile phone. In fact, where past filmmakers had to invent fantastic ways for their heroes to escape dangerous situations, modern screenwriters like *When a Stranger Calls*’ Jake Wade Wall are forced to explain why their characters lack the agency that a modern audience simply expects them to have. Protagonists of future narratives will possess a greater sense of inherent agency than those of the past, the direct result of advances in mobile communication.

Even with greater inherent agency, all will not be perfect for future cinematic characters. While the intention behind the invention of the mobile telephone was to fill a gap in our desire for communicative freedom, which results in what Paul Levinson refers to as “cellphonic freedom,” there are downsides to such communication. Levinson points to real-world situations in which the “accessibility of the cornucopia of information [granted by the mobile phone] may put unwanted pressures on us, and change things we might not want to change.” This can in fact happen to cinematic characters as well. While *Cellular*’s Ryan possesses a great deal of agency thanks to the features of his mobile phone, perhaps he would have been happier not becoming involved in such a harrowing experience, not having access to information about a kidnapped woman. Likewise, the constant ability for communication provided by the cellular phone may become the cause of terror for some future characters within telephonic films, associating them with unwanted outside influences. Yet ultimately the cinematic mobile phone will continue to grant agency, allowing for more narratives that hinge around the
use of mobile telephony by characters inherently granted greater agency than their past counterparts.
Conclusion:

The New Dominant Telephony

Although the screenplay of Cellular is credited to Chris Morgan, its story was created by Larry Cohen, a screenwriter who has clearly considered the differing representations of modern telephony. Two years prior to the release of Cellular, Cohen wrote the screenplay for another modern telephonic film, the Joel Schumacher directed Phone Booth, in which an affluent New York publicist picks up a ringing telephone inside a phone booth and finds that the caller is not who he anticipates it to be. Every day, the publicist uses the phone booth to anonymously call his girlfriend so that his wife will not find the calls listed in his cellular phone’s call log, yet today the voice on the other end is not his mistress’s but instead that of a man who claims to be aiming a high-powered rifle at him with the intention of coercing him into admitting his infidelity to his wife. With a tiny red laser hovering on his chest as proof that he will be shot if he hangs up, the publicist becomes trapped in the booth, unable to move not only because of the weapon keyed on him, but also because of the wires that connect the phone’s handset to the booth itself.

In most of the filmic examples I have incorporated into this text, the narratives reflect the current state of telephony within American society, where the mobile phone has not only gained widespread penetration within the public but is also becoming the telephone of choice for many individuals who no longer require a home land-line telephone. Yet much like the 2006 remake of When a Stranger Calls, Phone Booth
serves as a reminder that land-line telephony still has a role, albeit a reduced one, both within our culture and within popular entertainment, a role that has remained largely unchanged since its introduction at the turn of the 20th century. Phone Booth’s protagonist is, thanks to the immobility of his land-line connection, impotent and inactive, unable to react or defend himself from the killer who terrorizes him through the phone, just as Au Téléphone’s Andre Marex is unable to react in a productive manner to save his wife and child from the burglars breaking into his home. Yet the publicist of Phone Booth must deal with something that Marex did not; the monster on the other end of his connection is implied to be using a mobile telephone, free to move from space to space and thus becoming entirely spatially ambiguous. Even when the publicist becomes convinced that he has located the caller within the buildings surrounding the phone booth, the caller possesses the agency to move his location while still maintaining his telephonic connection. In fact, although Phone Booth recalls the role of the land-line telephone, so too does it simultaneously remind us that the mobile phone has supplanted it as the dominant form of telephony.

For nearly a century the land-line telephone maintained its position as the prominent form of long-distance communication, but now the mobile phone is clearly set up to occupy this role for the 21st century. Indeed, just as the mobile phone is becoming the primary source of communication in American society, so too has it become the principal form of telephony within cinematic narratives, causing a shift in the representations of such communication. Although the image of telephony intended by its early manufacturers and distributors was that of a safety device that could assist
individuals in dangerous situations, its cinematic counterpart instead caused impotency whereby the user could hear and thus understand the events occurring on the other end of the connection but not affect them in a direct, physical manner. With the advent of mobile telephony, the most important shift in the new representations of telephony has restored the positive image, with the user now granted agency to accomplish their goals, to both affect the outcome of events on the other end and use information gained by a constant connection without being limited by spatial constraints. As we have seen from numerous examples, this agency is the result not only of the mobility of these new devices but also their multi-function nature, which allows a greater amount of choice in long-distance communication while still maintaining the same sense of portability.

As we move forward into the 21st century, we now ask if the mobile phone can capitalize on its current position as the dominant form of long-distance communication, or if it will be replaced by other forms of interaction, such as email or online text and video chatting, each in many ways more robust versions of the secondary features found on mobile phones. Perhaps it will be surpassed by a yet unknown technology, or, more likely, perhaps these other forms will continue to be assimilated into one uber-device, a cellular phone capable of even more modes of public and private communication. It is easy to hypothesize this, with the mobile phone serving not only as a tool of communication but also as a statement of fashion or stature treasured by its user. Janey Gordon discusses this when she writes that the mobile phone has “developed a cultural meaning beyond its use,” and indeed the very narratives which have utilized mobile telephony to grant agency have also served to advertise the technology to the public.
When Ryan from *Cellular* checks his phone, you can be sure that the camera will catch its Nokia logo, letting us know which phone manufacturer makes the latest and best cellular phone. Continued marketing such as this assures us that society will not forget about or abandon the mobile phone anytime soon. Cell phones will continue to gain new users within the American public while Hollywood simultaneously creates new images of these phones for users to consume, images with characters granted with inherent agency by the mobile phones they possess.
Notes

Introduction


3 Anandam Kavoori and Noah Arceneaux, eds. The Cell Phone Reader: Essays in Social Transformation (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).


Chapter One


6 Crane, 75.

7 Crane, 75.

8 Crane.


10 Hall, 253.
Hall goes on to write a brief comparison between the film and its 1998 remake, *A Perfect Murder*, but merely points out the use of cell phones rather than discussing the qualities this change brings about.

Gunning, 187.

Gunning.

de Lorde, Gunning points out, wrote numerous one-acts surrounding the failures of technology and the horror this brings about, dealing with subjects ranging from automobiles to medical operations to scientific experiments.

Gunning, 192.

Gunning, 194.

Gunning, 192.

Schantz.

Schantz, 187.


Schantz, 24-25.

Schantz, 25.

Schantz, 26.

Schantz, 26.

Schantz, 27.

Schantz, 27.


Telotte, 52.

Telotte, 51.

Schantz and Crane are not alone in their discussion of *Sorry, Wrong Number*, a text that is referenced by several of authors discussed here. With its numerous phone calls and an opening in which a
narrator discusses the connections made possible by telephonic exchange (not to mention its title), it seems this film stands above the rest as a true example of “telephonic film.”

31 Telotte, 51.
33 Chion, 64.
34 Chion, 65.

Chapter Two

2 Palenchar, 16.
3 Ling, 130-142.
4 Gunning.
5 Telotte.
6 Ling, 70-71.
7 Ling, 73.
8 Ling.
9 Ling, 132. Ling notes that when receiving a call in a social situation, one must quickly choose the proper form of disengagement from that situation in order to not upset those around us. In Colin’s case, the very nature of his call would be disruptive, therefore he chooses to falsify the participants uses codenames like “mom.”
11 In a study conducted by Ling, it was discovered that teens do most of their text messaging during school hours and throughout the night, suggesting that it is in reality a popular form of secret (and silent) communication.
Chapter Three

1 Chion, 64.


3 Whitney, writing before the remake of When a Stranger Calls, goes on to compare the original film with the 1996 horror film Scream, whose opening sequence closely mirrors the earlier film. Like the newer Stranger, Scream features a young woman on a portable phone harassed by a caller who potentially has possession of a cellular phone. Whitney’s focus here is on the caller’s masked identity through voice manipulation and, to a lesser degree, his play with spatial ambiguity, much like the later killer from 2006’s Stranger film will do.


5 Levinson, 15.

Conclusion