

A man walked past my flat today. I heard him first; he was shouting. There was no response to his stentorian tones. I've been researching the phone voice and was intrigued as to whether that's what I was hearing. I raced to another window. Through ample spring leaves I discerned that indeed he was yelling into a device. I tried to imagine his voice existing elsewhere simultaneously — his anger reproduced below some other tree. I wondered if the person on the other end was shouting back, their voices not just here and there, but alongside each other and in between. How do I picture the cellular voice: as pixelation, vibratile; as a cloud of bats at dusk — diffuse and converged, flickering.

The cellular voice is crepuscular, scattered. The wired voice was a kite string. That's how the literary critic Steven Connor put it: a prosthesis, extended and still connected to the speaker like an angler's line. Connor posited that the advent of telephony actualised our perception of the voice itself, "thinned to a filament, a living, thrilling nerve". We still say line when we mean wavelength,

oscillation, ionosphere, light speed. A voice adrift between stations.

When I first heard Adele's song "Hello", the lyrics annoyed me. *I tried to call a thousand times ... you never seem to be at home.* That sort of thing. No mobile or caller recognition, apparently. I no longer own a home phone. The only time I actually speak over my mobile is to complain to the bank or order a curry. Or when I'm lost and switch from text atavistically. Adele's turn of phrase is the lyrical equivalent of a sepia filter. But the anachronism resonates: "Hello" was the first single to sell over a million digital copies in one week. The video accrued a billion YouTube views in less than three months. At its start, Adele loses signal, mutters a futile apology and snaps her flip-phone shut. She holds it in her palm like a makeup compact or prayer book before retreating into a dusty old house. Inside there are dead flies on the windowsill but a landline subsists. So Adele phones again the old-fashioned way. In engineering jargon this is known as POTS, a retronym meaning 'plain old telephone service'. Adele lifts

a tank-like handset to her cheek. If she gets through this time, her voice will be reproduced through copper, carbon, cables under the sea — all swelling like chrome microphone and orchestra to flatter the grain of her voice.

The video's director, Xavier Dolan, has explained away the superannuated props: to see an iPhone in a movie is "anti-narrative", forces the viewer back to reality. What is the plot exactly. It's been suggested that Adele is attempting to phone her younger self. Dolan has described his own concept as "highly unoriginal". The antiquated telephones seem purposed less to serve narrative than a sentimental ambience, one that equates regret with nostalgia.

The history of pop is entangled with that of the telephone. The term pop music was first recorded in 1926, the same year the first transatlantic telephone call was made. The phone voice arrives with a sense of magic that reflects pop's quest to conjure wonder within mass production. Now these coevals have both gone digital, it follows that a bygone vernacular is employed to simulate

earlier sensations of the reproduced voice. Like cassettes and vinyl, the telephone becomes a fetish object that reifies the wonder of sound. Donald Judd described "sentimentalizing the machine" as a malignity of the 20th century. The dilatory nature of rotary dials, the *unheimlich* effect of an unanswered ring in an empty room, the sexy pose of hanging by the telephone: auratic images dwindling in reality.

In *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Walter Benjamin wrote, "Whether because of the structure of the apparatus or because of the structure of memory, it is certain that the noises of the first telephone conversations echo differently in my ear from those of today." He describes the ambient noise of earlier phones as "nocturnal". The impression of a friend's voice was not just technological but spectral; young Walter would submit as if possessed by a voice from beyond the grave. Jacques Derrida echoed this impression, stating that telecommunication, like cinema, "enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us".

My own analogue phone memories come flooding. Call waiting. Prank calls. The feel of that little plastic button — the switch hook — under my index finger. A confabulation of falling asleep with a friend, silent but each refusing to hang up.

Adele eventually takes to the surrounding woods in which, despite being "in California, dreaming", she stands in front of an ivy-covered British telephone box (K6 model, I think), its receiver dangling in glamorous futility. It creates a melodramatic, tardis-like backdrop: timeless. A phone ruin. In Britain, around 2,000 red phone boxes have been Grade II listed. New York City's four remaining glass booths, each positioned along West End Avenue — at 101st, 100th, 99th and 66th Streets — have become destinations for young fans of the children's book *The Lonely Phone Booth*. Its author, Peter Ackerman, described such booths to the *New York Times* as "mini-theatres", through which we witness a user laughing or crying, enabling us to project our own stories onto them.

The basics of voice reproduction have remained

remarkably unchanged despite alterations in apparatus and transmission. If anything, cellular was less reliable. Choppy. The use of VoLTE (Voice over Long-Term Evolution) in advanced smartphones provides a quality comparable if not superior to plain old telephones, potentially outmoding circuit switched networks. Adele's successors will belt out quaint notions of breaking up over broken connections and leaving nightclubs to gain better reception. Stories require obstacles. Pop music loves a palaver. We upgrade to smooth but still dance to the bumpy.

The phone is a desire machine. Its predecessor, two tin cans vibing on a string, was referred to as a 'lover's telegraph'. Roland Barthes described the anxiety of expecting a lover's call as having the same intensity as waiting for him at night in the woods. The insistent pulse of a Grindr alert has its thrill, but not the undertones. The potency of the phone voice lies in its maybeness. The phone hides and reveals. The pleasure of the whispering game 'telephone' relies on mistakes incurred by

latent subjectivities. The lustre of the phone voice has been attenuated by the addition of video, or replaced with predictive text and emoticons. In a sense, we've been slow to adapt such technologies. A foldaway, pocket-size phone was patented in 1917. The first videophone call took place in 1927. An antecedent to the fax was invented in 1843. But we've held to the *bad line* and the *do you hear me*. The phone voice without sight, smell or touch allowed listeners to fantasise and speculate, becoming more alert to nuance and pausation. Mechanical sounds became part of the code. Late night when that hotline blings can only mean one thing.

On her album *You Cain't Use My Phone (Mixtape)*, Erykah Badu covers the Drake song "Hotline Bling" but updates 'cellphone' with 'cell-u-lar device'. Elsewhere, Badu, an analog girl in a digital world, plays on defunct tonalities. A busy signal becomes a

melody. The album includes a short treatise on the demise of honeybees, whose navigation is compromised by the electrosmog of cellphone radiation. Elsewhere she advises, "text me, because I really don't answer voicemail". Badu's mixtape (the title itself a skeuomorph) is a liminal artefact of retro-futurism. It registers like a conversation held between devices from different eras. Intertemporality is an amusing possibility of duplex technology. In a scene from Jim Jarmusch's film *Only Lovers Left Alive*, a pair of vampire spouses hold a passionate, fraught videophone conversation: one in Tangiers on iPhone, the other in Detroit using his own jerry-rigged assemblage that networks touch-tone cordless with television set.

Certain telephones briefly served as makeshift radios; at Victorian salons, guests would gather to listen to opera over the line. Marcel Proust would glean Opéra

Comique performances from the comfort of his Boulevard Haussmann apartment. Proust marvelled at the telephone's "admirable magic" but was immediately impatient for its improvement. The narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* nearly lodges a complaint over the lags in his very first call. And while impressed by the fairy tale-like ability to conjure an intimate — "the sound of distance suppressed" — he also feels "more acutely how illusory the effect of such intimate proximity was, and at what a distance we can be from those we love..."

Such melancholy becomes for Proust's narrator the defining characteristic of the phone voice. As with Benjamin, his thoughts spiral from an exaggerated sense of distance towards the mordant: "But it is also a foreglimpse of an eternal separation!" He finally likens the disembodied voice to one passing from lips "forever turned to dust".