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Making the connection: thoughts on the conceptual evolution of two short films

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MAKING THE CONNECTION

Thoughts on the Conceptual Evolution of Two Short Films

Luke Carstens

Declaration

I declare that this research report is of my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Dramatic Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____
Luke Edward Carstens

Date_____

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents for being, generally, very tolerant. I am exceedingly grateful to Anthony Haenen and Stephen Abbott for their generous input throughout the production of the various components of this project; and to my supervisor Jane Taylor for her invaluable insights. And finally, thank God… it is over.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the conceptual developments of two of the writer's short films. The research consists of several components: films produced between 2004 – 2005, including commentaries that provide description and analyse of the techniques and processes used in the production of the works; and a written component that explores some the conceptual backgrounds and interpretations of the films presented.

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Introduction

The aim of this project is to analyse and interpret the conceptual backgrounds for two of the films that I have produced as a student. The written component of this study, which is derived from the practical work, necessitates that as I write this paper I assume the role of spectator and interpreter of my own work. I have included a DVD of the films *Mind Out of Joint* and *Dialtone* as well as the screenplays for both films. I believe that this will provide a better perspective of not only the conceptual processes, but also the changes (omissions and compromises) that occurred during the shooting and editing of these films.

****

In his essay, *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes expounds on what he believes to be the dire, innate ramifications of considering the author when reviewing a text. “To give a text an Author,” he suggests, “is to impose a limit on that text.” When viewed from the perspective of the author, he argues, the text becomes tangled up in the complexities of that author’s culture and history and philosophy. Barthes asserts that the author should rather be considered as no more than an agency through which a particular story is told. Therefore, a story does not spring from the author; instead, the author acts as an intermediary, relating and performing the story, as it already exists.

Stephen King, that bastion of popular literature, reiterates Barthes thoughts when he describes the stories he writes as “fossils” or “relics”, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world, and King himself is merely an excavator of these buried treasures. Coming up with new story ideas certainly does feel like digging to me, not the delicate type of scapping and brushing that King’s archeaological metophor suggests though, but rather the type of hard labour required to dig a hole big enough and deep enough to trap a wild animal.

While reflecting on the conceptual processes of the films I discuss here, I find it difficult to separate the final project from the multitudes of ideas, wild creatures all, some very grand indeed, but most of them small and nuanced, that have absorb my mind, pulling me in strange and unexpected directions. I have discovered that every idea has its source in other ideas, and that the process of creating something ‘new’ is really a process of making mental connections out of the ‘old’. I do not know whether or not stories exist regardless of a person’s (an author’s, a writer’s, a filmmaker’s) contribution, but what has become increasingly apparent to me is that one story always begins with another.



Memory Games

It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.

Lewis Carroll

Recollection

As I remember it, the premise for *Mind Out of Joint* had its unlikely origins in a university production of the musical revue *Berlin to Broadway*, a tribute to the composer Kurt Weill. The film's origins, in truth, had nothing to do with the musical except for the fact that one of the production's cast members was a blind actor. And it was this actor's performance in one specific scene that set off the imaginative chain-reaction that resulted in *Mind Out of Joint*.

The scene was set in a New York Ghetto, the musical number about the stifling summer temperatures. It dictated that the actors fan themselves with their hands to stay cool. An action that seems simple enough, but for the blind actor it posed a distinct problem. He had been blind since birth and having never seen someone fan themselves, he had no point of reference, no memory to base his own gesture on and, no doubt, had to be coached in the action by his director. What resulted was an action more suggestive of beckoning than that of fanning. It occurred to me that, their recollection of the gesture (by subconscious recall) allowed the other actors to perform it in a way that the audience perceived as correct. Here was the play of memory – between the audience's expectation and the actor's reciprocation. But, having no memory, the blind actor's gesture was incongruous. To fan ones-self, then, is a learnt action – a memory act.

The blind actor's predicament, it seemed to me, was reminiscent of that of an amnesiac's. Without the ability to see, no amount of coaching could help the actor to truly grasp the action. He could of course become very good at it, but its quintessence would always elude him. Similarly, an amnesiac, told about his or her past may eventually come to claim those instances, that history, as their own. But with no recollection, how could they possibly come to comprehend the weight of those experiences, and the impact that those events have had on them? How, without this knowledge, could they know themselves?

Memory, it seems, is fundamental to the formation and maintaining of self-identity[i]. Indeed, John Locke, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690, Book II, Chapter 27), famously argued for the identification of the self with memory. As apposed to Descartes, who located the self in the immediate deliberate act of taking thought – "I think, therefore I am", Locke proposed that the foundations of the self were to be found in the extension of consciousness backward in time:

> …As far as [] consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that *person*[ii]; it is the same *self*[iii] now it was then; and 'tis by the same *self* with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done. (Locke 302)

A person's identity, in Locke's view, comprises all of their personal history, all that they can remember. As a result, past experiences,

thoughts, or actions that the person does not remember or cannot recall do not form part of his or her identity. Identity and selfhood, for Locke, have nothing to do with continuity of the body. Selfhood consists entirely in continuity of memory. A person who remembers nothing of his or her past literally has no identity.

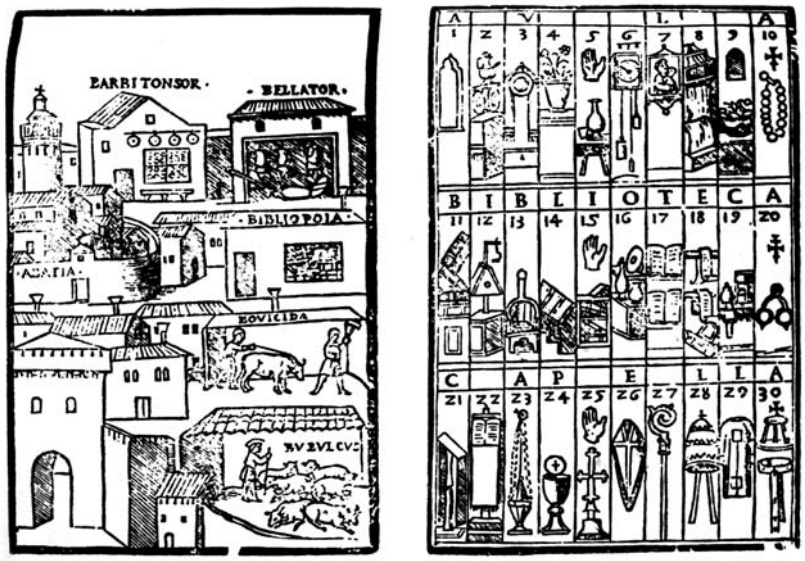
Mind out of Joint is the vague recollections, the disparate traces, of an amnesiac – a man (played by Andrew Turner), as Locke would have it, who is without an identity. There is no dialogue in the film so the man remains nameless, denied even this identity marker. In the screenplay I call him Les, and so will continue to call him that here. Originally, I conceived of Les as a detective - a noir private eye, who is investigating himself, trying to piece together his part in some far-reaching conspiracy. Early storylines had Les trying to track down the person who had killed him – an investigation into his own murder[iv]. Later, however, having reflected on the predicament of the blind actor and, consequently on the role memory might play in the formation of identity, I came to envision Les as a man investigating himself when he loses his memory after suffering a brain trauma; collecting evidence in a desperate attempt to recover a semblance of selfhood.

The Memory Palace

At the beginning of the film Les, literally, carries his mind, in the form of a box, on his back. The box is a printer's tray of sorts, containing memory objects - the basis of all his memories and therefore his

identity. The choice to literalize and externalize his mind was, in part, determined by a surreal aesthetic that pervades the entire film (which I'll discuss in more depth later), but the key to the image was the classical European concept of a 'memory palace'. In *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, historian Jonathan Spence tells the story of a 16th century Jesuit missionary, who, in undertaking to bring Christianity to the people of China, introduced them to a memory technique that had been in use in the West since the days of ancient Greece[v].

In 1596, Matteo Ricci wrote *A Treatise on Mnemonics*; a short book on the art of memory, which he wrote out in Chinese and presented as a gift to Lu Wangai, the influential governor of the Jiangxi Province. In it he described the memory palace: an imaginary building one would construct in their mind and appoint with mnemonic devices – memory images and objects. It is a structure for organizing knowledge. "To everything that we wish to remember, wrote Ricci, we should give an image; and to every one of these images we should assign a position where it can repose peacefully until we are ready to claim it by an act of memory" (Spence 2). Recollection, then, becomes a process of



Abby Memory System, and images to be used in the Abby Memory System From Johannes Romberch, *Congestorium Artificiose Memorie*, ed. Of Venice, 1533. Romberch's system is a type of the palace system. The image list is reminiscent of a printer's tray.

moving through the rooms in the structure and relating the objects and images contained therein with the information one desires to recall.

The size of the memory palace one would build, Ricci said, was relative to the amount of information one wanted to remember. An ambitious project, calling for the recollection of great quantities of knowledge, might demand an elaborate construction consisting of several hundred buildings. For smaller projects, however, less grandiose structures would be more appropriate, "such as a temple compound, a cluster of government offices, a public hostel, or a merchants' meeting lodge." And if one wanted to start smaller still, one could house their memory images and objects in the intimacy of a single room or merely the corner of a room - "or an alter in a temple, or even such a homely object as a wardrobe or a divan," or perhaps a printer's tray (Spence 1).

With the proliferation of written texts and the relative accessibility of information through books, newspapers, television, and other electronic media, the concerted practice of constructing memory palaces has become all but defunct. We may though, be constructing similar structures in our minds, unaware of the mechanics of our recollections. Ricci's system of deliberately organizing memories and knowledge may help to define the mnemonic processes that our brains perform automatically. As we live and interact with the world around us, our experiences are sorted and stored as memories that we can access later. We construct mental structures, continuously building palaces (or printer's trays) of memory that we can carry with us.

When we are first introduced to Les we find him walking through the veld with his mind/memory on his back. It is a burden, a difficult history that weighs him down. Something on the ground glimmers, attracting his attention. An open flick-knife lies half covered in the grass, glinting in the sunlight. He picks it up, studies it. It is a new memory object – a reminder, perhaps, of a violent past. Indeed, most of the objects in Les's memory box carry with them a disquieting sense of discord. Later, as he walks down an inner-city street, the camera focuses on the separate compartments in the printer's tray, and we are projected into the memories (inexplicable, at first however, in their discontinuity) associated with the objects housed inside.



Les (Andrew Turner) discovers the remnants of a violent past.

The first compartment contains keys of various shapes and sizes. Immediately, we cut to Les standing in a corridor. He places a key in a lock, looks around furtively. A moment later he removes the key and kneels so that he can peer through the keyhole. What he sees is a 'primal scene' of sorts – an intimate moment



The Lovers.

between two lovers that later on comes to invade his fantasies and haunt his dreams. The second compartment contains photographs of a woman. They flicker like old film rushes, roughly animating her changing expressions as her happy smile fades and is replaced with a look of disbelief. The significance of these moments is later clarified when Les's memory is restored to him, but initially they appear as random, disconnected events. This is a deliberate strategy, devised to draw the viewer into Les's world, where the tenuous links between meaning and meaninglessness have all but collapsed.

The Nail Fetish

The third compartment contains a totem in the shape of a double-headed dog. It is a significant lead in Les's search, a foreboding, shadowy object that persistently crops up amongst his 'evidence'. A fearsome display of nails and spikes has been hammered into the body of the figure. It is a



Nkisi nkondi (Kozo)
Kongo
Cabina
Before 1900
Wood, iron
h.67.5cm

nail fetish in the tradition of those produced by the Kongo peoples of east and central Africa[vi]. These fetishes are called *minkisi* (sing. *nkisi*), an untranslatable term, which is the same name for the rituals in which the objects are used. *Minkisi* rituals are performed for a variety of reasons; these include dealing with problems of conflict in the community, theft, and disease, as well as increasing sexual prowess and prosperity (Phillips 244). Today, the most recognised *minkisi* (fetishes) fall under a subcategory called *nkondi*, which translated means 'hunter'. The purpose of *nkondi* is to reveal and hunt down unidentified wrongdoers (Phillips 246).



The stylised Kozo from *Mind Out of Joint*. Several different sized fetishes were made for various parts of the film.

The *nkisi* that Les carries with him is a stylised rendition of a *nkondi* type called 'Kozo', the double-headed dog – a revered retributive fetish. Dogs, according Kongo belief, are intermediaries between the living and the dead, and as a result between the seen and the unseen. In fact, dogs are said to have 'four eyes', a pair for this world and a pair for the next, and this is reflected in the fetishes two-headed form. It is believed that the Land of the dead lies 'across the water' or 'in the forest', which in actual fact is where burial grounds are to be found. Wild animals that live 'out there', beyond the boundaries of the village, are believed to be the livestock of the deceased. Dogs, however, live in the village, but unlike other domestic animals they are not eaten. They

assist the hunters in killing game (the animals of the dead) in the forest (the domain of the dead), and so, are seen to have a privileged status that allows them to navigate the boundaries between the living and the dead and therefore to act as mediators (Phillips 224).

Each one of the nails and spikes in the body of Kozo, attest to a bitter grievance. The amount of nails and spikes that cover a *nkisi nkondi* indicate the extent to which it has been used and therefore, how effective is has been in remedying the grievances of its users. The example of Kozo in Les's possession has amassed an imposing collection of iron, demonstrating its eminence and usage. When we are first invited to look at the fetish inside Les's memory box, we are presented with a corresponding image of a man hammering nails into the fetish's body. This is the original owner of the totem, and his active abuse[vii] of it is a pre-emptive prophetic strike against those responsible for his eventual demise. As mentioned before, Kozo is a retributive fetish. The figure's function is to traverse the borders between the two worlds of "invisible causes and visible effects", in order to hunt down those individuals responsible for maladies affecting the community or the perpetrators of crimes (Phillips 244). Unbeknownst to Les in his amnesiac condition, the disorder of his mind and memory is inextricably linked to a crime of his own. So, his innocent investment in this particular fetish as a possible clue to his past, is also, ironically, leading him to his own revelatory unmasking as a malefactor.

In *Mind Out of Joint*, deviating slightly from the traditional ethnographic symbolism of *nkisi nkondi*, the fetish mediates the divides between the

amnesiac state and that of total recall, as well as the divides between reality and dream. These states, however, are intricately and perplexingly bound together in the film, so that the narrative flow is abstracted. The viewer is confronted with worlds within worlds, different perceptions of reality within different realities and steadily collapsing boundaries that are meant to differentiate them, causing reality, fantasy and memory to bleed into each other. This constitutes an enormous narrative haemorrhage – a gaping wound in the boundary between what is real, what is imagined and what is remembered, which threatens to collapse all distinction. Within this complicated milieu, Kozo acts as a symbolic 'guide dog', leading the viewer, who grapples blindly with the disrupted narrative form, towards the promise of a meaningful resolution.

Down the Rabbit-hole

Once the film has established the workings of Les's memory box, fate or perhaps Kozo, working psychically for the man that Les has in fact already knocked down and killed with his motorcar, interjects and Les himself is inexplicably struck down. His injuries may or may not have been caused by a pot plant that falls from a window ledge – it is irrelevant, the two incidents simply occur at the same time[viii]. Wounded, Les lies in the street, clutching at his bleeding head. A 'stepped out' technique, whereby the same moving image is laid over itself but delayed by a few frames, creates a blurring effect that produces spectator empathy with Les's dazed condition. The image fades to black

before a searchlight sweeps across the picture, illuminating the depths of a dank tunnel. This marks Les's descent down the allegorical 'Rabbit-Hole', into a netherworld peppered with promising memento mori, but essentially devoid of the anchoring attributes of memory.

When speaking of the netherworld at the bottom of the 'Rabbit-Hole', I am of course alluding to Lewis Carroll's classic children's book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice's fall into the surrealistic land of nonsense and chaos is mirrored in Les's plunge into the confusion that transpires with the onset of his amnesia. Alice quickly begins to struggle with meaning and order inside the strange, destabilised (and destabilising) new realm in which she finds herself. As she falls "down, down, down" what seems to be an absurdly deep well, she ponders whether "cats eat bats" or "bats eat cats", immediately presenting us with the nonsense that arises from attempting to determine a secure meaning in Wonderland. The uncertainty and constant lunacy of Wonderland quickly begins to affect Alice's young mind, and as an unavoidable result she begins to question her own identity:

> Dear, dear! How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night! Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, that's the great puzzle! (Carroll 37)

She feels estranged from both from her body and from her mind, she thinks that she might possibly have changed into somebody else, and attempts to verify her identity by trying to solve maths problems, tests of her memory, and school lessons to see if she still knows the things she has been taught. But, she simply cannot *remember* the logic and order of all that she has learnt (Greenacre 381 –382). Alice's 'great puzzle' is the same one Les struggles to decipher. He too is acutely affected by the uncertainty and instability of meaning in a world that he does not recognise; and, he is indeed, also *changed*.

When Les is presented on the other side of the 'rabbit-hole', he carries with him the literal scars of his past (a thin, healed over wound running up behind his ear), his memory box, however, is gone. At this point the film's emphasis shifts to Les's investigation of himself. An unsettling sense of confusion, absurdity, and the threat of death pervade these scenes. In his search, Les is confronted by images of singular peculiarity – two identical vacuum cleaners with human faces protruding from their sides and a tube full of blood slung between their mouths; a trail of dirt leading to and disappearing beneath a closed door; a plant, its roots exposed by water erosion, in a bathtub; soil washing down the drain. These images are designed to be subtly disquieting and are meant to be suggestive of how the sinister and disturbing things we like to repress (like to *forget*) can be inscribed in our environments, often shut up behind closed doors.

Later in the film, in a dream montage Les has after recovering a small bundle of memory objects, vague pieces of the memories we have been

privy to are further muddled, and mixed in with Les's sexual fantasies. His dream is intruded upon by otherworldly voices that speak in half sentences and cryptic whispers, always giving the impression that they will potentially answer all his questions. But the voices are his own, murmurs of the explanations that are in fact locked away inside his own head. Here, the boundaries between memory, dream and reality are at their most fragile – at one point the memory/dream/fantasy of the lovers having sex infringes on reality, occupying the space above Les's bed. His bizarre world of part-sleep, part-waking and part-memory[ix] is evocative of the surreal aesthetic of Carroll's book. At the end of Carroll's story, when woken-up by her sister, Alice declares that her passage through Wonderland had been "such a curious dream!"[x] (Carroll 162). This is certainly a very important statement in that it associates her experiences with those of the surrealists (Zarrello).

Believing, as they did, in the superiority of uninhibited imagination and the value of dreams over reality, the surrealists would have been well at home in the Wonderland of Alice's reverie. Considering Andre Breton's definition of surrealism: "Pure psychic automatism, by which an attempt is made to express […] the true function of thought. The dictation of thought, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations", and his



Salvador Dali
'Down the Rabbit Hole'
1969
Heliogravure
16x10cm

Dali's 'Alice' folio reiterates the surrealist fascination with Lewis Carroll's fantastic imagery.

contention that "surrealism rests on the belief in the higher reality of certain hitherto neglected forms of association, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought" (Curtis 15), there is, without doubt, a powerful correlation between Carroll's Wonderland and the surrealist ideal. When reflecting on the narrative's strange events, peculiar characters, and general absurdity, it is quite clear that Alice's adventure has all the intrinsic worth of a surrealist dream, "because it is one" (Zarrello). And, like Alice's "curious dream", Les's dream is a portal to a different reality, one that is unbound from the security of stabilising logic or reason.

There should be little doubt that *Mind Out of Joint* was born out of a fascination with surrealist aesthetics. Issues of memory, transformation, death, dreams and the shifting status of reality are unquestionably of central concern to this film, as they are to surrealism. The narrative was produced through a deliberate *psychic automatism*, and although the intention was not to describe a dream, the film's form benefits from a visual and structural sensibility comparable to that of dreams. The images and scenarios that make up the film have their foundations loosely grounded in things that I myself have seen or experienced, the source being, in a manner of speaking, a well of memories. Filtered through my sensibilities and arranged in the film as they are, images and scenarios become reconstituted, much in the same way as the psyche reconstitutes the memories accumulated during the day as dreams – thus corresponding with surrealist practice. In addition, the film was influenced, actively, but not always consciously, by a litany of early experimental films and it abounds with imagery that evokes

European avant-garde films of the 1920s and early 1930s, not least Luis Buñuel's surrealist masterpiece *Un Chien Andalou* (1928).

Beware the Andalusian Dog – it bites[xi]

In 1925, after studying in Madrid where he met and befriended Salvador Dali, Buñuel travelled to Paris with vague ambitions of becoming an artist. He recognised his true calling, however, after seeing Fritz Lang's *Destiny* (1921) and found employment in the film industry as an assistant to the acclaimed French director, Jean Epstein. Buñuel's apprenticeship with Epstein though was brief. He was fired shortly after working on Epstein's *Fall of the House of Usher* because of his unwillingness to work with Epstein's own mentor, Abel Gance. A slight resulted from Buñuel's dislike for Gance's work, and the fact that he found Gance pretentious. In a telling statement, Epstein warned against the waywardness of Buñuel's "surrealistic tendencies" (Buñuel 88 - 90)

In his autobiography, entitled *My Last Sigh*, Buñuel describes how, while visiting Salvador Dali at his house in Figueras, he told Dali about a dream he had had in which a thin cloud "sliced the moon in half, like a razor blade slicing through an eye." Dali immediately countered with a description of a dream of his own in which he had seen a hand crawling with ants.

"And what if we started right there and made a film?" Dali asked.

And with that they set about writing the script for *Un Chien Andalou* – "an encounter between two dreams" (Buñuel 103 - 104). By all

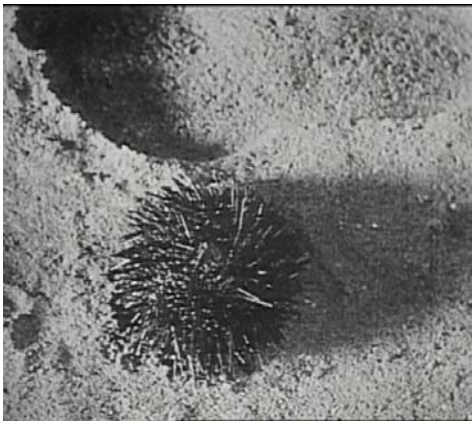
accounts, it was an effortless, happy joint collaboration in which there was never the slightest disagreement, and they finished the script in less than a week. Buñuel worked quickly once the script was completed, shooting the film over a period of two weeks on a small budget he was able to elicit from his mother[xii].

Buñuel and Dali's approach in working together on the scenario was to pitch shocking images or events at each other: "Our only rule was very simple: no idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted. We had to open all the doors to the irrational and keep only those images that surprised us, without trying to explain them" (Buñuel 104). So the image of an eye being sliced through with a razor blade is followed by the image of a man, wearing a nun's habit, riding a bicycle. This in turn is followed by other seemingly random images: ants crawling out from the inside of a hole in the palm of a hand (a stigmata?), an armpit, a sea urchin, a crowd gathered around a severed hand lying in the middle of the road, a sexual assault during which the assailant goes through ghoulish transformation – his eyes rolled back in his head, blood dripping from the side of his mouth (like a zombie creature in a George Romero film), the assailant taking up ropes and dragging pianos loaded with strange cargo across the room as the woman hides behind her bed and defends herself with a tennis racket.... There is no discernable storyline. A synopsis of the film then, is merely a recount of nonsensical shots and scenarios.

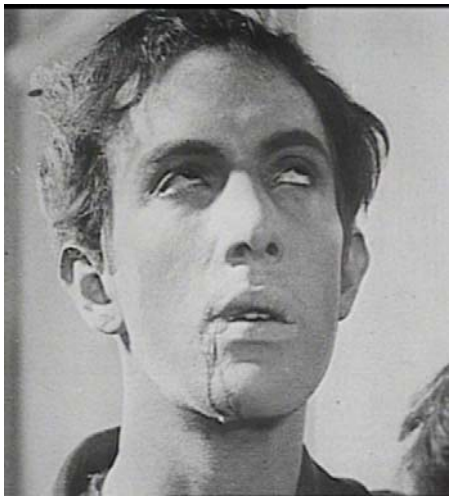














Un Chien Andalou
The randomness of shots and scenarios defy rational explanation.

But still, we try to make sense of it all, to order the logic of the images and events so that their narrative purpose might somehow become apparent. Indeed, the film tends to draw the viewer in by making use of many of the codes and conventions of narrative film – the use of expressive close-ups and establishing long shots, and the conscious avoidance of 'artistic techniques'. It is a strategy, David Curtis argues, that diverges significantly from the approach of avant-garde films that came before it: "[Buñuel] treats his subject as though he were making a popular thriller, presenting just enough 'continuity' and 'theme' – the pleasant bourgeois heroine, the recurring striped box, the physiognomical resemblance between various men (are they the same man?) – to reinforce the illusion of rationality. This strengthens the impact of the extraordinary plot." (Curtis 22)

So, opposed to the techniques of earlier Dada films, which were dependant on illogical, non-narrative and abstract devices, Buñuel employed "conventional cinematography, optical realism and narrative to invite identification, in order to make the misappropriation and rupture of these techniques all the more shocking" (Cook 114). In light of this, the opening sequence with its apparently candid images, the man (Buñuel himself), the baroque balcony, the 'romantic' full moon, produces a sense of innocence, lulling the viewer into conventional patterns of seeing. And, it is this very sense of innocence that makes the man's perverse deed – his slicing through of a woman's eye with the razor blade – especially awful (Curtis 22).

Besides this sequence's ability to shock (which it still does after almost seventy years), Jean Vigo suggests that it also provides a key that helps to partly decipher the rest of the film, or at least allows the viewer to

better accept the irrationality of the narrative progression. In his review of the film in *Vers un cinéma social* Vigo writes: "Our cowardice, which leads us to accept so many of the horrors that we, as a species, commit, is dearly put to the test when we flinch from the screen image of a woman's eye sliced in half by a razor. Is it more dreadful than the spectacle of a cloud veiling a full moon? Such is the prologue: it leaves us with no alternative but to admit that we will be committed, that in this film we will have to view with something more than the everyday eye" (Vigo 75 – 76). Jacques Brunius echoes Vigo's sentiments when he suggests that the brutal image of the destruction of the eye, "intimates that people hoping to have their retina deliciously tickled by artistic photography have picked the wrong film" (Brunius 99). The literal assault on the eye is emblematic of Buñuel's intent to figuratively assault the conservative ways of seeing and easy contentment of the audience whose substitute "screen-eye" he is deliberately attacking (Rees 46). The film must, therefore, be viewed from an alternative perspective.

Mind Out of Joint's intentionally evocative visual style functions partly as homage to the aesthetics of *Un Chien Andalou*, but it also attempts, in a similar way to Buñuel's film, to provoke an alternative perspective in order to challenge its audience's perceptions. The film operates as what I have described as a *disrupted narrative* – the narrative still functions as such, maintaining the conciliatory techniques of mainstream narrative cinema, but much of it has been abstracted or negated in order to reinforce an unsettling sense of dislocation. For the most part, the construction of the film is marked by a detached

practicality, brought on in no small measure by a plain lack of resources. However, the results of this practical approach tend to challenge the artistic abstraction that has been consciously built into the film, reiterating the play between the comfort of conventional construction and the surprise interjection of unconventional elements. While the narrative progression is fairly straightforward, the disruptive inclusion of apparently disassociated events and the paralleling of mismatched temporalities which effectively fractures the continuity of space and time, results in an aesthetic approach that not only throws into question the certainty of seeing, but of course, the certainty of remembering.

In addition to the similarities in narrative techniques, or perhaps more accurately non-narrative techniques (deliberate abstraction tends to work against story development), there are also corresponding images and scenarios that highlight *Un Chien Andalou*'s influence on *Mind Out of Joint*. These include scenes where space and time are dislocated through the geographical misplacement of locations in relation to each other – in *Un Chien Andalou*, the same bedroom door leads alternately on to a street, a park and a beach, and in *Mind Out of Joint* the lovers inhabit the space above Les's bed; as well as the episodes in both films in which pedestrians are struck down by motor cars. However, correlations like these were not always conscious decisions. The powerful imagery of Buñuel's film pervaded filmmaking from the very first, and has left an indelible mark on film history as well as on many an aspirant filmmaker. After all, *Un Chien Andalou* remains one of the most renowned short films ever made – sooner or later, anyone even

partially interested in cinema history and practice sees it, and very likely a number of times. Consequently, even though I was conscious of *Un Chien Andalou*'s influence while making *Mind Out of Joint*, it was only much later that the correlation between certain images became apparent to me – a demonstration of the subliminal power of Buñuel and Dali's vision[xiii].

Of the images more obviously linked across the films, the encumbering pianos of *Un Chien Andalou* and the loaded memory/mind box in *Mind Out of Joint* appear to have a particularly strong relationship. In both films, the remnants of remembered experiences and fixations, born out of fantasy and a skewed memory process, are presented in the form of burdens. Jacques Brunius states that it is quite simple to recognise that at the point in *Un Chien Andalou* where the young man is set to sexually assault the girl, what he hauls behind him with extraordinary effort at the end of two ropes, "from the lightest to the heaviest objects – corks, melons, priests, pianos filled with donkey-carrion," are the repressed lees of his formative memories (Brunius 100). Jean Vigo affirms this notion when he exclaims: "Two grand pianos, stuffed with corpses and excrement – our pathetic sentimentality!" (Vigo 76)[xiv] Similarly, as established earlier in this chapter, the box that Les carries on his back in *Mind Out of Joint* contains the memory objects that have shaped his identity. But, while Buñuel and Dali use the image of the pianos and their cargo for the express purpose of inducing shock and revulsion, and then discard it in favour of additional random images, Les's memory/mind box and its eventual disappearance are central to the narrative of *Mind Out of Joint*.

Working through a number of my own fixations with *Un Chien Andalou* was certainly a major contributing factor in the development of *Mind Out of Joint*, but this intertextuality should not be confused in any way with a lack of personal vision. The films are clearly different in many aspects. *Mind Out of Joint* has a very strong, very determined narrative arc, whereas *Un Chien Andalou* is almost completely random, merely offering up the *possibility* of narrative structure, but always rejecting it in favour of unmitigated irrationality. And therefore, besides been revelatory as it is in form, *Un Chien Andalou* does not offer any narrative revelations (unless you consider a lack of story revelatory), while the outcome of *Mind Out of Joint* is very definitely about revealing the narrative progression. The film's final revelations strive to make sense – the viewer is supposed to rerun the plot in their head, making sense of the initial scenes in terms of the end epiphany. And, while these revelations try to provide some sort of clarity to the load (a veritable box full, a printer's tray perhaps) of conflicting details, the ultimate objective of *Mind Out of Joint*, like so many mystery films, is to open up to re-viewing and with that, re-interpretation.

The Final Amnesia

Once Les is completely submerged in his amnesic condition, waking and sleeping begin to take on the same bewildering attributes. We find him reading a book, perhaps searching there for a key to unlock his memories – a piece of knowledge to prick his subconscious. There is

nothing there, however, only the reaffirmation of his mind's dislocation. Instead, he happens upon a business card, stuck between the pages of his book, for the mechaninitians *Tesla & Sons*[xv], and in a last-ditch attempt to recover his memory and his sanity he seeks their professional help. In the mechaninitians' waiting room Les waits with two other patients. Their ailments have been corrected by grotesque mechanical devices – one man inhales air through a gas-mask of sorts which is attached to a bell jar with a plant in it, the other wears an elaborated pair of glasses with several lenses which he slides and pulls to correct his focus. The devices have the counter effects of rectifying the wearer's defects and at the same time rendering them far more prominent. Les feels out of place, not sure of his prospects of finding remedy here, but in a world of such gross and absurd exaggeration it may be the best place to start looking.

Eventually, Les gets to consult with one of the mechanintians; the plaque on the desk announces that the consultant is Eugene Tesla[xvi]. In the list of dramatis personae at the beginning of the screenplay I describe Telsa as "an alchemist of sorts", a mythical character, who, much like Kozo, possesses privileged knowledge and ability that allows him insight into things otherworldly. He sits behind his desk, typing up a report on an old typewriter, the sound of each keystroke reverberating violently in the small office as he types the words – *The Final Amnesia*. Here again, Buñuel haunts the scene, not through an association with any of his films, but in fact more directly. In the opening chapter of his autobiography, Buñuel comments on the nature of recollection. He speaks of his mother's illness and her consequent memory loss with a

mixed sense of dread and resignation at the likelihood of the similar deterioration of his own memory:

> I can only wait for *the final amnesia*[xvii], the one that can erase an entire life, as it did my mother's.... You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all, just as an intelligence without the possibility of expression is not really an intelligence. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing. (Buñuel 4 - 5)

Buñuel's poignant and disturbing sentiments show concern for the same fundamental issues that Locke outlined in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. And so we return to the core problems that present themselves as the enquiry into the relationship between memory and identity: what sense of existence, what sense of lived experience, what sense of self, can be sustained without memory and its role in anchoring our temporality?

Tesla contemplates these very questions, but of course he has no definitive answers. What he does have, however, is a fantastic solution to Les's immediate memory problem. He presents Les with *The Olfactory Memory Machine*. An extraordinary contraption that consists of a box with a cranking handle protruding from one side and a rubber tube protruding from another. The tube is inserted into Les's nose and his

eyes are covered with a pair of completely darkened goggles, inducing a visual deprivation that allows his olfactory organs to dominate. The machine is meant to trigger recollection by stimulating the sense of smell, for "nothing is more memorable than a smell.... Smells detonate softly in our memory like poignant land mines hidden under the weedy mass [the undergrowth] of years. Hit a tripwire of smell and memories explode all at once" (Ackerman 3). Les begins to turn the cranking handle, and we see the inner workings of the contraption - a fan spins, a drop of liquid (scented oil perhaps or lubricant to smooth the rusty workings of Les's brain) runs down a piece of string - finally explaining the mysterious series of images in the beginning of the film. Les's consciousness is thrust backwards in time. Complex visions of his past actions "leap out from the undergrowth, " (Ackerman) revealing, at last, the identity that seemed lost forever.

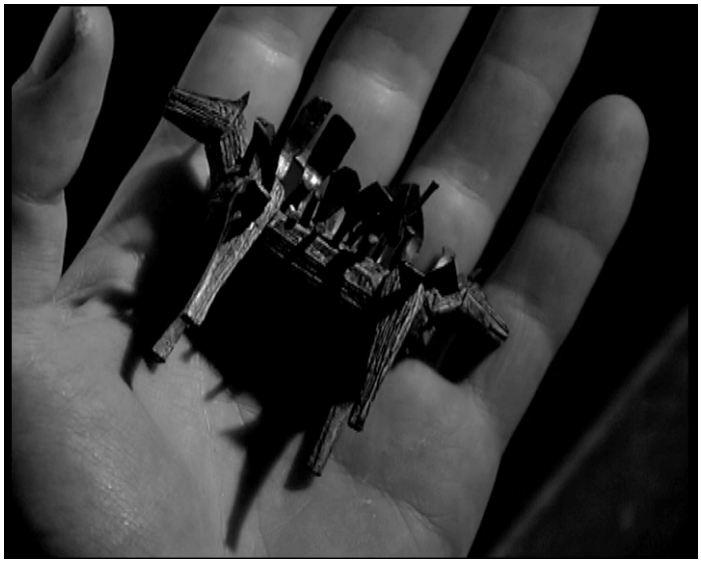


Les operating the *Olfactory Memory Machine*.

A woman knits, her hands dexterously working a pair of knitting needles. She is the same woman who at the beginning of the film placed on the windowsill the malevolent pot plant that effectively dislocated Les's memory. Her knitting not only perpetuates her domestic image, established with her beautification of the windowsill with the plant and

then her vacuuming of the living room carpet, but also provides a metaphor for the knitting together of Les's fragmented memories and the subsequent tying up of the narrative. When heavy footfalls from upstairs upset a ball of wool beside her, its unraveling sets up another metaphor, that of the unraveling or unknotting of the story - the denouement. In this climactic part of the film, the disparate snippets of memories from the rest of the film are strung together in chronological order, providing a progressive unfolding of the events that finally lends sense to them.

We are reintroduced to the moment when Les stands in the corridor, holding a key in the lock of a door, contemplating whether to unlock it. Eventually he decides against it, opting rather to kneel down and peer through the keyhole. He sees the lovers, sharing a tender moment[xviii]. This is the point at which the original presentation of this memory broke off, leaving its meaning and purpose unclear. Now, however, the episode is completed. The lovers hear Les at the door. He flees, and in his mad dash to escape he accidentally knocks a pedestrian down with his car. He is shocked and disorientated, and in his panic he chooses to run instead of help, but not before he finds the accusatory *nkisi nkondi*



Memento mori

in the street beside his victim – a memento mori in the most accurate

sense. And so Les's memory is restored to him, but this success is overwhelmed by the ironic nature of his recovered knowledge. The things he has strived so long and hard to remember are exactly those that he would want to forget, and "nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory," as Michel de Montaigne keenly observes, "as the wish to forget it."

Notes

[i] Of course, social and cultural identities are also heavily reliant on memory. Defining peoples - communities and cultures - is always an articulation of tradition, belief and shared history.

[ii] Before discussing his principle of *personal identity*, Locke finds it necessary first to define the parameters of what a *person* might be, describing one as: "…a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it…" (Locke 302).

[iii] Locke argues that whenever a *person* uses their senses to, "see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything," they recognise the fact that they are indeed using their senses. "Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this everyone is to himself that which he calls *self*" (Locke 302).

[iv] These are not new ideas. In Rudolph Maté's noir classic, *D.O.A* (1950), Edmond O'Brien plays a small town insurance salesman attending a convention in San Francisco, who, after a night out on the town, discovers that he has been fatally poisoned with a slow releasing toxin, and begins his death-watch through the city's dark underbelly in an attempt to find his murderer (Hirsch 173).
And, in Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987) Mickey Rourke plays detective Harry Angel, hired to track down the enigmatic and murderous Johnny Favourite, only to discover that he and Favourite are in fact the same person.

[v] In anticipation of Chinese inquiries into the evolution of the 'memory palace' system, Ricci ascribed the idea of memory training to the ancient Greek poet Simonides (Spence 2). Frances Yates, in describing the first of three Latin sources for the classical art of memory, gives an account of the event that is said to have suggested to the poet the principles of the art of memory. As the story goes, Simonides was called upon to recite a poem in honour of the host of a large banquet gathering, a nobleman by the name of Scopas. Simonides, however, included in his praise a passage honouring the demigods Caster and Pollux. Scopas, taking offence, spitefully instructed the poet to be paid only half the sum agreed for his services and that the twin gods to whom he had devoted half the poem should pay the balance. Later, a message arrived, informing Simonides that two men were waiting to talk to him outside. Simonides excused himself and left, but found no one there. Just then, the great hall's roof collapsed killing Scopas and everyone else in attendance. The bodies of those killed were so obliterated that even their relatives could not recognize them. Simonides, however, could remember the precise order and location in which they had been sitting, and as he recalled them one by one their bodies could be identified (Yates 1-2).

[vi] The Kongo are comprised of those people who speak the Kikongo language. With a population of roughly three million, they are distributed among the republics of Angola, Zaire and Congo (Phillips 244).

[vii] A *nkisi* and its powers are aroused through abusive treatment of it. So, "by driving nails into it, comparing it unfavourably to a lump of wood, and threatening to throw it away in the bush" the spirit represented by the fetish is provoked into action (Phillips 246).

[viii] Here we see, very simply, the power of montage. Juxtaposing these shots makes them literally and figuratively collide. It is from this figurative collision that new meaning is produced (Hayward 79).

[ix] Eugène Ionesco's thoughts on memory are particularly sympathetic of Les's condition: "The light of memory, or rather the light that memory lends to things, is the palest light of all. . . . I am not quite sure whether I am dreaming or remembering, whether I have lived my life or dreamed it. Just as dreams do, memory makes me profoundly aware of the unreality, the evanescence of the world, a fleeting image in the moving water." (Ionesco 190)

[x] Les, too, is woken up at the end of his narrative. He wakes up to the facts about his misdeed, and his own 'true' nature.

[xi] Jean Vigo pp76

[xii] All my films have been made possible, either entirely of partially, but without fail, through the investment of my parents. To a certain extent this has come, as was the case with Buñuel's mother's investments, in the form of money. More often though, they have freely invested their time, as well as those other undervalued commodities, their concern and sympathy. To any student setting out in the

notoriously costly film field, I would recommend that they seek out generous patrons – preferably people who like them. Possibly their parents.

[xiii] Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that the source of Buñuel and Dali's images lies in dreams – the images lodge so effectively in the subconscious as a result of their unconscious origins.

[xiv] J. H. Mathews challenges this type of analysis of *Un Chien Andalou*, suggesting that while interpretations of this sort are of course discretional, that in fact an attempt to uphold *any* one reading of the film ultimately exposes two flaws of which no surrealist could ever be accused. Mathews argues that the desire to support one deduction exclusively, demonstrates the need to consider the film in such a way as to render the irrational content that it presents, more *rational*, and therefore more palatable. And, in addition to this, the neurotic necessity to punt a rational explanation counteracts a style of surrealist humour that is distinctively radical, one of the most distinguishing qualities of a film irrelevantly entitled, *An Andalusian Dog*. For Mathews, by negating this essential element, the reach and capacity of the scene that is being scrutinized so intently is unduly restricted (Mathews 87).

[xv] The address on the card for *Tesla & Sons* locates them in *Wonderville* – a barely disguised nod to *Alice* once again.

[xvi] I chose the name Tesla with the idea that the company of mechainitians is in some way related to Nikola Tesla (1856–1943), the famed American electrical engineer and inventor who developed the first alternating-current induction motor, as well as several forms of oscillators, the tesla coil, and a wireless guidance system for ships, and who remains a favorite subject of science fiction writes because of continued speculation over several fantastical devices he supposedly invented and the alleged conspiracy that has kept them under wraps.

[xvii] My italics

[xviii] Les's relationship to the lovers remains unclear, but what is apparent is his infatuation with the woman, which opens up many alternative readings, including the possibility that Les and the woman are themselves lovers and this is his discovery of her betrayal. A far more sinister possibility is that Les is simply a voyeur.



Voices from the Other Side

The marriage of reason and nightmare which has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy.

J. G. Ballard, Introduction to the French edition of *Crash*, 1974

Contact

"I hear, I hear!" exclaimed Dom Pedro II as he leapt out of his chair. The Brazilian emperor's cry of amazement at Alexander Graham Bell's demonstration of the telephone at the U.S. Centennial Exposition in 1876[1] sounded the symbolic universal unblocking of our aural faculties. Indeed, in our modernity, our ceaseless expansion, the telephone is our ear and we are deaf without it. It is an extension of ourselves, and a point of contact with our world. Marshall McLuhan has even gone so far as to suggest that the enhancement of ear and voice precipitated by the telephone constitutes a kind of extrasensory perception (McLuhan 289). The telephone has become part of our mental composition, sutured into our consciousness, and through it we hear voices.

This encounter with voices from the other side is a strange engagement indeed. They are disembodied, but exceedingly present, able to communicate all manner of idea and thought across the vastness of the globe, directly into our homes with near-immediacy. And because of the incorporeality of the telephonic voice, the traditional principles of a face-to-face dialogue do not apply. When conversing by telephone, one is completely cut off from the visual cues that arise from physical exchange and assist in the conveyance of meaning: "There is no flashing glance to 'register' […] wrath; no curling lip to betoken scorn; no twinkling eye to suggest whimsicality; none of the charm of personal presence that might give substance to an attenuated argument or power to feeble retort. The voice must do it all" (Peters 198)[2].

As a consequence of this visual absence, this 'blindness', the telephone could very well be considered impaired. But its sensory selectiveness could also be its strongest attribute – a disengagement with the eye that effectively stimulates a reengagement with the imagination which re-emphasises verbal expression. Here, contact is achieved by speaking to the 'mind's eye'. Sandy Stone suggests that it is not merely voices that are transmitted through the wire, "other things are sent right along with them: Agency, Icon, Bodies, Desire" (Stone 400). Unshackled from physicality, the possibilities for expression become infinite and the bodiless subject is opened up to wondrous new ways of *connecting*.

In the short film *Dialtone*, Johnny (Kieron Van Rooyen), the film's protagonist, longs for contact. He *uses* the phone – utilising its connective function and exploiting the bodiless anonymity it provides – placing a call to a sex chat-line. In the ensuing conversation he has with the disembodied female voice on the other end, Johnny begins to articulate his desires and give voice to his fantasies. The film is primarily an enquiry into the role that spoken language plays in the construction of a sexual state; how speech, particularly speech disembodied by the intervention of technology (in this case the telephone), encourages the mental refiguring of bodies, where the identities of the subjects on either end of the line are in constant flux.

The film begins with a voice, spoken over a black screen – a disembodied voice to begin a meditation on disembodiment. "I think

about you constantly," the voice says, "about making love to you."[3] Later we discover that this is Johnny's voice, and this is a desperate inner desire made audible. The object of this desire remains obscure, but because a scene in which Johnny surreptitiously watches a young woman as they ride on the bus together follows this voice-over, one could possibly assume that he is talking to her. Is this a snippet of a telephone conversation? Perhaps. If so, the confusion over its meaning and relation to what we are seeing is most certainly produced by its incompleteness – for the telephone by its very nature splits a "conversation into halves that meet only in the cyberspace of the wire." Without the other half of the dialogue the communication remains cryptic (Peters 199). Mark Twain contemplates this very peculiarity in his short skit *A Telephonic Conversation*:

> Consider that a conversation by telephone--when you are simply sitting by and not taking any part in that conversation--is one of the solemnest curiosities of modern life… Without answering, I handed the telephone to the applicant, and sat down. Then followed that queerest of all the queer things in this world-- a conversation with only one end of it. You hear questions asked; you don't hear the answer. You hear invitations given; you hear no thanks in return. You have listening pauses of dead silence, followed by apparently irrelevant and unjustifiable exclamations of glad surprise or sorrow or dismay. You can't make head or tail of the talk, because you

never hear anything that the person at the other end of the wire says. (Twain)

Even though dialogue, as it occurs on the telephone, is extolled for its sense of immediate presence, the connection of its two halves takes place in a removed, virtual no-man's-land. A paranoid in his or her anxiety might see this place as a suspicious 'black hole': "It's bad to hear myself talk on any occasion. It's worse to talk into an empty black hole, without the comfort and guide of a responsive face before me" (Peters 198)[4]. But for those unafraid to partake in the pleasures of virtual embodiment, the remote electrical space that the telephone taps in to can also be a tantalising new realm of sexual fancy.

Self-Abandon

Johnny's foray into the erotic environment between receivers is shaky at first. He has to find his feet – not an easy undertaking when



Johnny (Kieron Van Rooyen) makes the call.

you are disembodied – as he navigates the vague terrain. When his connection finally goes through, Johnny is nervous and circumspect. The woman who answers his call, on the other hand, is composed and articulate, just as one would expect form a professional. She introduces herself as Lindi, and immediately tries to elicit a sexual reaction: “I’ve been waiting for you, jus’ fantasising out loud, an’, ahhhh, I could use a well-hung man…” But Johnny is weary of the impression he is projecting and he wants to put the picture, which she might have in her head of him, straight. “I’m not jerking off on the phone right now,” he assures her, fully aware of the limitless manifestations available in cyberspace, and trying desperately to maintain control over his own body. The telephone is a device of “control and uncontrol”. While the distance inherent in telephonic interaction is a form of protection, an emotional defence that allows one to literally save face, the immeasurable possibilities, including those of intimacy and emotional vulnerability that emerge through articulations of wants and needs and acts of confession, constantly threaten the subject’s restraint (Hanson 44).

In the beginning, Johnny is at pains to sidestep the object of phone sex. He explains to Lindi that he doesn’t usually do stuff like this and asks her if it doesn't give her the creeps to have all *these* guys calling her. Here, Johnny inadvertantly reveals his own prejudice and preconceptions of the *type* of people who call chat lines; he believes that he is not like them. This is another way for him to keep control, and, ironically, keep his distance. He is obviously missing the point. Phone sex requires the relinquishment of conrol to allow for the free flow of description and narrative – maintaining telephonic control in

this instance is like talking into a mirror; you have an affinity for everything being said, but it is not all that much fun.

The characters in Nicholson Baker's phone-sex novel, *Vox* (the most influential text in my conception of *Dialtone*, but utimatly far removed), do not suffer from control issues. Theirs is a give and take relationship, where stories and fantasies are freely exchanged. Jim and Abby call an adult party-line, and somehow, amongst the lewd chatter, discover that they like each other's voices. They retreat to the "fiber-optical 'back room'" for a more intimate one-on-one talk. The resulting conversation makes up the entire novel. Jim lives in a city on America's west coast, Abby in one on the east coast; separated literally by the span of the continent as well as the anonymity afforded by the phone, they engage easily in erotic narrations, entering vicariously into each other's scenarios and assuming shifting roles.

The call is a meeting of like minds. Both Abby and Jim are intelligent, articulate, and insightful, and of course have a penchant for autoeroticism. Abby is a virtuoso sexual raconteuse, turned on predominantly by her own capacity to titillate. Jim's desire is to be privy to the desires' of woman. He is a cerebral peeping tom, 'getting off' on peeking in on woman's thoughts rather than their showers, and Abby has just the image for him – she describes how she masturbates *in the shower*, and what she thinks of when she does so. "It's a miracle," Jim announces, "a telephone conversation I want to have. I *love* the telephone." Abby likes it too. She says that it has power, beyond its basic connectivity, capable of making one *believe*;

she refers to the child's game of talking into a toy phone and imagining another's presence on the other end[5], intimating that the device's form and function has an intrinsic quality that encourages the play of fantasy.

At times, Jim and Abby's reciprocity transends simple eroticism. Maundering tales that set out to arouse, deviate into congenial details of their everyday lives; he describes the view from his window, "I can see a streetlight with lots of spike holes in it, from utility workers – I mean a wooden telephone pole with a streetlight on it.... The streetlight is photo-activated, and watching it come on is really one of the most beautiful things;" (9) and they impart lyrical observations on modernity; she says of pop songs that simply fade-out instead of ending on a chord, " [it's] a kind of artistic sloppiness, this attempt to imply that oh yeah, we're a bunch of endlessly creative folks who jam all night, and the bad old record producer finally has to turn down the volume on us just so we don't fill the whole album with one monster song...." (27). By grounding his characters in the pathologies of day-to-day living, Baker effectivly upsets the bounds of sexual desire and is able to expand on his own impressions of the idiosyncrasies of modern society.

There comes a point in the novel when one realises that Jim and Abby are simply using the telephone and each other as devices that safeguard them from the awkwardness of physical interaction, and in this, Baker exposes an odd sort of pride harbored by his characters, which is really to blame for their isolated lives. Of course with all the complications of embodiment – where you are located, what you look

like, what you wear, how you stand and walk and sit - it is far easier to pick up the phone than it is actually to meet people face-to-face. In a way, *Vox* reveals the bizzare (dis)connections of our contemporary existance, how, through technology, people have achieved a peculiar sense of remote intimacy.

Back to Johnny's call. He asks Lindi what she is doing and she says that she is at home lying on her queen size bed, wearing nothing but a taupe coloured camisole. These are claims impossible to verify; the likelihood is that she is in the mundane setting of an office or study, a place more conducive to work rather than play. Robert Altman illustrates this idea of *dis-location* wonderfully in his film *Short Cuts* (1993). Jennifer Jason Leigh plays a woman supplementing the family income by working as a phone sex operator who spins graphic sex fantasies to strangers over the phone while at the same time changing her baby's diaper[6]. Lindi, no doubt, operates the same way, able to attend to Johnny's fantasies without imposing her own reality. And, as Johnny starts to relax, so he begins to buy into the illusion.

The viewer never gets to see the real Lindi, but instead sees her as Johnny imagines her; a flurry of fragmented close-ups as specific details are described – a hand, a leg, a breast. Lindi is mediated through the machine. One cannot help thinking that if it were not for the telephone, she would not exist at all. Technology mediates between the 'real' world, Johnny's world, and the 'ghost' that is Lindi. Her voice is always present, a narrator of the images on view, but she is always heard through the telephone receiver making her

seem distant; or perhaps contained. We know, or at least we believe, that she is on the other end of the line, but she is also *inside* the device and, in the manner of certain schizophrenic manifestations, Johnny's (our) head.

In a paper entitled *Split Subjects, Not Atoms; or, How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis*, Sandy Stone relates an incident in which she was fortunate enough to attend a lecture by world famous physicist Steven Hawking. At first, the auditorium having being packed to capacity, Stone had resigned to listen to the talk over the university's PA system, but after easily weaving her way past campus security, she found herself in the front row of the lecture theatre. After a few moments of listening to Hawking's lecture, Stone realised that there would have being no difference to hearing Hawking talk over the PA system and hearing him in person. Stone describes Hawking's presence as the perfect illustration of body- and self-division through communication technology.

Hawking has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and is consequently confined to a wheelchair unable to move any part of his body except his fingers. To talk, Hawking uses a specially designed, artificial speech device. So, whether speaking over a PA system or 'in person', Hawking is always mediated through technology. The question this raises for Stone is: 'Where exactly is Steven Hawking?' "In an important sense, Hawking doesn't stop being Hawking at the edge of his visible body. There is the obvious physical Hawking, vividly outlined by the way our social conditioning teaches us to see a person as a person. But a serious part of Hawking extends into the

box in his lap." Just as a plastic prosthesis substitutes for an amputee's missing limb, Hawking's specially designed, artificial speech device substitutes for his missing voice, but more than that, it acts as an extension – expanding Hawking's presence so as to make his edges seemingly intangible[7] (Stone 394 – 395).

Ghosts

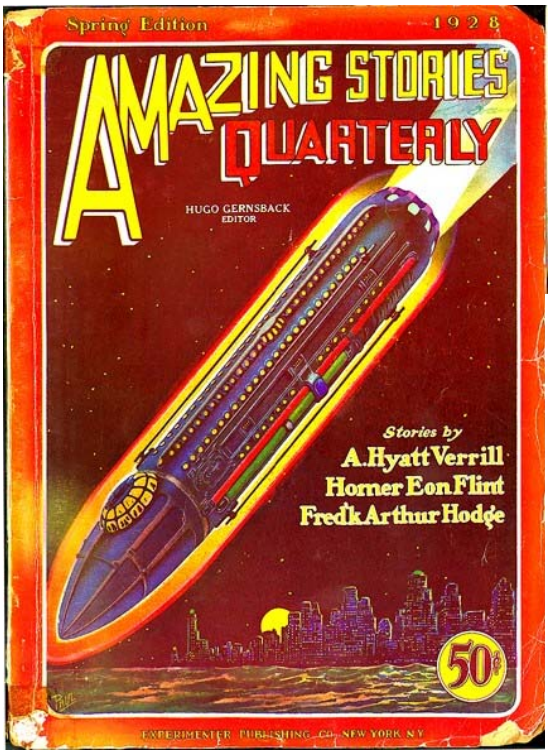
Hawking's situation is obviously very different from that of a person speaking over the phone. His body is completely incapable of expression, and so, his intellect, trapped inside the unresponsive soma, can *only* be liberated via technological intervention. For us, the telephone is simply a convenience, but in the device's invisible projections, its temporal and spatial displacement of the subject, or more accurately the self, the telephone-user becomes, like Hawking, disembodied. Judith S. Donath proposes that, in the physical world the body presents a "compelling and convenient" establishment of the boundaries of identity. The self (the soul, one's essence) has an innate wholeness, for although the self may be intricate and changeable over time, the body always acts as identity's mainstay. On the telephone, however, as in cyberspace, things are very different. Rather than an encounter of real, physical matter, all interaction is an exchange of information. "Information spreads and diffuses; there is no law of the conservation of information. The inhabitants of this *impalpable* space are also diffuse, free from the body's unifying anchor" (Donath 29). Our technology seeks to bridge the distance between us, but in the process we become mental

spectres in the mechanics of our own machines. On the phone, as with all emerging communication technologies, we are rendered ghostly.

Charles Horton Cooley, writing in 1902, expounds his perception of all communication as a psychical undertaking, in which physical presence is irrelevant; a concept that is impressively in line with the current evolution of communication systems. According to Cooley, the body in itself is not necessarily the bearer of an individual's personality; "What, for instance," he asks, "could the most elaborate knowledge of his weights and measures, including the anatomy of his brain, tell us of the character of Napoleon?" (121). Instead, for Cooley, the attributes of personality are to be found in our unconscious communications, the way we might read an expression on a face or make sense of the timbre of a voice – he describes these as "ghost expressions" (113). The realities of society, Cooley argues, are what people glean from each other, whether this be in person, over the phone, or in writing, and build into mental images: "the imaginations that people have of one another are the *solid facts* of society" (121). By this reasoning then, telephone conversations with a person, photographs, literary descriptions, and fantasies of them, can evoke their presence better than any physical interaction. Indeed, with the intervention of communications media our instinctive 'ghost expressions' become separable from the restraints of our bodies, and this in Cooley's view enables communications with the dead (Peter 186).

To further illustrate his case Cooley asserts that, because of their cultural dissemination by way of communications media, figures such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Colonel Newcome, Romola, Hamlet – the departed; the purely imagined; or indeed concepts of gods and other supernatural beings, are more real than people who have yet to lose their corporeity and therefore should be given status as *present* in society. “What, indeed, would society be, or what would any one of us be,” he asks, “if we associated only with corporeal persons and insisted that no one should enter our company who could not show his power to tip the scales and cast a shadow?” (123) Communications media, then, act as portals to a notional space, an alternative world that exists alongside our own and contains the spectral fragments of all the possible ‘imaginations’ of human interaction, and which periodically intersects with our own 'real' world.

The “semiotic ghosts” of William Gibson’s short story *The Gernsback Continuum* inhabit just such a universe parallel to our own. The ‘continuum’ is a spatiotemporal sequence comprised of the multitudes, from the most logical to the most extraordinary, of possible manifestations of the present imaginable. The ‘ghosts’ that



Amazing Stories Quarterly one of Hugo Gernsback’s many publications. Flying machines, like ‘spacecraft’ on the cover, take on a life of their own inside *The Gernsback Continuum*.

occupy this space are defined by the media imagery and sounds that saturate our culture. The story's narrator, a photographer contracted to photograph examples of art deco architecture along North America's west coast, not only takes a journey across America, but also a journey into the collective imaginations of a forgotten, but not fully eliminated, public life. Via a combination of his own impending mental collapse and amphetamine-induced psychosis, the narrator inadvertently penetrates the "membrane of probability" that separates the real world from the continuum, and begins to have hallucinations – initially catching glimpses of impossible flying machines like those that appeared in early twentieth century Hugo Gernsback pulp fiction stories.

Uneasy about his visions and worried about his apparent slip into dementia, the narrator drives to Tucson where he gets in touch with Merv Kihn, a "free-lance journalist with an extensive line in Texas pterodactyls, redneck UFO contactees, bush-league Loch Ness monsters, and the Top Ten conspiracy theories in the loonier reaches of the American mass mind" (84). He is, in short, a tabloid hack, but Merv is also an expert on the 'continuum' phenomenon and quickly determines that our narrator has slipped through the permeable barrier that separates our world from the alternative universes that intersect with it. Inside he is inclined to be haunted by bits of deep cultural imagery like the enormous twelve-engined flying-wing liner he sees on the outskirts of Bolinas or the zeppelin docks and mad neon spires he sees in his rear-view mirror of the Tucson that never was, all of which have separated from the collective imagination and taken on a life of their own. Strange things prevail outside the fragile

stockades of normality. By conjuring up these manifestations, and in an appropriately Cooley-esque manner, the 'continuum' invites communion with the dead, the historical, and the imaginary.



Lindi's vaguely defined telephonic presence, fragmented by shadow

Lindi is a semiotic ghost, a fragment of the "Mass Dream" – a culturally rendered, imaginary semblance of sex, inhabiting a parallel universe between telephone receivers. Her presentation in *Dialtone*, revealed in quick snippets as a light sweeps over her, illuminating parts of her body for fleeting moments before petering into shadow, illustrates the transient nature of her vaguely defined telephonic presence and identity. It is this instability of identities that is at the very heart of the telephone's strangeness. Because only voices can travel through the wire, the telephone relies completely on the exchange of description and narrative, which in turn encourages "a polymorphous play of bodies and identities" (Hanson 36).

The Sound of Black

As Lindi begins to describe herself in the particular sex fantasist parlance, she alludes to the colour of her skin. "You're black?" Johnny asks, a little surprised at this revelation. The slippery

electronic voice has conveyed only so much as has been said, and he has assumed that she is white. Since bodies over the phone are unseen, skin colour obviously remains unseen[8]. So rather than the display of bodies conveying race, these details can only be imparted as assurances – the parties involved must give their *Word*[9]. The communication of race becomes entirely about the oral prompts that identify the interlocutor with a specific racial group – issues of disclosure, intimation, assumption, idiom, and accent (Hanson 37). The phone sex participant needs to have an *ear* for race, but these verbal cues are often difficult to interpret, and because of this, there are vast possibilities for deception and confusion. Johnny says to Lindi, "s' just.... you don't sound black." He believes that he has missed the verbal cues to her colour. Lindi responds by asking, "What does black sound like?"[10] With the unrestricted socializing of all groups in our society, differences in accents and speech patterns are less recognizable. Often, the only cues to race are physical, and the 'blind' telephone cannot draw a distinction.

For Johnny, the disclosure of Lindi's ethnicity is incidental. He urges her to go on describing what she is doing, and she immediately begins to set out the imagery of their illusory sexual encounter. Actual physical sex incorporates all the senses at one's disposal – taste, touch, sight, hearing, and possibly an intimate psychic perception. Phone sex operators, knowingly or not, distil the entire experience of engagement down to auditory stimulus. Lindi's moans and harried breathing are fabricated in order to intensify the sensations she is describing to Johnny. Sandy Stone points out that this "compression" of all sensory perception into audio-function

alone, is a reinvention of the art of radio drama. (Stone 369) Indeed, radio plays have a similar impetus to phone sex. Both forms seek to fuel the imagination through aural stimuli only ("the voice must do it all"), but succeed when they generate real physiological reactions in their listeners, whether this is sexual stimulation, fear, sadness, or joy.

Radio's (and by proxy, the voice's) ability to create real reactions is impressively illustrated by the frenzy produced by the 1938 dramatised broadcast of H.G. Wells' classic science fiction fantasy, *War of the Worlds.* Orson Welles and 'The Mercury Theatre on the Air' produced the broadcast, which according to reports, "Disrupted households, interrupted religious services, created traffic jams and clogged communications systems." After Welles had given a narrative preamble, the mock broadcast began with a banal, accurate weather report, immediately lulling those who might have tuned in late into accepting that what they were hearing was simply a news broadcast. A music programme then proceeded for a brief time, but was interrupted by a "flash" bulletin about reports of explosions occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars.

News bulletins and scene broadcasts followed, dispatched in the same manner in which previous radio broadcasts had carried reports of genuine events, with coverage of the impact of a meteor in a field and the discovery that the meteor contained bizarre tentacled creatures which had begun killing police officials and curious onlookers. Although the reported "occurrences" were of the most extraordinary nature, the programme managed to spark the

imagination and generate behavioural and emotional reactions throughout the broadcast region. The programme's style was convincingly realistic enough to produce real alarm and panic, even though the show was announced and presented as a radio play. It frightened people because they assumed that what they were listening to was an authentic event, not an invented one. Recognizing the radio play as an actual occurrence necessitated real action and people reacted as if to a genuine emergency and not to what was simply a scary story.

The planned rebroadcasts of *War of the Worlds* were cancelled. It was decided that the programme's verisimilitude was a dangerous misrepresentation of that mode of communication, and that the narrative was disturbing in light of the growing threat of real invasion from Europe. Phone sex, of course, has been accused of similar distortions; it is unfairly banded together with obscene calls, which exploit the telephone's private function and transgress customary telephonic decorum; and criticised for its overemphasis on autoeroticism, and its general commodification of sex. But all media have their shortcomings, and restricting them tends to fan people's curiosity and desire for them. When all is taken into consideration, the telephone remains a convenient and comparatively secure and benign outlet (and, indeed, inlet) for sexual impulses.

Privacy

As Lindi continues her graphic descriptions, progressively working herself up to a frenzy, Johnny becomes distracted by a door standing ajar on the other side of the living room. He is torn, wanting to stay on the line as Lindi 'climaxes', but concerned about being discovered in the act. The door wins out. He excuses himself midway through her groaning refrain, and crosses the living room. He slowly, quietly closes the door, and believing that with it shut his privacy is secure, returns to the illicit call. He thinks that the threat to his privacy will come (if it comes at all) from somewhere within his 'real', immediate geography, erroneously neglecting that vast space beyond the telephone receiver.

In Francis Ford Coppola's, *The Conversation*, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), a surveillance expert and master wire-tapper, also believes that by shutting himself up inside (physically and emotionally) he will protect his privacy. He triple locks his apartment door and, most significantly keeps his telephone shut up in his desk draw. At the end, however, when he is informed that he himself is under surveillance, it is via this very phone. His number is unlisted, but the conspirator's in the plot he has uncovered have it anyway. They phone him up and warn him, "We'll be listening to you," and play back a recording of the saxophone music he was playing just before he received the call. This, for Harry, an inveterate paranoid, is an absolute nightmare. He begins a search for the bugging device; stripping off wallpaper, prying off doorframes and pieces of the hardwood floor, completely gutting the apartment. But he cannot find it. "His sanctum sanctorum has been penetrated by his own gaze turned back upon him" (Hanson 49).

Johnny's situation is unnervingly similar to Harry's, with his voyeuristic impulses ("I like to ride the bus.... [it] affords you time to look at things.... at people") levelled against him by the voyeuristic impulses of another, of which he is, as yet, oblivious. When he returns to the phone he seems to have come to terms with the telephonic engagement. *He* starts to create the imagery of their fantasy encounter with descriptions that are not limited to bodily detail and performace, but weave a complex narrative. He imagines Lindi in her entirety, transformed now from the fragmented white woman at the beginning of the film to a sensuous black woman. He begins to compose her surroundings, as well as the circumstances of their illicit relationship – we see all of this, as scenarios, set-up earlier, are reordered, and details already established shift in Johnny's imagination.

In this fantasy, Johnny casts an imaginary Lindi in the role of the woman he was watching on the bus at the beginning of the film – she wears the same clothes, carries the same bag, but instead of the furtive engagement of the original event, Johnny sets-up a shockingly direct mutual seduction. She coquettishly smiles at him when her dress gets caught in the bus seat exposing her backside, and allows him to follow her home, where she then exposes herself as he masturbates. We cut between



Lindi exposes herself. The fantasy has become shockingly direct

the fantasy and Johnny on the telephone as the sexual verbalizations and Lindi's vocalizations intensify. But something stops Johnny, shame perhaps or a realization of the shallowness of the encounter – a truly masturbatory engagement – and he unceremoniously hangs up the phone.

In an adjoining bedroom, behind that door he took pains to close so discreetly, Johnny sits on the bed beside the mysterious, terminally ill man we have seen only briefly throughout the film. Johnny's voice-over, with which we began, is repeated as he leans over and tenderly kisses the sick man on the cheek. *Here* is the true object of Johnny's desire, and this revelation precipitates the transformation of another body, evoking Lindi's challenge in relation to the sound of her blackness by confronting the viewer with a new question: What does gay sound like? In review, the film becomes a reversal, in terms of sexual orientation of the subjects, on the model idea of a straying heterosexual partner engaging in a homosexual affair. But more than this, it becomes representative of our present sexual crisis.



The object of Johnny's desire

The telephone, praised as an instrument of amorous engagement and expansively utilised as a sex aid, has become a symbolic prophylactic. On the phone, as has already been established, it is the interplay of voices rather than bodies that engenders arousal. This is safe, sanitised sex - no fondling, no stroking, and no infections. There are a lot of things that can be transmitted by telephone, Ellis Hanson observes, "but HIV is not one of them" (36). In the face of the ravaging virus, sex has changed; the nature of desire itself has changed, readjusting to the realities of the disease, and presently, the telephone has become vital matériel in the minefield of sexual interaction.

The opening voice-over, when repeated in this new context, becomes a far unhappier utterance than it was at the beginning of the film. Now, more than desire, it seems to evoke a sense of loss. Johnny places his head on his lover's chest, and in response his lover gently strokes his head. It appears as though Johnny has reconciled himself

to his devotion to his partner. But as Johnny looks up into his lover's face he notices that the telephone next to the bed is off the hook. Slowly it dawns on him that his call was never private; that his attempts to keep his impulses under his control, to keep them 'inside', were futile. The telephone breached the barriers – the walls and the door – acting as a conduit between the two rooms, and like Harry Caul, at the end of the conversation, "his inside has been turned inside out." (Hanson 49)

Notes

[1] *The People's Chronology*, 1992

[2] Peters quotes an article entitled "On conversation by Telephone," published in the 10 May 1915 edition of *Independent*.

[3] This voice-over did not appear in the original screenplay. It was added in part way through production in order to clarify the relationship between Johnny and the sick man whom we see glimpses of throughout the film. See *Dialtone* screenplay in Appendix pp.

[4] Peters quotes an article entitled "Telephone Terror," published in the February 1920 edition of *Atlantic Monthly*.

[5] Charles Horton Cooley observes how children, when left to themselves, simulate sociability by creating for themselves imaginary friends. He describes how a three-year-old boy, R, invariably talked aloud while he was playing alone: "Most commonly he would use no form of address but "you," and perhaps had no definite person in mind. To listen to him was like hearing one at the telephone…" Cooley suggests that this practice is an essential form of thought, flowing from a life in which personal communication is of chief interest. (Cooley 88)

[6] Leigh's husband in the film, a pool cleaner played by Chris Penn, is infuriated by her line of work. He asks her, "How come you never talk that way to me?" Even though he has the *real* relationship with her – he is married to her, he sleeps in the same bed as her, he can have actual physical sex with her – he resents the callers who will never meet her. On the phone the relationship is pure uninhibited fantasy, but in real life it is a chore… like changing soiled nappies.

[7] Applying our technological expansion to the mass media representation of celebrities, David Chaney suggests that the attention, which often borders on religious worship, paid to cultural stars is one of the most constantly perplexing characteristics of contemporary audiences. Chaney describes the type of heroism that stars embody as "imaginary Fame" - their fame is based on audience opinion, which is fabricated or at least severely influenced by the media. The media is both a stage on which the stars can perform, and a medium for all the ways they are to be talked about and represented. Without the media the celebrity would cease to exist. (Chaney 202)

[8] Ellis Hanson points out that even though the characteristics of race are negated by the telephone's disinterest in physical bodies, race continues to be a major concern for many phone sex callers. He cites the significantly large number of advertisements for sex-chat lines, which state that their operators or clientele are of African or Asian descent. (36)

[9] In Spike Lee's *Girl 6*, Theresa Randle plays an out of work New York actress so demoralised by being rejected that she takes a quick-buck job as a phone-sex worker. Her boss, played by Jenifer Lewis, runs a multiethnic call-centre, but she urges all her operators to *lie* about their colour and tell their callers they are white girls. "Don't I look pretty with my long blond hair and big blue eyes," says Girl 29 (Shari Freels), a black woman who wears her hair in cornrows. Here Lee is revealing the mutable nature of bodies over the telephone, but at the same time he is having a dig at what, he believes, society considers as the *perfect fantasy* body.

[10] When *Dialtone* was screened at the 2005 Next Reel International Film Festival in New York, members from the largely American and European audience had particular difficulty in understanding this exchange. While accent and diction, no doubt, play a significant role in determining where a person comes from and possibly their economic status, it is more difficult to establish race through verbal cues alone when most people have the same mother tongue. In South Africa, however, where we have eleven official languages, these cues play a far more significant role in identifying racial groups and subcultures.

Appendix

Mind Out of Joint

Screenplay

CHARACTERS

LES	-	A tired man, confused by a world he has no recollection of.
WOMAN	-	A thread, tenuously linking the world.
TESLA	-	A mechanician and alchemist of sorts.
THE KNOCKED DOWN MAN	-	A bad memory.
LOVERS	-	Part recollection, part fantasy.
PATIENTS	-	Damaged people.

FADE IN

[K][BLUR
Ghostly shapes – a mass of indefinable matter.

CUT TO

THE LETTER PUNCHES OF A TYPEWRITER
as they thud into paper leaving their marks.

CUT TO

MORE BLUR

CUT TO

THE LETTER PUNCHES OF A TYPEWRITER
thudding into paper and spelling out the title:

MIND OUT OF JOINT

CUT TO

BLUR
and out of the blur emerges:

A PAIR OF SHOES
as the wearer walks down the street. Stuck to the sole of one shoe, and sticking out at the heel is a card.

The shoes suddenly stop, and the wearer, noticing the card for the first time, bends down and peels it off.

LES
a middle-aged man with short-cropped greying hair, looks at the card.]

[THE CARD
has the words TESLA & SONS printed on it.]

CUT TO

BOTTLES
placed upside down in a rack, swing back and forth.

[K] Cut from completed film

A drop of liquid seeps from a bottle.

The drop falls onto a taut piece of string and then, gently, runs along it.

A SMALL FAN
chops at a strand of light as it spins.

CUT TO

BLUR
and out of the blur emerges:

A LIVING ROOM
A WOMAN enters carrying a pot plant

THE WOMAN carries the pot plant through her living room and places it on a windowsill. The window is open and a breeze flutters the plants leaves.

CUT TO

A BOX
divided in to small compartments housing various objects. The objects are visible through windows in the compartments. The objects are jostled about as the box sways back and forth.

LES
carries the box on his back. It sways as he walks.

A COMPARTMENT
in LES'S box. The compartment is filled with keys. They jangle as LES moves.

CUT TO

A DOOR HANDLE
A key hesitantly slips into the keyhole.

LES stands in a corridor with the key in a keyhole. He looks about cautiously and then changing his mind, he removes the key from the lock.

He gets down on his knees and peers through the keyhole.

THROUGH KEYHOLE – we see a bed. A woman lies under the covers; a man sits on the edge of the bed gently, lovingly stroking her leg. They are LOVERS

CUT TO

The compartment filled with keys.
PAN AND TILT TO:

A compartment filled with photographs.

A PHOTOGRAPH
of a woman. She's smiling.

CUT TO

PHOTOGRAPHS
animate the woman as her smile turns to a look of disbelief.

A tear begins to run down her face.

CUT TO

The compartment filled with photographs.

PAN AND TILT TO

A compartment containing a totem in the shape of a double-headed dog. Nails and hoe heads have been hammered into the body – a nail fetish.

CUT TO

A MANS MOUTH
Rusty nails stick out from the side of the man’s mouth.

A nail is removed from the mouth and the point placed to a piece of wood.

THE FETISH
In the background, slightly out of focus, a man holds the nail to the fetish and raises a hammer, and as he brings it down.

CUT TO

The compartment containing the fetish.

PAN TILT TO

[A compartment containing coins.**]**

CUT TO

THE POT PLANT
Beyond the pot plant, in the street below, we can see LES approaching.

[1]**(**A light flashes across LES'S eyes as he walks.

Something shiny sparkling from the gutter.

LES squints as he looks into the light.

Lying in the gutter, half covered by a plastic packet, is an open flick-knife. There appears to be blood on the blade. LES picks up the knife gingerly and holds it close to his face as he inspects it.

LES sits on a bench and opens his suitcase.

We see the contents of the suitcase. It is, like the box, full of collected objects.

LES slips the knife carefully in to a compartment**)**

THE POT PLANT
In the background we can make out THE WOMAN vacuuming.
LES, once again, carries his box and suitcase down the street.

A gust of wind whips about LES'S legs, fluttering his tie Wildly around his neck

CURTAINS
billow in the window and knock the pot plant from the window ledge.

CUT TO

LES

[1] Takes place, in the completed film, in the veld. Introduces us to LES.

lying dazed on the ground, blinking drowsily, blood oozing about his face.

[A COIN
spins on the ground, and as it comes to rest.]

CUT TO

LES'S CAR
The car is stationary and we're looking at the back of LES'S head. A thin scar runs up from behind LES'S ear and cuts a path through his hair. He touches it absentmindedly.

Then, as if struck with a sudden thought, LES fishes in his jacket pocket and comes out with a photograph, a nail fetish, and a piece of paper.

LES places the fetish on the dashboard and looks at the photograph.

[THE PHOTOGRAPH
is very blurry. We can just make out a ghostly figure.]

LES shakes his head, confused by the photo, and flips over the piece of paper.

THE PIECE OF PAPER
has an address written on it that reads: FAIRWAY MANSIONS No 4

Les looks up and out of the car window.

LES'S POV – we see a building with the words FAIRWAY MANSIONS set into the brickwork.

A STAIRWAY
LES climbs the stairs. The place looks deserted, but all around there are the muted sounds of life – Televisions blaring, doors closing, someone coughing, a baby crying somewhere in the distance.

[A HALLWAY
LES finds flat number four. He knocks and waits. He looks around warily, but the hallway is empty. He knocks again.

There's still no answer.

LES looks down at doorknob.

He slowly puts his hand on it. Turns it.]
The door glides open.

Two identical vacuum cleaners standing side by side in the flat.

LES walks towards the vacuum cleaners - he crouches in front of them; inspecting them.

The base of one vacuum cleaner is on top of a patch of soil and a soil trail leading to another part of the flat.

LES cautiously follows trail. He is nervous.

The trail disappears underneath another door.

CUT TO

A BATHROOM
There's soil everywhere.

Soil on the floor.

Soil piled against the bath.

The bath tap drips.

THE BATH PLUGHOLE
Muddy water trickles down the drain.

There’s a plant in the bath with muddy water running from its base.

CUT TO

[LES
walking down a shop lined street with the plant in his arms.

A SHOP FRONT
As LES passes the shop something in the shop window catches his attention.

THE FLICK-KNIFE
is displayed in the shop window.**]**

CUT TO

LES
As he places a cloth bundle on a table and begins to unwrap it. The bundle contains the flick-knife, keys, coins, a photograph and, in the centre, the nail fetish.

CUT TO

BLUR
and out of the blur emerges:

THE LOVERS
They make love

LES
lying on his bed, masturbates.

[LES’S room is small and everywhere, piled on the floor, heaped in the corners, on a shelf and window ledge, are history books.**]**

CUT TO

LES scans the lines of a book.

His mouth moves slightly as he reads

CUT TO

[An illustration of keys.

CUT TO

An illustration of a flick-knife.

CUT TO

An illustration of coins.

CUT TO

An illustration of the nail fetish.**]**

CUT TO

LES reading. As he turns the page of his book a card slips out from between the pages.

THE CARD
lies on LES'S lap. It has the words TELSA AND SONS printed on it.

[AN OFFICE DOOR
the plaque on the door reads:

TESLA AND SONS
MECHANITIANS OF REPUTE SINCE 1902

A FLY
lands on a window pane. We hear the sounds of high heel shoes clicking on contact with the floor as they approach.

A FLY SWATTER
suddenly shoots into frame and squashes the fly with a resounding THWACK.

THE DEAD FLY
A woman's fingers come into frame and delicately pick up the tiny carcass.

A woman (THE SECRETARY) holds the fly up and inspects it with satisfaction.

She flicks the fly carcass out of a window.

LES watches as THE SECRETARY returns to her desk. She ignores him

LES looks down awkwardly at THE SECRETARY as she begins flipping through a magazine.

Eventually THE SECRETARY looks up at LES, very nonchalant, and points to a spot behind him.

LES turns to look where the SECRETARY is pointing.]

A WAITING BENCH

On the bench sit two men. The one man’s face is obscured by a newspaper. A door leads off to one side.

One of the men wears a gas mask of sorts. A tube protrudes from the front of the mask. The tube winds down in front of the man and enters into a box with a bell-jar top; and growing inside the box is a tree.

A drop of condensation rolls off one of the tree’s leaves.

[2]The gas-mask-man's breathing suddenly becomes laboured. He grabs his throat.

The man next to gas-mask-man lowers his newspaper revealing an elaborate set of glasses. He looks at the choking gas-mask-man.

The gas-mask-man tugs at the tube.

Glasses-man looks down at the tube, a section of which is on the floor.

Glasses-man's foot is on a portion of the tube.

Gas-mask-man yanks desperately at the tube.

Glasses-man lifts his foot off the tube and Gas-mask-man's breathing returns too normal.

LES who has watched this event with confusion takes a seat next to the glasses-man, who resumes reading his newspaper.

CUT TO

THE NAIL FETISH
The light changes rapidly causing the fetish to cast a shifting shadow like a sundial.

CUT TO

THE WAITING BENCH
Only LES is left sitting on the bench.

---

[2] In the completed film, this moment is preceded by a short interlude in which Les looks at his number in the queue – making sure that he is in the right order, and in doing so seems to offend gas-mask-man.

THE LETTER PUNCHES OF A TYPEWRITER
as they thud into paper leaving their marks.

A TYPEWRITER
Index fingers hit the keys sharply.

LES sits in front of a desk - he looks uncomfortable. On The business side of the desk sits a tall, gaunt man hunching over his typewriter, his fingers hovering over the keys a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth.

A plaque on the desk announces that the gaunt man is EUGENE TESLA.

TESLA stops typing, stares at LES across the desk and takes a long drag on his cigarette.

LES shifts uncomfortably in his chair.

TESLA considers LES for a moment then slowly begins to type again.

[3]-THE LETTER PUNCHES OF A TYPEWRITER
MIND OUT OF JOINT-

[4]TESLA puts out his cigarette.

A FILING CABINET
as TESLA slides the draw open.

TESLA runs a finger along the alphabetised records until he reaches -M-.

He pulls a thin file from the cabinet and slides it onto the desk.

LES looks down at the file. Looks up at TESLA

TESLA taps his nose with his finger knowingly.

---

[3] In the completed film this was changed to: 'The final amnesia.'

[4] In the completed film Tesla puts out his cigarette in reaction to the small nail fetish Les has taken out of his pocket and presented to him.

LES opens the file revealing a technical drawing of a contraption - a box with a turning handle protruding from one side and a tube protruding from a mask on another.

MATCH CUT TO

THE CONTRAPTION
sitting on a table.

TESLA stands in the corner of a dreary room smoking a cigarette.

[5]**(**The one end of the tube protruding from the contraption is inserted into LES'S nose by TESLA'S assistant.

The assistant covers LES'S eyes with a pair of goggles, double checks connections and then turns to TESLA.

TESLA nods to the assistant.

The assistant takes LES'S hand and places it on the turning handle.**)**

LES slowly begins to turn the handle.

TESLA takes a last drag on his cigarette, drops it and crushes the butt beneath his shoe.

LES begins to turn the handle of the contraption faster.

CUT TO

BOTTLES
placed upside down in a rack, swing back and forth.

A drop of liquid seeps from a bottle.

The drop falls onto a taut piece of string and then, gently, runs along it.

A SMALL FAN
chopping at a strand of light as it spins.

CUT TO

[5] In the completed film, Les does this himself without the aid of an assistant.

BLUR
And out of the blur emerges:

KNITTING NEEDLES
as they click together - interlocking stitches.

A DOOR HANDLE
A key is removed from the lock and LES slowly puts his eye to the keyhole

A BALL OF WOOL
on top of a bag placed on the floor. In the background we can make out THE WOMAN knitting.

THROUGH KEYHOLE – we see a bed. A woman lies under the covers; a man sits on the edge of the bed gently, lovingly stroking her leg. Suddenly he looks up and directly at the keyhole. He stands and strides across the room towards the door, the floor vibrating with his every step.

Vibrations, resounding through the building, disturbing the bag and the ball of wool falls to the floor and begins to roll.

THROUGH KEYHOLE – THE LOVER advances on the door and puts his eye to the keyhole.

LES retreats. He jerks his head back and quickly flattens himself against the wall adjacent to the door.

The ball of wool rolls out of the door, leaving a trail of thread.

LES is nervous. He looks sideways at the door, waiting for any possible movement.

The ball of wool rolls to the edge of a stairwell and stops.

LES nervously watches the door handle.

A door slams shut.

The ball of wool jolts and begins to tumble down the stairs.

LES bolts

At first the ball of wool bounces down one stair at a time, but as it gains momentum, it starts to leap over several stairs at once.

LES dashes down a stairwell.

Eventually the ball of wool leaps its last stair, and the momentum it has now achieved sends it rolling out of the building door and into the night.

The ball of wool tumbles off the pavement and begins to roll across the road. As it reaches the middle of the road, it stops.

In the background we see LES'S car approach and then speed over the ball of wool.

LES drives.

[LES'S MEMORY BOX
rocks gently from side to side on the back seat.

The nail fetish is missing.

CUT TO

The back of LES'S car – the ball of wool is caught behind the car and is unravelling, leaving a trail of thread.**]**

Light shifts across LES’S face as he drives.

From the back seat - We see the world through the windscreen as LES does.

Suddenly there's a flurry outside. Something shoots across the windscreen.

LES hits the brakes.

[The memory box on the back seat is thrown forward.**]**

LES'S eyes are suffused with shock – he’s breathing heavy. There's blood on the outside of the windscreen. LES notices it, reaches up and touches that place with his forefinger.

LES opens the car door and steps out unsteadily.

There’s a body on the ground in front of his car. **[**A taut line of wool extends from the back of the car and disappears into the surrounding darkness.**]**

LES looks down at the body, then looks around - distraught and suddenly acutely aware of his solitude.

Something on the ground catches his attention.

A SMALL NAIL FETISH
stands in the road. In the background we can see the crumpled body and the out stretched hand of the person LES has knocked down.

LES'S fingers come into frame and gently pick up the fetish.

LES holds the fetish up to his face and inspects it quizzically.

He looks from the fetish in his hand to the body on the ground.

THE KNOCKED DOWN MAN’S HAND
In the background we see LES climb frantically back into his car and begin to pull off.

[As LES pulls off the thread of wool attached to the back of the car snaps.

The body lies in the middle of the road with a trail of wool thread leading away from its head.

LES, still in shock, drives. He looks up at the rear-view mirror.

In the rear-view mirror we can see the crumpled body in the road, rapidly getting smaller as we move away from it.**]**

LES'S EYES
as he contemplates what he has done. He looks down at his hands on the steering wheel.

In one hand clutched between the wheel and his fingers, LES holds the nail fetish.

A SMALL FAN
chopping at a strand of light as it spins.

LES'S HAND
on the turning handle of the memory contraption. He stops turning the handle.

TESLA takes a long drag on his cigarette.

LES removes the goggles that cover his eyes and looks down at his hand.

He slowly unclenches his fist revealing the same small nail fetish.

FADE TO BLACK

Dialtone

Screenplay

♦{BLACK

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
I think about you constantly... about making love to you. We were supposed to grow old together.}

FADE IN

1.INT. BUS – MOVING - DAY

The bus sways rocking JOHNNY, a white man in his mid thirties, back and forth.

JOHNNY stares at the back of an attractive woman sitting a few rows in front of him.

The bus begins to slow down and JOHNNY watches as the woman gathers her things and moves to the front of the bus. She looks up as she does and for a brief moment their eyes meet.

The sound of telephone dialling tone becomes audible.

JOHNNY quickly looks away and the woman climbs off the bus.

The dialling tone is suddenly interrupted by sharp beeps as a number is punched in on the keypad.

JOHNNY watches from the bus as it pulls away and the woman disappears from sight.

We hear the muffled sound of a telephone ringing - as if heard through a telephone receiver.

2.INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

JOHNNY holds a telephone receiver to his ear. He sits in a swivel chair at a small secretary-table. A newspaper

♦ This voice-over was added on suggestion of Dorian Heatlie, my editing tutor at the time. By including this snippet at the beginning and then again at the end, I hoped to bookend the narrative and clarify the relationship between Johnny and the sick man who occupies the room next to the living room in which Johnny is making his call.

opened to the classified section is spread across the tabletop. *[He taps a pencil on an advert - a line drawing of a woman wearing a bow tie and the words 'Black Tie – Discreet Live Chat' printed underneath.]

There is a click as JOHNNY'S call is diverted and a woman's voice suddenly becomes audible.

WOMAN
(v.o.)
...I'll take it. Ooooh, that'll be good.

JOHNNY sits up straight as if caught unawares by the woman's voice.

JOHNNY
Hello?

WOMAN
(v.o.)
Hi, this is Lindi. How are you doing?

JOHNNY
Who were you taking to? Did I interrupt?

LINDI
(v.o.)
Nah. I've been waiting for you, jus' fantasising out loud, an', ahhhh, I could use a well-hung man right now.

JOHNNY
I'm not gonna…

JOHNNY looks furtively at a door leading off the living room. It is slightly ajar.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Yes?

JOHNNY
You know…

* Cut from completed film

LINDI
(v.o.)
Tell me, baby.

JOHNNY turns his back on the room – away from the door.

JOHNNY
I’m not jerking off on the phone right now. Jus’ so you know.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Okay. You don’t *have* to jerk-off. We could jus’ talk. Would you like that?

JOHNNY
I don’t usually do stuff like this.

LINDI
(v.o.)
No? Well you should. ‘s good for you. I’m good for you.

JOHNNY swivels restlessly in his chair.

LINDI
(v.o.)
What’s your name?

JOHNNY
Johnny.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Tell me what you what, Johnny.

JOHNNY
I’m not sure. What are doing?

LINDI
(v.o.)
I’m lying on my bed.

JOHNNY

Double?

LINDI
(v.o.)
Queen.

CUT TO

3.A QUEEN-SIZE BED.

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
Of course.

2.1.INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

JOHNNY clears his throat.

JOHNNY
Doesn't it give you the creeps, all these guys calling you?

LINDI
(v.o.)
No, It gives me a job. I can do it from home...

CUT TO

4.VARIOUS SHOTS OF TRADITIONALLY WOMAN’S THINGS –
hairdryer, curling tongs, make-up, make-up brushes etc.

LINDI
(v.o.)
And it turns me on. Doesn’t it turn you on, Johnny?

2.2.INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

JOHNNY swaps the receiver to the other ear.

JOHNNY
What are you wearing?

LINDI
(v.o.)

A camisole.

JOHNNY
What colour?

LINDI
Taupe.

CUT TO

5.A TAUPE CAMISOLE

LINDI
(v.o.)
It’s so light it feels like I have nothing on at all.

2.3.INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

JOHNNY wipes his brow with the back of his hand.

LINDI
(v.o.)
I’m sliding off the straps... an’ running my hands over my breasts. Can you see my breasts? See how round and firm they are. The soft brown skin, so smooth...

JOHNNY’S brow knits into a perplexed expression.

JOHNNY
Brown.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Like soft milk chocolate…

JOHNNY
You’re black?

LINDI
(v.o.)
Oh, yeah, baby.

A beat.

LINDI

(v.o.)
You’ve called Black Tie chat service, sweetheart.

JOHNNY
Ja. Black Tie.

JOHNNY circles the ad in the newspaper.

LINDI
(v.o.)
For discerning gentlemen who like their sugar brown.

A beat.

JOHNNY
Oh, I get it. ‘s just... You don’t sound black.

LINDI
(v.o.)
What does black sound like, baby?

JOHNNY
I know, I know. It’s not a problem. So, you’re on your queen-sized bed...

The door leading off the living room creaks as a breeze blows it open further.

LINDI
(v.o.)
I’m running my hand down my body and over my hips to the inside of my thighs...

JOHNNY raises his hand willing the door to stop opening.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Oooo, that’s soooo good.

JOHNNY swallows hard.

LINDI

(v.o.)
I want you badly, Johnny...I want to feel your hands on my tits. Heavy and smooth, nipples puckered, standing erect as you hold them between your lips.

JOHNNY'S torn he wants to stay on the line, but the doors swinging open.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Ahhh ahhh ohhh, Johnny! Johnny!

JOHNNY can't take it any longer.

JOHNNY
Could you jus' hang on a second?

LINDI
(v.o.)
What? Oh, okay.

JOHNNY tiptoes across the living room and slowly, softly closes the door. He tiptoes back to the phone and then says in a hushed voice:

JOHNNY
Sorry about that.

LINDI
(v.o.)
's okay, baby. What do you want to do now?

JOHNNY licks his lips. A beat, then -

CUT TO

6.CLOSE UP ON A POCKET OF A PAIR OF TROUSERS

as the pocket lining is turned inside out. A pair of tailor scissors shears off the bottom part of the pocket lining and a hand is slowly thrust through the resulting hole.

JOHNNY

(v.o.)
I like to ride the bus.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Uh ha.

7.INT. BUS – MOVING – DAY

The bus sways rocking JOHNNY back and forth. **[**His hand is in his pocket, the tendons on his arm move slightly, almost imperceptibly, and the material around his crotch distorts with the movement.**]**

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
I have a car, but the bus affords you the time to look at things... at people.

JOHNNY stares at the back of an attractive black woman (LINDI) sitting a few rows in front of him.

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
I’m looking at you on the bus.

LINDI
(v.o.)
I know you are. I can feel your eyes on me. It’s making me hot.

LINDI turns her head slightly, sensing JOHNNY’S eyes on her.

The bus starts to slow down

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
When the bus slows down you stand up. Your dress is caught between the seat...

JOHNNY watches as LINDI gathers her things and as she moves toward the front of the bus her dress which is

caught between the seat pulls aside, briefly exposing the curve of her backside.

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
...and it rides up high and I can see your arse right there…

She looks up and their eyes meet. JOHNNY doesn’t look away.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Mmmmm. I want you to put your hand under my dress. I want to feel your fingers on my pussy.

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
I want to... I want to bury my head between your legs, but it’s to soon.

The bus comes to a halt and LINDI climbs off. JOHNNY follows.

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
When you get off the bus I follow you.

LINDI
(v.o.)
I knew you would. I wanted you to.

8.EXT. STREET – DAY

JOHNNY follows LINDI as she walks down the street. He watches her legs as they move, the gentle sway of her backside.

JOHNNY
(v.o.)
I watch your arse move as you walk...

2.4.INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

JOHNNY cradles the receiver with both hands.

JOHNNY
...an’ I think about the skin at the top of your thighs rubbing against the lining of your panties.

[LINDI
(v.o.)
Ooch!]

JOHNNY
I... I follow you back to your place.

9.INT. APARTMENT BLOCK – DAY

An apartment door is slightly ajar.

LINDI
(v.o.)
An’ I’ve left the door open for you, baby.

10.INT. APARTMENT – DAY

LINDI lounges seductively on a couch.

JOHNNY
It’s hot. You’re on the couch; your legs are apart, your toes holding on to the edge of the coffee table. You’ve hiked up you dress an’ a table fan blows over you through your underwear.

A fan rotates slowly, blowing air between LINDI’S legs. She looks up to see JOHNNY looking down at her and, for he first time, she speaks directly to him, but her voice is still mediated by the telephone, still muffled and distant.

LINDI

I want you inside me. I need you inside me.

JOHNNY slips his hand into his pocket, his trousers distorting around the crotch as his tugs on himself.

LINDI
Ahhh ahhh. Fuck me, Johnny. Fuck me.

2.5.INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

JOHNNY masturbates; his eyes shut tight, his breathing laboured.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Put your cock in me. Slid it in, every inch. Open me up… make me take it, let me have it. Ahhhhhhh…

JOHNNY opens his eyes, a look of desperation breaking across his face.

LINDI
(v.o.)
Ahhhhhh Ahhhhhhhh...

The sounds of LINDI’S moans pour out of the receiver as JOHNNY, exhausted, drops it from his ear and replaces if on the hook – CLICK.

Silence.

11.INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

A very sickly looking man is laid out in bed. There are particularly nasty lesions on his neck and chest.

JOHNNY leans down, lovingly kisses the sick man’s cheek and gently places his head on his stomach.

{JOHNNY
(v.o.)

I think about you constantly... about making love to you. We were supposed to grow old together.**}**

The sick man tenderly strokes JOHNNY’S head.

JOHNNY smiles and looks up at the sick man’s face. And then he notices it – the telephone next to the bed with the receiver lying off the hook.

FADE OUT.

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