

HELLO?

Alison Peirse a.peirse@leeds.ac.uk

<https://vimeo.com/1056404690?share=copy#t=0>

Abstract

This video essay explores the role of the landline in five canonical telephone slasher films - *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), *Black Christmas* (1974), *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), *Scream* (1996) and *Scream* (2022). It utilises the potential of videographic criticism to imagine happier endings for the women victims in these films.

Creator Statement

In September 1996, when I was fifteen, Lucy, Robyn and I went to London for the Top of the Pops weekend at Wembley Arena. We stayed with Lucy's mum, who worked in London Monday to Friday, which seemed to me impossible, like working on the moon, and at the same time, unbearably glamorous. In my Year 10 careers consultation, I had revealed my chosen career path to be "a music PR in London" as it involved free CDs, invites to after-show parties at the Barfly, and hanging out with bands at the Good Mixer. Even as I proclaimed this to the baffled careers advisor, I knew it was too ambitious. London was another world, 200 miles away from my Leeds home. But then, the Top of the Pops Weekender was announced. It was a full day and night of bands at Wembley Arena, all bands that I knew: Bjork, Cast, Kula Shaker, Ocean Colour Scene, Sleeper and Terrorvision. It was the sign I needed. I prepared for my first outing to the capital: a gig ticket from Jumbo Records; skin-tight blue PVC trousers from Miss Selfridge; a nose piercing with a stud gun in Pagan Body Piercing (my mum and dad did not agree to the latter, and I got a rollicking when I slunk home later).

We got a lift down to London, and before the gig, Lucy took us sightseeing. I was ecstatic, drinking in a world that had until that point only existed in the NME and Melody Maker. We fought our way through the crowds of Covent Garden, rode the tube to Leicester Square (rookie error), and spotted Pulp's keyboardist Candida Doyle and Blur's bassist Alex James on Oxford Street. It was dizzying, blissful, and exhausting, so we floated over to Trafalgar Square to rest. Lucy and Robyn sprawled out at the water fountain and commenced arguing with the vicious, calculating intensity of teenage sisters born only two years apart. I wandered off towards Nelson's column, plotting how to make London my home.

Then a telephone rang.

I looked across the road and saw a red phone box, heard the phone ringing. Trafalgar Square was busy, tourists snapping photos of the four lion statues and the world's smallest police station, but no-one seemed to care. Why did no-one answer the phone?

I crossed the road against a red light, pulled at the brass door handle and entered. The door closed softly behind me; the cacophony of London muted in an instant.

And still the phone rang.

I picked up the receiver, keen to show off my newly acquired being-in-London skills.

"hello!" I chirruped.

A pause. Breathing.

Then.

"RAAAEEHHHRRRR" a man screamed. "REEHHHHAAAA".

I went cold. "Err...?" I stammered, my arms prickling.

"BITCH! FUCKING BITCH DIE YAAAHHHHHH"

I could see Nelson's column through the phone box window. The statue began to blur.

I pressed my hand against the glass, steadying myself.

"I'M WATCHING YOU" he screamed.

That was it. The sight of Alex from Blur, the proudness of my giant nose stud, my teenage girl joy. Ripped away in a single moment.

I was not part of the living, breathing throng of London, I was not part of something huge and great and alive, filled with friends and music, promise and delight.

I was alone. Vulnerable.

I replaced the receiver. I stepped out of the phone box, heart hammering. I re-joined Lucy and Robyn by the fountain. I didn't tell them what had happened. I just sat and smiled, mutely, at their bickering while wondering if the man who screamed at me could see me, if he was watching us.

I laughed with Lucy even as I wondered, are we safe? Is he here? What does he look like? Who do I look for? Again and again: *but are we safe?*

I tried to tell myself it was probably teenage boys mucking about. I descended into self-loathing. I'm an idiot. I should have known better.

What teenage girl would be stupid enough to pick up a ringing phone and talk to a stranger?

A few months after *London*, Dimension Films released *Scream* (1996), a postmodern take on the ‘babysitter and the man upstairs’ urban legend, that, for Valerie Wee, ‘resurrected and redefined’ the slasher film ‘for a new generation of teenagers’.¹ I was one of that new generation and *Scream* was my first slasher film. This meant that the film’s discussion of *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980) was moot; not a nod in the know, but a recommendation of films to seek out. Yet, as I’ve got older, I’ve grown ever more interested in this specific lineage of horror film, and the connection between the woman victim, the male killer, and the telephone. I wonder, why is the telephone so popular in horror film? It is a useful mode of exposition for the filmmaker, a legitimate way to signal plot development and to verbalise character desire. But surely there must be more to its enduring popularity?

In his essay on slasher films, Charles Spiteri argues that ‘when things go wrong with the technology’, when the telephone stops working, ‘isolation becomes apparent’. He suggests that in *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) and *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984) what makes the handset horrible is that the telephone becomes ‘an instrument rendered inoperative’.² This has parallels with Ned Schantz’s study of the telephone in classical Hollywood cinema, in which he argues that the ‘most basic promise of the telephone is an end to ‘gothic isolation’, and that ‘when we see a character grab a phone in a movie’ it signifies the ‘character’s availability, or her vulnerability’.³ What Schantz prioritises here (notable in his choice of pronoun), is the way that answering and talking on the phone is inherently gendered. He argues that the telephone system has, from almost the time of its invention, ‘been a heavily female domain’.⁴

My video essay ‘HELLO?’ is located at the intersection of these perspectives. Intellectually, it considers the function of telephones in horror film, then questions why and how this function is gendered by genre; that is, ‘how gender gets into genre and what genre does with it’.⁵ Formally, it is inspired by the ‘videographic assemblage’ of Christian Marclay’s ‘Telephones’ (1995), Catherine Grant’s ‘Rites of Passage’ (2014) and Jennifer Proctor’s ‘Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can’t Fix’ (2017).⁶ ‘HELLO?’ then employs repetition-as-progression as its narrative form, taking similar or identical audiovisual extracts from *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1946), *Black Christmas* (1974), *When a Stranger Calls* (1978), *Scream* (1996) and *Scream* (2022) and ordering them into a subtle story arc. The arc demonstrates that the telephone horror film is built upon an unrelentingly misogynistic narrative which has remained unchanged from the 1940s to the present day. The woman is alone in a house. She becomes dependent on a landline, which turns out to be the primary mode of menace as well as her only means of communication. The narrative culminates in

(either) her comprehension that ‘the call is coming from inside the house’ (*Black Christmas*; *When a Stranger Calls*) or the revelation that the killer is now inside the house and listening in on her call (*Sorry, Wrong Number*; both versions of *Scream*). Her realisation leads to physical and mental trauma, corporeal mutilation, or dismemberment.

If ‘HELLO?’ stopped here though, it would be depressing. My London anecdote already has a sad ending: the silent return to my friends, the verbal abuse of a teenage girl unchallenged. So, instead, in ‘HELLO?’ I ask, what if the story ends differently? In other words, what if I created an audiovisual ‘experiment in imagining otherwise’?⁷ What if the woman picks up the phone and talks to the killer, but then, she remains safe? If I want to enact this premise, who might I need to introduce to ensure their safety? What might they do, and what might they say? In the second half of the video essay, I answer these questions: I create heroines who save our victims. I take each of the five films explored in the first half of and pair it with a contemporaneous horror film which features a female character using a telephone. I cut between the pairings, manipulating sound and image to create original conversations between the two women and the killer. In these pairings, the new characters take control. They hang up on the killer, they convince the victim to call the police, and, in some cases, they decide to inflict a bloody and murderous revenge themselves. In ‘HELLO?’, the female characters don’t just survive. They put the down the phone. They smile. And then the credits roll.

Notes

¹ Valerie Wee, ‘The *Scream* Trilogy, “Hyperpostmodernism”, and the Late-Nineties Teen Slasher Film’, *Journal of Film and Video*, 57.3 (25): 44.

² Charles Spiteri, ‘Isolation and Subjugation: The Telephone in the Slasher Film’, *Senses of Cinema* 32 July (2004): https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/beyond-the-grave-of-genre/telephone_slasher_film/

³ Ned Schantz, *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film And Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 60.

⁴ Schantz, *Gossip*, 56.

⁵ Christine Gledhill, ‘Preface’, in Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz (eds), *Women Do Genre in Film and Television* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), ix.

⁶ Christian Marclay, ‘Telephones’, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, (1995); <https://www.moca.org/collection/work/telephones>; Catherine Grant, ‘The Remix that Knew Too Much? On *Rebecca*, Retrospectatorship and the Making of *Rites of Passage*’, *The Cine-Files* 7 Fall (2014): <https://www.thecine-files.com/grant/>; Jennifer Proctor, ‘Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can’t Fix’ (2017), <https://jenniferproctor.com/Nothing-a-Little-Soap-and-Water-Can-t-Fix>

⁷ Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (London: Hajar Press, 2021).