Heard over the phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde tradition of the terrors of technology

TOM GUNNING

There is something spooklike in the title of this Biograph subject, but we hasten to say that the incidents are of a decidedly material nature . . . .
Publicity bulletin for *The Lonely Villa*[1]

Maintaining and joining, the telephone line holds together what it separates. . . . Being on the telephone will come to mean, therefore, that contact is never constant nor is the break clean.
Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book*[2]

. . . it's a most astonishing thing, but if I were to telephone twenty times a day, I should never get the hang of the blessed thing, it seems weird and uncanny
André Marex in André de Lorde's play *Au téléphone*[3]

Near the opening of *Civilization and its Discontents* Sigmund Freud examines the contention that it is civilization itself, and specifically modern civilization, that might be responsible for man's discontent Taking a sceptical view of the claim that man was happier in simpler times, Freud asks:

> . . is there then no positive gain in pleasure, no unequivocal increase in my feeling of happiness, if I can, as often as I please, hear the voice of a child of mine who is living hundreds of miles away or if I can learn in the shortest possible time after a friend

has reached his destination that he has come through the long and difficult journey unharmed?

However, after listing some other clear benefits modern technology has bestowed on mankind, Freud gives the floor to 'the voice of pessimistic criticism' and adds:

> If there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice, if travelling across the ocean by ship had not been introduced, my friend would not have embarked on his sea-voyage and I should not need a cable to relieve my anxiety about him [4]

If the years around the turn of the century inaugurate (as Stephen Kern has indicated[5]) a new culture of time and space, we should not be surprised that Freud was particularly aware of the ambivalence of this new chronotope. On the one hand, distance (and the duration needed to cover it) is abolished. On the other hand, this technological conquering of space and time can be illusory. Families and friends are dispersed by the new technology as much as they are brought together, and the apparent compression of time can, in fact, cause a precipitate collapse of the processes of reflection. Kern theorizes, for instance, that instantaneous communication through cable and telephone artificially speeded up the July crisis that led to World War One, as technological haste propelled ultimatums and responses into a scenario of unstoppable confrontation [6] When Freud compared the telephone's ability to overcome distance to the magical powers of a fairy tale[7] he was well aware of the dire consequences such magical gifts often entail.

Now at the close of another century, with new technological topologies confronting us, I believe we look back at the first experiences of technology with an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*. Not only do we confront the same ambivalence of optimism and anxiety, but the scenarios constructed around these primal ambiguities seem even more clearly legible. In the recent historicizing of film study, placing film within a history of the reception of technology has emerged as a primary challenge Deriving inspiration particularly from Walter Benjamin's curtailed arcades project (and from such heirs to the Benjamin tradition as Wolfgang Schivelbusch[8]), the new exploration of the history of technology is more than technical. If Benjamin's method is fully understood, technology can reveal the dream world of society as much as its pragmatic rationalization.[9]

Although Freud does not really emphasize the dichotomy, I think that the opposition he sets up between technologies is revealing, particularly for early cinema. On the one hand he invokes those powerful devices of transportation and separation, the steamship and the railway On the other hand, and apparently healing the breach, stand the machineries of communication and binding, the telephone

4 Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its discontents in James Strachey (ed and trans) The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol XXI (London Hogarth Press, 1961), p 88 Ronell uses this quote in The Telephone Book, pp 86–94 I signal here the inspiration and uncanny amusement Ronell s book provided for me, in spite of a wide divergence in method and thank Mary Ann Doane for alerting me to it

5 Stephen Kern The Culture of Time and Space (1880–1918) (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1983)

6 Ibid 259–86

7 Freud Civilization and its discontents p 91

8 Benjamin s arcades project has been brilliantly presented and discussed in Susan Buck-Morss The Dialectics of Seeing Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project (Cambridge MIT Press 1989) Wolfgang Schivelbusch s translated works on the history of technology are The Railway Journey Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century (New York Urizen Books 1979 - now available from University of California Press) and Disenchanted Night The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley University of California Press 1988)

9 On the concept of the dream world of mass culture see Buck-Morss The Dialectics of Seeing particularly pp 253–86

and telegraph. As Schivelbusch has shown, the railway was the nineteenth century's mythic image of the new technology, embodying an excessive power that inspired terror as well as awe Schivelbusch reveals that the railway's beneficial overcoming of space and time was balanced by the spectre of the railway accident, a figure as terrifying in fantasy as it was overwhelming in reality. The catastrophic effect of a train wreck on victims not injured physically led to the first medical diagnosis of traumatic neurosis and the acknowledgement that psychic events could have physical effects, paving the way for the theory of hysteria as formulated by Freud and Breuer at the end of the century.[10]

Lynne Kirby in her work on the image of the railway has proposed hysteria as a model for the spectator's experience of early cinema [11] Thinking along the same lines, I have tried to theorize the particular effect of the non-narrativized cinema of attractions as an aesthetic of astonishment, exploiting a turn of the century taste for entertainment which confronted its spectator with a series of shocks [12] The enduring film genre of early actualities of locomotives seemingly bearing down on camera and spectator exemplifies the audience address of a cinema which favoured direct visual stimulus over narrative development. But what about the role of technology in the period of narrativization which prepared the way for the classical paradigm? A film like D. W. Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) shows how the new technology's ability to 'annihilate space and time' could support and interrelate with new narrative devices such as suspenseful parallel editing. The pattern of alteration brilliantly analysed in this film by Raymond Bellour[13] not only establishes gender positions (from Blanche Sweet, the threatened telegraph operator, to Frank Grandin, her engineer boyfriend) but also articulates the mode of technology each commands: the railway and telegraphy The technology seems to follow Freud's typology. The railway separates the young lovers at the beginning while Blanche's morse code call for help reunites them. However the telegraph only *communicates* her plight to her lover and it is the speeding locomotive that brings them back together.

As Noel Burch and others (including myself) have pointed out, as cinema moved toward classical storytelling it had to overcome the self-contained and self-sufficient aspect of autonomous attractions addressed directly to a spectator.[14] Narrative development demanded the creation of a larger fictional whole assembled from a succession of shots. The individual shot was subordinated to an extended action in the new multi-shot narratives, with the direct address to the spectator sublated *into a vectorized narrative expectation which* carried the spectator from shot to shot. This was largely accomplished through a genre whose fictional action clearly required a succession of shots, the chase films so popular from 1903 to 1908

10 Schivelbusch *The Railway Journey* pp 131–45

11 Lynne Kirby, Male hysteria and early cinema' *Camera Obscura* no 17 (1988), pp 113–31

12 Tom Gunning, An aesthetic of astonishment early film and the (in)credulous spectator', *Art & Text* no 34 (1989), pp 31–45

13 Raymond Bellour 'Alterner/raconter' in R Bellour (ed) *Le cinéma Américain* (Paris Flammarion 1980) pp 69–88

14 See Noel Burch 'Passion poursuite la linearisation in *Communications*, no 38 (1983), pp 30–50 and Tom Gunning 'Non-continuity, continuity, discontinuity a theory of genres in early films', *IRIS* vol 2, no 1 (1984), pp 101–12

These films traced a clear line of diegetic action, creating a fully legible course for the spectator to negotiate as action moved from locale to locale and from shot to shot.

But with the appearance of parallel editing and the narrative devices of alternation it supplies, such simple tracing of physical action no longer suffices Appearing as it does during the period of film's intense narratization, in which character psychology begins to motivate narrative action and the spatial and temporal relations between actions are no longer restricted to the clear linearity of the chase format, parallel editing typifies, without exhausting, the systematic nature that cinematic narration begins to display around 1908. It is the workings of this narrative system and its hardly accidental interrelation to technology that I wish to explore here In the films I will discuss in this article the newly emerging forms of filmic narration display a relation (simultaneously thematic and structural) to the way technology structures modern life.

In the increasingly narrativized cinema of the transitional period (roughly 1907–13) the discontinuous shocks of early cinema become increasingly absorbed into a complex narrative process. This systemic approach to narrative creates a number of new tasks for the spectator, as he/she negotiates a series of spatio-temporal relations between events and interprets characters' motives. Placed in an active (yet also narrowly circumscribed) role before what (following Walter Benjamin) we could describe as a conveyor belt of narrative information, the newly formed cinematic spectator bears a striking similarity to the modern participant in technological processes Integral to a process not in his/her control, the spectator must make the connections demanded or risk narrative incoherence

Temporal simultaneity demands a more abstract sense of the interrelation of space and time and in many instances early filmmakers incorporated recent technology into the plots of their films to naturalize film's power to move through space and time The telephone supplies a particularly powerful example In a key article Eileen Bowser demonstrates that portraying the unique spatial and temporal relations of a telephone conversation (different spaces but simultaneous time) called for ingenious solutions by early filmmakers, which were eventually coded and became common practice [15] True to the cinema of attractions' preference for the single shot, split-screens or split-sets predominate initially, with James Williamson's *Are You There?* (1901) using a none too stable curtain to separate the supposedly distant telephone lovers who are filmed within a single shot Biograph's *The Story the Biograph Told* (1904) uses an actual superimposition of the two parties in a phone conversation (a solution I have not seen elsewhere), while Edwin Porter's *College Chums* (1907) creates an ingenious shot in which both participants appear in matted-in frames over a graphic image of a city, as animated letters pass between them conveying their

15 Eileen Bowser, Le coup de téléphone dans les primitifs du cinéma', in Pierre Guibert (ed) *Les premiers ans du cinéma français* (Perpignan Institut Jean Vigo 1985) pp 218–24 Most of this text has been incorporated into Bowser s *History of American Cinema Vol II The Emergence of Cinema* (New York Scribners, 1990)

conversation Such split-screen devices remain an alternative method of conveying phone conversations into the classical period, with Lois Weber's three way split-screen in *Suspense* (1913) providing the most elaborate example from the pre-feature era.

But after 1908 the most frequent device for portraying a phone conversation was parallel editing, cutting from one end of the telephone line to the other. While the earliest instances of extended parallel editing only occasionally portray telephone conversations, the fit between the spatio-temporal form of the event and that of its portrayal has a particularly satisfying effect which one suspects rendered the innovative technique particularly legible to film audiences Griffith's first extended use of parallel editing appeared in *The Fatal Hour* shot in August 1908. In this suspenseful tale of white slavery, a murderous clock device supplied the technological mediation, precisely counting off the minutes and marking the time between shots. In February 1909 Griffith shot his first film containing a suspensefully intercut phone conversation, *The Medicine Bottle*, followed in April and May of that year by his most famous telephone film, *The Lonely Villa*, a film which has become the *locus classicus* of parallel editing.

It is the genealogy of this film that I want to explore. With its last minute rescue; invasion of the bourgeois home; strict alternation between gender positions (the hysterical women inside the house, the threatening/rescuing males breaking in or rushing to the rescue); and, most important for my purposes, the technological link via the telephone that propels the climax into action, *The Lonely Villa* has become recognized as an archetype of film melodrama. But if the film is often cited as an ur-form of later rescue melodramas, we need to realize that it actually retells an older story which had already undergone a number of transformations Retracing these various versions, we uncover a grim fable of technology whose fascination for early filmmakers reveals some of the darker aspects of the dream world of instant communication and the annihilation of space and time.

A variety of film scholars have recently pointed to Pathé's *The Physician of the Castle* (1908) as the direct inspiration for Griffith's film.[16] The film, released in the US in 1908 under the title *A Narrow Escape*,[17] has practically the same plot as *The Lonely Villa*. A doctor leaves his house to treat a patient after receiving a false message sent by burglars seeking to rob his house in his absence. When he arrives at the home of the patient he receives a desperate telephone call from his wife who tells him of the burglars' invasion. The physician jumps into his car for a wild race home, picking up two gendarmes on the way. He arrives home just in the nick of time to arrest the burglars about to seize his wife. Anyone familiar with Griffith's film recognizes an almost exact duplication There are only minor plot changes (for example, the husband in Griffith's film is

16 The late Jay Leyda directed my attention to this and Barry Salt has published the most complete discussion of the film, in 'The Physician of the Castle Sight and Sound, Vol 54 no 4 (1985–6)

17 Cooper C Graham, while a member of Leyda s seminar on Griffith Biograph Films at NYU located the notice of the US release of this film A synopsis can be found in *Moving Picture World* Vol 2 no 13 (1908) p 270

The Lonely Villa

The Lonely Villa

The Physician of the Castle

The Physician of the Castle

not a doctor; he calls home due to car trouble, only to discover the burglary in progress; and a gypsy wagon is dragooned into the race to the rescue in place of the disabled auto).

On the level of filmic discourse, however, the differences between the two films are significant. The Pathé film has twenty-six shots while *The Lonely Villa* has fifty-two. The most significant section of hyper-editing comes with the phone call. *The Physician of the Castle* devotes only four shots to this conversation (a long shot as the physician lifts the receiver; a parallel cut to a medium closeup [framed at the bust] of his wife on the phone telling of the burglary; a similar medium closeup of the physician as he hears the news; and a return to long shot as the physician hangs up the phone). Griffith, in contrast, develops the conversation over eighteen shots, including the husband briefly rushing out to check on his car and shots of the burglars' progress. In fact the suspensefully intercut telephone conversation far surpasses the actual race to the rescue to which Griffith devotes only seven shots.

However, in researching the connection between these two films, I suddenly uncovered a number of other films from this transitional period with similar plots, which traced a path back to a 1901 play that served as the source for them all. Unfortunately, filmic analysis has to end here, since these earlier films exist only as catalogue descriptions which do not, alas, indicate the visual means of the portrayals of the telephone calls so central to their plot. But the differences in story-line command attention. The most detailed plot description comes from a film made by Edwin Porter for the Edison Company in August 1908 (between the Pathé and Biograph films) entitled *Heard over the Phone*. In contrast to the earlier demonstrations of patriarchial power restored with the aid of technology, Porter's film told a grim tale of defeat. In *Heard over the Phone* the disruption of the well-to-do suburban household comes from a hostler who is fired by the man of the house for mistreating the family's horses. As the father departs for New York City on business, the hostler vows revenge. I will quote from the film's original publicity bulletin for its description of the film's telephonic climax:

BEFORE THE STORM: Mother and Child in sitting room – Mother reading to Child – Has presentiment of danger – Hears footsteps – Rushes to 'phone.
AT HUSBAND'S OFFICE: Husband called up – Is startled – Thinks Wife unduly alarmed – Tries to allay her fears – Advises calmness.
A TERRIBLE ORDEAL: Sudden interruption (Wife drops 'phone) – a masked face at the window – Husband hears a crash of broken glass – The Hostler's entrance – Wife screams – The attack – Child's pleading.

AS IN A VISION: Husband wrought to a pitch of madness – In dreadful agony – Powerless to move – Hears every word – Witnesses as in a vision every scene enacted.
MOTHER LOVE: Husband hears Wife's frantic appeal for mercy – His child's prayers – The curses and denunciation of the enraged Hostler.
SUSPENSE: SILENCE – Hears Child's cry as Hostler secures her – The mother going to the rescue – The desperate struggle – The mother's cry as she regains her child – Frenzy of enraged and baffled Demon – A pistol shot – The mother's dying words as she crawls to the 'phone – The child's heart-rending sobs – Then silence.[18]

As anyone knows who has worked with early publicity bulletins, it is impossible to determine the visual treatment of this sequence. The text seems to indicate alternation between the two scenes. However the phrase 'As in a Vision' may indicate some form of vision superimposition modelled on the vision scene as managed in nineteenth-century theatre. As *College Chums* and *Cupid's Pranks* (1908) show, Porter was adept at split-screen images. But, even without the actual film text, the narrative description of Porter's film is striking in its contrast to both the Pathé and Biograph films. The brutal violence, the father's incapacity to do anything but listen, and the specifically technological agony of the final silence carried over the telephone line provide a nightmare revision of Griffith's rescue melodrama.

Soon after Charles Musser directed my attention to this Edison film, my colleague, André Gaudreault, responded to my search for an original French catalogue description of *The Physician of the Castle* and sent me what appeared to be the description I needed. However, on closer inspection I realized that this text from the 1907 Pathé catalogue described an earlier version of *Physician of the Castle*, entitled *Terrible angoisse*, which shared Porter's grim ending. The description reads as follows:

A successful lawyer at his country house for the summer is suddenly called to court. During his absence burglars break into his villa and the terrified young wife barely has time to rush to the telephone to call her husband. While she is telling him about the criminals, they seize her by the throat and strangle her, as well as her little boy. Hearing nothing more at the other end of the line, the devastated lawyer realizes what has happened and, mad with grief, rushes home. He throws himself on the corpses of his dear companion and his child.[19]

The rather shocking motifs of these two films (the destruction of a bourgeois family, technologically 'witnessed' by the *paterfamilias* who is incapable of intervening; his technological torment by sounds

18 *Film Index*, 5 September 1908, p. 14. I am indebted to Charles Musser for first alerting me to the existence of this film

ANDRÉ de LORDE

THÉATRE
DE LA PEUR

LIBRAIRIE THÉATRALE

19 *Films et cinématographes Pathé* (Paris: Pathé Co., 1907), pp. 195–6. (my translation)

of unimaginable violence; and finally his devastation by deafening silence, as this aural medium mutely speaks of death) constitute the actual ur-form of *The Lonely Villa*, a nightmare of masculine impotence which the later film undoes and denies. These horrifying effects of a specifically modern agony, this demonstration of the suffering made possible through the illusory 'annihilation of space and time', are, in fact, the carefully managed effects of one of the first masters of suspense, playwright André de Lorde. De Lorde coauthored (with Charles Foley, whose short story provided the basic plot) the 1901 one act play on which all these films were based, *Au téléphone*.[20] Although this play premiered at the Théâtre Libre with the founder of this innovative theatre of naturalism, André Antoine, in the lead, de Lorde was best-known as the house author of the Grand Guignol, the Paris theatre of horror, and, after its premiere, *Au téléphone* soon became a well-known part of this theatre's repertoire.

The Grand Guignol had opened in Paris in 1897, featuring the grim naturalistic *rosse* plays that had shocked audiences at the Théâtre Libre a few years before, interspersed with satirical and *risqué* comedies. Working with manager Max Maury, de Lorde soon focused this formula on a particularly modern experience of agonizing suspense and horrifying climaxes. While certainly related to the nineteenth-century tradition of melodrama, The Grand Guignol differentiated itself by chronicling the triumphs of vice and the misfortunes, rather than the rewards, of virtue. Equally importantly, the theatre prided itself on its realism both in stage effects and in subject matter. De Lorde particularly sought out a modern topology of horror, introducing the operating table (*Le laboratoire des hallucinations*) and the scientific laboratory (*L'horrible expérience*), the new treatment of mental illness at Salpétrière (*Une leçon à la Salpétrière*), the terrors of the speeding automobile (*40 HP*), and the dangers of colonialism (*La dernière torture*) to the stage. De Lorde's plays were brief, building like Poe's tales, to a single emotional effect, one which de Lorde frequently described as 'the fear of being afraid'.[21]

Au téléphone embodies the psychological tension and the peculiarly modern effect of horror that de Lorde pursued. Its plot combines the action of *The Lonely Villa* with the ending of Porter's *Heard over the Phone* in a play consisting of two scenes in two locations. The first scene presents the vacation home of André Marex as he prepares to return to Paris on business and worries about train schedules and getting to the station on time. While the isolated location of their lonely villa has made train connections complex, Marex has had, at great expense, a telephone installed to aid his business. Using the phone to arrange a stopover at a friend's house that evening, he then departs, cautioning his wife and servant to be vigilant in his absence. After his departure, the male servant is

20 To my knowledge Kemp Niver was the first scholar to note *Au téléphone* as the source for *The Lonely Villa* in Bebe Bergsten (ed.), *D W Griffith, His Biograph Films in Perspective* (Los Angeles: John D Roche, 1974), p 91

21 The Grand Guignol is chronicled in Mel Gordon, *The Grand Guignol: Theater of Fear and Terror* (New York: Amok Press, 1988), which includes de Lorde's essay 'Fear in literature', and Francois Riviere and Gabrielle Wittkop, *Grand Guignol* (Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1979)

Le Grand Guignol

22 *Dramatic Mirror*, 11 October 1902, p 16

23 Ibid.

24 The obvious link between Hitchcock, Grand Guignol and de Lorde in particular needs further investigation The most effective scene in *Rear Window*, in which Stewart helplessly watches from across the courtyard as Grace Kelly is being beaten, clearly owes a great deal to *Au téléphone*

25 The *locus classicus* of this argument is Nicholas A Vardac, *From Stage to Screen Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (New York Benjamin Blom, 1968) Vardac's thesis was important for alerting film scholars to the prehistory of cinema in theatrical melodrama However too many scholars have adopted it too literally, ignoring the very real differences between stage craft and film editing

drawn out of the house by a false message, leaving wife and child alone with an elderly female servant. Anxious, the wife calls her husband at the friend's home to which he had telephoned earlier. The phone call bridges the scene change, the second scene opening in the friend's apartment as the telephone rings. Marex at first tries to dispel his wife's anxiety, but suddenly she chokes with fear and Marex hears his home being broken into. He listens helplessly to the sounds of violent struggle, the screams of his child, and then complete silence. Marex cries out, 'they have murdered them', and the curtain falls.

In the play, the scene of distant violent death is conveyed only by the sounds heard over the telephone, mediated by Marex at the telephone. This technique supplied a tour de force for the actor playing Marex, through whose reactions 'the whole scene at the other end of the wire is brought vividly before the auditors', to quote a review from *The New York Dramatic Mirror*.[22] Marex moves from reassuring his anxious wife with rational discourse to uttering incoherent cries, until finally 'he drops the receiver unmanned, terror struck and maddened by the thought of his impotency'.[23]

Immobile, de Lorde's hero undergoes an agonizing paralysis, dramatically effective since the spectators are in the same fixed and helpless relation to unfolding events as Marex.[24] But if this technological torture serves mainly as a brilliant device in de Lorde's theatre of shudders, it also stands as a devastating fable of technology. Rather than allowing Marex to overcome space and time, the telephone torments him with distance and impotence. Electronic sound on the telephone can pass to and fro instantly, but the flesh and blood husband and father remains fixed and humiliated.

De Lorde frequently inverted the expected triumph of virtue in his horror plays. *La dernière torture*, for instance, deals with a group of French diplomats beseiged by Chinese rebels during the Boxer Uprising. The play ends as the French consul shoots his teenage daughter in order to prevent a 'fate worse than death' if she fell into the hands of the rebels. As soon as this act of murder is completed, the distraught father discovers that colonial troops have broken the seige. Seen today, this one-act play might well appear as a dark parody of Griffith's last-minute rescues.

Following the somewhat simplistic thesis which sees cinematic techniques as an answer to the narrative demands of nineteenth-century theatre,[25] it might seem that parallel editing provides the perfect technical solution to the dramatic situation of *Au téléphone*. However, cinema's ability to switch between locations instantly would in fact undercut de Lorde's effect of paralysis. And Griffith (and his Pathé predecessor) seem to understand this, matching parallel editing's mastery of space and time with the narrative

transformation of the father's triumphant return in the company of the law to rescue his female family members But if Griffith's film represents a secondary revision of de Lorde's nightmare, it also contains a moment that seems to hark back to the impotence of the ur-plot, a modified return of the repressed. Interestingly, this moment has no parallel in the simpler Pathé film. The shadow that de Lorde's ur-text casts over *The Lonely Villa* allows us to read this seemingly optimistic melodrama in another light.

This moment of extreme frustration comes when the burglars cut the telephone wire, thus creating a technological interruption which produces the greatest panic in the film, with both wife and husband making melodramatic gestures of despair (the husband in particular, staring out towards the camera, clenching his fists and bringing them to his head). The cut line brings to an end the eighteen-shot sequence which has alternated between ends of the phone line. Beyond the narrative omnipresence created by this parallel editing, this sequence also visualized a relation between husband and wife that goes beyond simple communication. Through a series of matching gestures the pair seem to be directly influencing each other physically, setting up an uncanny pattern of cause and effect.

As Rick Altman has shown in his penetrating structural analysis of *The Lonely Villa,* three times during the phone call Griffith cuts from the husband initiating a motion to the wife mirroring his gesture· first, both point toward the left presumably explaining their situations; second, as the husband tells the wife to get his revolver from his desk and fire it, he mimes pulling the trigger and the wife tries to shoot the gun; and finally the husband and wife both respond to the cut phone line by jiggling the phone switch. As Altman points out, each of these refers to a blockage in the plot (the broken down auto which the husband points towards; the

26 Rick Altman *The Lonely Villa* and Griffith's Paradigmatic style in *The Quarterly Review of Film Studies* Vol 6 no 2 (1981), pp 123–34 see particularly pp 126–7

unloaded revolver which does not fire, the cut phone line).[26] But, more explicitly, they all refer to technological breakdowns, with the cut telephone line producing the most panic These cuts on gestures create an almost supernatural sense of the husband's ability to manipulate his wife; like a puppet master he makes the manipulative gesture which she completes as a performative gesture. The panic of the cut line produces an almost masturbatory gesture of ineffectiveness, as he seems to jiggle the phone endlessly, while the cut to his wife performing a similar gesture ironically establishes separation rather than power The telephone connections and puppet lines have snapped

The central technological breakdown in this triad, the misfiring revolver, may seem the weakest in terms of modernity, flanked by the stronger examples of the modes of transportation and communication. However, if slightly earlier in invention, the revolver plays a pivotal role in the technological and gendered plot. As a simple form of self protection, available at the flexing of a

trigger finger, the revolver allows an equality of the sexes which permits the husband to leave his wife unprotected, (one which, significantly, does not repay his confidence). In Griffith's two later dramas of railway and telegraph, *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) and *A Girl and Her Trust* (1912), it is the woman's ability to create a simulacrum of a revolver that allows her to hold invading burglars at bay until the help summoned by her telegraph can arrive

The importance of the revolver also indicates that someone at the Biograph company was aware of de Lorde's original The removal of the bullets by the false messenger from the revolver the husband leaves for protection, as well as the departure of the servants, are details that *The Lonely Villa* shares with *Au téléphone* and which are missing from *The Physician of the Castle*. If not attributable to Griffith, this familiarity might derive from the film's scriptwriter (reputedly Mack Sennett who, in 1912, produced a comic parody of *Au téléphone* at Biograph, *Help, Help*)

If this moment of panic at technological interruption recalls the final effect of de Lorde's play, the contrasts set up by Griffith's version are also revealing Both patriarchs are rendered hysterical by silence. In de Lorde's play the silence is the signifier of death; in Griffith's film it indicates a dead line. In *Au téléphone* it is the competence of the technological connection that causes horror – the husband can hear the murder as it takes place. In *The Lonely Villa* it is technology's malfunction that causes silence and panic While Griffith on first sight seems to have generally whitewashed de Lorde's disturbing plot, his portrayal of technological panic may have an equally disturbing dimension.

The panic at the cut phone line parallels a transformation in the experience of technology that Schivelbusch observed in the railway Initially train travel itself – the sensation of speed and dislocation it entailed – had caused anxiety for travellers But as familiarity effaced fears, instead of the actual travelling causing anxiety, it was the possibility of the sudden interruption of its functioning that terrified the rail passenger and 'immediately reawakens the memory of the forgotten danger and potential violence; the repressed material returns with a vengeance'.[27] Like de Lorde's particularly modern horror – 'the fear of being afraid' – it was the possibility of breakdown, of catastrophic accident, that caused anxiety.

Technology appears to play a more beneficial role in Griffith's film than it does in *Au téléphone*. It is, after all, the telephone call that informs the father of his family's danger and allows him to rescue them. However, contained within this fable of the restoration of order is the panic of its interruption. This reveals an essential aspect of modern technology· its inscription of its own interruption as the sign of catastrophe [28] Just beneath the surface of the smoothly-functioning system lies the threat of paralysis and impotence caused by its disruption

27 Schivelbusch *The Railway Journey* p 132

28 Mary Ann Doane s work on the portrayal of disaster on television in a paper delivered to the Columbia Seminar on Cinema 27 April 1989, entitled Information crisis TV and catastrophe news coverage stimulated my thinking in this direction

To talk by telephone, *The Lonely Villa* indicates, is to risk being cut off. To travel by car is to risk mechanical breakdown. To rely on a revolver as a means of family protection is to risk having it useless if the bullets are removed The smooth functioning of technology glides over the abyss of anxiety at its possible sudden failure Technology functions, as Freud indicated, as a more than mixed blessing; it becomes a system of connections and separations, of distances and proximities, or appearances and disappearances, in fact a sort of titanic game of *fort/da*, by which modernity manages its fear of loss by tying it to a secondary anxiety – that of being cut off.

The climax of *The Lonely Villa* in some sense anticipates the climax of *Intolerance* (1916) in which the race to the rescue is constructed as a race between technologies, pitting race-car against locomotive, telephone against the efficiencies of the modern gallows. The strongest closeup in this sequence from *Intolerance* enlarges the hands of the hangmen with their razors poised over the cords which will release the gallows trap and string up Bobby Harron. Griffith constructs an elaborate system here of the need to make connections (the race-car stopping the train in its tracks, the governor phoning the warden) and the ever poised terror of cutting them off. The system of *Intolerance* can be described precisely in these terms, as Griffith places long distance calls between millennia and continents, never sure if the circuits will hold (In fact the great interpreter of modern hieroglyphic civilization, the poet Vachel Lindsay, described the film with a nearly telephonic metaphor: 'In Griffith's *Intolerance* Babylon is shown signalling across the ages to Judea . .'[29]) Behind the assembling of these shots stands the image of the razor, the cutting implement that preceeds the suture And complexly situated, the spectator is placed to make these connections, a switchboard operator of narrative messages.

In *The Lonely Villa*, parallel cutting portrays a telephone conversation, visually conveying an aural experience In *Au téléphone* the sound heard over the phone horribly calls us to imagine unseen atrocities. (Before the break-in becomes obvious, Marex had been romantically speaking to his wife saying, 'You are close to me – I hear the slightest inflection of your voice – almost every movement – can very nearly see you – yes, I see you, little wife '[30]) In the play the new apparatus functions properly, driving the husband and father mad by conveying the fact that there is ultimately nothing more to hear. In the film the panic of interrupted communication galvanizes the head of the family into frenzied action, reaching home just in time. But before the restoring action there comes the crucial moment of interruption. De Lorde casts his shadow over this rescue melodrama by revealing at its centre this image of the hysterical father, profoundly cut off

Interestingly, adaptations of *Au téléphone* did not end with *The*

29 This comment contained in a 1917 review of Hugo Munster s *The Photoplay a Psychological Study in The New Republic* is reprinted in George C Pratt (ed) *Spellbound in Darkness A History of the Silent Film* (Greenwich New York Graphic Society, 1973) pp 224–7

30 Andre de Lorde *At the Telephone* in *One Act Plays for Stage and Study* p 398

Lonely Villa. Besides Sennett's 1912 parody, I have traced descriptions of a film from the independent Phoenix Company, *The Telephone Call* (1909), as well as versions by other important directors, such as Abel Gance's *Au secours* (1923) with Max Linder, which concludes with a witty send-up of the Grand Guignol standard, a Russian version from 1914 by Yakov Protazanov,[31] and Lois Weber's *Suspense* (1913) which is perhaps the single most original one reeler from the period of transition to features Further, Griffith's later Biograph films include a large number of technological plots, among them *Death's Marathon* (1912) in which a dissolute father threatens suicide over the telephone and eventually commits it (when a last minute rescue by friends fails) as his wife listens on the other end of the line

While the imagery I have invoked from these fables of modernity clearly calls up a series of Freudian concepts, my use of Freud has been somewhat perverse Following Benjamin's lead in his essay 'Some Motifs in Baeudelaire', I have tried to use Freudian concepts of castration and the *fort/da* game historically, as images that convey deeper strata of the experience of modernity, rather than as eternal aspects of human nature. Freud himself was often explicit on the role that modern technology played in either causing or revealing the nature of psychic trauma, from the relation between hysteria and the train accident, so important at the beginning of his career, to the war-time traumas that inspired his later speculations on the death drive. While for Freud the technical and historical aspects are ultimately superficial, it may well be that part of the nature of modernity is to call into question the relation between surface and depth, an inversion that Freud was instrumental in initiating, by directing attention to accidental acts of daily life and the nonsense of dreams In the ongoing investigation of the history of early film Freud may – even unwillingly – provide us with profound insights into the dream world of technology