
Caroline Martel’s documentary traces the transformation of the occupation of telephone operator from 1903 till 1989, although some images shown at the beginning of the film (e.g., the young male operators) take us back to the 1870s. The film stresses the technical development of the telephone and its impact on the telephone operator’s work, adopting an original format and an innovative long-durée context and using a wide range of secondary sources. Appropriate visual and audio effects are employed to accentuate some issues, and the narrative is imaginative and interesting. Some of the images are beautiful aesthetically and artistically but, more importantly from my point of view, socio-historically.

The Phantom of the Operator is innovative in other ways as well. It uses kinds of film rarely taken into consideration before and covers periods of the telephone expansion that have barely been discussed in academic works. For example, the period from the 1930s till the early 1970s has only been studied sketchily. So, historically, the documentary is helpful as it gives an encompassing picture of the way changes in the technology of the telephone affected the operators and conversely how the operators influenced the working of the telephone. The first 10 minutes or so cover material that has already been discussed in published works on Bell’s development of the telephone in central Canada (e.g., Martin’s “Hello Central?” 1991), but the image undoubtedly adds to the reality of the occupation of that time, putting into action a part of what had been said in writing. Yet images are only translations of reality, to use Callon’s words (1988); that is, they hide important elements of both the intentions behind their production and the events they depict, therein transforming reality.

As it is, Martel’s documentary re-appropriates parts of sexist and racist industrial and self-promotion films produced by telephone companies. These films constituted a form of propaganda used to “educate” their viewers about the “marvel” of the technology, and to convince them of its usefulness and of the goodness of the company in offering both such a beneficial instrument and such interesting jobs to women. This “materiality” of the image, to use Chartier’s term (1994), would be particularly important to stress in the film as it uses these sources. Yet this materiality is never mentioned in the narrative.

The documentary has its insightful moments. For instance, a montage shows “a cascade of scenes” (Latour, 1988) in which we first see the operators entering in lines, like primary school pupils, to reach their respective places at the switchboard, then some operators dancing to jazz music in what they called their recreation room, then some female messengers using what looks like the ancestor of the skateboard to speed from one place to the next to reach the women connecting calls, then the operators dancing again. This rapid cascade of scenes mimics the rapidity necessary for a good operator to connect calls, illustrates the pressure under which these women were working, and also portrays their attempts at relaxing. The montage is reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times (1936), as it strongly suggests that the operator’s work had been “taylorised” in the same way as factory work using assembly line production.

Another important moment is that covering the World War II period, a passage reminiscent of the Rosie the Riveter movie (1944). It was, indeed, essential to document the role played by women hired as telephone technicians to take the place of men engaged in the army during the war, who were then casually fired when the “boys” came back. Finally,
an insightful moment comes at the very end when the commentator critiques the way telephone companies were presenting the telematic era around the 1980s, which gave telephone companies increased control over the operator’s work, asserting: “My output was monitored down to a fraction of a second. The computer wasn’t working for me. I was working for it.” One would have liked to hear more critique of other important issues presented in the film extracts.

The Phantom of the Operator covers some key themes: the voice, “manipulated” to become “a voice with a smile” to make it “visible” and to transform it into an “international agent”; the two-faced side of glamour: “everyone wants to be an operator” to connect important subscribers from Vancouver to England, but at the same time “The brighter the projections from the dream-machine, the darker the shadow they cast”; the subjection of the operator to the machine orchestrated by the management subjection of the operator to the machine by introducing various aspects of taylorism in their work; the paternalism of telephone companies, particularly Bell, obliging the operators to go to weekend camps “in family”; and finally the downside of modernism: “How could we have believed that, in designing the world as a network, we could inhabit that network as a world?” Still, here I suggest that “they” would have been more appropriate than “we.” The “we” suggests that operators were responsible for planning the physical expansion of telephone networks, which, of course, was not the case.

Although it is an interesting piece of work with some useful insights, the documentary also has some shortcomings. The most important one, from an academic point of view, is the almost total absence of feminist critique. Nearly all the film sources used in Martel’s production were produced from a blatant sexist position. Given the historical context that these visual documents cover and the gender of their producers, the sexism is not surprising. What is surprising, though, is the lack of comments on this particular issue in The Phantom of the Operator. Although the commentary is sometimes “tongue in cheek,” it is not sufficient to balance the very heavily sexist character of these documents pieced together, and by analogy of Martel’s documentary. A few well-placed comments on the sexism of the films would have made Martel’s work more interesting without limiting popular access to its popular appeal.

Finally, although the French commentator’s voice is beautiful, the tone used in the documentary is cloying; agreeable at the beginning, it becomes insufferable over time. The whispering technique would have been more effective if used discriminately for specific moments, rather than throughout. But this should not deter people, including instructors, from using this documentary as well as enjoying it. Caroline Martel’s production is generally very well done, certainly useful for undergraduate students when accompanied by critical explanations, and worth watching even just for fun.

References
Chaplin, Charlie (Director). (1936). Modern times [Silent film].

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