

## **Mobile Phones as Narrative Tropes**

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Early in *The Departed* (Dir: Scorsese, 2006), there is a scene in which police Lt. Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) swaps the SIM, or subscriber identity module, in his mobile phone to avoid detection as he speaks to Costello, the Boston mafia boss played by Jack Nicholson. He does this while standing in a phone booth, an interesting allusion to the rich history of telephones in cinema; but as astute viewers pointed out, he's calling on a Sprint RL7400 phone that doesn't use SIM cards.

At first it seems surprising that Hollywood, so alert to the opportunities of new technology, got this detail wrong, especially in a film that calibrates its rising action to an increasingly sophisticated use of mobile phones. Later, for example, there is a scene in a warehouse in which Sullivan, by allowing his ringtone to be heard, draws the Mafia boss to him, kills him, and takes the mobile from his dead hand. By the film's end, we understand that Sullivan uses mobiles to shift between his personae of cop, crook, and lover, with an ease that we would disbelieve if he used a landline. The Sprint gaffe almost seems like planted naiveté.

This sophisticated use is an important development in narrative. Film and fiction early on recognized the potential of the land-line telephone, but it has taken twenty years to realize the possibilities of the mobile. Narrative recently has had a hard time keeping up with audiences' increasingly sophisticated use of communications technologies, but

after awkward early attempts, film now understands the mobile phone as a possible trope for character transformation. Print fiction remains skeptical about mobiles.

Both narrative forms have proceeded from their traditional attitudes toward new technology. Fiction looked askance at mobiles because of their mundane aspects, treating them as at best revealing of quotidian aspects of character, at worst as cultural contagion. Film, building on its use of the landline, seized on the mobile earlier, as a means to “overhear” distant scenes, to complicate plots, and to accelerate action. It also depicted them in mundane daily aspects, as status accessories, etc. In 2006 both narrative forms produced notable depictions of mobiles, but film broke new ground in *The Departed*, in which mobile phones enable shifts in character function.

All this lags social reality severely. As Jon Agar points out in *Constant Touch* (2004), since Japan rolled out the world’s first widely-used, analog mobile phones in 1979, the devices have spread so rapidly that they outstripped the world’s land line systems within fifteen years. By 2006 the majority of the citizens of Europe, North America, and of the wealthier nations of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America owned mobile phones.

In film and fiction, however, mobiles only begin to appear around 1990. This is an extraordinary gap when we consider that, for the first time in history, human communication was freed from the ancient constraints of physical proximity and spatial immobility: one or both restrictions had always prevailed. No form of communication has ever been adopted so rapidly across cultures, age groups, literacy and income levels around the world.

There is a great deal of research on the new social reality that the mobile has created, particularly in Europe. Sociologists have noted an increase in “grooming calls” by which members of a family or group show concern and “nearness.” These short, frequent calls reinforce bonds of affection, and appear across cultures, gender, and age groups and are notable among immigrant families and diasporic clans. The “universal availability” of mobile users also allows the reinforcement of hierarchies: bosses call employees after hours, parents patrol their children, and couples monitor each other. “If you are without a mobile phone it means that no one depends on you for urgent direction,” writes researcher Holly Bausch (2001).

In public space, mobiles have created a dynamic of “civil inattention,” in which bystanders pretend to ignore overheard conversations and speakers use vague or euphemistic language. Banned from theaters, religious institutions, funerals, airplanes, and many restaurants, mobiles are also frowned upon in museums, bookstores, trains, and buses. Some users employ their phones as symbolic bodyguards in public areas, warding off unwanted (usually male) attention or refusing to participate in the public arena. “Public space is no longer lived in all of its aspects, stimuli, and prospects,” writes Leopoldina Fortunati (2000), “but is kept in the background of an itinerant cellular intimacy.”

Receiving mobile calls is another fraught area, as users choose to keep their phones on, or off, or in message-only mode, determining not only when they are available, but their appearance of availability. They decide who shall have their numbers, who to block, who to answer, and who hears a busy signal. Studies in Finland show men more likely than women to turn mobiles off to avoid social surveillance. Since mobile

calls arrive unpredictably but habit dictates they be answered, other calls or conversations must be suspended. These interruptions cause anxiety, anomie, and difficult restarts. Speakers must manage facial expressions and body language for multiple audiences, indicating primary and secondary importance to those present and absent – which calls on acting skills that *The Departed* was first to represent. “Managed availability” has its pluses, however, for it increases the capacity of parents and other multi-taskers to coordinate their various roles. Managing conflicts and the discrepant awareness of conversation partners is difficult, but it leads to new skill sets and, hence, to new matrices of grace, gaucherie, or power (as Matt Damon’s character believes).

National adoptions of the mobile have differed, following cultural fault lines. The Italians have a culture of “nomadic intimacy,” according to Leopoldina Fortunati: more peripheral relationships but fewer deep ones(17). Social life has become deregulated and “nights out [are] characterized by endless deferrals and reshuffling of meetings and events which might never occur,” writes Sadie Plant (2003). This would seem to offer possibilities for drama. As for comedy, “freedom from punctuality is permitted by constant ability to update other parties as to your status,” writes A.M. Townsend (2000). The popularity of the mobile in Italy “seems to be associated with its support for a spontaneous, disorganized lifestyle that has always reigned among most of the country’s population” according to Hans Geser (2004). Italian television sitcoms increasingly parody such mobile habits.

Other aspects of mobile reality remain undepicted. Parents communicate with other parents about their children’s’ attitudes and whereabouts; employees engage in a similar dynamic about bosses; and law officers speak directly to each other, rather than

through dispatchers or superiors. Little of this enters narrative, and none of it reflects a quotidian concern about night-weekend minutes, excessive charges, reception areas, misusing company phones, or dying batteries. Studies in the U.S. show that mothers and wives act as the mobile phone “information hubs” in most families. Other studies show that although mobiles may reduce the number of shared family experiences, they seem to be assimilated to traditional roles. This is missing from narrative, as are larger topics such as mobile networks of the politically affiliated, used for fund-raising or candidate rallies or to spread news uncensored by the government, as in China.

Skeptics point out that the same sorts of social transformations supposedly took place when land-lines appeared. The telephone was well established when Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrill Lynd conducted their research in Muncie, Indiana, in 1925 for *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*. They concluded with alarm that the telephone had replaced personal visits, created social stratification, and increased individual isolation. This view -- that consumers were being shaped by technology, rather than the traditional ‘self-making’ that Americans prized -- was then in vogue among intellectuals. Recent work by Claude S. Fisher (1992) and the Middletown Media Studies group has complicated that earlier technological determinism. Fisher argues that the telephone industry modeled itself so much on the telegraph business that it ignored farmers, the poor, and minorities, and that the Lynds ignored business use of phones, even when it was as crucial as the “nickel phone” in pharmacies. The Media Studies Group (2004) has shown that diaries, phone and personal interviews (the Lynds’ principal tools) generate unreliable statistics. In their contemporary survey, for example,

the Media Studies Group found that mobile phone users self-reported 31 minutes a day of use, but observers recorded them at 65 minutes.

If in fact the land-line telephone was alienating or marginalizing, that was not emphasized in narrative at the time. The mobile phone also has the potential to be isolating, but its use in recent film narrative has depicted it breaking down barriers. For example in *Babel* (dir: Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) one plot line focuses on short message systems (SMS) and “iMode” live video among a group of deaf girls in Tokyo. Already a popular feature of Asian youth subcultures for a decade, this “texting” offers trial relationships, invitations without risk, and virtual friendship. Some Japanese teens maintained multiple personas for hundreds of *meru tomo* (e-mail friends) whom they had never met. But 2006 also produced a stellar example of print narrative’s traditional view of telephony in Stephen King’s *Cell*, in which mobiles spread a brain-wasting malady.

Why have such sociological and affective changes to life not infiltrated narrative more? Narratives don’t “reflect reality,” of course, but they do preoccupy themselves with change. And in those narratives that presume a mimetic basis, why have so few of the actual uses or affective traits of mobile phones appeared?

The matrix of response to these questions is, in fact, a century old. As film scholars Tom Gunning (1991) and Mel Gordon (1997) have pointed out, early film treatments of the telephone derived from the theater, especially the French *grand guignol*. “Early filmmakers incorporated recent technology into the plots of their films to naturalize film’s power to move through space and time,” writes Gunning in “Heard Over the Phone” (187). The telephone appeared in combination with new cinematic techniques, particularly in rescue melodramas, and notably in Pathé’s *Terrible Angoisse*

(1907) and Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911). The master plot for both may have been the play "On the Telephone," by Andre de Lorde and Charles Foley (1902).

According to Gordon, it was "one of the Grand Guignol's most popular and influential plays" (38). In it the bourgeois Andre Marex receives a phone call from his wife, who reports strange noises in their vacation home. As he listens, his wife, their son, and the maid are "brutalized" and then strangled by tramps. Gordon points out that stage melodrama played to working class audiences' expectation of dramatic emotion (horror) and to their secret delight in class retribution. When D. W. Griffith remade the play as *The Lonely Villa* (Biograph, 1909), he used the telephone primarily as a device to cross-cut between the besieged wife and children, who barricade the doors, and the policemen who race to the scene. One actor is seen speaking into a phone at one location, another listening at a second place: the telephone is the "rationale" that makes visual sense of cross-cutting. But the film added an endorsement of the new technology, as film frequently would: in *The Lonely Villa* the family is saved, whereas in the play they perish.

Print narrative about the telephone took a different course. Mark Twain, who owned one of the first U.S. telephones, depicted them in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) to contrast English with American culture and to serve plot action: his narrator keeps track of the King by phone. But he also complained that the phone was "the very demon for conveying similarities of sound that are miracles of divergence from similarity of sense." This sense of dis/similarity, of dissonance, even of a disconnection, bothered the Connecticut early adopter, and it bothered a succession of writers who followed. The sensibility of poets with regard to the telephone was also shaped by a

distrust of this dis/similitude. For T. S. Eliot, as Hugh Kenner has explained, telephones produced a disquieting sense of “overheard voices” discrepant from the reality producing them. For Frank O’Hara, the gap between a friend’s note on his door saying “Call me, call when you get in” and his own very tardy response is filled by possibilities of irony, satire, and complicity in the possible death of the note’s author (“Call Me,” 1957).

Elizabeth Bishop was overtly parodic in “Electrical Storm” (1998) in which her narrator got up to

find the wiring fused,  
no lights, a smell of saltpeter,  
and the telephone dead.

Novelists have been somewhat less skeptical. Sinclair Lewis used telephones in *Babbitt* (1922) as emblems of Tanis Judique’s “fast set.” Babbitt arranged his liaisons on them, and Tanis’ friends telephone out for bootleg liquor. When the strain of adultery is too much, Babbitt “did not see Tanis nor telephone her.” When she calls him, he puts her off with a series of short excuses and, in an interesting atavism, “She did not telephone again, nor he, but after five more days she wrote to him.” For F. Scott Fitzgerald, telephones typified the worlds of both Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Early on the Buchanans’ dinner is famously interrupted by calls from Tom’s mistress Myrtle. At the height of his involvement in this world, Nick Carraway dumps girlfriend Jordan Baker over the telephone, a first for her and perhaps in fiction. As Louis K. Grief (1991) pointed out, “Gatsby [is] repeatedly interrupted by messages on the telephone all through the novel except ... the one time he desperately wants to be disturbed,” namely by Daisy, when he hopes that she will leave Tom. As he waits by his



pool, Gatsby can't be reached even by Nick Carraway: "the line was busy. I tried four times; finally an exasperated central told me the wire was being kept open for long distance from Detroit" (156). Having prevented the call he most desires, Gatsby is killed by Myrtle's husband. It completes a pattern, Grieff argues, that begins when Gatsby shows Daisy his clippings in their giddy initial reunion and a phone call "shifts him suddenly out of this conversation and into an absurd lecture to an associate concerning the size of Detroit" (95).

Readers waited until 2006 for a novelist to make mobile phones similarly significant. Then Stephen King in *Cell* imagined an apocalyptic world in which mobile users were infected by The Pulse, which spread over mobile networks. They attack one another vampirishly, shout deranged gibberish, and destroy cities. Mobiles for King represent the complex of fashion, youth speak, incivility, and groupthink that he feels engulfing us. Twenty-four hour news, microwave popcorn, the internet, boom boxes – these things rile Stephen King, who prefers Maine, Red Sox baseball, spunky women, private schools, nice suburbs, Colt .45 handguns, classic heroes in comic books, and *genuine conversation* (as he would put it). Mobile phones stand as the symbol of cyber-cooption, 24/7 accessibility, and a pre-programmed sensation society. "It's like being nudged by a hand, only inside your brain," one character says. Much as one might sympathize with King's view, his plot suffers from the weakness of using contagion as his narrative paradigm. The mobile plague slays all its users in the same horrible and hemorrhaging manner, but without possibility of redemption, without interesting ambiguity or moral nuance. "Only the Luddites and phone-phobes are safe" in this novel, Janet Maslin (2006) writes: "although it would have been better had Mr. King not agreed

to promote ‘Cell’ with cell phone ring tones being sold by his publisher.” Indeed. King’s work is clearly in debt to the very consumption machine that it damns, and as several critics have noticed, he lifts his zombies directly from George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*. When the “normies” flee the “phoners” to the receptionless Maine region of Washwak, King describes the threat of the mobile-users as “something more and less than human, joining into nests, hive minds linked together by telepathy.” After hundreds of pages repeat this point, the ‘uncanny’ begins to seem like holding for the next available operator.

Mobiles begin to appear in Hollywood film around 1990, with *Evolution* (1989), *Taking Care of Business* (1990), and *The Hard Way* (1991). None of these employ the mobile innovatively, but at the end of the decade someone must have remembered Fitzgerald. In *A Whole New Day* (1999: Dir. William Garcia) James Gandolfini’s wife apparently dumps him via a message on his mobile phone. He reads it as he wakes from a drunk in a strange, empty apartment. He thinks his wife has emptied it and left him. His perception turns out to be a case of mistaken place (he’s in someone else’s apartment), an interesting narrative innovation. Also in 1999 *The Matrix* (Dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski) depicted mobile phones as one link between an illusory world and reality. At the outset Neo receives an overnight letter containing a mobile phone, which rings immediately and connects him to Morpheus.

More innovative was *Message in a Cell Phone* (Dir. Eric Hendershot, 2000). Two boys have to crack a voice-mail code to find a saved message that will rescue the father of one – a version of cipher-driven plot that dates to Poe’s “The Gold Bug” (1843). The phone as a device concealing a clue, perhaps *the* clue, is a narrative device whose

use will expand greatly. Meanwhile television shows, such as *Law and Order* and *24*, and various post 9-11 terrorist films, advanced the idea that the tracking of GPS-enabled mobile phones was as easy as eating angel food cake. That Jack Bauer gets “patched through” firewalls and secure lines from remote regions of the Earth to speak to the U.S. President is one of the great television conceits of our time. Never once does a cell phone tower appear, never once is there a dropped call. No matter how many steps are involved in letting Jack talk to the President, this use of the mobile is not far different from the use of the land-line back in “On the Telephone” by Lorde/Foley. It creates suspense by abutting disparate scenes. But the insertion of extra steps for suspense (Jack’s batteries are running low!) points up the problem with the plot of the mobile as either bridging device or “cipher.” After a certain number of suspense-building pauses or steps in a technical solution, audience fatigue sets in. The film *Message in a Cell Phone* had five or six steps in the solution of the cipher, about what a popular audience will stand (and the same number that Poe used in “The Gold Bug”). By adding more steps, authors risk creating a puzzle or, more limiting, a scenario of men retrieving information from machines.

In 2002 mobile phone narrative advanced significantly with the Hong Kong police thriller *Mou Gan Do (Infernal Affairs)*. Dirs. Wai Keung Lau, Siu Fai Mak), which became the prototype for *The Departed*. The plot depicts two police cadets who become moles, one for the police in a crime family, the other for the crime family in the police. In order to stop leaks, their bosses order them to ferret out each other. The leaks occur mostly via texting, though once the Mafia mole uses Morse code. Both take care not to be caught on their phones inside the opposing organizations. But in a shocking scene at

police headquarters, Ming (Andy Lau) takes a call from his Triad boss right in front of his police superior. This danger and the effrontery he shows in doing so seem to shock the audience. But viewers also seem to identify with the dilemma of using a mobile in a situation of divided attention and soon they seem to admire Ming's boldness. Ming isn't just competent at this; he becomes a master and believes he cannot be caught. He feels that he cannot be perceived as a mole *because* he uses a mobile, in police headquarters, in front of his boss. Something about the mobile – the way it divorces communication from proximity and immobility - leads him to believe himself transformed. Aside from these scenes (which *The Departed* would recycle), much of the film develops a saccharine love story, and the ending is sadly predictable.

Brad Pitt acquired rights to an American remake of *Mou Gan Do* in 2003, and Martin Scorsese developed the project. The plot remains the same: there are two state police cadets who become moles. Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) drops out of police academy but is recruited back to spy on the Mafia. Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) rises through the police force, but is actually a mole for the mob. Scorsese amplified the romance plot by having Sullivan marry the department psychologist Madolyn (Vera Farmiga), to whom the perpetually frowning, Oxycontin-addicted Costigan goes for therapy. This is a major improvement over *Mou Gan Do* and allows for a new layer of betrayals, some of which occur on mobiles. In addition, Sullivan's inability to have sex with his wife Madolyn is implied to be due in part to the intrusion of work into his home life, symbolized by interrupting calls from Costello.

Such gestures toward mimesis work well. For example, when Costello is in his apartment, talking to Sullivan with a glowering Costigan in the background, we have one

of those moments of “discrepant awareness” that imitates an uncomfortable reality we have all experienced. As Shakespearians have taught us, the *frisson* arises from characters having different and partial pieces of the whole picture, while the audience knows all. In *The Departed* Sullivan and Costigan know evil things, but Costello knows more than they do. He knows, it turns out, more than the audience does.

In a scene paired with the one just mentioned, Sullivan takes a call from Costello while Madolyn stares on from the apartment background. This repeats the earlier triangle with Costigan and Costello, but reverses their physical positions. It recalls the triangle that Poe created in “The Purloined Letter,” which directed us to the symbolic function of words left in obvious places, or so Lacan thought. It is also a function known to all mobile phone users who have juggled two audiences, one present and one virtual. They must don masks that do not betray them. When Costello implies that he will kill Madolyn if Sullivan does not cooperate -- “Do you like little Miss Thing sucking on your cock?” -- Sullivan has to cover his face so that Madolyn and the audience cannot see his distress. It is the moment of character transformation - his real face covered, a ritual masking. Earlier Sullivan had bragged to Costello about his ability to lie, but now he struggles, and when he does so, Madolyn knows immediately: “You’re lying to me,” she says. After this failed charade, he begins to use the mobile as a mask. The phone, which had been a seam between film settings or crosscut narrative lines, now becomes a sememe whose meaning lies at the jointure. In this film no time is tenser than call time.

In fact, as I wrote at the outset, the “mobile phone drama” of *The Departed* builds in syncopation with the rising narrative action. Not only do the phones become more

modern as the film progresses, but each character has a different color phone. Costello gives Costigan a striking red phone when he co-opts him. Most characters set their phones to vibration mode, a macho police style, but the brash Sullivan uses ring tones. Style of phone use becomes an element of characterization. By all rights Costigan, with his drug-addled honesty and sophisticated use of texting, should be the film's victor, if personal and technical virtuosity were paramount. But the film advances a darker view: as police Lt. Dignan says, "Most of the people of the world [play a role] every day." Costigan responds, "I'm not them," and his inability to transform himself will doom him.

The mobile phone drama peaks after Lt. Queenen is thrown off a roof. Using Queenen's phone, Sullivan calls Costigan, who is seated in front of the array of phones he has acquired but not figured out how to "wear." He watches his "police informant" phone ring, inching toward him in vibration mode, as "restricted number" shows in the caller ID window. He looks as if he were seeing a ghost: dead men like Queenen make no calls. He answers, listens, and hangs up, realizing that someone has discovered him. He packs a bag and immediately leaves, calling Queenen's number again from the airport. "You called this number on a dead guy's phone," he says, "Who are you?"

Sullivan answers: "I'm taking over Queenen's unit." Now, he does not officially have Queenen's job, but he has his mobile phone. That turns out to be the same thing, a totem of power, containing his contacts, a matrix of his debts and favors and interests that is personal and potent. Once that mobile is in Sullivan's hands, the actual office must follow. Sullivan has become a figure for whom "identity is composed entirely of a myriad of masks upon masks beneath which there resides nothing authentic but the ability to create yet more masks," as Reena Goyal put it in an article on Nietzsche and

transformation (2003). If Sullivan leaves viewers disturbed, it may be because the “purpose behind using the language of masks is not limited to causing the reader to perceive her/himself as a combination of disguises” (Goyal).

Repeated viewings of *The Departed* make it clear that the mobile phone motif has been choreographed, no scene more pointedly than the first climax. Costello phones Sullivan, asking him to call off a tail so that he can complete a drug deal. Sullivan convinces his police colleagues to drop the tail, but Costigan, sitting in the back of Costello’s car, manages to send a one word text message to the police -- “Sheffield” -- revealing the rendezvous for the deal. There Costello is ambushed, with Sullivan a reluctant participant. In the gun battle Costello is wounded and staggers into a cul-de-sac to call Sullivan, to find out what went wrong. To his surprise a nearby mobile rings. By now viewers have been habituated to Sullivan as the only character who keeps his phone in ring mode. As Costello listens in shock, Sullivan appears around a corner, his phone held high, a kind of homing beacon that draws him to his Mafia boss.

Sullivan reveals that he knows Costello is a protected FBI informant. The two shoot at each other, but Sullivan is wearing a bulletproof vest, and the mafioso is fatally wounded. He falls back against a container, cruciform, still clutching his mobile phone, which emits a personalized ring tone even as Sullivan removes it from his dying hand. The call is from girlfriend Gwen, who wants to know why Costello is not home yet. “Gwen,” says Sullivan in dulcet tones, “We’ve lost Frank.” Then he pockets the phone. Having collected the mobile phones of Queenen and Costello, he has a pocketful of masks.

With these he can now trick Costigan into coming in from the cold. When the two meet, there is a moment of pure Poe. Costigan sees an envelope bearing his own writing on Sullivan's desk, then Sullivan returns and deduces what Costigan has seen – so he leaves the room and erases Costigan from the police computer, denying him the “life” he so desperately wants back. Though Costigan later on creates an old-fashioned confrontation by producing audio tapes (Costello recorded everything, unbeknownst to the audience), the combination of film grammar and mobile phone use makes it clear that only Sullivan has grown in his use of technology so as to acquire its liminal powers. Costigan's later “arrest” of Sullivan on the rooftop, the film's second climax, is old-fashioned, and viewers alert to the power of the mobile trope already know who will prevail.

If dead men make no calls on mobile phones, narrative after *The Departed* has decided to explore the possibility that they can still receive them. Sarah Ruhl's 2008 play “dead man's cell phone” [sic] focuses on a woman who shuts off the ringing phone of an apparently sleeping diner, only to discover that he is dead. She assumes the responsibility for tidying up his life. She is mousy and has no life, while he had a dozen complex relationships, some of them difficult. His mobile phone becomes her version of the Native American “talking stick,” requiring that attention be paid to her. People in his life must listen to her tell how he died, what he said, and how he felt about them (which she invents). The deep need for attention that she manifests has found the perfect medium, as she spins out romantic, retributive, and satiric resolutions to his life. It's as if Matt Damon had taken over the *lives* rather than the powers of Lt. Queenen and Costello in *The Departed*, which is to say that it steps in a new narrative direction.



“By close-ups of the things around us,” Walter Benjamin once wrote (1954), “by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.” The mobile phone has been such a field of action, we see now, as well as a necessity that rules us, but it had not until now been lifted to our hermeneutic regard. An object at once stolen, bought, and sold in the *banlieux* of all large cities, not to mention the precincts of eBay, the mobile phone is now narrative trope. In *The Departed* it ends up imparting a quality of the “uncanny” to the common. By uncoupling communication from personal immobility and from fixed locations, the mobile estranges us just enough to assume the oneiric functions of a primitive mask.

It was not obvious material for such, but from the land-line telephone’s use as a cross-cutting device in film the mobile phone inherited a kind of tool value. After a time it was no longer the logical explanation of how two settings could abut, but rather the power to *make* two settings abut. Similarly, viewers now understand that when a film character appears with a mobile phone in hand, another character in another location is about to be added to the narrative, a complication perhaps, or a friend, or a foe. And, if the mobile call is made, in private, then something transforming will take place. If it is made in public (as in “dead man’s cell phone”), the register will be somewhat lighter, comic or satiric or whimsical, in keeping with those primordial associations of place and communication. Some essentialized quality of the caller, or quality that ties the callers to each other, or to some plot function, is about to undergo transformation. The potential of

the mobile as a trope for transformation is enormous, and the emplotments have just begun.

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