

The Telephone: A Modern Day Hermes

'REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE!' The telephone 'BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER!' So chime the advertisements of the telephone company which would like to convince us that the telephone, just as the messages it brings, can only mean good news. This technological masterpiece of our age has come to be seen as a truly wondrous object, especially if a box of metal and wires connected to cords and cables can perform such a feat for humankind. Like the equally mythic boundary-crosser and namesake for hermeneutics Hermes, whose winged feet transported him between alien lands and cultures as the messenger of exchange, the telephone, as the mediator of dialogue and thus understanding, has assumed Hermes' role in our daily life. Just as we may now take this mythical product of communication wizardry for granted and forget that every home and business was not always equipped with two, three, or four telephones, so too can we ignore the telephone's impact on understanding between human beings and especially its function poetically in literary texts. After the heroes of cultural criticism like Marshall McLuhan in the sixties and Roland Barthes¹ in the seventies have exposed and often exploded the myths of obvious events and artifacts of everyday life, it is impossible to let the telephone in literary texts remain merely a neutral object, theatrical prop, or a fictional accessory. If the telephone's specific function, in contrast to earlier communication mediums such as the letter and the telegraph, is to mediate understanding through dialogue, the spoken word between human beings, then in the literary text it should necessarily be a model for the modern concern with understanding and interpretation itself.

It is then perhaps not a coincidence that in this essay I have chosen to discuss two German literary texts — Hofmannsthal's *Der Schwierige* (1921), and Kafka's *Das Schloß* (1925), and only one French text — Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* (1930), since an awareness of this problem is so informed by the German philosophical tradition of hermeneutics and

1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill 1964). See especially the chapter 'The Telephone: Sounding Brass or Tinkling Symbol?' Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang 1978).

language philosophy from Herder to Gadamer and Habermas.² Moreover, in the strictly etymological sense, the Greek *tele* meaning far and *phone* meaning sound was translated into English and French literally as telephone and *téléphone* respectively, yet into German as *Fernsprecher* or the often used *Ferngespräch*. This German word used even today captures the dialogic quality of speaking and discussion which the telephone facilitates. The word *Ferngespräch* is now only reserved for actual 'long distance calls' which all telephone connections necessarily implied during the 1880's to 1920's, when the telephone came into its own and still held the wondrous sense of communicating over a distance as close as a few miles away.

Yet in the late 1870's and through the 1880's, even with the excitement coming in from business circles abroad over the possibilities for the new invention, 'die deutsche Geschäftswelt [hat] zunächst nur wenig Anteilnahme für das neue Verkehrsmittel.' A great deal of work had to be accomplished to convince businessmen of its value; it still remained unsuccessful.³ The General Postmaster reported in the Reichstag in 1889-90:

Es ist kaum glaublich, wie ich über die Achsel angesehen wurde, wenn ich mit Begeisterung von dem Instrument sprach, wie man hier in Berlin in den ersten Häusern und in den intelligentesten Kreisen vielfach meinte: Ach das ist wohl amerikanischer Schwindel, ein neuer Humbug u.s.w., das waren Reden, die ich täglich zu hören bekam. Ich habe erst eigene Agenten herumschicken müssen — um die ersten hundert Firmen, ich möchte sagen, zu überreden, daß diese Einrichtung nur überhaupt erst ins Leben gesetzt wurde.⁴

By the 1920's the frustrations of the enthusiastic postmaster were relieved by the telephone's acceptance into daily life.

While one reason for the resistance, as the postmaster points out, was 'wie zurückhaltend, um nicht zu sagen mißtrauisch, der Deutsche häufig neuen Unternehmungen, Gestaltungen und Entwicklungen gegenüber ist, ...'⁵ later generations were to experience other grounds for their hesita-

2 *The Hermeneutic Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*. Edited with an Introduction and notes, by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum 1985)

3 Erwin Horstmann, *75 Jahre Fernsprecher in Deutschland 1877-1952. Ein Rückblick auf die Entwicklung des Fernsprechers in Deutschland und auf seine Erfindungsgeschichte* (n. p.: Bundesministerium für das Post- und Fernmeldewesen 1952) 143

4 Horstmann, 143

5 Horstmann. McLuhan also reports that '[t]he readers of the New York Evening

tion, frustration, and even hostility towards the telephone. The astonishing achievement of communication might well allay the fears of a public who would bemoan the accomplishments of the growing technological wonders as dehumanizing life. Yet it might also make tragically clear that this instrument is not only unreliable, but also a hindrance to human understanding since it encourages the technologization of man. The telephone becomes, in fact, the most insidious reflection of this new age after World War I, since what it offers becomes its own medium of subversion. In the texts of Hofmannsthal, Kafka, and Cocteau, the telephone incorporates the modernist dilemma of the self-reflective and thus tentative and tenuous nature of language and understanding.

Such *Sprachskepsis* as a symptom of modernism has already become a cliché. Hofmannsthal's classic *Brief* (1901) to Lord Chandos is used consistently by critics as a programmatic statement on the doubtful credibility of language and its inability to provide a secure reference for describing reality. This notion could easily be seen as an essential part of neo-Romanticism, Expressionism, and Surrealism which could be well applied to Hofmannsthal, Kafka, and Cocteau respectively. Without a doubt these writers are understood in traditional literary history as spokesmen of the broader international modernist tradition in literature with the likes of Symbolists in Germany like George and Rilke or the spearheads of modernism in the English-speaking world such as Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner. Within the philosophical framework of the early twentieth century as well, the problem of understanding with its emphasis on language became a central concern, as the writings of major philosophers like Husserl and Heidegger would easily attest. Joachim Wach's classic three volume study on hermeneutics *Das Verstehen* (1924-1933) is itself a forerunner of Gadamer's contemporary philosophical hermeneutics which has made the linguisticity of understanding (*Sprachlichkeit des Verstehens*) its focus. This rather general view of the problematic is presented simply to reaffirm how obvious the complex nature of language and understanding is for all of these movements and how productive the interpretation of the telephone is in this context.

While during the apotheosis of modernism in the 1920's, McLuhan can claim that the songs of the time, to hit a banal note, bemoaned the

Telegram were told in 1904: "Phony implies that a thing so qualified has no more substance than a telephone talk with a superstitious friend." He also notes that '[t]he New York Daily Graphic for March 15, 1877, portrayed on its front page "The Terrors of the Telephone — The Orator of the Future."'

loneliness which the telephone could create,⁶ Europe and America became fully internationalized, even if it was against the background of the shattered images of reality brought home from the front. Facile communication could, in fact, 'bring people together,' as the telephone advertisements claim, less tragically than the confrontations in the Great War. Whether by speaking to each other over the telephone, gathering around the popular phonograph, or even more, the newly developed radio, whose first entertainment broadcast came from the German Army in 1917,⁷ people were drawn together by the human voice. A world which was recovering and prospering by healing the breaks and disconnections between 'alien lands and cultures' welcomed the 'roaring' of the Twenties which was to grow louder as these machines of sound became a part of everyone's everyday life.

While the phonograph, radio, and telephone all extoll the human voice, only the telephone creates dialogue, only the telephone demands a partner and will not permit itself to be mere background 'music.'⁸ Yet like the word or text which resists definition or interpretation, the telephone seems only to be acknowledged when it malfunctions, when it hinders communication. Then the telephone becomes like the most obvious semiotic system, language, once the realistic myth of referential transparency of meaning dissolves and the translucent word which signals the shadowy silhouette of itself presents the idea of the object as much as the image of the word. The 'indiskrete Maschine,'⁹ to use Hans Karl's cynical coinage in *Der Schwierige*, is no longer merely talked through, it is, rather, talked to.

Approaching the telephone in this anthropomorphic sense only underlines the expressionistic quality of these three texts of the period, since the telephone seems to assume a life of its own. Like a looming object or grotesque backdrop in a Fritz Lang film, the telephone dominates its environment and takes on human, sometimes superhuman power.

That Hofmannsthal's play essentially thematizes the problem of language is not a new interpretation. Lothar Wittmann points out, for example, ' "Konversation" ist nicht nur die Sprache, in der gesprochen

6 McLuhan refers to the song 'All Alone by the Telephone, All Alone Feeling Blue.'

7 'Radio,' *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 427

8 McLuhan, 235

9 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Schwierige*, *Gesammelte Werke*, Lustspiele II, hrsg. Herbert Steiner (Frankfurt: Fischer 1951) 195. All further references to this text will be indicated by a page number.

wird; um "Konversation" geht es auch ganz konkret und unmittelbar im Lustspielvorgang selbst; sie ist Leitmotiv, thematischer Gegenstand des Spielgeschehens.¹⁰ But what is striking is how few critics, if any aside from Wittmann and this author,¹¹ have interpreted the telephone as a significant symbol for the crisis of language, especially in the early technological age which tinges it with this expressionistic overtone. Therefore the telephone does not remain in this social comedy with distinctly tragic sense, a neutral mediator of polite conversation, but a powerful force which aggressively makes its presence known. When Neuhoff calls Hans Karl to the ringing telephone, 'Bitte, bleiben Sie, der Apparat begehrt nach Ihnen' (p. 195), he acknowledges how demanding the apparatus can be.

The power of technology is symbolized in that very object which should function as this 'direct line' — the receiver which literally links listening (aural) and speaking (oral), but also separates the partners in communication. Unwilling to remain quiet, the telephone both talks and listens. The telephone is indiscreet because it invades Hans Karl's privacy like a chatty gossip and seduces its prospective partners to call and banter so easily and spontaneously. It calls persistently with its ringing. When it is busy, it signals that it is occupied and can't be spoken to and the neutral dial tones says, 'I'm ready!' Appropriate to this crass and almost boisterous image is its irresponsibility.

While the gentility of epistolary writing, both in actuality and as a literary genre, may mark an era which is being strangled by the telephone lines of modern technology, it also signals an end to the quiet reflection and responsibility of putting the word to paper. With the telephone each word dissolves into the flurry of hurried conversations and with the placing of the receiver back on the telephone, there is no letter to open and reopen, to read and reread. The tangible proof pleasant to the touch and pleasing to the eye has been replaced by the cold metal

10 Lothar Wittmann, *Sprachthematik und dramatische Form im Werke Hofmannsthals*, Studien zur Poetik und Geschichte der Literatur 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1966) 144. The telephone receives almost no recognition although the topic of *Sprachskepsis* is discussed at such great length in Hofmannsthal scholarship especially in regards to this play. For a detailed bibliography see Ehrhard Bahr's 'Dezenz der Rede: Zur Sprachproblematik in Hofmannsthals Lustspiel "Der Schwierige,"' in *Austriaca. Beiträge zur österreichischen Literatur. Festschrift für Heinz Politzer zum 65. Geburtstag in Zusammenarbeit mit Richard Brinkmann*. Hrsg. Winfried Kudsus und Hinrich C. Seeba (Tübingen: Niemeyer 1975) 285.

11 See my book *Hermes Disguised. Literary Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Literature: Kleist, Grillparzer, Fontane* (Bern: Peter Lang 1983).

black box staring blankly back. This 'cool' medium, in McLuhan's sense, neutralizes conversation. While the number may change, the ease and equanimity of the gesture (especially with today's pushbutton phones) make all telephoning equally banal and destroy the 'Aura' of the 'Hier und Jetzt' in Benjamin's sense.¹² Like the words passing through the wires, the society which depends on the telephone is reduced to a mere representation of its substantive self. According to Wittmann, the society in *Schwierige*:

ist quasi ein 'Apparat', der nur durch das Prinzip der Wiederholung notdürftig funktioniert. Alle Worte der 'Konversation', alle ihre Formeln und Floskeln haben notgedrungen die Struktur unbegrenzter Wiederholbarkeit. Durch den ständigen Gebrauch werden die gesellschaftlichen Redensarten abgegriffen, abgeschliffen, der tägliche Verkehr verbraucht die Substanz des Wortes, macht es zum Klischee.¹³

It is no wonder that Hans Karl therefore remains 'schweigend' through much of the play, since as he claims, 'Ich verstehe mich viel schlechter wenn ich red als wenn ich still bin' (p. 261). But Hans Karl's silence is also a response to a society whose language has become empty 'Formeln' and 'Floskeln,' and yet which still naively assumes that this bankrupt language can communicate understanding. Therefore 'chronisch[e] Mißverständnisse' (p. 154), as Hans Karl points out, are unavoidable, especially when this society misuses language in order to deceive itself that it has grasped the world and even Hans Karl himself with words which no longer have a concrete echo of reality. This problem of 'Verständigung' is a much more serious concern than mere 'Verständnis' in an age where communication through the spoken word is coming into its own, especially to a character like Hans Karl who seems to have been sensitized to the duplicity of his peers by his experiences in World War I.

The extremity of this problem is, of course, best illustrated in the telephone conversation with Hechingen in Act 1, Scene 15. In the course

12 See Walter Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,' *Gesammelte Schriften* 1, ii, hrsg. Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schwepenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1974). In Benjamin's sense one could say that the availability to the Masses of the telephone and the ease with which one makes calls reduces the uniqueness of each personal interaction. When the only possible means of conversing with someone personally required a great expense of energy, time and concentration, each contact assumed a greater meaning.

13 Wittmann, 150

of the discussion, as Wittmann notes, 'Empfindung' becomes a 'gleichgültige Phrase' (p. 149). Aside from the extreme transformation in the word itself through the obvious disturbance in the telephone, it becomes clear that the 'medium has become the message,' to use McLuhan's well-worn phrase. By the end of the conversation Hans Karl's intentions of healing Hechingen and his wife's marital problems have been redirected to making him simply understand at all. 'Sensibility' is translated into an 'indifferent phrase' since the technological medium exerts its presence and dehumanizes language. It filters out the human quality of the word and leaves only an empty and 'indifferent' shell. This technological alienation of man takes place when the technological apparatus takes on human qualities, and as in the play, the ethical character of human beings is lost along with the words which drain the meaning. Ironically such words inflated and floating through the air without any tangible reference point, as if in a Surrealist painting, nourish the telephone, grow even larger and ever more dominant like Hans Karl's voice as he repeats the misunderstood word to Hechingen.

Hans Karl rejects both polite society and Parliament in order to establish alone with Helen a private language and personal understanding in a world removed. His vision is a kind of *Paradise* where technology is unnecessary, where language and understanding are not alienated and misinterpreted. Unfortunately for Hans Karl this new Utopia is illusory, since it means that in an age of communication he will remain disconnected from the major lines of dialogue.

For K. in Kafka's novel *Das Schloß* (1925),¹⁴ the 'Apparat' in the multiple senses of the 'bureaucratic structure,'¹⁵ the surveyor's tools, and the telephone itself isolate the land surveyor who learns more quickly and dramatically than Hans Karl that the telephone cannot be trusted. Although K. confronts the telephone in an alienated and unnamed world removed from the everyday banalities of a polite society like Vienna, his

14 I am very aware here of the many readings of *Das Schloß* and K.'s relationship to the castle. Since it is not my intention here to give another new interpretation of the novel but only to analyze the function of the telephone as part of a broader issue of communication and understanding, I refer the reader to 'Das Schloß' in Hartmut Binder's *Kafka Kommentar zu den Romanen, Rezensionen, Aphorismen und zum Brief an den Vater* (München: Winkler 1976) 262-375; in *Franz Kafka: Eine kritische Einführung in die Forschung* (Frankfurt: Athenaeon 1974) 328-38; and in better known texts on Kafka by Sokel, Politzer, and others.

15 Hartmut Binder, 'Kafka und der behördliche Apparat,' *Kafka in neuer Sicht: Mimik, Gestik und Personengefüge als Darstellungsformen des Autobiographischen* (Stuttgart: Metzler 1976) 396-419

experience is no less disjunctive. In the first pages of the novel, immediately after arriving in the village and getting to sleep, K. confronts the telephone when he is disturbed by the gatekeeper's son who wants to telephone his father at the castle for information. K. is still confident and can allow himself the luxury of pondering whether he should allow the boy to bother him further by using the telephone above his head. The return call from the castle which will reinstate K.'s dissolving credibility comes and K. already seems to acknowledge the power of the telephone to disassociate him from the world he wants to enter and to control his destiny. 'Da läutete das Telephon nochmals, und, wie es K. schien, besonders stark.'¹⁶

K.'s repeated attempts by making contact through the telephone to understand the world circumscribed by the aura of the castle illustrate the weakness of the individual when confronted with the more dominating presence of the 'behördliche Apparat.' Neither the bureaucratic nor the technological apparatus which should, K. naively believes, facilitate his contact, functions for him. If K. had been more aware of the etymological senses of the 'Apparat[e]' once his helpers arrived empty-handed, he might have spared his energy in trying to contact the castle a second time by telephone. The telephone becomes here the center of attention, 'Alle erhoben sich mit K., und obwohl sie der Wirt zurückzudrängen suchte, grupperten sie sich beim Apparat in engem Halbkreis um ihn' (p. 32). K. picks up the receiver:

Aus der Hörmuschel kam ein Summen, wie K. es sonst beim Telephonieren nie gehört hatte. Es war, wie wenn sich aus dem Summen zahlloser kindlicher Stimmen — aber auch dieses Summen war keines, sondern war Gesang fernster, allerfernster Stimmen —, wie wenn sich aus diesem Summen in einer geradezu unmöglichen Weise eine einzige hohe, aber starke Stimme bilde, die an das Ohr schlug, so, wie wenn sie fordere, tiefer einzudringen als nur in das armselige Gehör. K. horchte, ohne zu telephonieren, den linken Arm hatte er auf das Telephonpult gestützt und horchte so (p. 32).

Analyzing 'Musik im Schloß und in *Josefine, die Sängerin*,' Winfried Kudsus, the only critic to comment extensively on the telephone in Kafka, notes ' "K. horchte, ohne zu telefonieren," und indem er dies tut, hat sich das Telefon vom Instrument, dessen man sich unter bestimmten

16 Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß, Gesammelte Schriften* 4, hrsg. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books 1946) 9-10. All further references to this text will be indicated by a page number.

Gesichtspunkten bedient, gewandelt zu einem Medium, das festgelegte Perspektiven tranzendiert.¹⁷ In this vein it becomes a medium which takes over power from K.. The sound 'Summen,' the word used to describe what K. hears and also actual technical disturbances such as buzzing on the telephone, becomes transformed, literally, first into 'zahllose kindliche Stimmen,' a drone of innumerable childlike voices, and then into 'eine einzige hohe, aber starke Stimme.' Unlike Hans Karl whose telephone conversation disintegrates from comprehensible language into misunderstanding, K.'s conversation never even begins.

K. is so transfixed by the 'voice' of the telephone that he seems to lose track of time. 'Er wußte nicht wie lange; so lange, bis ihn der Wirt am Rock zupfte, ein Bote sei für ihn gekommen' (p. 32). K. is not even moved by the report that a messenger has arrived, ' "Wegl!" schrie K. unherrscht, vielleicht in das Telephon hinein, denn nun meldete sich jemand' (p. 32). K. naively believes he may receive on the telephone the word he so urgently awaits, but it is instead the letter presenting the written word which substantiates his arrival. Although in the next moment a voice on the telephone demands to know his identity, K. has already lost the battle which he will later realize he has lost definitively. 'K. zögerte, sich zu nennen, dem Telephon gegenüber war er wehrlos, der andere konnte ihn niederdonnern, die Hörmuschel weglegen, ...' (p. 32). K. only listens, with no hope of making himself understood. The increasingly isolated individual K. may well be forced to reject the telephone for the same reasons as Freud did, since as Barthes reports, the psychologist of the ego was also bothered by the cacophony and the transmission of the wrong voice.¹⁸

K.'s final confrontation with the telephone could well be understood in Freud's sense that the telephone communicates falsely and denies the separation which exists between human beings.¹⁹ The wires and cables bind less powerfully than words. The reality of making connections with the castle seems equally illusory, since there is 'keine bestimmte telephonische Verbindung mit dem Schloß,' 'keine Zentralstelle, welche

17 Winfried Kudsus, 'Musik im Schloß und in *Josefine, die Sängerin*,' *Modern Austrian Literature* 11, no. 3/4 (1978) 247. See also Kudsus' discussion of the acoustic-oral tendencies at the end of the novel in W.K., 'Changing Perspectives: Trial/Castle,' *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for our Time*, ed. Angel Flores (New York: Gordian Press 1977).

18 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang 1978) 114-5

19 Barthes.

unsere Anrufe weiterleitet,' although '[i]m Schloß funktioniert das Telefon offenbar ausgezeichnet' (p. 107). Those like K. who stand outside the castle are condemned to hear the 'Rauschen und Gesang' (p. 107) in the telephone which may merely provide a kind of strange musical entertainment for the guests at the inn. Ironically, since such inarticulate sounds are 'das einzig Richtige und Vertrauenswürdige' and 'alles andere ist trügerisch,' especially when an overworked civil servant's message is only considered 'Scherz' (p. 107), both language and the possibility of K.'s communication are reduced to inarticulate noises. The telephone's uninterrupted use to those outside who have no chance for communicating through the instrument expressly designed for the purpose signals how far outside the castle they stand, how far they are alienated from themselves. The vision of constant telephoning created only through the continuous droning on the telephone enhances the sense of activity, albeit it aloof and almost inhuman, which goes on in the castle and which shuts K. out.

K.'s loss of faith during the course of the novel is already presented *in nuce* during his discussion with the *Vorsteher*. A reverse logic which preserves the bureaucratic structure (*Apparate*) destroys the intent of the telephone, since one can never, in fact, speak to the party who is actually called. It is no wonder then that as the *Vorsteher* points out, 'es [ist] besser, man läuft vom Telefon weg, ehe der erste Laut zu hören ist' (p. 108). K. learns that the telephone is not any less suspect and not any more secure than any other means of communication which has to do with bureaucratic concerns. K. gives up trying to reach the castle by telephone again.

While the telephone reflects the existential frustration of K.'s search, he still survives. The apparatus remains for him still just an object which he may reject when it proves useless. In contrast, Cocteau's one act play and libretto *La Voix humaine* (1930)²⁰ presents the telephone in its most radical and most lethal form. The title (*The Human Voice*) emphasizes that which the telephone glorifies above all else, particularly in the context of post World War I technology. The play's entire action revolves around one telephone call made by a frantic woman to the lover who has just left her.

20 Jean Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* was accepted by the prestigious and conservative Comédie Française for presentation on Feb. 17, 1930. It caused a great scandal and was perceived as an example of alienated theater influenced by modernism. The play was used by François Poulenc for his opera of the same name. It was finished in 1958 and presented in Paris in February, 1959.

Here the telephone not only functions symbolically, but literally as well. The woman's separation is reflected in the disengaged voice which comes over the wires, which ultimately can give her only a false sense of connection, especially since it also reminds her of the unbridgeable distance between them. The telephone's ability to give us the potential of immediate closeness and security is deceptive since there is no face to see, no body to touch. She may be able to say 'Je t'entends comme si tu étais dans la chambre,'²¹ but his voice is only a weak reminder of what real intimacy could mean. The black box may contain the possibility for contact with many but as long as it remains silent it only exacerbates her alienation. Ironically the couple thematizes the telephone's magic when they discuss the distance between them. 'Si, mais très loin, très loin ... Toi, tu m'entends?' (p. 9). Only the woman's voice is heard, the man's voice remains the phantom he will be for the woman.

The disturbance on the telephone symbolizes how disengaged their bond has become. The conversation is not only interrupted by distance, but also by the other voices on the party line. The enthusiasm for communication creates confusion when each speaker is anxiously trying to reach his/her partner in dialogue and fear for the woman when her conversation continues to be broken. 'Si, on coupe, redemande-moi tout de suite' (p. 8). To continue her dialogue becomes, in fact, a question of survival.

Her existence alone with only the telephone to connect her to her lover becomes increasingly tenuous as the conversation progresses. Here the entire dialogue begins to break down as the 'telephonic' bond is stretched beyond the breaking point. The telephone is not able to replace what she has lost, although she tries to make it into an object of her will. Although she first lies and states 'Je n'ai pas la voix d'une personne qui cache quelque chose' (p. 8), the telephone becomes a shield behind which she hides her gestures and her tears 'surtout ne me regarde pas' (p. 10). Then it turns into a kind of magical projector which allows her to conjure him up in her imagination. 'Je te vois, tu sais. Le foulard rouge ... Ta main droite? Ton stylographe. Tu dessines sur les buvardes profils, des coeurs, des étoiles. J'ai des yeux à la place des oreilles' (p. 10). When her ears become eyes, the telephone is transformed into the lover himself, ('Ce fil, c'est le dernier qui me rattache encore à nous ... Avant hier soir? ... Je m'étais couchée avec le téléphone — ' [p. 14]), and then even a weapon to kill herself. 'Si tu ne m'aimais pas et si tu étais adroit, le téléphone viendrait

21 Jean Cocteau, *La Voix humaine* (Paris: Ricordi 1961) 9. All further references to this text will be indicated by page number.

une arme effrayante. Une arme qui ne laisse pas de traces, qui ne fait pas de bruit ...' (p. 11).

The man's voice which grips her so powerfully is her last fading bond to him. Although she seems to have been able to recreate him in the apparatus through a disembodied voice ('il suffit que tu parles pour que je me sente bien ... j'entendais ta voix, exactement la même que ce soir dans l'appareil' [p. 13]), she will learn that the telephone cannot preserve the voice nor recreate the man. Although Orpheus' voice could magically bring the rocks to tears, the human voice transmitted through the telephone seems to have lost much of this transformative power. Her increasing fear of being 'cut off' grows as the conversation nears its own end. She wraps the cord around her neck in a last operative gesture ('J'ai le fil autour de mon cou. J'ai ta voix autour de mon cou' [p. 17]) and takes the phone in her arms as if to embrace her absent lover. Crying out for him to hang up, to literally, in the French sense of the word, cut him off quickly, she cuts her own life off while she reaches an almost orgasmic pitch with the refrain of 'Je t'aime' (p. 18). The receiver which falls to the ground marks not only her own death, but also the malevolent power of the telephone to cut off the life and liveliness of personal contact. She commits the error typical of the technological age — to mistake what the telephone does for what it should be. That the telephone which simply transmits the voice is projected onto the voice, the body, and ultimately the person itself marks the malevolent domination and empty victory of technology.

The severity of the protagonists' alienating confrontations with the telephone dramatically increases from Hofmannsthal to Kafka to Cocteau. The protagonists' absent names reflect their dissolving humanness and loss of identity which ultimately signal the silence to which they will all come: Hans Karl Bühl rejects, albeit freely, the empty *Geplauder* and *Gerede* which condemns him to silence professionally, socially, and even existentially,²² powerless K. is silenced by the telephone and then downgraded by the talkative Pepi who represents the acoustic-oral tendencies which are apparent by the end of the fragmentary novel which 'ends ... with a silence beyond literature,'²³ the unnamed female

22 Hans Karl's absence, i.e. silence, at the end of the play ends the work on a pessimistic, even tragic note. His refusal to embrace Stani, his nephew, and the least ethical and most talkative of all the characters, is significantly not understood by the family.

23 See W.G. Kudsus, 'Changing Perspectives: Trial/Castle' in Flores, Kudsus' discussion of Pepi's acoustic-oral tendency, her belief in 'the magic of speech' and thus her ability to live 'in a field of orientation rather than in a "visually" compartment-

protagonist in *La Voix humaine* dies, is literally strangled by the telephone.

Even against this pessimistic backdrop, there is no question that the telephone has become the most important invention of the twentieth century. Life as we know it today would be quite unthinkable without it or the other inventions it has spawned. Still it is perhaps not surprising that texts in the following generations, as the wonders of the technological age were transformed into the everyday and commonplace, would continue to use the telephone as a symbol of alienation, albeit in a rather humorous (Carlo Menotti's short opera 'The Telephone' [1947]) and demystified way (Heinrich Böll's novel *Ansichten eines Clowns* [1963]).²⁴

In the only article which devotes itself to such a complete analysis of the 'Funktion und Tradition des Ferngesprächs' in literature generally and in Böll's text specifically,²⁵ Walter Pache does mention *Das Schloß*, *Der Schwierige*, in addition to Kafka's *Amerika* (1927), Marie Luise Kaschnitz' volume of short stories entitled *Ferngespräche* (1966), and Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Tynset* (1965). Although Pache's interest is Böll, he correctly sees, that 'in den Jahren nach dem ersten Weltkrieg scheint die mechanische Übermittlung der menschlichen Stimme — sei es durch Radio und Plattenspieler oder durch das Telefon — zum ersten Mal stärker in den Vordergrund zu treten. Der negative Ansatz überwiegt.'²⁶ In this context he mentions the record player in Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924) and Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf* (1927). Pache rightly situates Böll in a tradition which began with the 'Nachrichtentechnik' in Fontane's *Stechlin* (1897) and culminates after World War I. But while he understands 'Gesellschaftskritik' as a natural outgrowth of the 'ge-

talized world' (p. 393) which underlies her criticism of K. would reinforce why K. was unable to make any use of the acoustic-oral instrument par-excellence — the telephone. He sought out what he only could see whereas the telephone functions just in that field of vision beyond our sight. This is the realm in which Kudsus seems to imply K. lives.

- 24 In Menotti's opera Ben is frustrated trying to propose to Lucy who is continuously called to the telephone. Since her 'engagement' on the telephone precludes his proposing marriage to her directly, he is compelled to propose marriage to her by calling from a telephone booth.

In Böll's novel the clown, Hans Schnier, alienated from the world around him, can only seem to make contact with his family and friends via the telephone, via 'long-distance.'

- 25 Walter Pache, 'Funktion und Tradition des Ferngesprächs in Bölls *Ansichten eines Clowns*,' in *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 3 (1970) 151-66

- 26 Pache, 161

scheiterte Dialog' on the telephone, he unfortunately does not go far enough when he acknowledges:

Unter dem Eindruck der Gefährdung der Menschlichkeit durch die fortschreitende Zivilisation kommt es zu ersten Ansätzen der Gestaltung einer technisch bedingten und technisch vermittelten Kommunikationsproblematik.²⁷

It is here where the telephone becomes a modern day Hermes; it is here where the telephone becomes the agent for a broader theoretical awareness.

Pache merely implies that the telephone, as mediator of dialogue between two human beings, symbolizes the impossibility of unmediated understanding. Hermes' flight in an age of communication between gods and man was uninhibited by the wires and cables which would entangle and interrupt his journey in the years after World War I, when obvious gaps in understanding needed to be bridged between different cultures. The fact that the telephone mediates the verbal message which Hermes would carry over these wires emphasizes the necessity of a theoretical enterprise like hermeneutics, whose task it is to create a framework for reflection on the conditions of our understanding and interpretation, as a way of bridging the gaps. Because such questions became more complex, as Hermes became trapped in the black box of a technological age, the telephone in these texts became both a symbol of the self-reflective nature of dialogue and the model for the mediated quality of all interpretation. Interpretation here thus becomes a problem of communication. In Gadamer's words, 'Das hermeneutische Problem ist also kein Problem der richtigen Sprachbeherrschung, sondern der rechten Verständigung über die Sache, die im Medium der Sprache geschieht.'²⁸

Gadamer's concern with the communicative aspect of understanding through language (*Sprachlichkeit des Verstehens*) illustrates that the unmediated quality of such dialogue increases self-awareness for each partner who experiences the strangeness of the other. The question and answer of dialogue lead the participants towards self-reflection, towards understanding in a new way, so that on some level every text becomes a lesson in hermeneutics, in what occurs in the interpretation of texts. 'Das

27 Pache, 166

28 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr 1975) 362

Gespräch ist ein Vorgang der Verständigung'²⁹ is thus an anthropological moment which is recreated in the critic's dialogue with all texts in the mediation between his/her perspective in the present and the text in the past. The uniqueness of the telephone, as the modern day Hermes, both facilitating and complicating dialogue, is recaptured in contemporary hermeneutics. While the critic today may not be able to tread his/her path towards interpretation with the same light and winged foot as Hermes, he/she undoubtedly makes his/her way more self-consciously and self-critically, making the journey each successive time perhaps not easier, but certainly more judicious and rewarding.³⁰

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²⁹ Gadamer, 363

³⁰ I would like to thank Hinrich C. Seeba who gave me the idea for this essay many years ago. In contrast to the conversations of the characters in these texts, our dialogues both then and now always inspired hermeneutic understanding whether on the telephone or in person.