Cinema of Confinement

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In May 2000, Pacific Bell removed what has been referred to as the “Mojave phone booth.” Captured in a short documentary called Mojave Mirage (Derek Roberto and Kaarina Cleverley Roberto, 2003), the phone booth was built for volcanic cinder miners working in the desert in the 1960s. In the late 1990s, the phone booth became a popular site of attraction, with websites devoted to the oddity of its location. Covered with markings, graffiti, and bumper stickers, the Mojave phone booth elicited constant visitors to answer calls from all over the world. Certainly one of the curiosities of the Mojave phone booth was its location within an uncontactable place, especially in the age of cell phones and satellite communication. Indeed, the Mojave phone booth’s curious location closely follows the public’s fascination with fantastic tales about communication technologies, which can be traced back to the telegraph and early wireless radio. As one of the visitors in the documentary points out, a phone booth within the vastness of the desert is something out of The Twilight Zone.

The Mojave phone booth’s social attraction illustrates the power of telecommunication in relation to spaces, places, and the bodies that anchor distant voices. The telephone, historically, has played an important role in building narrative tension and suspense in cinema. As Michel Chion explains, the telephone is a favorite device in suspense cinema, noting that it “serves in separation and disjunction; the voice travels through space, bodies stay where they are.” For Chion, the disembodied caller creates narrative suspense in viewers’ desire to locate the face that belongs to the voice. As explained in the chapter on Talk Radio, Chion terms the presence of the bodiless voice as acousmêtre: “when we cannot yet connect it [the voice] to a face.” The disembodied callers demonstrate how the subject’s desire distorts the aural field. It is what Lacan terms the invocatory drive: objet a within the aural field. Just as the excess of the gaze energizes the confined space, the voice can produce a similar effect in intensifying our spectatorship. In Talk Radio, for example, Barry’s
VOICES, TELEPHONES, AND CONFINED SPACES

hostile callers create a paranoid atmosphere because the bodies that belong to these callers are unknown to the viewer. The basketball sequence, in particular, builds a disjunction between voice and body as we speculate whether Barry’s unstable callers are present in the crowd. Introducing the caller’s voice before we see the caller himself not only illustrates the powerful effects of the acousmêtre as a narrative device, but also shows how it formally shapes cinematic space. Stone’s excessive cinematic style correlates to Barry’s ethical activity and perverse enjoyment. Barry’s pure devotion to duty is to speak candidly on controversial topics regardless of the numerous death threats he receives.

As explained, Rope, The Passion of Anna, The Shining, and Talk Radio render space unstable within the confined setting by exposing cinematic excess. I have attributed this effect to Jacques Lacan’s notion of the gaze: the manifestation of objet petit a in the field of vision. The gaze exhibits a distortion within the visual plane as the scopic drive, revealing an excess that realizes what is in the space more than the space. As explored in Talk Radio, the voice as the invocatory drive contributes to a similar effect of the gaze within the confined setting. Whereas our encounter with the gaze realizes how our desire to look distorts the visual field, the disembodied voice realizes how our desire to hear shapes the aural field. What follows is an examination of voice, telecommunication, and confined spaces and their relationship to cinematic excess in Joel Schumacher’s Phone Booth and Steven Knight’s Locke. In Phone Booth, an unnamed Caller (Kiefer Sutherland) embodies sinister qualities assigned to the acousmêtre as omnipotence and authority in holding Stu (Colin Farrell) hostage in a phone booth. At the same time, the use of split-screen photography, mobile screens, and an oversaturation of images makes cinematic excess visible within the film’s confined setting. As such, Phone Booth demonstrates the gaze as a knowable and distorting presence within the field of vision and hearing. In Locke, cinematic excess is linked to voice diction as a mode of melodrama. Ivan Locke’s (Tom Hardy) calm and logical voice is pitted against the emotional voices of the disembodied callers as they react to his spontaneous decision to drive to London to support Bethan (Olivia Colman), a woman with whom he had a one-night affair. Bethan is about to give birth to his child, and Ivan drops everything to be with her. Ultimately, Ivan’s motivation to drive to London is to avoid making the same mistakes as his father. In both films, excess unsettles space within the confined setting. In Phone Booth, the oversaturation of visual information and the disembodied voice of the Caller destabilize any sense of ordered space. At the same time, the excess of the image and the voice are intimately connected to the film’s exploration of screen culture and news media sensationalism. In Locke, excess is depicted not only in Ivan’s
ethical decision to be with Bethan, but also in how he derives surplus-enjoyment from organizing the last details for Birmingham’s biggest concrete pour by way of his car phone. Ivan’s pure devotion to his plan costs him his job and destroys his family. Yet, in both films, the confined space is where Stu and Ivan confess their lies and infidelity. Together, these films provide a glimpse into the development of telecommunication devices and their imagination within the confined setting. Moreover, both films speak to their current social moments, exploring how digital communication is reshaping our relationship to work, family, and community.

Phone Booth Fantasy

The phone booth conjures up a number of meanings linked to popular media. In television and cinema, phone booths are often associated with time and teleportation, as in Doctor Who’s tardis (Time And Relative Dimension in Space), a design based on a London telephone police box. Consider the ending of Get Smart’s (1965–70) credit sequence, in which agent Maxwell Smart (Don Adams) enters a phone booth strangely housed inside an office building. Max dials a number as a trap door below him opens, transporting him somewhere within the building, a location not revealed to the viewer. Or, in Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure (Stephen Herek, 1989), a time machine is disguised as a phone booth that Bill (Alex Winter) and Ted (Keanu Reeves) use in their hilarious travels to learn about three historical figures for their oral high-school report in San Dimas, California. Perhaps the most iconic image is Clark Kent using phone booths to transform into Superman.

Before the 1950s, most phone booths were wooden structures located in hotels, railroad stations, and banks. J. M. Hayward explains that the demand for the outdoor booth arose due to “the popularity of telephones along highways, parkways and turnpikes.” The new aluminum phone booths served an important purpose because they were “a great convenience and a necessity in time of emergency.” As Hayward notes, the design of the aluminum outdoor phone booth was engineered for “weathering, for economy of manufacture, installation and maintenance, and for attractiveness of appearance.” The glass design of the phone booth allows for private conversation to occur within a public setting. The phone booth’s windows operate as barrier and transparency at once. Certainly, one is reminded of the scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s The Birds when Melanie (Tippi Hedren) finds temporary refuge in a phone booth as the birds attack the town of Bodega Bay. It is interesting to note that
in the 1960s, *Phone Booth*’s screenwriter, Larry Cohen, initially pitched the concept of a film taking place entirely in a phone booth to Hitchcock. Since Hitchcock had made a number of films that take place in one location, it is no surprise that he was drawn to Cohen’s concept. But Cohen and Hitchcock could not design a plot that would sustain a feature-length film.\(^7\) It would take almost thirty years before Cohen’s idea would come to fruition.

*Phone Booth* takes place in contemporary New York City. The story follows Stuart “Stu” Shepard, a media publicist who makes his living using media gossip as a form of leverage to promote his clients. Stu is cheating on his wife, Kelly (Radha Mitchell), and uses a phone booth to talk to his mistress, Pam (Katie Holmes). We learn from the film’s narrator that this is the last standing phone booth in New York City, and it is scheduled for removal the following day. As the narrator explains, this phone booth is the “last vestige of privacy.” For Stu, the phone booth provides anonymity because his calls to Pam cannot be traced. After one of Stu’s conversations with Pam, a man holding a pizza approaches the phone booth. Confused, Stu rudely turns the delivery man away. After Stu finishes his call with Pam, the phone rings. Curious, Stu answers it and learns that an unnamed Caller warns him not to leave the phone booth or he will shoot him. We later learn that the Caller is a sniper who has already killed two people in New York City. Having bugged the phone booth, the Caller has obtained knowledge of Stu’s life and his affair with Pam. Tethered to the phone booth, Stu is forced by the Caller to prevent pedestrians from entering the booth or risk being shot. A group of prostitutes who need to use the phone bang on the windows, shouting obscenities at Stu. At one point, their pimp, Leon (John Enos III), smashes the phone booth with a baseball bat and pressures Stu to leave. The Caller asks Stu if he wants him to stop Leon. Stu says “yes.” The Caller shoots and kills Leon. When the police arrive, the prostitutes blame Stu for Leon’s death. Headed by Capt. Ed Ramey (Forest Whitaker), a standoff ensues because Stu cannot leave the phone booth. Soon, Stu’s situation turns into a media spectacle. With all eyes watching—including the Caller—Stu has to covertly convey to Ramey that he is being targeted by an unseen sniper.

Similar to the Mojave phone booth, *Phone Booth*’s depiction of the last remaining phone booth in New York City has surreal qualities. The phone booth is attractive because it no longer fits within the new technological landscape of cellular phones. Whereas *Mojave Mirage* explores the communal dimension of the desert phone, *Phone Booth* conveys a sinister quality that is connected to mobile communication and the voice of the Caller as the *acousmître*. For Stu to stay alive, he must stay on the phone and obey the Caller’s demands. Except for point-of-view shots of the
Caller’s gun crosshairs, viewers have no visual access to his whereabouts. Both *Mojave Mirage* and *Phone Booth* demonstrate two sides of fantasy. As portrayed in the documentary, the Mojave phone booth evokes a peaceful fantasy scenario, a vast environment to which people from all over the world travel to connect with each other. In *Phone Booth*, a nightmarish and obscene underside of the phone booth is depicted, as the Caller uses the confined space as a form of power and torture to extract a confession from Stu. As such, Schumacher exploits cinematic excess to both visually and *audibly* depict this obscene dimension of communication.

**Recording the Voice**

Part of the Caller’s power is attributed to the film’s sound perspective in recording Sutherland’s voice. Sound in cinema is often subordinate to the moving image. In examining the evolution of sound technology, John Belton explains that “sound achieves authenticity only as a consequence of its submission to tests imposed upon it by other senses—primarily by sight.” For Belton, sound “lacks ‘objectivity’ (thus authenticity) not only because it is invisible but because it is an attribute and is thus incomplete in itself.” It is when the source of the sound is synched to the image that sound has achieved its fidelity (faithfulness to its source), such as synching dialogue to the actor’s lips. One practice of sound mixing and recording, as Belton explains, is the removal of a noise “that interferes with the transmission of meaningful sound.” Just as filmmakers avoid intrusive camera bumps or unnecessary camera shakes, the art of sound mixing involves diminishing the presence of noise or distortion. Although it is hard to achieve the perfect sound, *Phone Booth* shows a dark dimension to the Caller in recording Sutherland’s voice with little noise. The Caller’s voice lacks reverb, presenting an up-close and personal connection with viewers. The flattened effect not only eliminates noise, but also prevents little or no scale to the Caller’s environment. Background noises, for instance, are not audible when the Caller speaks due to the flattening perspective of his voice. As such, when the Caller is talking to Stu, no other sounds vie for the viewer’s attention. The mixing of this voice eliminates any sense of mediation or noise in order to stress the Caller’s immediate and powerful presence as the *acousmêtre*. At the same time, the flat recording of the Caller’s voice not only draws attention to itself as a haunting presence, but also uncomfortably realizes how our desire to hear shapes the aural field as the invocatory drive.

Although the Caller forces Stu to obey his commands, he also op-
erates as a listener, taking on aspects of what Chion calls commentator-
*acousmêtre*: “he who never shows himself but who has no personal stake in
the image.” This entails a performative dimension in which Stu has to
make up excuses and enact scenarios on the spot, such as telling Ramey
that he cannot leave the booth because “he is busy.” Stu’s improvisation
often causes the Caller to laugh while adding comments such as “Good
one, Stu,” or “I didn’t know you had it in you.” But there is a dark side to
the Caller as commentator-*acousmêtre*. At one point, Ramey tries to talk
Stu out of the phone booth, speaking about his own intimacy issues. He
reveals to Stu that he is divorced. The Caller instructs Stu to ask Ramey
if it was because “he couldn’t satisfy his wife.” He forces Stu to ask Ramey
if he “masturbates on those lonely nights.” Indeed, the Caller’s uncom-
fortable demands demonstrate the power attributed to the *acousmêtre* as
both the disembodied voice and listener. The flattened and “noiseless”
recording of the Caller’s voice builds narrative tension. His voice sounds
too perfect, creating a sense of imbalance and uncertainty. It is as if we
are inside his head, which is demonstrated in the Caller’s frequent “think-
ing out loud” commentaries to Ramey, such as “get this man a seat on
Oprah,” or “this guy is really getting on my nerves.”

At the same time, the flat mixing of the Caller’s voice not only prob-
lematizes his location, but also emphasizes his unreliability as a source
of knowledge. For instance, the Caller connects Leon’s dead body in the
street to his experience in the Vietnam War. At one point, he emotionally
explains to Stu that his mother did not love him. Of course, the Caller
tells Stu that these are all lies. But Stu’s sudden empathy for the Caller
shows his naivete. As spectators, we are not fooled by the Caller. These
are cliché motivations employed in cinema, illustrating *Phone Booth’s*
self-reflexivity. We only know that the Caller has targeted certain people
whom he deems immoral and that he has technical skills to keep him-
self untraceable. As such, the flat and raw recording of the Caller’s voice
underscores the power he commands over Stu. As Chion explains, “the
*acousmêtre is all-seeing*, its word is like the word of God: ‘No creature can
hide from it.’ The one who is not in the visual field is in the best position
to see everything that’s happening.” The dry recording of the Caller’s voice
contributes to the film’s narrative tension. Here, *Phone Booth’s* cre-
ative use of the split-screen format not only demonstrates the all-seeing
disembodied voice, but also shows how new technologies inform the
film’s design in presenting simultaneous information in unsettling narra-
tive space as an embodiment of the excess of the gaze.
Obey: Screen, Screens, and More Screens

Tom Gunning explains that the new technology of the telephone had an intimate relationship with the development of narrative cinema, as shown in D. W. Griffith’s *The Lonedale Operator* (1911). The phone’s collapsing of time and space, according to Gunning, “could support and interrelate with new narrative devices such as the suspenseful parallel editing.” Similarly, digital and satellite communication have informed new forms of narrative, as in the increasing use of multiscreens and the presentation of simultaneous information. It is what Marsha Kinder terms “database narrative”: “narratives whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language.” A tenet of classic narrative is presenting visual information that emphasizes unity and linear order with a beginning, middle, and end. Even when the narration digresses or departs from its forward flow, it must continue its effort to motivate, such as a flashback to depict a character’s memory. Databases, however, do not adhere to the logic of narrative, nor do they have beginnings, middles, or endings. Instead, databases invite users/viewers to organize and narrate a constellation of items, for example, scrolling through a list of apps on an Internet-ready television, or exploring the bonus features of a DVD. Whereas continuity editing synthesizes and subordinates narrative time to a linear and chronological order, database narratives manifest their structure to underscore the processes of selection and combination. Database narratives elicit a highly interactive spectatorship by inviting viewers to organize, compare, explore, and navigate their disparate pieces, acts that can lead to multiple outcomes of meaning.

Although the narrative structure of *Phone Booth* unfolds linearly, the multiple-screen display of visual information closely adheres to a database aesthetic. Whereas the telephone enhanced the parallel editing techniques of the silent and classical periods of cinema, the split-screen format allows Schumacher to create narrative tension, not only in the separation of voice and body, but also to present multiple planes of action that unfold simultaneously for the viewer (see figure 6.1). Here, Schumacher’s use of the split-screen format follows the film’s exploitation of excess as a knowable presence within the confined setting by showing us too much information. For example, when the Caller first calls Pam, he puts Stu on mute. Although Stu and the Caller do not have visual access to Pam, viewers see Stu and Pam’s reaction to the Caller’s phone call unfold at the same time. The characters’ shared reaction allows viewers to experience simultaneous information. Moreover, the split-screen format permits simultaneous information to be circulated without the
Caller’s knowledge, such as when Stu covertly dials Kelly while talking to the Caller. Kelly’s image appears in a split screen as she answers her cell phone. Hearing Stu’s conversation with the Caller, she now knows that he is being held hostage by a sniper. Kelly brings her phone to Ramey, which significantly changes the narrative.

At the same time, the film’s excess of information not only speaks to film’s investigation of the screen culture, but also addresses the imprisonment of both spectators and Stu and the Caller. In writing about the body and the screen, Lev Manovich explains that the cinema spectator remains immobile while ready to receive the mobility of the moving image. Classical cinema situates the audience with the best viewpoint, but the body of the spectator remains seated. Stu and the Caller are characteristic of cinema’s immobile spectator because they must remain tethered to their designated spaces. Stu cannot move from the phone booth or risk his life, nor can the Caller leave his “all-seeing” position or risk being captured by the police. Although viewers remain tethered to their seats in watching Phone Booth, the use of the split-screen format closely reflects the film’s saturation of mobile screens, creating a highly interactive spectatorship. Indeed, there is already a battle of images depicted in New York City, as signs and advertisements compete for viewers’ attention. Yet the Caller uses these public screens to his advantage, particularly when the news media covers Stu’s standoff with the police. The Caller latches onto the televisions displayed in an electronics store across from the phone booth. The TV screens are another set of eyes for the Caller. This becomes problematic for Stu when the news media interviews Kelly. The Caller sees Kelly on the television screens across from the phone booth and uses this visual information to his advantage, targeting
her with his gun. This ultimately forces Stu to make an uncomfortable decision. Knowing the Caller has identified Kelly as his wife, Stu must publicly admit his lies to her and to the public itself.

Notably, behind the phone booth are Shepard Fairey’s stickers of his street art campaign of the professional wrestler, Andre the Giant (OBEY Giant) (see figure 6.2). These stickers would become part of Fairey’s well-known OBEY logo, which derived from John Carpenter’s film They Live (1988). For Fairey, these stickers were designed to provoke people to question and observe their relationship to their surroundings. Here, the OBEY Giant stickers contribute to the film’s self-reflexivity, as we are reminded of the Caller saying to Stu: “You see people come in and out of this phone booth. The same ones every day. You make up names for them. You imagine their stories. But eventually, you get tired of imagining and follow one of them.” Two people that the Caller follows are a German porn king and a corrupt executive, whom he will eventually kill. Of course, we should not equate Fairey’s OBEY Giant stickers with the Caller’s motivation for killing these two men. Rather, it is what the Caller says to Stu in relation to his media and image-saturated environment: “Life has given you more than your fair share, Stu. But it appears you don’t appreciate it. Look, look, listen, appearances can be deceiving.” At one point the Caller says to Stu that he has gotten himself into this situation because of the “sin of spin” and “avoidance and deception.” Indeed, the Caller’s ability to see things that otherwise go unnoticed in the city frighteningly connects to They Live, taking on an extraterrestrial dimension. In They Live, aliens conceal their appearances, blending in with the people of Los Angeles. Yet the aliens, or “ghouls,” as they are referred to in the credits, are manipulating people to spend money, breed, and accept their subordinate positions. John Nada (Roddy Piper) discovers special sunglasses that allow him to see the hidden messages (such as obey, consume, and conform), as well as the aliens posing as humans. The Caller takes on a similar role by figuratively forcing Stu to “put on the glasses” and not only see his surroundings, but also look within himself, as the Caller states: “I’m trying to help you, Stu, but you won’t help yourself.” In one of the film’s emotionally charged moments, Stu redeems himself, telling the police, news media, and crowds of strangers that he has never done anything for anybody and that he lies to people and his friends. His gold watch is a fake and underneath his Italian clothes, he “still feels like the Bronx.” He confides in Pam and Kelly that he has been “dressing up as something I’m not for so long, I’m afraid you won’t like what’s underneath.” For Stu, this moment of pathos not only demonstrates the confessional mode under which the phone booth operates, but also its connection to They Live in exposing Stu’s lies. Moreover, by showing us
too much information as a cinema of excess, Schumacher, in a sense, is forcing the viewer to put on the glasses. As such, the film’s exposure of excess explicates not only a dark dimension of the news media and celebrity gossip culture, but also the concern with mobile communication emerging at the turn of the millennium.

Excess is certainly not new territory for Schumacher. Schumacher, who started out as a fashion designer, is known for his highly visual style and production design, as seen in the expressionistic and classic horror film atmospheres of *The Lost Boys* (1986) and *Flatliners* (1990). As explained previously, excess is made visual by the deployment of fantasy within the confined setting. In *Rope*, the mise-en-scène becomes unstable once Brandon and Phillip’s secret is revealed. Hitchcock times the revelation of the secret as the city lights emerge, flooding the penthouse with an orchestration of lights. The neutral lighting evokes a tableau of German Expressionism as Rupert exposes Brandon and Phillip’s secret. The revelation of the secret is intimately connected to the film’s exploitation of excess, whereby the gaze is produced with disturbing results. But in the case of *Phone Booth*, the film’s design begins and ends with oversaturation—what Todd McGowan terms a “cinema of fantasy.” The gaze is made knowable within the visual field as a distorting presence, demonstrated in the frenetic editing, the over-the-top performances, the use of the split-screen format, and the inundation of images. Yet there is a social factor at work in connection to the film’s depiction of excess: the gaze as a knowable force corresponds to Stu’s admission of his lies not only to Pam and Kelly, but also to the public itself, as captured by the news media. Here, we are reminded of the Caller’s concerns about deception and the “sin of spin.” The film’s excess is intimately connected to an obscene enjoyment that ideology attempts to neutralize and regulate.
The Caller’s sadistic act exposes ideology’s obscene underside by taking on the role of a vigilante in his execution of those he deems immoral and corrupt.

_Falling Down_ and a Ringing Phone Must Be Answered

After the police trace the location of the Caller, they arrive at the apartment and discover that a man’s throat has been slit. The police assume that the Caller committed suicide. As they cart the man’s body away, Stu and Kelly request to see the body. The police lift the sheet, revealing the pizza delivery man. Stu believes that the pizza delivery man was the Caller because of their previous altercation. But this moment is a knowing-wink to the audience, because it is assumed that viewers know that the voice of the Caller belongs to the actor Kiefer Sutherland. This ironic moment is what Chion calls the already visualized _acousmêtre_: “the one temporarily absent from the picture, is more familiar and reassuring—even though in the dark regions of the acousmatic field, which surrounds the visual field, this kind can acquire by contagion some of the power of the complete acousmêtre.” Of course, one does not need to know that Sutherland is the Caller in order to enjoy the film. But this moment of the already visualized _acousmêtre_ has a self-reflexive dimension. There is a strong connection between Sutherland and Schumacher as an actor-and-director team in the films _The Lost Boys_ and _Flatliners_. Those who are familiar with Sutherland’s work, particularly the television series _24_ (2001–2014), would most likely recognize his voice from the very start of the film. Stu’s confirmation of the delivery man as the Caller affirms the film’s self-reflexivity. It addresses the film’s exploration of celebrity spectacle, whereby Stu, who makes his living on media gossip, is the target of attack.

During the last scene, Stu relaxes in the ambulance after being given a sedative. From his perspective, a male voice is heard off-screen saying “nice shoes.” A man wearing glasses appears from the corner of the ambulance door. The man is blurry and out of focus as Stu realizes that he has identified the wrong man as the Caller. The clue for the viewers is knowing what Sutherland looks like as the already visualized _acousmêtre_. This moment for Stu is his encounter with the gaze, as he realizes that this man is, indeed, the Caller. Here, voice and body are finally embodied as the Caller walks away holding a gun case. The embodiment of the voice is emphasized by the slow-motion photography, an excessive aesthetic that emphasizes the gaze as a distorting presence. The irony is that Stu, who
had been tethered to the phone booth, is immobilized as the tranquilizer takes its effect upon him, and therefore cannot call for help.

The Caller looks strikingly like the character William Foster, aka D-Fens (Michael Douglas) from Schumacher’s *Falling Down* (1993), which continues *Phone Booth*’s self-reflexivity. Arguably, *Falling Down* can be read as a companion film to *Phone Booth* in their exploration of change and progress. Although *Falling Down* is not a limited location film in terms of space, it does share a feature with *Phone Booth* in its compression of time (approximately eight hours). *Falling Down* is set in Los Angeles and follows Foster, a divorced, laid-off missile engineer who wants to go home to be with his daughter on her birthday. In an homage to Federico Fellini’s opening dream sequence in *8½* (1963), Foster mentally collapses during a traffic jam when his car’s air conditioner breaks down. He abandons his vehicle and begins his journey on foot across Los Angeles, transforming into a vigilante. As such, Foster is prone to violence, as demonstrated by his anger over the high price of a can of Coke charged by a Korean store owner and his altercation with gang members over territory. Of course, Foster’s psychological breakdown and racist dimension should not be solely equated with the Caller’s sniper attacks. Both the Caller and Foster, however, do share concerns with change and progress. *Falling Down* takes place shortly after the Cold War, when highly educated engineers such as Foster are no longer needed or are “not economically viable.” Dressed in 1960s attire, Foster is a fish out of water as he traverses the urban geography of Los Angeles, interacting with different people along the way. He reflects on the Cold War era of defending America from the Soviet Union. Similarly, the Caller takes on a defensive role as a vigilante. Like Foster, the Caller sports old brow-line glasses, a conspicuous look in his contemporary period. Like the phone booth itself, the Caller no longer fits in this changing world. But whereas Foster is shot and killed by police Sgt. Prendergast (Robert Duvall) in Venice Beach, the Caller outsprts both the police and Stu, leaving the film with an ambiguous ending. Indeed, both films speak to their current moment in terms of space and telecommunication. Whereas Foster frequently stops to use pay phones to call his wife, the Caller is fixed within one location. *Falling Down*’s narrative tension relies on parallel editing, moving back and forth primarily as a cat-and-mouse narrative between Foster and Sgt. Prendergast, who maps Foster’s movement through Los Angeles’s diverse neighborhoods. By contrast, *Phone Booth* relies on the split-screen format as a means of depicting multiple spaces while Stu and the Caller remained fixed within their locations. Yet both films depict the gaze as a distorting presence within the field of visual perception that overwhelms the
viewers. Schumacher’s treatment of the excess of the gaze as a knowable force within the field of perception shows us that Foster and the Caller are angry men who no longer fit in current social reality.

At the end of the film, the Caller repeats the aphorism delivered during his first exchange with Stu: “Isn’t it funny? You hear a phone ring and it could be anybody. But a ringing phone has to be answered, doesn’t it?” The Caller’s question addresses a formal aspect of answering a ringing phone. It is not so much about the content as it is about the ritual that a ringing phone has to be answered. Certainly, this is what Louis Althusser means by interpellation: how the structures of ideology hail or construct the subject. But perhaps the Caller’s mocking effort to compel Stu’s agreement that a ringing phone must be answered shows us two sides of fantasy. The appeal of the Mojave phone booth is not only its strange location, but also how this technology of modernity, once thought of as alienating, can suddenly bring people together. The people represented in the documentary express excitement in answering the desert phone’s calls. In Phone Booth, however, a ringing phone from a landline seems to be the oddity within the crowd of people and the surge of mobile communication devices. Yet, the fact that the ringing phone must be answered is what the Caller knows so well in hatching his sadistic plan. Here, a dark and sinister side of telecommunication emerges in the emerging cell phone era. In both cases, a ringing phone elicits our desire because we seek to know who the caller is.

Locke and the Road Movie

Whereas Phone Booth explores the sadistic and sinister effects of the disembodied voice, the separation of voice and body in Steven Knight’s real-time thriller Locke offers new insights, not only in its employment of dramatic effects of the acousmêtre, but also in its augmentation of the European road movie in its uses of communication technology. The story follows Ivan Locke, an architectural foreman who is preparing for one of London’s largest concrete pours. Ivan unexpectedly learns that Bethan, a woman with whom he had a one-night affair, is about to give birth, and he is the father. Ivan spontaneously decides to drive to London to be with her, a decision that involves abandoning the concrete pour and canceling his plans to watch an important soccer game with his sons, Eddie (Tom Holland) and Sean (Bill Milner), and his wife, Katrina (Ruth Wilson). Using his BMW’s communication technologies, Ivan juggles a number of calls, including confiding in Katrina about the affair, and guiding his
less-experienced deputy, Donal (Andrew Scott), in managing the various moving parts in preparation for the concrete pour.

Although Locke takes place entirely in Ivan’s vehicle, the film abides by many themes of the road movie narrative. David Laderman explains that the road movie seeks the unfamiliar in traversing space into the unknown. For Laderman, road movies often entail a rebellious component that “celebrates subversion as a literal venturing outside of society.”

Many American road movies involve outlaws, such as Gun Crazy (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950), Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1967), and Natural Born Killers. Of course, American road movies are emblematic of the road’s powerful attraction and the political currency it entails, such as Sullivan’s Travels (Preston Sturges, 1941), Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969), and On the Road (Walter Salles, 2010). As Laderman notes, the propelling force of the road film is not only movement, but also a “journey as means of cultural critique.” By contrast, European road movies, as Laderman explains, “tend toward the quest more than the flight, and imbue the quest with navigations of national identity and community—navigations that often take on sophisticated philosophical and political dimensions.”

Consider the theme of national identity associated with the soccer match Ivan is supposed to watch with his family, a ritual that involves cooking sausages, wearing the team’s shirt, and drinking special beer. At one point during Ivan’s journey, he has to convince Donal to get “the Albanian” to help with the rebars in preparation for the concrete pour, only to discover that “the Albanian” is watching the soccer match. Ivan then asks Donal to call his son to help with the rebars, only to learn he is in Germany digging missile silos. Ivan tells Donal to call Stefan (a Polish concrete farmer) and his road gang. Donal, however, is concerned about hiring a road gang, which Ivan acknowledges, stating: “They are slumming it for cash. But Stefan is the best concrete farmer I know.” As Laderman explains, “With smaller countries sharing more national borders, the European road movie explores different national identities in intimate topographical proximity.” Although we never see Ivan traversing these spaces, his phone conversations exhibit the close continental borders of a European road film.

Locke, like many European road movies, such as La Strada (Federico Fellini, 1954), Wild Strawberries (Ingmar Bergman, 1957), and Alice in the Cities (Wim Wenders, 1974), is more concerned with self-reflection and introspection, as opposed to the outlaws or criminals on the run so often depicted in the American road film. Aesthetically, the film is permeated with reflections of streetlights and the lights of passing cars that reflect across Ivan’s vehicle. Indeed, Locke is not only about a physical journey, it also tracks an existential quest. Here, Locke shares a common trait
with film noir in its engagement with questions of fate. Ivan’s journey is to be with Bethan, but it is also to prove that he will not commit the sins of his father. Conversations with the ghost of his father unfold when Ivan is speaking to his rearview mirror, one of the aesthetics that Knight employs within the film’s confined space.

As much as *Locke* is about Ivan trying not to make the same mistakes as his father, it is also a film about how digital communication technologies have changed our relationship to labor and the automobile. It is well known that the risk of an accident greatly increases when driving distracted. Just as the aluminum outdoor phone booth met a demand due to the growing number of vehicles on the road in the 1950s, today’s car companies have responded to the rising number of car crashes caused by distracted driving by developing new anti-distraction technologies such as Bluetooth and hands-free texting. The goal is to reduce the cognitive load for drivers, diminishing the risk of distraction. Indeed, *Locke* is a film about hyper-attention and multitasking, and speaks to our current cultural moment of mobile communication devices. Yet the film’s confined location and real-time depiction of events command deep attention from its viewers. The film’s one-location experiment challenges viewers to ride along with Ivan to London while he juggles a number of phone calls. Whereas both American and European road movies involve detours and roadside attractions—picking up strangers, stopping at diners, and filling up at gas stations—*Locke* employs none of these components. *Locke* takes place entirely within the vehicle as a real-time film of confinement. Whereas *Phone Booth* provides an early account of cell phone usage, *Locke* adds another dimension to the road movie, allowing one to be mobile yet interact with other characters through automobile communication technologies.

*Locke* is more than simply a filmed one-man play. It employs a dimension of cinematic excess. Here, *Locke* shares features with *Talk Radio* in relation to subjectivity and ethical action. Knight show us how excess grounds our subjectivity by experiencing Ivan’s commitment to duty for the sake of duty. Like Barry, Ivan will not deviate from his plan to be with Bethan, even if it costs him his marriage and his job. Following the ethical dimension explored in *Talk Radio*, *Locke* renders space uncertain in Ivan’s commitment to duty for the sake of duty. But, unlike Barry’s over-the-top performance in *Talk Radio*, Hardy’s low-key, minimalist performance and calm voice embody his precision and logical thinking as he juggles a number of phone calls. At the same time, he has to manage his family’s emotions in their learning of his affair. Here, anti-distraction technologies add a new dimension to ethical action and cinematic excess. Barry’s ethical action is to speak unabashedly on controversial topics, even if it
risks his marriage or losing the deal with Metro Wave. In *Talk Radio*, Oliver Stone illustrates how Barry’s duty for the sake of duty exceeds the social order’s prohibition of enjoyment. Ethical action for both Barry and Ivan is extreme because they enjoy a pure devotion to their duty. In the case of *Locke*, anti-distraction technologies allow Ivan to operate ethically at two levels simultaneously: one that involves his drive to London, and the other to make sure that all elements are ready for the concrete pour to occur, which can be described as an ethic of multitasking. Ivan cannot detach from his work duties even though he has been fired. Ivan’s pleasure in working, in particular, can be traced to voice diction as a mode of melodrama.

The Ethics of Voice and Diction

The relationship between desire and fantasy can generate different effects of the gaze within the confined setting. The power of cinema lies in its ability to depict events and situations in ways that are harder or even impossible to experience in the everyday world. The pathway toward having what we want is through fantasy; fantasy sets the coordinates for desire, allowing one to relate to his or her impossible object, or what Lacan terms *objet petit a*—the object cause of desire. This visual manifestation of *objet petit a* is the gaze. Rather than depicting the gaze as a traumatic force that interrupts our spectatorship, *Phone Booth* deploys the gaze as a knowable presence within the field of perception. This is often the case with visually excessive filmmakers such as Schumacher, who employs frantic editing, over-saturation of images, and split-screen displays of information in *Phone Booth*. Schumacher overwhelms viewers with simultaneous information in a form of database aesthetic as a means to reflect Stu’s frantic situation. At the same time, the film’s excess reveals a dark underside pertaining to media technologies in the age of cell phones and satellite communication technologies.

By contrast, films that evoke desire emphasize what we cannot have. These films are about lack and dissatisfaction. Of course, films that employ desire can be challenging, because they withhold satisfaction. This does not mean they are not pleasurable to watch. But they do demand more from viewers. *Locke* certainly bears similarity to a film that emphasizes desire. For one, the film never embodies the callers with whom Ivan communicates. Second, the film lacks narrative closure. This is partially attributed to the film’s experiment with confining the narrative solely within the space of Ivan’s vehicle.
At the same time, Locke entails a dimension of fantasy not only in Ivan’s incommensurate pleasure in multitasking with various callers to prepare for the concrete pour, but also in the expressive and excessive diction of his callers. Ivan’s interlocutors lack what Chion terms “de-acousmatization,” whereby the “end point of de-acousmatization [is] the mouth from which the voice issues.”

As Chion explains, “embodying the voice is a sort of symbolic act, dooming the fate of acousmêtre to the fate of ordinary mortals.” Because viewers do not see Ivan’s callers, the callers are assigned certain powers. Part of Locke’s narrative tension pertaining to the acousmêtre’s power is voice diction and the callers’ reactions to Ivan’s decision to drive to London. In this regard, Locke and Talk Radio both share and differ in dramatizing the disembodied caller. In Talk Radio, Barry refuses to tone down his comments, even as he continues to receive death threats from his more extreme listeners. Barry’s ethical action to enjoy creates a paranoid and unsettled space. In the case of Ivan, his disembodied callers do not so much create a space of paranoia as evoke emotional violence through voice and inflection in their reactions to Ivan’s affair and his decision to abandon the concrete pour.

Writing on the modes of melodrama, Thomas Elsaesser explains that the importance of expressive diction is creating “emotional resonance.” For Elsaesser, “sound, whether musical or verbal, acts first of all to give the illusion of depth to the moving image, and by helping to create the third dimension of the spectacle, dialogue becomes a scenic element, along with more directly visual means of the mise-en-scène.” It is not only words that give emotional punch, but the sound and orchestration of the voice itself as an aesthetic effect. Elsaesser’s reading of the voice and melodrama closely follows Roland Barthes’s “grain of the voice”: when sound becomes the “material” of the body. As Barthes explains: “[The] grain of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language, and can therefore also be, along with diction, the substance of art: the art of guiding one’s body. . . . The language lined with flesh [is] a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language.” For Barthes, the grain of the voice is not a search for meaning, but the pleasure in the emotion of the performer. From a psychoanalytical standpoint, the emotional responses of the callers are uncomfortable to listen to. They realize how our desire to hear shapes the aural field. In Locke, voice diction stands in for the disembodied callers in order to give expressive means and narrative tension within the confined setting of Ivan’s vehicle. For example, Donal reacts emotionally to Ivan’s leaving him in charge of the concrete pour. Bethan’s voice becomes highly emotional
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in preparing for the task. Probably the most expressive voice comes in Gareth’s reaction to Ivan’s decision to abandon the concrete pour: “Oh! Sweet monkey Jesus! This is not happening.” Later, Gareth tells Ivan that he vomited because of this shocking news, connecting the body to the voice as a mode of melodrama.

Ivan’s enunciation, however, characterizes his devotion to duty in his minimal expression. Even in the midst of his crisis, Ivan continues to be specific, calm, and logical, which is captured by his voice diction. When Ivan confides in Katrina about his affair, he repeatedly tells her that he wants to discuss a “practical next step.” Or, when Gareth calls Ivan to tell him that Chicago fired him, he explains that he spoke about Ivan working for ten years, “working for Park without a foot wrong.” Ivan corrects him by saying he worked for Park for nine years. When Ivan first informs Donal of his decision to abandon the dump in order to drive to London, Donal becomes upset, saying, “Ivan, at 5:45 a.m. tomorrow morning, three hundred and fifty metric tons of wet concrete is being delivered to the site. We have two hundred trucks from all over the fucking country descending on us.” Ivan calmly replies by correcting Donal, stating: “Three hundred and fifty-five metric tons, two hundred and eighteen trucks.” Of course, Donal thinks Ivan’s decision to leave him in charge of the concrete pour is a joke. But Ivan replies that he has no choice, demonstrating his pure devotion to his duty to drive to London. Yet when Ivan is truly private, he unleashes his pent-up frustrations, shouting “Fuck” when he learns that he has the phone number Donal needs for the sign-offs for the road closures. It is only when Ivan is not on the phone that his voice emotionally modulates, particularly his conversation with his father in the rearview mirror. Certainly, these conversations speak directly to the film’s noir aspect of fatalism. At one point Ivan says to his dad: “You think this is all fate, don’t you dad? Your dirty fucking fingerprints all over me. It was bound to happen because of the little seeds you planted. Well, let me educate you. Let me teach you something. Even no matter what the situation is, you can make it good. Like with plaster and brick.” This is precisely what Ivan is attempting to achieve with his callers—to make good out of a dire situation. Ivan’s managing Katrina’s emotional meltdown is no different than his orchestrating the moving parts of the concrete pour. Yet, as he attempts to quell his callers’ feelings, he cannot escape that fact that he has inherited the past sins of his father. These dimensions of the acousmêtre’s powers derive not only from voice diction, but also from their relationship to Ivan’s calm and logical expression. Not unlike the flat and dry recording of the Caller’s voice in Phone Booth, Ivan’s monotone diction closely relates to the perfect sound. Ivan’s minimalist reaction to his callers closely mirrors
his ethical action in not deviating from his plan to be with Bethan. These competing voices shake up and disturb *Locke*’s confined setting, drawing attention to the film’s excessive dimension.

At the same time, Hardy’s minimalist performance has more in common with desire than with fantasy. For one, the film refuses to visually present the callers. At the same time, the disembodied callers represent a certain power, which is expressed in voice diction. Secondly, the film lacks narrative closure: viewers never see Ivan getting to Bethan. Ivan makes it to London, receives the calls from Bethan, and says he is on his way. But we never see Ivan arrive at the hospital. The final image is of Ivan driving away. The film’s open ending leaves viewers speculating about whether Ivan actually arrives at his destination. In certain ways, the disembodied voice mirrors the unrepresented places in the film, such as Ivan’s home, the hospital, or Donal at work. These details certainly position *Locke* as a film of desire. Yet Ivan’s excessive enjoyment with work makes *Locke* a film about fantasy. Through fantasy, *Locke* shows us that excess constitutes our subjectivity. Entry into the symbolic order requires the renunciation of enjoyment. The regulation of enjoyment grounds the functioning of the symbolic. Our participation within the symbolic also leaves us with a piece of enjoyment (surplus-enjoyment) that sticks with us as the privileged “lost object” (*objet petit a*). The perpetual absence of the *objet petit a* sustains the engine of our desire. Ivan’s ethical action is to carry out all the steps in preparation for the concrete pour, whether he loses or profits. We cringe at Ivan’s ethical action, because he gives up everything to commit to the plan. We cannot turn our eyes away or close our ears as he juggles multiple calls during his journey to London. Yet we root for Ivan to make sure all points are checked off in preparation for the concrete pour. Even though Ivan succeeds in preparing for London’s biggest concrete pour, he fails to fix his domestic situation. These components intensify the film’s constrained-setting narrative.

Indeed, excess shapes the dynamics of space within the confined setting. *Locke* is not simply a filmed play, but involves an obscene enjoyment assigned to Ivan’s refusal to relinquish his plan to be with Bethan and his determination not to commit the same sins as his father. Knight’s attention to visual details, such as the emphasis on the kaleidoscope of lights that reflect and slither off of Ivan’s vehicle as it drives along in the night, are some of the ways in which space is energized within the film’s constrictions. Similar to *Phone Booth*, the film hardly employs long takes, but instead relies on fast editing and a variety of camera angles on Ivan as he traverses the highway. Knight will often cut to Ivan’s car as it moves along the highway. But these shots are not Ivan passing by the camera, but the camera positioned onto the vehicle to give the viewer a sense of
movement. But this movement lacks direction—as if Ivan is driving out of time. This is reflected in Locke’s film noir tone and its exploration of fate and memory production. Even Ivan’s name entails these dimensions, where his fate is “locked.”

At the end of the film, Ivan continues to drive, leaving viewers to speculate whether he will truly meet Bethan. Ivan’s ethical action closely follows Lacan’s notion of the drive—where enjoyment is found in its movement and not in obtaining its goal by repeating loss. For Lacan, drive circles endlessly around objet petit a, whereas desire seeks to obtain the objet petit a, but always fails to achieve it. The drive is literally and connotatively rendered in Locke in both the physical and the mental travel to London. Ivan’s enjoyment is not in reaching his goal, but in the drive itself and his obscene enjoyment and devotion to work, a commitment enhanced by his vehicle’s communication technologies and his logical voice diction.

Locke demonstrates how digital communication devices not only augment our understanding of the road movie in terms of time and space, but also involve a dimension of power in our inability to embody his callers. The acousmêtre creates suspense not only because viewers do not see the callers, but also by the diction of the callers’ reactions to Ivan’s affair and his spontaneous decision to abandon the concrete pour. In the case of Phone Booth, the disembodied caller takes on powerful effects not only in viewers’ inability to localize the Caller, but also in how the film imagines digital communication in the use of multi-screen imaging and mobile screens. Yet both films explore Ivan’s and Stu’s infidelity through confined spaces. At one point, Stu explains to the Caller why he cheated on his wife, using the metaphor of home and hotel: “Look, I don’t want to hurt Kelly. She’s always there for me. . . . Kind of like having a beautiful home. With everything you ever dreamed of. But you still need that vacation now and then. Some nice hotel room with a great view.” Similarly, Ivan explains his affair to Katrina using the analysis of painting: “She [Bethan] isn’t what you would call an oil painting.” Ivan attempts to use logic and reason for his bad decision, as if he can manage his infidelity like the concrete pour: “I want to talk about a practical next step.” What connects Stu and Ivan is that their confessions take place within a confined setting. Both the phone booth and Ivan’s car are confessional spaces. In Phone Booth, the Caller frequently reminds Stu of his sins: “Your sins have caught up to you,” “Redeem yourself,” and “I know your crimes, tell them.” In Locke, Ivan not only confesses to his wife about his affair within his vehicle, but also his conversation with the ghost of his father functions as a mode of confession, explaining that everything will work out—the concrete pour and the birth of his baby.
Ivan adds that Katrina “will be ok. In the morning she will be ok. That is how it can be. That is my prayer. . . . The Lockes were a long line of shit but I straightened the name out.” Certainly, the film’s ambiguous ending suggests that Ivan may have saved the concrete pour from turning into a disaster, but whether Katrina will ever forgive him remains unknowable. In both films, telecommunication devices and acousmêtre render the confined spaces unsettled and antagonistic.