Rise of the Modern Mediatrix: The Feminization of Media and Mediating Labor, 1865-1945

Leana Hirschfeld-Kroen

Yale University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, leanahirschfeldkroen@gmail.com

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Abstract

Rise of the Modern Mediatrix: The Feminization of Media and Mediating Labor, 1865-1945
Leana Hirschfeld-Kroen
2021

This dissertation uncovers a vast archive of fictional female telegraph, telephone, and typewriter girls, combining rigorous historical research with feminist, psychoanalytic readings of mass cultural texts to show how the global gendering of low-level communication work shaped modern media. It begins in the United States, where women first performed this work, and explores three further national contexts (France, Germany, and Britain) where female operators and typists circulated as media icons of techno-social connection in an increasingly atomized age. The title “modern mediatrix” describes the essential mediating role white-collar woman workers have played in modern media infrastructure, from switchboard to editing bench. This role has been promoted by corporations, nations, and mass media as feminine for over a century.

Across four chapters that engage ad campaigns, plays, novels, and films, I reveal the modern mediatrix to be a uniquely flexible character, capable of creating continuity across industrial ruptures and activating new narrative forms. To trace this character’s construction, I tie her unique semiotic tools and social skills to evolving Christian notions of sanctified feminine transmission, weaving as women’s work, and Hollywood’s reliance on an invisible feminized clerical proletariat. Media scholars who point out telegraphs and typewriters still rarely note the girl behind the machine. For too long, my field has clung to the male factory worker as an all-purpose archetype for cinematic labor and depicted female tech users at home, alone, in the thrall of the apparatus. Instead, my project proposes the rise of the modern mediatrix as an essential theoretical and material foundation for film and media studies.
Each of my chapters explores a different facet of the modern mediatrix. I begin in the 1860s, when Western Union began recruiting lady telegraphers and the Catholic Church premiered its Blessing of the Telegraph, with Mary cast as a pure channel for man’s natural use of electricity. Framed by this techno-romantic mother-figure, Chapter 1 examines three teenage girls enshrined in US popular history as the first users of the telegraph, telephone, and typewriter. I show how inventors and companies used virginal foremothers to claim paternity over communications technologies and their feminized workforces. Chapter 2 argues Bell’s speech-weaver ad campaigns coded onscreen operators as vernacular translators of transitional cinematic syntax. Highlighting telephone girls’ enlistment as temp techno-pedagogues during US film’s introduction of cross-cutting and European film’s polyglot transition to sound, it offers women’s film-weaving labor as an alternative to the surgical rhetoric (suture) and patriarchal authorship model typically used to historicize film editing conventions. Chapter 3 traces the secretary’s construction as an automatic audience member in interwar European modernist media. Suggesting that the hypnotic effects of taking dictation stoked Weimar-era anxieties about women workers’ receptivity to media-savvy fascist dictators, it catalogs secretarial symptoms that trouble Frankfurt school divisions of worker-spectators into shocked factory workers and absorbed little shopgirls. Chapter 4 uses the metallic echoes of taps to read Astaire-Rogers musicals as anxious allegories for the Production Code’s reliance on typists, and as encrypted channels to two fleetingly feminized languages, Morse and binary code. A postwar coda draws out the clerical conduit’s transgressive potential, hinted at by her narrative flexibility and explicitly reclaimed in the 1970s and 80s by feminist filmmakers and techno-scientists. With access to the codes of information capitalism, virginal electric muses and hysterical film fans became canny decipherers of mystified techno-cultural matrilineages.
Rise Of The Modern Mediatrix:  
The Feminization Of Media And Mediating Labor, 1865-1945  

A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
Of  
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By  
Leana Hirschfeld-Kroen  

Dissertation Directors:  
Katie Trumpener and Charles Musser  

December 2021
It was like a dream and I can only tell it that way—me noticing things in little broken bits, as if I was at the ‘movies’ and kept falling asleep, and then woke up and saw a new picture.

Geraldine Bonner, *The Girl at Central* (1915)

Since I disappeared from the face of the earth, sometimes I hear the cold, empty echo of my voice. And when I come back through time and space to reach you there, satellites pick up the noise. I am the ghost of invisible women workers, without whom the twentieth century would never have been the same.

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She was aware that the book in which she was involved was still in progress. Now, when she speculated on the story, she did so privately, noting the facts as they accumulated. By now, she possessed a large number of notes, transcribed from the voices, and these she studied carefully. Her sense of being written into the novel was painful. Of her constant influence on its course she remained unaware and now she was impatient for the story to come to an end, knowing that the narrative could never become coherent to her until she was at last outside it, and at the same time consummately inside it.¹

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As it turns out, writing acknowledgements during the last gasps (we hope!) of a global pandemic is a fairly emotional experience. There are so many people to thank for the fact that I am alive, safe, healthy, and still clinging to some semblance of reality. So, in the words of Julia Roberts, “I’m going to spend some time here to tell you some things… because I may never be up here again.” First and foremost, this dissertation would not have been possible without the help of my advisors and support of Yale University. I am particularly grateful to Katie Trumpener, who advised the project from start to finish and shared innumerable secretary films along the way (not to mention modernist novels and East German musicals). I wrote the beginnings of Chapter 3 in Katie’s British film seminar, and began my research with her through an orals list on women’s voices, types, and taps. I feel profoundly lucky to have Katie as an interlocutor: she has offered vital intellectual guidance and championed me professionally in a number of ways over the past seven years. I am also grateful to Charlie Musser, who took me on as an advisee late in the game. Charlie’s course on American silent film history provided the foundations for Chapter 2, which became the basis for an award-winning article. The abiding faith these two people had in my work drowned out my internal monologue and kept me writing.

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One of the defining frames for this dissertation was the fight for a graduate union at Yale (still ongoing). Learning the history of industrial, clerical, and academic unionization efforts shaped how I thought about labor in my dissertation. Presentations at Rough Cut and the WGSS working group allowed me to try out some of these thoughts. My thanks to the organizers, Tadas Bugnevicius, Jacinda Tran, Patricia Ekpo, and my co-presenter, Pooja Sen, for her insights on the gendered performance of fascism. The editors of *Feminist Media Histories*, Jennifer Bean and Xin Peng, shepherded me through the publication of my first article. Special thanks to Xin for sharing the rich footage she uncovered of the San Francisco Chinatown telephone exchange.

The last two years are a blur. I wrote my first mediatrix etymology for John Mackay’s wonderful seminar on global film and media concepts while quarantining in Gainesville. This spring, I refined theories about grids and radio receivers teaching for John Durham Peters. Marta Figlerowicz extracted core claims from my job application materials. I am grateful to all three for their wisdom and for agreeing to be my outside readers. My thanks to Francesco Casetti for chairing my defense and Rüdiger Campe for being a true advocate during an exhausting period when I did not know if I’d have funding or healthcare in 2020-2021. More broadly, I also want to thank administrative faculty, staff, and graduate students in Comparative Literature and FMS for their tireless efforts on my behalf amidst global chaos and institutional austerity.

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Yale University
May 2021
‘The matter is,’ she said in a calm, analytical voice, ‘simply, that I am human.’ Emmeline, utterly taken aback, stared at her secretary with a surprise that was most unfortunate.²

Introduction: The Medium of that Girl

The suggestively titled Eve’s Wireless, a 1922 women’s “cine-magazine” segment produced by British Pathé, opens with an intertitle that links the first woman’s pursuit of knowledge in the Garden of Eden to the rise of the modern media consumer, always restlessly awaiting the next new gadget: “Bless us, they’re never still—always up to something new. And Eve’s latest invasion is in the wireless world—” As we see from the three consecutive images below, the eponymous heroines of the newsreel are two fur-clad female friends who gamely Gerry-rig a “portable wireless phone” by tying a home radio set to a fire hydrant and turning an umbrella into an antenna.

The device they set up is hard to pin down, but then so are the Eves themselves. Are they highly innovative electricians? Amateur ham radio enthusiasts? Or frivolous housewives disruptively requisitioning a public resource for domestic use? The second intertitle guides us toward the last answer by narrowing the film’s bemused male onlooker perspective (“Bless us”) to the husbands in the audience, soon to be tasked with lugging around their spouses’ electrical equipment, along

with their purses: “It’s Eve’s portable wireless ‘phone—and won’t hubby have a time when he has to carry one!” The playful tone and marital theme, seemingly designed to diffuse the threat evoked by the image of two women collaborating on an impromptu tech experiment, is consistent with many popular depictions of female wireless users from this time, filled with crystal sets and radio aerials used as clotheslines. As radio scholars have shown, the 1920s saw radio’s fluid cultural signification and diverse applications solidify into a state-regulated, monopoly-controlled broadcast medium purchased by wives and consumed in the home.\(^3\) The “portable wireless ‘phone” our two Eves assemble in the street reminds us of one way the domestication of radio was ultimately accomplished, through analogy to the precedent of the home-bound telephone (this is literalized by one possible identifier of the tech in question as a “home-o-phone”). But the clichéd familiarity of the film’s premise also reminds us that the stakes of defining and regulating new media technologies have long intertwined with the stakes of defining and regulating modern femininity. *Eve’s Wireless* captures a transitional moment in media history when both are in flux. The liminal instability of the medium is echoed by the unstable signification of its female users, despite the intertitles’ efforts to contain them.

It was only in 2010 that British Pathé archivists discovered this novel film fragment and traced it to *Eve’s Film Review* (also known as *Eve and Everybody’s Film Review*), a women’s cine-magazine produced by Pathé from 1921 to 1933, which largely featured “film of women doing interesting and novel jobs and hobbies, fashion displays and novelty items ranging from excerpts of musicals and plays to slow-motion camera studies of nature.”\(^4\) Individual segments


\(^4\) "Eve and Everybody’s Film Review," housed at BFI: [http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/index.php/series/80](http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/index.php/series/80)
were likely exhibited in advance of feature film screenings, alongside more conventional newsreels and advertisements. While the hybrid mass media form of the “cine-magazine” explicitly targeted female filmgoers, we also know that Fred Watts, the producer of *Eve’s Film Review*, designed all the segments and wrote all the intertitles, which were celebrated for their “amusing, often ironic” tone. This detail allows us to read the contradictory textual and visual narratives of *Eve’s Wireless* through the cine-magazine’s conflicted relationship to the gender identity of its audience.

The clip of *Eve’s Wireless* uploaded to YouTube upon its discovery quickly became “an internet phenomenon,” in no small part due to the viral claim, first made on the British Pathé website and later repeated across multiple headlines, that *Eve’s Wireless* featured the first cinematic depiction of a cell phone in use, and by women no less! But hidden in the heart of this story, another kind of mythic female media user is also present: the young, anonymous telephone operator who answers Eve’s call. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to call her a wireless operator? Building on the hybrid makeup of the original device, the film adamantly fails to clarify matters, as if intentionally casting its hidden heroine as a hybrid figure herself. Instead of patching the women through to a third party and thereby wedding the film’s gender technopaody to telephonic gossip, this multi-faceted female mediator puts a record on and sets up a speaker next to it, so that her callers can listen to music.

5 Ibid.

6 “Eve’s Wireless becomes an Internet Phenomena” (sic), British Pathé blog: https://britishpathe.wordpress.com/2010/05/27/eves-wireless-becomes-an-internet-phenomena/. Other article titles include “Video Shows Mobile Phone, Portable Media Tech of 1922” (*Wired*, 2010) “Eve’s Wireless, Silent Film About the World’s First Mobile Phone (1922)” (*Laughing Squid*, 2011), and “As the iPhone 5 is released… How the first ‘mobile phone’ was launched in 1922—and it even had a rudimentary form of iTunes” (*The Daily Mail*, 2012). *Eve’s Wireless* can still be viewed on British Pathé’s Youtube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Mhln1R5Mhc&t=4s
As we see from the four framegrabs above, this young woman plays the tripartite role of wire hook-up, telephonic interlocutor, and radio disc jockey. Moving from the switchboard to the gramophone, she not only shifts seamlessly between onscreen machines; she also demonstrates a meta-cinematic logic of narrative continuity by miming the communicative techniques that carry us across the film’s intercut locations. Her appearance exposes the cuts in the film’s narrative world—she resembles a film editor or sound engineer revealed behind the screen—but her mediating labor also sews us into the narrative illusion by returning to the Eves on the sidewalk, listening through their wireless. In short, her calm demeanor, fluid motions, and professional-grade equipment offer us an industrially feminized counterpoint—at once corrective and companion—to the housewives’ more domestically and chaotically coded wireless “invasion.” With every new invasion Eve makes in the media world, these shots suggest, her working girl media conduits will adapt accordingly. Returning to the opening intertitles with this flexible mediating function in mind, we can see that the operator does in fact register—at least syntactically—in the film’s discursive frame. Unlike Eve, she is not named. But her formal role as a reliable link—between old media and new media, between new women and new media, between communication and entertainment—is signified in shorthand by the intertitular dashes that hook Eve up to her portable wireless phone. This anthropomorphic dash, this hidden and unnamed but immediately recognizable heroine, this highly adaptable techno-social creature, is an exemplar of the cultural character I call the modern mediatrix.
Rise of the Modern Mediatrix: The Feminization of Media and Mediating Labor, 1865-1945 uncovers a transatlantic archive of fictional female telegraph, telephone, and typewriter girls, combining historical research with feminist, psychoanalytic analyses of mass cultural texts to illustrate how the gendering of low-level clerical and communications work shaped modern media. It begins in the United States, where women first performed this work, and explores three further national contexts (Britain, France, Germany) where girl operators and typists circulated as mass media icons of techno-social connection in an increasingly atomized age. Over the course of this dissertation, to trace the cultural construction of the modern mediatrix, I will tie her specialized semiotic tools and social skills to evolving cultural notions of sanctified and corruptive feminine transmission, capitalist labor patterns, the marriage plot, the rise of fascism, and classical film form.

To establish this character as a useful theoretical tool for film studies, in particular, I will read cinematic operators and typists as hyper-visible avatars for Hollywood’s invisible feminized proletariat, from seamstresses and stenographers to the cutter girls who “knitted the pieces of film together” on studio lots. Most film and media scholars who point out telegraphs and typewriters in films still rarely notice the girl behind the machine. Like contemporary online viewers of Eve’s Wireless, they have failed to note the crucial cultural linking role played the modern mediatrix in media history, while spending a great deal of time ogling the machines themselves or their accompanying new Eves. For too long, my field has clung to the male factory worker as an all-purpose archetype for cinematic labor and experience, while primarily depicting female tech users at home, alone, in the thrall of the apparatus. There is no book-length study of operators and typists in film, despite their ubiquity on the margins of film plots and studio lots.

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from the silent era onward. By assembling an eclectic cast of mythic, symptomatic, and subversive white-collar heroines, I offer a feminist, labor-focused riposte to a dominant media studies tradition that has yet to apply the lessons of feminist Marxism or techno-science to the study of gendered media and mediation. This dissertation tries to do more than fill that gap in cultural history. It proposes the rise of the modern mediatrix as an essential theoretical and material link for the discipline of film and media studies.

Throughout this dissertation, mediatrix will be the title I use to describe the essential mediating role played by woman workers in modern communications infrastructure, a role that has been promoted by corporations, nations, and popular media as paradigmatically feminine for over a century. In 1865, Western Union decided that the strategic benefits of training young, white, working-class women as telegraph operators outweighed the outcry their mass employment would surely arouse. Over the next thirty years, as telephone and typewriter manufacturers worldwide came to similar conclusions, obscuring their financial interests behind biological determinist claims and domestic analogies, an iconic archetype took shape in the cultural imagination. The modern mediatrix is, as we shall see, a uniquely flexible cultural character, capable of skilling up and flattening out on a moment’s notice, creating continuity across industrial ruptures, and activating new narrative forms. As a theoretical keyword, mediatrix productively evokes female mediator, media woman, and feminized media matrix. In my critical lexicon, mediatrix and modern mediatrix will primarily refer to fictional female characters or real working women installed at telegraph stations, switchboards, and keyboards across the world. But these titles can also be used to describe industrial weavers, inventors’ daughters, female film editors, studio stenographers, tap dancers, and all other techno-cultural
workers exploited (by individuals, companies, and culture alike) for their modern feminine skills of mediation.

An ancient Catholic title for Mary’s role as preeminent mortal mediator of God’s “Word,” mediatrix is also an all-but-extinct word that encodes multiple forms of gendered mediation—from immaculate conception to literary patronage—relevant to the structures of modern society under examination here. While “Eve” has been a flashy, familiar figure in popular gendered allegories of modern media, from the iconic android erotics of Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s novel L’Eve Future (1884) to the feminine wireless invasion staged in Eve’s Wireless (1922), “Mary” has left a fainter trace on the surface of cultural discourses about media and technology.

In the next section, I will speculatively link the disappearance of “mediatrix” from vernacular discourse in the late nineteenth century to the appearance of the modern female information worker, suggesting that Mary’s mediating powers were too dangerously boundless to use as an explicit model for the new girl-mediated global discourse network. But as I will also illustrate, Mary’s communicative-reproductive function as a mortal female mediator of divine, paternal discourse covertly established a foundational “natural” logic for the modern gendering of telegraph, telephone, and typewriter work, which techno-romantic inventors and PR-savvy monopolies knew how to exploit. While I do not intend to wed my own use of the terms “mediatrix” or “modern mediatrix” to a Catholic framework for the duration of this dissertation, the conceptual history of the word will inform my longer historical excavation of the gendering of modern mediating labor and has yet to be explored by media scholars, despite the field’s renewed interest in philosophical and philological genealogies of the “media concept.” Parsing the many conflicting terms of Mary’s mediation allows us to expose the long-suppressed,
unconsciously reproduced cultural codes underpinning the female information worker’s original construction. So as a prelude to a more conventional history of the feminization of telegraph, telephone, and typewriter work, I will begin by offering a brief etymological history and roving preliminary investigation of what we might call the missing mediatrix concept.

**The Mediatrix Concept: Purified womb, go-between, translator and patroness**

Originating in third-century Roman Catholicism, Mediatrix is an ancient Latin title for the Virgin Mary’s preeminent mediating role between God and humankind. Early uses of this title are careful to subordinate Mary’s mediation to that of Christ, the perfect Mediator, and serve primarily to clarify “what and who Christ is” in relation to the “Theotokos” or Mother of God. Following this model, a prayer attributed to Ephrem the Syrian in the 4th century positions Mary as an earth-bound second-in-command to her sacred son: “after the mediator, you (Mary) are the mediatrix of the whole world.” While the distinction between Mediator and Mediatrix is designed (in a way Protestant theology would later exploit) to withhold premature divinity from Mary by relegateing her to the role of human maternal vessel for a holy spirit, it also establishes her as the central link between Christ (who is both human and divine) and “the whole world.” She is thus a mother and intercessor to all people, always bringing them closer to God. In the eighth century, “mediatrix” takes on broader bureaucratic implications for the Church, extending from Mary, preeminent Mediatrix, to the mediating function of saints, who follow her example.

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by leading lives that bridge the gulf between world and heaven. Under the umbrella of her saintly preeminence, the title “mediatrix” is applied to saints of both sexes, despite its feminine ending.

By the Middle Ages, “medyatrix” is primarily used to characterize Mary as a “go between” “for almankynde,” but the structural power and social agency attributed to her as intercessor continue to be in tension with the passive instrumentality attributed to her role in the birth of Jesus. The Latin ending -atrix, also associated with “matrix,” meaning “mother,” “womb” and “breeding woman” in late Latin and old English, suggests the embodied, reproductive stakes that dictated the Church’s evolving understanding of Mary’s mediation. The heterodox view, that “without the paramount role of the Virgin, the mysteries of Christian salvation could not have taken place,” involved attributing a troubling amount of “universal” mediating power to women and their wombs. In this sense, the Church’s abiding obsession with parsing the minutiae of Mary’s mediation may be regarded as an elaborate patriarchal campaign to abstract women’s primacy in the creation of human life. In order, in other words, for the Mother to serve as a usable matrix for Christian thought—as we would use “matrix” today, to mean organizing structure or principle—her matrix (in the ancient sense of womb) had to be cleansed of Eve’s knowledge and replaced with “conceptual” sanctification. This is why the Mediatrix is often called “the Second Eve.” Like the fictional female androids who will overtake the late-nineteenth-century imaginary, brought to life by scientific men seeking to cure women of their natural artifice through technological reproduction (exemplified by L’Eve

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10 “mediatrix, n.,” OED Online (June 2020, Oxford University Press).

11 “matrix, n.,” OED Online (June 2020, Oxford University Press).


Mary saves women from their inheritance of original sin through her embodiment of the possibility of sexless (wombless) reproduction.\footnote{I am alluding specifically here to Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s media theory staple of a novel, \textit{L’Eve Future} (1886), which was also the basis for the most famous female android film, \textit{Metropolis} (1928). For more on how fictional female automata have been made to embody the dangers, excesses, and prelapsarian possibilities of new media technologies, see Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang’s \textit{Metropolis},” \textit{New German Critique} 24/25 (1982): 221-237, and Annette Michelson, “On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy,” \textit{October} 29 (1984): 3-21.}

Following Carol Gilligan’s famous feminist re-reading of Eve’s role in Genesis, we might also see Mary’s womb-mediated access to God’s Word as a knowing Christian corrective to Eve’s \textit{active}, single-minded pursuit of knowledge in the garden. As Gilligan observes, a return to the text reveals that Eve is “not the dupe of the serpent or seduced by the prospect of being as gods. In the face of conflicting authorities and truths, she decides to see for herself and—she acts on her own perceptions.”\footnote{Carol Gilligan, “Disrupting the Story: Enter Eve,” \textit{Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association} 68.4 (August 2020): 678.} Mary, the Second Eve, knows only the word of God, which she channels obediently through her body and gives to Man. By establishing Eve as a prefiguration of the Mediatrix, the Church reinscribed an ancient Jewish tradition within its own evolving temporal and moral logics. While Eve is the most famous example of this typological phenomenon, other biblical heroines were also recast by Christian theology as prefigurations of Mary’s mediation: Miriam, a prophetess (like her brother Moses), is a particularly evocative prefiguration of Mary for my purposes, because the sublimation of her prophetic sight into a clean maternal vessel mimics the management of Eve’s Ur-agency. In short, the mediatrix domesticates more unruly women’s histories, but her very construction as a corrective also means that she is haunted, from the first, by a boundless array of suppressed mediating powers.

As we can already begin to see, there are many splintered and ambiguous forms of “mediation” imbedded in Christian conceptions of the “mediatrix”—from the process of...
immaculate conception to hierarchical networks of intercession, sanctification, and advocacy. These forms continue to evolve and multiply over time, offering a number of rich threads for media theorists to follow, in technological, social, and political directions. Kathryn Ready, for example, compellingly highlights the historical connection between Mary’s function as Mediatrix and her status as Reader. First introduced in the medieval writings of Origen, St. Ambrose, and St. Thomas Aquinas, the Mary as Reader trope imagined Mary being impregnated by the *Word of God* through the mediating agent of an angel’s voice, a painterly and poetic idiom that, as Ready quips, “transformed her into a book through which the Logos might be understood.”16 But in this tradition, Mary is rarely depicted as a passive inscription site, without knowledge of the text she bears. On the contrary, Ready points out that paintings of the Virgin’s education suggest “it was assumed that prior to the Annunciation Mary had received hints of her destiny from her lifelong study of scripture and grasp of its typological meaning. […] It was as *interpreter* of the Logos that Mary came to be regarded as an essential bridge between humanity and divinity, all the more essential because she appeared closer to humanity than Christ.” (my emphasis)17 To this example of Mary’s medial duality (both medium and mediator, book and reader), we might add the associated tradition in Marian painting of depicting the immaculate conception—based on the psalmic phrase “incline your ear”—as an act of active listening, a holy transmission into Mary’s awaiting ear. Typically visualized as beams of light that seem to penetrate the side of her head, the conception-by-ear idiom suggests that Mary not only mediates God’s Word as a book and reader, but also as a receptive listener to divinely mediated aural

16 Ready, “Reading Mary as Reader: the Marian Art of Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti,” 152.

17 Ibid.
messages, an audience in a very literal sense.\textsuperscript{18} It is worth noting that in both cases, the functionality of the medium (Mary’s womb as book, her ear as receptor of God’s Word) depends on the purity of the Mediatrix (Virgin reader and listener).

From the Renaissance onwards, as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation launch a new era of intensified “Marian devotion” and increasingly complex debates around the “problem” of Mary’s mediation,\textsuperscript{19} “mediatrix” also enters secular discourse as an informal title for wealthy, influential women who adopt intercessory social roles. In political correspondence, “mediatrix” becomes shorthand for female diplomatic “go-betweens,” as in the late sixteenth-century example offered by Nina Ergin of an English ambassador who fears losing his main conduit to the Ottoman court (via the harem): “because my selfe [sic] cannot come to the speech of the Sultana, and all my business passe [sic] by the hands of the said Mediatrix, loosing her friendship [sic], I loose the practick [sic] with the Sultana…”\textsuperscript{20} Elsewhere, the title is used to describe aristocratic patronesses who use their social capital and marital connections to support the work of young male writers. As Julie Crawford explains in her book Mediatrices: women, politics, and literary production in early modern England (2014): “In a letter John Donne wrote to Sir Henry Goodere in the early years of his courtship of Lucy Harrington Russell, Countess of Bedford, as his patron, he pondered whether she was the ‘proper Mediatrix’ to present his case to the necessary people. His term evoked Bedford’s status as an influential go-between in early Jacobean political and literary circles, and thus her ability to serve as an intermediary on his


\textsuperscript{19} Dodd, *The Virgin Mary, Mediatrices of All Graces: History and Theology of the Movement for a Dogmatic Definition from 1896 – 1964*, 29.

behalf.” In both Ergin and Crawford’s examples, the mediatrix seems to unite two forms of mediation: she is on the one hand a fortuitously positioned instrument or means of reaching an audience and on the other an active, sophisticated agent of social reproduction, performing a cultural technique still perceived as paradigmatically feminine and vital to the maintenance of social order.

These secular, metaphorical applications of “mediatrix,” which largely reproduce the Catholic dichotomization of embodied medium (womb-vessel) and public benefactress (intercessor), fade from common usage in the mid-nineteenth century, even as global Christian interest in Mary’s mediation rises, amidst multiple Church-certified Marian apparitions (1830, 1846, 1858) and the 1854 papal definition of the Immaculate Conception as dogma. Peaking in the 1896 foundation of a movement for the dogmatic definition of Mary’s universal mediation of grace, the Church’s negotiation of Mary’s mediation has clearly been an arduous, multi-tiered process, one which is still very much ongoing. Catholic theologian Manfred Hauke describes Mary’s social function as Mediatrix of all Graces, in particular, as “the most disputed topic of modern Mariology.”

The rise of the mediatrix in Mariology and decline in its colloquial use coincide uncannily with the feminization of spiritual “mediumship” and low-level communications work in Europe and the United States. In the late nineteenth century, the séance, telegraph station, switchboard, and office were all united by their need for a human go-between and preference for a female one: cheap, manageable, young, unmarried and demure; as Katherine Stubbs puts it, “a


22 Dodd, *The Virgin Mary, Mediatrix of All Graces*, 529.
mediating agent who was not an agent at all.”

We might indeed offer the dominant corporate fetishization of a pure and passive feminine channel during this period as one reason why “medium”—the same term used to describe the telegraph—became the preferred term for professional female mediators, instead of “mediatrix.”

This applies most literally to the official title of “medium” for women who unconsciously transmitted messages from the dead by voice or keyboard, but also to the techno-metaphorical language used in popular literature to describe female communications workers. As John Durham Peters, Jill Galvan, Christopher Keep, Pamela Thurschwell and Leah Price have shown, these spheres were materially and rhetorically intertwined.

Not only was the channeling process often performed by women at typewriters and conceptualized through electrical media (“a kind of mental wireless”); from the 1860s onwards, telegraph operators—the first feminized white-collar workforce, soon followed by switchboard and typewriter operation—were also constructed as comely channels for magnetism, double

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24 “The term “medium” described both the telegraph (which communicated across distances) and the human channeler (who communicated across the gap between living and dead).” (John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 96.)

25 John Durham Peters provided the foundations for much of this work in his first book, where he illustrated that “spiritualism, the art of communication with the dead, explicitly modeled itself on the telegraph’s ability to receive remote messages,” and moreover that telegraphers and spiritualists both conflated the girl with the machine. (Peters, Speaking into the Air, 94.) For more on the overlapping gendering of spiritual and technological media, see also Jill Galvan, The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919 (2010); Christopher Keep, “Blinded by the Type: Gender and Information Technology at the Turn of the Century” (2001); Pamela Thurschwell, Literature, Technology, and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920 (2001); Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell, Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture (2017); John Durham Peters, “Discourse Network 1912” (2012) and Laura James, “Technologies of Desire: Typists, Telegraphists and their Machines in Bram Stoker’s Dracula and Henry James’s In The Cage” (2012).

conscience, “attacks of energy,” 27 and “divinations.” 28 As women became electric, mechanical, and communicative media across the world, the word mediatrix fell out of familiar use.

**The Mediatrix resurfaces (and remains hidden) in media scholarship**

In her book *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, and Modernity* (2016), Katherine Mullin lifts the title “Mediatrix” out of the dustbin of early modern political and literary discourse in an intuitively modern way, to name the anxious patriarchal question always lurking behind the industrial feminization of communications labor: “Might the gender of the mediatrix compromise the integrity of the message itself?” 29 Mullin is, interestingly, not alone these days in using “mediatrix” as a mobile theoretical keyword. Since the 1980s, in fact, the social mediatrix has seen a small but noticeable comeback in English-language feminist literary theory and cultural history, seemingly in line with a general increase of interest in the structural invisibility of feminized mediating labor under capitalism and the transgressive, border-crossing possibilities embodied by the female mediator, a dualism Donna Haraway canonically associates with the cyborg.

Some scholars in this wave self-consciously anchor their own theorization of “mediatrix” in Mariology. 30 Alison Chapman, for example, answers Luce Irigaray’s call for feminist theorists to knock Christ off his hermeneutic throne and restore Mary as a “privileged mediatrix of the

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27 Ella Cheever Thayer, *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (New York: W.J. Johnston Publisher, 1879), 120.

28 Henry James, “In the Cage,” *The Turn of the Screw & In the Cage* (New York: Random House, 2001), 129.


30 See, for example, Christina H. Lee’s “La Señora Peregrina as Mediatrix in ‘La ilustre fregona’” (2005), Julie Crawford’s *Mediatrix: women, politics, and literary production in early modern England* (2014), and Kathryn Ready’s “Reading Mary as Reader: the Marian Art of Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti” (2008).
divine and the material” by reading the Victorian “Angel in the House” through Mary’s uneasy
double bind of motherhood and public intercession. For Chapman, juxtaposing the two figures
“exposes the possibilities of the Victorian female mediatrix as a negotiator between not only the
separate spheres, but between the collapse of women into the maternal and the political subject
position that conventionally belongs to the masculine identity.” In other words, the long debate
over the terms of Mary’s mediation provides an apt model for the Angel of the House, because
the coherence of Victorian society’s separation of spheres—domestic and political, private and
public—actually depends on connections created across gendered antinomies by a symbolic
maternal messenger figure.

Other scholars, like Mullin, use “mediatrix” without reference to Mary, instead drawing
out the term’s postmodern soupçons of hybridity, liminality, marginalization, and intermediality.
For example, Avriel Goldberger’s 1987 edited volume, Woman as Mediatrix: Essays on
Nineteenth-century European Women Writers and K.A. Neeley’s 1992 essay, “Woman as
Mediatrix: women as writers on science and technology in the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries,” both seem to offer mediatrix as a synonym for woman writer, as if “mediatrix” speaks
self-evidently to the transgression of writing as a woman in nineteenth-century Europe.

(Like Levi-Strauss’s trickster figure, the mediatrix is adept at crossing boundaries.) But while
Goldberger never uses the term in-text at all, suggesting its function is more evocative than
prescriptive, Neeley goes to great lengths to explain the importance of female “intermediaries” to
the “continuum” of “technical exposition” in the modern scientific community: “The mediatrix,

31 Alison Chapman, “Phantasies of matriarchy in Victorian children’s literature,” Victorian Women Writers and the
Woman Question (Cambridge UP, 1999), 17.
32 Ibid.
33 Avriel Goldberger (ed.), Woman as Mediatrix: Essays on Nineteenth-century European Women Writers
(Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987).
though often limited in her sphere of activity, handles the crucial functions of establishing unity, order, and mutual understanding. Although mediation is often conceived as being unrelated to invention, it is important to remember that […] denied access to laboratories, society meetings, and many institutions of higher learning, women channeled their creative intellectual energies into the task of structuring, synthesizing, and conveying scientific knowledge.”

Here, we see the mediatrix cast as a long-repressed, historically vital feminine link between “invention” and the public.

In at least one academic example from the 1990s, the gender of the mediatrix is superseded by its technological connotations. Philosopher and cultural critic Mark Taylor reboots “mediatrix” as a portmanteau of media and matrix, to describe the intertwined systems of mass media that structure late-twentieth-century experience: “Our medium is the mediatrix, […] which is constituted by the intersection of electronic media and computer-telecommunications technology. This mediatrix includes mediating structures ranging from television, radio, film, and video to telephones, faxes, computers, and, perhaps most important, the net.”

I find this 1995 example particularly interesting because of the etymological evolution of “matrix” it encodes, despite itself, from womb to interconnecting technological network. While an example of the latter (most common contemporary) definition does not in fact appear, according to OED, until 1873, we can also see that womb and network are conceptually connected from the seventeenth century onwards by an intermediate definition: “a place of medium in which something is originated, produced, or developed; the environment in which a particular activity

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or process begins; a point of origin and growth.”

This intermediate definition takes us to the heart of the abstracting, de-sexing process to which Mary’s womb is subjected by Catholic theology in order to make it a pure medium for divine transmission of God’s Word. I find it telling that in the late twentieth century, historians and literary scholars writing about women are drawn to the resonances of mediatrix with female mediating labor, but the lone tech-focused scholar abandons its material, maternal roots in favor of clean electrical connections. For those not looking for her, the mediatrix always remains hidden in plain sight.

With the Euro-American frame of this project in mind, it is important to note that English is unique in carrying over the rather arcane-sounding Latin feminine suffix -atrix, instead of translating it to a vernacular suffix (like -atress). Because of the rarity of “-atrix” in modern English, “mediatrix” can travel incognito as a neologism, while encoding a curious mixture of deviant female sexual power (dominatrix), old-timeyness (aviatrix), and technological systems (matrix). This is what I assume is happening for Anglophone scholars like Katherine Mullin and Mark Taylor, who have reclaimed the term for their own purposes. German and French translations of “mediatrix,” by contrast, may have been more adaptable to uses outside Mariology over the past few centuries, because both “Mittlerin” and “médiatrice” have suffixes common to human women and feminine nouns in their respective languages.

Nonetheless, the research I have conducted so far suggests that modern French and German split the term into two

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36 “matrix, n.” *OED Online.*

37 In rare instance, we do also see “mediatrix” translated as “mediatress.” For an example of this, see Manfred Hauke. Mary, "Mediatress of Grace". Mary's Universal Mediation of Grace in the Theological and Pastoral Works of Cardinal Mercier (Mary at the Foot of the Cross IV, Supplement [Part B]), Academy of the Immaculate: New Bedford/Massachusetts 2004.

38 An 1866 Latin-German dictionary, for example, translates Mediatrix as “Mittlerin” without any reference to Mary, while Latin-French dictionaries from the same period omit the mediatrix altogether, though they offer “médiateur” and “Le Médiateur (Jésus-Christ)” as translations for mediator: prima-elementa.fr/Dico-m03.html
distinct forms of mediation: one gendered, theological, and embodied, the other non-gendered, secular, and abstract.\(^{39}\)

Trending toward the latter, modern German-language scholarship most often uses Mittlerin to describe a non-human social or cultural mediating agent,\(^{40}\) but there is at least one recent exception. Sabine Messner and Michaela Wolf’s 2000 book, *Mittlerin zwischen den Kulturen—Mittlerin zwischen den Geschlechtern? Studie zu Theorie und Praxis feministischer Übersetzung* (Mediatrix between cultures—mediatrix between genders? Studies on feminist theory and practice) uses the term, like many of the other gender-focused scholars I have examined here, to describe a role historically played by women, which also offers a potential model for feminist critique.\(^{41}\) Mittlerin is conspicuously missing, by contrast, from Friedrich Kittler’s highly influential *Aufschreibsysteme 1800/1900* (1985) and *Grammophon Film Typewriter* (1986), despite the fact that both books teem with female mediators, from the feminine reader, mother tongue, and amanuensis to the mass reproducible typist. Like many media theorists, Kittler is more interested in Eve than Mary, as we see from the first page of the Typewriter chapter in *Grammophon Film Typewriter*, where he puckishly predicts the clerical singularity through the merging of the first and last woman: “It might be possible—as we approach the threshold of infinity—to forecast the year in which typist and woman converge.

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\(^{39}\) All my international research was radically limited by the pandemic, so consider this section a launching point for a more in-depth investigation to be completed at a later date.

\(^{40}\) Fritz Ernst’s 1932 *Die Schweiz als geistige Mittlerin von Muratt bis Jacob Burckhardt*, for example, casts the nation of Switzerland as a Mittlerin of art history; Anton Scherer’s 1970 *Die Literatur der Donauschwaben als Mittlerin zwischen Völkern und Kulturen* casts a regional literary tradition as a Mittlerin between peoples and cultures. Neither text deals with the human gender or religious history of the term.

Minnie Tipp will have been Eve.”\(^2\) Throughout *Aufschreibsysteme 1800/1900*, he attends to resonances among spiritual, technical, and female media, particularly in the “Great Lallula” section, when all the previous feminine characters seem to come together in the body of the typist. Through the iconic office couple case of Henry James and Theodora Bosanquet, he riffs on Bosanquet’s original wordplay with “medium,” turning it into a porous interface between woman and machine:

Thus began Bosanquet’s ‘job, as alarming as it was fascinating, of serving as medium between the spoken and machined word.’

The Remington, together with its medium, were ordered to the deathbed in order to take three dictations from a delirious brain.\(^3\)

In German, there is a crucial missing linguistic link between “Medium” and “Mittlerin” that prevents the kind of associative, analytical play Kittler engages in above. His mythic feminine model for the typist, instead of Mary, is Pallas Athena, because her motherlessness models the new regime of mechanical reproduction that rules in the modern office. *Grammophon Film Typewriter* continues the rich excavation of secretaries and typewriter girls begun in *Aufschreibsysteme*, but also re-routes the earlier book’s gendered media genealogies into a technological triptych tied to an *almost*-father figure of all three media. As we see below, Kittler’s explanation for the juxtaposition of gramophone, film, and typewriter is wistfully mediated through the Wizard of Menlo Park.

Cinema and the phonograph, Edison’s two greatest achievements that ushered in the present, are complemented by the typewriter. […] Edison commented positively on the inventions potential when Sholes visited him in Newark to demonstrate his newly patented model and to invite the man who had invented invention to enter a joint venture.


But Edison declined the offer—as if, already in 1868, the phonograph and kinetoscope preoccupied their first inventor. [...] Thus, there was no Marvelous One from whose brow sprang all three media technologies of the modern age. On the contrary, the beginning of our age was marked by separation or differentiation. On the one hand, we have two technological media that, for the first time, fix unwritable data flows; on the other, an ‘intermediate’ thing between a tool and a machine,’ as Heidegger wrote so precisely about the typewriter. On the one hand, we have the entertainment industry with its new sensualities; on the other, a writing that already separates paper and body during textual production. [...] The historical synchronicity of cinema, phonography, and typewriting separated optical acoustic, and written data flows, thereby rendering them autonomous.44

While explaining why they belong together, Kittler rightly notes the seemingly untenable differences that separate the three historically synchronous media-technologies: they split neatly into extensions of the ear, eye, and hand. Two are forms of art and entertainment, one is an office tool. For Kittler, these differences are synonymous with the perceptual “differentiation” wrought by phonography, film, and typing. This in turn becomes the logic for juxtaposing them, because together they definitively dissolve the monopoly of writing, fragmenting the human sensorium and thereby catalyzing all kinds of fragmented ways of thinking, from psychoanalysis to modernism. But Kittler’s anecdotal efforts to hook up his epic media theory of fragmentation with a “Marvelous One from whose brow sprang all three media-technologies of the modern age” also seems to blind him to the missing link on the page. As we see below, the passage is punctuated by an illustration of a woman transcribing music from a Dictaphone-like phonograph on a typewriter-like machine (with musical notes as keys).45 Like the operator in Eve’s Wireless, this is a hybrid mediatrix, instantly recognizable as a bridge between two of the media Kittler differentiates. The word “between” (zwischen) hovers suggestively just above her head.

44 Kittler, Gramophone Film Typewriter, 14.

45 Kittler, Grammophon Film Typewriter, 26. In the English-language edition, this passage appears on the page directly across from the image (Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 15). This image also appears in Aufschreibe systeme 1800/1900, 450. (p.355 in the English-language edition)
It is just like the mediatrix, to play peekaboo like this. While Kittler does not pick up his own cue, I will. Another way of saying “the beginning of our age was marked by separation or differentiation” is: the beginning of our age was marked by a new kind of female mediator, tasked with mending the many separations and differentiations wrought by modern media.

This dissertation was significantly shaped by *Grammophon Film Typewriter*, but it also attempts to subvert its organizing structure, which marginalizes the mediatrix’s *intermedial* role in modern media history. While taking many conceptual cues from Kittler’s media archaeology of the nameless typing girl masses at the heart of the discourse network, I will show that the
typist’s most pervasive fictive mutations—as plucky New Woman, chronic daydreamer, fallen muse, accidental writer, mesmeric medium and sexless metronome—are inextricable from preceding and parallel fantasies about female telegraph and telephone operators. A number of feminist literary scholars have begun to fill in the gaps of Kittler’s master narrative by highlighting the semiotic play, class politics, and erotic performances of female clerical workers.\(^{46}\) I will add to these revisionist efforts by grappling with the cultural myths and memories of three media-machines that have fundamentally shaped modern experience, while insisting on a media genealogy re-wired along industrially feminized lines (Telegraph Telephone Typewriter!) instead of another study structured around cold machines and old male inventors.

In France, a historically Catholic country, where linguistic links among sacred, social, and technical female media might be expected to appear on the surface of modern culture, “médiatrice” primarily circulates outside Mariology as a mathematical term: as every French high school student knows, the “médiatrice” (or bisector, in English) is a line dividing a segment through its middle into two equal parts.\(^{47}\) This definition effectively drowns out other competing meanings. That said, at least one canonical almost-example of overlap between female communications workers and the Virgin Mary readily comes to mind: Marcel Proust’s 1907 parodic ode to telephone operators as “Vièrges vigilantes dont nous entendons chaque jour la voix sans jamais connaître leur visage et qui sont nos Anges gardiens dans ces ténèbres vertigineuses… les Divinités implacables, les Demoiselles du téléphone!” (Vigilant virgins

\(^{46}\) I am thinking in particular of Angelika Führich, “Woman and Typewriter: Gender, Technology, and work in Late Weimar Film” (2000); Laura James, “Technologies of Desire: Typists, Telegraphists and their Machines in Bram Stoker’s Dracula and Henry James’s In The Cage” (Victorian Network Volume 4, Number 1 Summer 2012); Morag Shiach, “Modernity, labour and typewriter,” Modernist Sexualities; Leah Price and Pamela Thurfwell’s edited volume, Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture; and Jennifer S. Light on the coding women left out of Gramophone Film Typewriter’s historical account of computing.

\(^{47}\) Larousse definition of médiatrice: https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/m%C3%A9diatrice/50112
whose voices we hear every day without seeing their faces, our guardian angels in this vertiginous darkness… those implacable divinities, the telephone girls!\textsuperscript{48} This oft-cited tidbit from the modernist literary sphere suggests there are more links between virginal girl workers and the Virgin Mary to be found in French culture (which I look forward to pursuing in the wake of the pandemic).

In twentieth-century French scholarship, “médiatrice” \textit{does} play the dual role of sacred and social female mediator throughout Luce Irigaray’s oeuvre, most notably in her essay, “La femme, médiatrice entre vie privée et vie publique” (2012), and has made at least one appearance as a synonym for biological, social, and cultural female mediator in a classic text of French social theory, Henri Lefebvre’s monumental \textit{Critique de la Vie Quotidienne}. In Volume II (1981), under the section heading “ambiguïté,” Lefebvre writes,

\begin{quote}
Biologically creative, ‘women’ have always been ipso facto the natural mediators [médiatrices] between social groups, generations, culture and nature, and individuals. They mediate—in other words, they generate conflicts and divisions even when carrying out the conciliatory role their ‘functions’ attribute to them! Biologically creative, and probably the creators of the first human realities at the dawn of history—agriculture, the village, the house and its basic equipment, the hearth, cooking utensils, furniture, fabrics—women have subsequently been demoted to carry out inferior tasks, making them relatively unproductive economically and relatively ineffective socially. And so they ‘are’ the illusory substance of the everyday, its unreliable depths, its terrain and its climate, and yet they are endowed with the attributes of the human race (intelligence and rationality) as well as with the specific qualities of the groups to which they belong. Nothing stops them from intervening in the gamut of public or private situations, but everything forces them to use indirect methods if their interventions are to be effective. The consequence is a profound and permanent conflict which can never reach a climax, i.e., it can never become the kind of overt, explicit antagonist which would endanger society. So the conflict is contained in a state of ambiguity: a blunted, ever-rekindled, ever-stifled contradiction.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{48} Marcel Proust, “Journée de lecture,” \textit{Le Figaro}, March 20, 1907. (my translation)

I have quoted Lefebvre at length here because he explicitly uses “médiatrice” to establish mediation as an ancient feminine role that has shifted and mutated to meet modern needs, from the “natural” forms of mediation associated with motherhood, creation, and social reproduction to the “indirect methods” of modern mediation women are forced to adopt in a capitalist society built on barely hidden, potentially explosive contradictions. In a stance that aligns with feminist Marxism and techno-science, Lefebvre singles out the extraction of domestic industry from the home as a foundational contradiction of modern gender relations, which modern women must reconcile on a daily basis even as their continued enlistment as mediators threatens to rupture the precarious coherence of separate spheres. “The consequence,” as Lefebvre writes, “is a profound and permanent conflict which can never reach a climax,” a “state of ambiguity” in short, “a blunted, ever-rekindled, ever-stifled contradiction.” Lefebvre’s modern mediatrix—dissolving into “the illusory substance of the everyday”—is a rather pathetic creature, blue-balled over and over again by untenable antinomies that leave her eternally contained and in between things, instead of creating and acting directly.\(^{50}\) She has none of the spiritual power of Irigaray’s médiatrice, much less the camp flamboyance of Virginia Woolf’s “queer composite creature” of poetry and history, or the posthuman potential of Donna Haraway’s cyborg, which, “through a perverse shift in perspective,” knowingly critiques its contradictions while embracing techno-hybridity as the new flesh.\(^{51}\) And she is certainly not a typist, operator, or virgin mother in Lefebvre’s lexicon.

\(^{50}\) Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, II: 221.
In short, this vision comes close to the kind of gendered genealogy I am interested in charting, without bringing the spiritual or technological architecture of feminine mediation into full view. Though we can find multiple mediatrixes littered throughout Lefebvre’s epic critique of the everyday, they are never explicitly woven together: an isolated reference to Mary Mediatrix (“la Médiatrice), for example, appears in Volume I, but not in Volume II. The Verso reprint of Volume II, which features a woman on the telephone as its cover image (see below), does some post-op suturing on Lefebvre’s behalf—behold the iconic, anonymous, mass-reproduced modern mediatrix, our intermedial entryway into the everyday—but not enough. The work ultimately leaves us with an incomplete picture of how all these female mediators relate to one another. A long, deep, media-minded reading of the Mediatrix is left below the surface of text.

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52 “Dieu est loin et terrible le Père. La Vierge est proche. Mère absolue, jeune fille absolue, elle évoque mystiquement et poétiquement tout le féminin. Mère, elle accueille ses enfants. Vierge, elle rassure, car la virginité qui ne s’est encore donnée à personne appartient à tous. Grande déesse en voie de formation (ou de reviviscence) mais qu’une théologie prudente ramène au rang de médiatrice, elle attire la plupart des veux, des suffrages, des prières.” (Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la Vie Quotidienne: Introduction* (Paris: L’Arche, 1977), I: 229-230.) “God is remote and terrible is the Father. The Virgin Mother is near. Absolute mother, absolute virgin, she conjures up mysteriously and poetically the feminine totality. Mother, she receives her children. Virgin, she reassures, for a virginity which has not been surrendered to anyone belongs to everyone. Great goddess in the process of formation (or revival), but reduced by a prudent theology to the rank of mediator, it is she who attracts the most wishes, the most support, the most prayers.” (Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Introduction*, transl. John Moore (New York: Verso, 2002), I: 215.) Note that “Médiatrice” is translated as “mediator,” rather than “mediatrix” in Verso’s English-language edition.
It is important to note that most other canonical cultural analyses of the ambiguity inherent in modern conceptions of mediation leave the mediatrix out altogether. In his entry for “mediation” in *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (1976), Raymond Williams evokes the “complex of senses ranging from reconciling to intermediate to indirect” which make mediation at once a productively fluid term for cultural studies and a difficult term to keep consistent, because some of its most prevalent senses conflict with one another: for example, mediation as “conciliation,” mediation as unconscious transmission, and mediation as manipulative displacement of the “real.” In Williams’ analysis, “medium,” “media” and “mediation” finally fuse in a familiar sense with the rise of mass media and communications, but “mediation” remains the most troublesome among the three.

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53 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* [1976] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 204-205.
Continuing Williams’ line of inquiry in “Genesis of the Media Concept” (2010), John Guillory claims that cultural criticism has, in recent years, “set aside mediation even as the study of media has intensified,” finding the former too self-sabotaging a concept, prone to recursive reflection between ideology and critique.54 While Guillory reads this disciplinary dismissal as evidence of the “limits” of “the usefulness of the mediation concept,” I would argue we should attend to resonances between mediation’s current double bind—“it is always possible to collapse the mediations performed by the media back into representations, which become vulnerable at once to ideological critique”—and the Mediatrix’s ancient double bind, her sanctified intercessory role always threatening to collapse into the corruptive materiality of her womanhood.55 Like Williams, Guillory alludes to the influence of Christian theology on the common colloquial notion of mediation as conflict resolution, with reference to “the grandest example—the ‘mediation’ of Christ as Redeemer.”56 Without Mary, Christ’s mediation serves to shore up Guillory’s central overlapping claims: that “there are few instances before the twentieth century in which a process of mediation is extrapolated from the medium”57 and that the word “medium was rarely connected with matters of communication before the later nineteenth century.”58 If we add what we have learned about the Mediatrix to existing genealogies of medium/media and mediation, however, we gain access to an ancient theology of communication oriented around a mortal woman sending messages through her body between God and man; one that peaked in global popularity and notoriety during the same period (the late nineteenth and

56 Ibid., 341.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 321.
twentieth century) that technological mediation became feminized under the stop-gap profit-logic of industrial capitalism. Of course, because far from flooding technical and business terminology, “mediatrix” actually receded from secular discourse—in English at least—altogether by the 1890s, there is no readily discernible basis to argue with Guillory’s basic etymological claims. It does seem telling, however, that Guillory and Williams both leave gender out of their genealogies of “medium,” as well, which arguably exacerbates their frustrations with the “limits” of mediation.

While Guillory, unlike Williams, notes the most “surprising common use” of the word medium in the nineteenth century—“a person believed to be in contact with the spirits of the dead and to communicate with the dead”—Guillory does not specify the femininity of the spiritual medium and, moreover, quickly dismisses spiritualists’ “tenacious” use of “media technology” as a “nice joke of history.”59 This departs from a precedent established by John Durham Peters, who places a substantial emphasis on the gender overlap between technological and spiritual media in Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (1999). But Peters’ book still separates the categories of “medium” and “media.” For Peters, “the history of communication via mediums, unlike that via media, has been dominated by women.” (my emphasis)60 Jill Galvan’s more recent book, The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919 (2010) has further blended the categories of medium and media through a modern gendered, technological frame, but I would argue that media studies’ broad blindness to the gendering of mediation as a foundational Christian concept has led an important prehistory of the modern gendering of spiritual and technological mediation.

59 Guillory, 347-348.

to remain hidden in plain sight. This has, in turn, led media theorists to reproduce (even as they bemoan) the untenable, dialectical abstractions the Church created in the first place to reclaim the powers of Motherhood and biological reproduction for man and God, by way of a divine technology of (virgin-mother-mediated) communication.

The mediatrix as feminine mediating laborer: Sadie Plant via Luce Irigaray

As I suggested above, Henri Lefebvre’s rather nuanced efforts to connect the long, contradictory gendering of mediation to its “ambiguity” as a term constitute a break from this tradition. But it is only by bringing together the work of feminist psychoanalytic theorists and techno-scientists that we can tie Mary’s mediating powers and women’s ambiguous mediating roles in modern society to the history of feminized mediating labor. As I noted above, Luce Irigaray has written extensively on the relationship between Mary Mediatrix and socio-cultural mediatrices, but her feminist reclamation of Mary has been criticized for essentializing socially constructed gender relations by upholding the sacred-biological matrix of feminine mediation (might the body politics of the theoretical model compromise the theory itself?). In Irigaray’s later work, after her Catholic awakening, “this is not simply a matter of tone, style or strategy. It

61 Meanwhile, as an exemplar of the consequences of clinging to ungendered, dialectical abstractions of mediation, Bruno Latour’s famous dichotomization of actor-network theory into active, transformative “médiateurs” (mediators) and passive, automatic “intermédiaires” (intermediaries) offers a more representative example of how mediation has been dealt with in the potpourri of academic fields that constitute media studies. Despite the fact that computers and modern infrastructure make up the bulk of his case studies, Latour never ties the “constant uncertainty” over whether entities are “behaving as intermediaries or as mediators” to the gendering of sacred, social, or technical mediation. This is particularly regrettable given how neatly the mediator/intermediary model maps onto cultural anxieties about managing the bounds of the immaculate conception and clerical conduits’ agency. The corporate ideal for operators and typists is ostensibly the intermediary: in Latour’s terms, a black box that “transports meaning or force without transformation.” (Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39.) But as we have seen, the shadow of the Mediatrix is always lurking behind this ideal, an unstable agent that threatens to “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning of the elements [she is] supposed to carry.” (Latour, 39) In the always-dissolving distinctions between the two, we find the echo of Katherine Mullin’s shorthand for the concern that stalked girl operators in the nineteenth century (and many different kinds of girl conduits by the twentieth): “Might the gender of the mediatrix compromise the integrity of the message itself?”
entails asserting the need for a female divine and proposing interpretations and representations which may begin to constitute this divine. It also involves reinterpreting myths and actually adopting certain concepts, figures and mysteries from the Christian tradition for the purposes of nurturing a female spirituality.”

The latter is clearly not aligned with my aims or claims in this dissertation.

Nonetheless, Irigaray’s construction of women as “the very possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference—between man and his fellow-creatures, indeed between man and himself” has productively offered British cyberfeminist Sadie Plant a conceptual foundation for a more material history of modern feminized mediating labor. In *Zeros + Ones: Cyberfeminism and the New Technoculture* (1997), Plant never uses the word mediatrix, but the techno-cultural matrilineage of “go betweens” she constructs from Ada Lovelace to postwar female coders reveals a “quite simply material” web of girl workers made out of mutating machines of gendered mediating labor. Explaining her choice to adopt weaving as her primary critical connective tissue for this web, Plant writes,

> The yarn is neither metaphorical nor literal, but quite simply material, a gathering of threads which twist and turn through the history of computing, technology, the sciences and arts. In and out of the punched holes of automated looms, up and down through the ages of spinning and weaving, back and forth through the fabrication of fabrics, shuttles and looms, cotton and silk, canvas and paper, brushes and pens, typewriters, carriages, telephone wires, synthetic fibers, electrical filaments, silicon strands, fiber-optic cables, pixeled screens, telecom lines, the World Wide Web, the Net, and matrices to come.

As we see from the last line, unlike Mark Taylor, Plant plays with the resonances between wombs and modern media infrastructures (“matrices to come”), reminding us that a metamorphic feminized media infrastructure has invisibly linked one up to the other “through the history of

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computing, technology, the sciences and arts.” Remediated through a lens of feminized materiality, Luce Irigaray’s spiritual feminine mediatrix gives way to a creature of capitalism who mediates through typewriters and telephone wires. Note how Plant weaves Irigaray’s claim that women are the very “possibility of mediation” into a techno-cultural, labor-focused frame:

Women are the very ‘possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference—between man and his fellow-creatures, indeed between man and himself.’ Women have been his go-betweens, those who took his messages, decrypted his codes, counted his numbers, bore his children, and passed on his genetic code. They have worked as his bookkeepers and his memory banks, zones of deposit and withdrawal, promissory notes, credit and exchange, not merely servicing the social world, but underwriting reality itself. […] Theirs is not a subsidiary role which needs to be rescued for posterity, a small supplement whose inclusion would set the existing records straight: when computers were virtually real machines, women wrote the software on which they ran. And when computer was a term applied to flesh and blood workers, the bodies which composed them were female.

Assembling go-betweens, child-bearers, and code-breakers into a single genealogy of gendered mediation, Plant allows us to begin to construct the kind of cultural-historical matrix I am interested in applying to close analyses of clerical characters in modern American and European literature and film. To Plant’s last line about the computer, we can add the precedents of the typewriter and secretary, both of which were also terms applied to female flesh and blood workers, as well as office equipment.

With Mary established, since the third century, as preeminent Mediatrix by way of a message—the Word of God—received through a mortal, virginal woman’s ear via messenger angel and transmitted through her womb, we can begin to see some of the rich avenues available for exploration in the nineteenth and twentieth century, even in predominantly Protestant countries like England and the US, as women take over the nodes of public and private discourse.64 Without claiming that the word “medium” is literally invoked in Mariology or that

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64 “Although Catholics remained in the minority, Great Britain experienced renewed interest in Mary during the nineteenth century, stimulated in part by the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 and the growth of a native Roman Catholic church, whose leadership deliberately set out to encourage devotion to the Virgin, and in part by the Oxford Movement, a religious revival within the Anglican church that flourished between 1833 and 1845 and insisted on the
the word “mediatrix” is literally invoked in relation to female media in the nineteenth century, I have tried to suggest here that many of the “difficulties” ascribed to the concepts of media and mediation are actually palimpsests of a missing media theoretical concept—an ancient theology of divine communication and gendered mediation designed, at its heart, to technologize and thereby reclaim conception itself, the creative power of motherhood, for God and men. I have also tried to suggest it was no accident (to borrow a Kittlerism) that the word mediatrix faded from popular, secular use as women took over the work of techno-social mediation across the United States and Western Europe. Indeed, it seems likely to me, given the patriarchal anxieties and Taylorist tendencies that surrounded the introduction and rapid multiplication of modern girl mediators, that the term was actively repressed—in favor of “medium”—because of the unstable signification, unruly agency, and ancient feminine power it encoded.

This section has traced a multilingual etymology and academic review of the mediatrix in order to highlight pre-capitalist myths and anxieties that shaped the modern mediatrix’s industrial design and continue to obscure her central role in modern media history. But in this dissertation, I will largely use the word mediatrix as a conceptual umbrella for a transatlantic archive of fictional female telegraph operators, telephone operators, and typists, so I will zoom in on them now. Beyond supplying the missing concept of the mediatrix, this dissertation also uses a mélange of Marxist and psychoanalytic critique to turn mass cultural texts that mystify women workers’ labor into subversive channels for feminist media historiography. By reading for repression, alienation, and technologically mediated imagination,
we can recover the female labor and feminized media structures that literary and filmic representations (often unsuccessfull) sought to occlude or domesticate.

A Brief History of the Feminization of Telegraph, Telephone, and Typewriter Operation

In order to understand how the modern mediatrix shaped and was shaped by modern media, we must return to the techno-utopian 1840s and 50s, when the first lady telegraphers began to appear on the scene, and follow the construction of the archetypal female information worker through a tangle of shifting, economic, cultural, and technological regimes. In the early days of commercial telegraphy, an aura of the strange and new surrounded female telegraphers. As mistresses of electricity and pioneers of what would become the first industrially feminized white-collar workforce, they were objects of popular fascination and figures of “ambiguous social standing,” creating a “new and almost indecipherable niche in the social hierarchy.”65 Like women working in the early film industry fifty years later, women in the nascent telegraph industry benefited from its fluid and informal organization.66 In the 1840s and 50s, before Western Union’s monopoly formation, female operators had not been explicitly subject to policies determined by gender. Rather, their presence and success within the industry, as Thomas Jepsen argues, provided the foundations for Western Union’s subsequent strategy of feminization, officially set in motion during the 1860s.67 As the category of “information worker” solidified with the advent of typewriters and telephones, office work came to be seen as


66 Ibid., 2.

an avenue of upward social mobility for young women who would have otherwise gone to work in “immigrant-crowded” factories, sales, or domestic service.\(^{68}\)

Historical analyses of how and why telegraph, telephone, and typewriter operation were systematically overtaken by women typically open with explanations grounded in industrial interest. In the United States especially, the only country where all three mass communications industries were private instead of nationalized, a common argument is that labor unrest among underpaid technical workers led Western Union, and later Bell Telephone and Remington to seek out employees less likely to demand higher wages, go on strike, or join unions. Because all three technologies depended on skilled human intermediaries to function (at least through WWI), even companies with secure monopolies found themselves at the mercy of their workers. Women, the story goes, were considered not only cheaper but also more *docile* and therefore a safe economic investment.

This narrative must be qualified. Venus Green argues that if docility and low pay had been primary market priorities for telephone companies, then immigrants and people of color would have been hired *en masse* instead of young white women: “female gentility, not female docility, accounts for their introduction into the telephone exchange.” Green uses the word “gentility” to expose the racial- and class-coded language typical of telephone operator recruitment. The conceit of “lady-like” comportment collapses under Green’s critical gaze. It is a veil for white femininity: “Black women, of course, could never be revered as ladies. Except in extremely rare individual cases, companies maintained an explicit policy against hiring blacks and immigrants are operators.”\(^{69}\) The same point could be made about telegraph operators and

\(^{68}\) April Middeljans, “‘Weavers of Speech’: Telephone Operators as Defiant Domestics in American Culture,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.3 (Spring 2010): 58.
typists, also overwhelmingly selected for their whiteness, in addition to their cheapness and assumed lack of militancy. Green’s emphasis on “gentility” dovetails with a strangely persistent historical narrative of telegraph and telephone operation, that telegraph and telephone “boys” were employed as operators before women, but were replaced because of how rowdy, vulgar, and prone to playing pranks they were. This narrative seems suspicious both because of how much it relies on essentializing differences between boys (pranksters) and girls (demure), and because of how fortuitously it erases the complaint of women replacing men, which dominated white-collar labor disputes in the second half of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. History itself provides the most gratifying retort to the conceit of feminine docility. Not only were female communications workers active in agitating for their rights, but once they were admitted into larger unions, most of which took several decades to warm up to the idea of female membership (and only then because they perceived the benefits of expanding their rank-and-file base), they proved to be militant strikers as well.

Despite launching the feminization of communications work, telegraphy was only systematically feminized in the United States and England, unlike telephone and typewriter operation, which were both feminized on a global scale. Consequently, American and British authors and artists were the first to establish the cultural profile of the modern mediatrix: a plucky, can-do heroine with a tendency to dissolve into the many media and mediated worlds at

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71 Alice Kessler Harris, speaking of nineteenth-century trade unions in general, observed that “women were admitted to unions after men recognized them as competitors better controlled from within than allowed to compete from without.” (Jepsen 154); “The militancy of the women, remarked the Chicago Tribune, was a ‘curious feature of the present strike.’” (Jepsen, 151); See also Stephen H. Norwood, Labor’s Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878-1923
her fingertips. Justin McCarthy’s 1870 short story “Along the Wires,” repeatedly describes its
novel-reading female telegraph clerk heroine, Annette—whose eyes flash when she takes
messages—as a pleasing “medium” for telegraphic transactions: “If you went into the office to
send a message, you would rather transact the business through the medium of that girl.”72 The
story’s hero, a smug physiognomist who thinks he can read the girl in question “like an open
book,” assigns himself the task of decoding her “vacant” gaze: when he had occasion to dispatch
telegraphic messages through her medium […] he always took care to couch them in a peculiar
sort of phraseology, which, suggestive of nothing but commonplace ideas to an ordinary
observer, would, if he was right, find other explanation in her mind.73 The peculiar wording of
“through her medium” simultaneously conjures an image of Annette as a human pneumatic tube
or “throbbing” wire and as a potential, but rarely activated, reader and interpreter.74 The hero’s
penetrating gaze, as it will turn out, finds an excessive, almost deviant medium in Annette’s
mind, which wanders off on its own journey for most of the story. She is too absorbed in her own
daydreams to see the man staring at her, much less decipher his encrypted overtures.

In late-nineteenth-century telegraphic fiction, girl operator heroines are—like the Virgin
Mary—often represented as active readers and listeners, but instead of studying scripture in
preparation for a message from God, they read cheap romances and weave their own out of what
they pick up along the wires, while seated at the heart of a complex narrative infrastructure.75
Ella Cheever’s novel, Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes (1879) and Henry James’

73 McCarthy, “Along the Wires,” 418.
74 Ibid., 416.
75 For primary source examples of this, see Anthony Trollope’s “The Telegraph Girl” (1877), Ella Cheever Thayer’s
Wired Love (1879), Henry James’ In the Cage (1898), and Geraldine Bonner’s The Girl at Central (1915).
novella *In the Cage* (1898) offer emblematic articulations of the latter. Thayer’s telegraphic heroine loves her job because she gets to live “in two worlds,”

the one her office, dingy and curtailed as to proportions, but from whence she could wander away through the medium of that slender telegraph wire, on a sort of electric wings, to distant cities; where, although alone all day, she did not lack social intercourse, and where she could amuse herself if she chose, by listening to and speculating upon the many messages of joy or of sorrow, of business and of pleasure, constantly going over the wire.76

Twenty years later, James’ telegraphic heroine must grapple, in all humility, with the limits of the telegraphic “medium” Thayer’s heroine found so liberating, upon realizing she has misread the messages around which she has built a fulfilling prosthetic narrative world. But her imaginative, romantic rendering of the adventures of the wealthy men and women whose cyphers she interprets daily from inside her titular cage also models a uniquely modern hermeneutic practice bordering on authorship, though one, it must be said, always threatening to collapse back into a moral lesson on the consequences of overactive female reading: a Madame Bovary or Female Quixote-style fiasco. The modern mediatrix, as well shall see, is often found in a restless space between incognito authorship and hysterical media consumption.

While in “Along the Wires,” Annette’s “mental weaving of untold tales” out of the telegraph network is ultimately coded as benignly digressive and somewhat charming—a hypermediated gendered lens that finds a comic mirror in the hero’s equally gendered pseudo-scientific “observation”—it is tellingly absorbed, like Thayer and James’ double-minded heroines, into a single heterosexual dialogue by the end of the narrative: “She felt no interest in any body’s history now but his.”77 As Jill Galvan notes in *The Sympathetic Medium*, “the insidious consistency of the trope of automatism/mechanism in discussions of women media,” by


77 McCarthy, “Along the Wires,” 421,
which Galvan means spiritual channels, typists and operators, “suggests its centrality to perceptions of mediation itself and provides a key for understanding in more detail the reasons behind women’s prevalence in the vocation.”

As consistent a trope (in fiction about women media) is the figure of the absent, absorbed, and excessive media consumer, from novel-reading to radio listening and film spectatorship.

On the one hand, I see the continuation of this trope from fictional telegraph operators to telephone operators and typists as evidence of how old gendered media—like the domestic novel—were used to manage the emergence of a new kind of feminine mediation at the center of the discourse network. The circuit from novel-reading and idle daydreaming to middle-class marriage insistently reproduced by most novels and films with white-collar heroines from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century domesticated a real threat posed by the gendering of communications labor: that women media would leave the marriage plot, talk to one another and become intercessors on behalf of their colleagues instead of isolated, alienated icons, invisibly massaging the public’s daily technological experiences. (Recall Eve’s Wireless’s anxiously heterosexual intertitular framing of its three newly connected female tech users.)

On the other hand, the persistence of the mediatrix media consumer in the Euro-American cultural imagination also suggests the centrality of modern narrative media—novels, pulp fiction, and film in particular—to the century-long perception of technological mediation as uniquely feminine. To put it another way, the women workers installed at the interstices of mechanical discourse media and communications media are from the first constructed as inherently intermedial themselves: while words and voices flow through them, they use the network and archive as raw material for imaginative romances, mysteries, and films. Phone lines

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and office tech serve as their prosthetic channels to other worlds. No matter how *seamlessly* they transmit memos and calls, they are always perceived as *unruly, porous* links between communications media and entertainment or mass media.

The mass feminization of telegraph, telephone, and typewriter operation from the 1870s onward placed young working-class women at the center of all major technologically mediated discourse networks, from finance to the federal government: telegraph operators translated and rewrote the messages sent through them; telephone operators listened into and redirected calls; typists took dictation and read what they typed. Recognizing the central positioning of these women in a rapidly changing world of information, as Kittler has famously done with the typewriter, may initially elicit a certain degree of feminist glee. But this feeling quickly fades in the shadow of the cultural anxieties that circulated pervasively around this intimacy of access: about women’s chattiness, their impulse to edit without context, their flightiness and distractibility. These anxieties, articulated (primarily by men) in industry literature, technical journals, and popular fiction, fueled arguments for the unsuitability of women as information workers and shaped employers’ and efficiency experts’ efforts to rigidly standardize the contours of their work, removing as much human agency from it as possible.

In a telegrapher training film called *Accuracy First* (ca. 1928), a female telegraph operator is discouraged from “correcting” what she might assume to be spelling errors but are more likely sophisticated financial cyphers: the film’s moral lesson is that the girl who takes too much initiative will cause the stock market to crash.79

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This trope, which returns in at least one classical Hollywood film about a switchboard operator on Wall Street (also released as a radio play), exemplifies the management of intellectual agency that came to undergird telegraph and telephone operator training policies as Western Union and AT&T standardized their offices across the nation. Telephone operators were increasingly subject to highly codified systems of speech, trained to use stock phrases and as few words as possible in their interactions with subscribers. Typists were taught to avoid thinking about what they typed in order to become optimally efficient mechanical relay stations for their employers’ compositions. While measures like these should be understood within a broader trend of white-collar Taylorization, they also clearly targeted a new unruly element in the system: we might think of them as efforts to filter out human excesses and isolate an extract of purified femininity maximally conducive to client satisfaction, smooth information flow, and the maintenance of a traditional social order.

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80 *She Knew All the Answers* (1941) – both the radio play and film version were based on a short story by Jane Allen, a former film studio secretary who also wrote the infamous Hollywood novel, *I Lost My Girlish Laughter.*
Meanwhile, as we have already begun to see, mass culture reveled in more deviant fictional doubles, interstitial clerical characters capable of massaging, manipulating, and derailing a narrative network from deep within its gears. Most of the novels, plays, and films I will highlight in this dissertation rely on excessive female mediators to catalyze their plots: operators who spy and typists who edit. To put it in corporate terms, the story can only begin because Edna “takes a chance” and goes off-book. But the story also almost always ends with Edna getting married and leaving the vast (telegraphic, telephonic, or epistolary) narrative network behind, as if modern media can’t help but reify capitalist logic in their efforts to sew back up the unruly female bodies and imaginations they have unwittingly unleashed on a previously stable text, now ruptured from within. My main critical counter-texts to this tradition, Sophie Treadwell’s experimental play, *Machinal* (U.S.A., 1928) and Mela Hartwig’s novel *Am I a Redundant Human Being?* (Austria, 1931), offer death by electric chair and mob mentality as the natural narrative ends of alienated, mechanical lives of mental channeling. These texts are narrated by numb, emptied out souls whose dash-ridden and self-recriminating internal monologues register the neurasthenic effects of Taylorist typewriting. Figuring out how different modern media, narrative forms, and genres process the recurring patterns (echoes, rhythms, and control mechanisms) of feminized labor will be one of the main aims of this dissertation.

As we will see throughout this dissertation (especially in Chapter 2), a number of overlapping domestic images and biological claims were used to manage the feminization of modern mediation.\(^{81}\) Once Western Union, E. Remington & Sons, and AT&T decided that young, literate white women would make better (read: cheaper and less likely to organize) low-

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\(^{81}\) While this dissertation will later expand to include cultural imaginaries built around operators and typists in the UK, France, and Germany, it begins in the United States because the telegraph, the telephone, and the typewriter were all arguably invented and certainly first commercialized and feminized there.
level communications workers than organized white men, all three began to cultivate publicity campaigns demonstrating women’s “natural” fit for telegraph, telephone, and typewriter operation. One of the strongest arguments for reading these three occupations as part of a single gendered genealogy is the number of overlapping monopoly-driven metaphors used to domesticate them in the public eye, replacing images of “masculine” technologies of warfare and industry with “feminine” technologies, like sewing machines and pianofortes.

This genealogy of domestic metaphors began with female telegraph operators, who made up 25% of the telegraphic workforce by the 1880s, and metastasized with the overwhelming female domination of telephone and typewriter work by the early twentieth century. As Katherine Mullin observes, the function of these metaphors—“pastel ribbons, musical sounders, dainty keys”—disseminated first by employers and then diffused into broader cultural consciousness—was to establish the “telegraph office as a place where the graces of girlhood were preserved,” leading smoothly, even fortuitously, into a future of marriage and maternity. Mullin goes on to correlate the swift ascension of the female typist with the persistence of this precedent: “The Lady Typewriter was a clear successor to the Lady Telegraphist,” she writes, noting the ease with which domestic metaphors were carried over from one technology to another. This transition was aided by the mechanical makeup of early commercial typewriter models, “powered by an adaption of the company’s sewing machine treadle” and equipped with a keyboard preternaturally suited to the daintiness and dexterity of young women’s fingers, honed by years of piano practice. Primarily known as a gun manufacturer until the 1870s, E.

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84 Ibid., 25.
Remington & Sons took care to emphasize these features of the typewriter over its “strikes and triggers,” which resembled the ammunitions support in revolvers and machine-guns.\footnote{Kittler, \textit{Gramophone, Film, Typewriter}, 191.} Similarly, AT&T singled out a visual rhyme between switching and weaving for its ‘weavers of speech’ advertising campaign: “Binding twentieth-century working girls to nineteenth-century domestic iconography, [Bell] romanticized the operator as an angel of the wires, a handmaiden whose discipline oiled the gears of men’s business without restructuring traditional social spaces.”\footnote{Middeljans, “Weavers of Speech,” 39.} A particularly trenchant justification for the feminization of telephone operation was the female voice box. Echoing the biological determinism that associated fast typing with feminine fingers, H.M. Betting reports, “Few devices are so well matched [as the telephone] to the particular needs and style of women. The instrument seems particularly suited to their voice range and timbre.”\footnote{Quoted in Ellen Lupton, \textit{Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office} (New York: Cooper-Hewitt National Museum of Design and Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 59.}

As many recent social histories of white-collar women’s work have demonstrated, dainty fingers, high-pitched voices, detail-oriented minds and politeness were not why Western Union, followed by AT&T and Remington, began to recruit women. Much more sinisterly, these ladylike qualities became talking points in a strategically orchestrated cultural campaign, designed to quell the moral panic of a puritanical public, class and racial anxieties of wealthy employers, investors, and subscribers, and anger of male communications workers replaced by women working longer hours for half the pay. Allusions to weaving, piano practice, and vocal quality implicitly wedded mechanical labor to a nostalgically genteel class of young womanhood that would have been aspirational for the majority of female communications workers employed in the US in the late nineteenth century. The young ladies of marriageable age conjured through
these metaphors would not have been out of place in a Jane Austen novel, delicately honing their digital dexterity at the sounder and singing voice on the telephone while waiting for the arrival of a young man of good fortune who must be in want of a wife. They certainly bore little resemblance to the more relevant wage-labor precedent that mill girls, the first feminized industrial workforce in the United States, might have provided. This precedent was, indeed, deliberately obfuscated by employers, in part to encourage the perception among potential workers that tapping, typing and switching would prove an attractive alternative to dust-ridden, immigrant-filled textile mills, and in part to generate a nostalgic, de-industrialized, and white image for their bourgeois clientele.

The sustainability of this image involved imagining a symbiotic relationship between femininity and the office enabled by the civilizing influence of young women on their male colleagues. The “marriage bar” imposed by many companies by the turn of the century, which forced women to retire once they wed, institutionalized the idea that communications labor offered a temporary waystation for young, single women, intended to carry them safely from their father’s to their husband’s house. The corporate line paradoxically presented the “marriage bar” as both a paternalistic intervention—to preserve the viability of the uterus and boundaries of the home—and a natural extension of the choice most commonly made by female employees, who did not wish to pursue careers after marriage. This mixed message disguised a highly lucrative corporate strategy: through the ideological veil of the marriage bar, employers could shed their most experienced (and highest-paid) workers and retain a predominantly entry-level salaried workforce.

Images of young women knitting or reading novels at their stations also disingenuously represented the amount of physical labor and sensory stress that telegraph, telephone, and typewriter operation demanded. While Western Union and Bell explained the average age (roughly 17-25)\(^9\) and high turnover rate of their female employees in matrimonial terms, “industry statistics indicate that the high turnover rate among operators was more likely due to low wages, long hours and job stress.”\(^9\) Still, 25-year-old operators leaving the industry because of “glass arm,” seizures, carpel tunnel, hysteria and “nervous exhaustion”\(^9\) could be assured that if they ever did get married, their “ambidextrous training” would allow them “to hold a baby and handle a carpet sweeper at one and the same time.”\(^9\) This kind of detail would have been carefully formulated to pre-empt a common concern descended from mid-nineteenth-century arguments against employing women in mills, that the years of intense industrial labor would destroy their ability to conceive and carry children.\(^9\) Studies revealing the mental and physiological damage caused by switchboard operation would emerge decades too late to enforce desperately needed protective labor legislation. In 1909, women’s labor advocate Josephine Goldmark observed she was “unable to learn of any American investigations into this subject.”\(^9\) In Chapter 3, I will conduct a closer examination of female clerical workers’ unique array of


\(^9\) Goldmark, *Fatigue and Efficiency: A Study in Industry*, 75.
neurasthenic symptoms. For now, suffice it to say that this was not the image of “naturally” feminine labor that Bell or its fellow communications monopolies sought to promote.

Female Clerical Workers in Literary, Film, and Media Scholarship

Since the 1980s, social and labor historians have done a great deal of work to resurface histories of female information workers (also known over the years as clerical, communications, white-collar, pink-collar, immaterial, and reproductive laborers). The most canonical books from this wave of scholarship—many of which informed the last section—include Alice Kessler Harris’ Out to Work (1982), Marjorie Davie’s A Woman’s Place is at the Typewriter (1982), Kathy Peiss’s Cheap Amusements (1986), Stephen Norwood’s Labor’s Flaming Youth (1990), Michele Martin’s “Hello, Central?” (1991), Lana Rakow’s Gender on the Line (1992), Thomas Jepsen’s My Sisters Telegraphic (2000), and Venus Green’s Race on the Line (2001).

Film and media theorists, meanwhile, were noticeably slower to notice the girl behind the machine. In 2004, while writing a book about the cultural construction of the female typist, Lawrence Rainey noted the odd absence of literary and film scholarship on female clerical workers. “Over the last quarter-century,” wrote Rainey,

feminist historians have brought about a major historiographical revolution, patiently mapping the vast terra incognita of female clerical labor which so radically transformed the lives of women, a subject once omitted by male historians who traced the history of twentieth-century labor. […] But if one were to look for something comparable in literary or film studies, one would search in vain. The books and films that assayed the new female protagonist at the dawn of the twentieth-century have simply vanished into a strange, almost eerie silence. […] Anglo-American cultural studies are currently lavishing their attention on questions of gender, technology, and metropolitan space, only to ignore the cultural experience and representations of the women who inhabited that space. New York, London, Paris, Berlin… Unreal.95

“Unreal” is the last word in Rainey’s essay. It matches the feeling I still get when I think about my subjects as real live androids littered all over the margins of modern media. It is unreal how long it has taken for my field to catch up to the feminist historical scholarship from the 1980s and 90s.

Nonetheless, over the past ten years, there has been a significant upsurge in chapter and article-length studies of literary secretaries, telegraph operators, and telephone operators, notably marked by the publication of Pamela Thurschwell and Leah Price’s edited volume, *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture*, in 2005. Most Anglo-American literary studies still orbit around a narrow modernist canon—the typist-medium in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), the operator-reader in Henry James’s *In the Cage* (1898), the mechanical typist in T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” (1922)—all one-off forays into mediatrix lit (a variation on chick lit?) whose iconic machine-women have traditionally been cast as symptoms of their male authors’ ambivalent embeddedness within feminized technological and mass cultural modernity. But scholars like Mark Goble, Ned Schantz, Katherine Stubbs, Christopher Keep, Katherine Mullin, Morag Shiach, Tom Gunning, Friedrich Kittler, Bernhard Siegert, Richard Menke, and Katherine Biers have also used canonical authors as anchors for more intermedially and mass-culturally attuned explorations of fictional female media.96 As a result, we now have a burgeoning counter-canon

of techno-romances, detective fiction, melodramas, operettas, and woman-authored texts across a range of genres to add to the older canon, from forgotten best-selling serial novels and films like Ella Thayer’s *Wired Love* (1879) and Geraldine Bonner’s *The Girl at Central* (1915) to understudied modernist works like Sophie Treadwell’s play *Machinal* (1928) and Mascha Kaleko’s book of poetry, *Das Lyrische Stenogrammheft* (The Lyric Stenography Booklet, 1930).

In short, my work builds on a wealth of recent scholarship related to girl operators and typists in literature and culture. But Lawrence Rainey is still in the minority in his focus on *cinematic* depictions of clerical workers, and sadly he died this year before he could complete his manuscript on the literary and filmic typist. While film scholars have long read studio-produced films as symptomatic products of an “apparatus” and “system” through the lens of an assembly-line production process, an array of new woman-authored books remind us that the field has largely ignored the question of how *gendered* divisions, rhythms, and technologies of “non-creative” film labor might differently underwrite film history and film form. Starting from this question, Erin Hill’s book, *Never Done: Women’s Work in Media Production* (2016) reveals the masses of culturally invisible female clerical and technical workers who made up more than 50% of Hollywood studio workforces throughout the classical era. While Hill ties the gendering of certain non-creative film roles to the earliest days of film history by beginning with the female hand-tinters and splicers who worked for Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers in the 1890s,


her predominant focus is on how the standardized labor divisions wrought by the rise of the studio system turned rooms full of deft-fingered girls processing memos and scripts into “the fuel of Hollywood’s large-scale, industrial production process.”98 As Hill explains,

Much of the book focuses particularly on women in clerical fields, not only because the clerical branch of feminized labor was one of the largest at studios, but also because clerical workers were present in some capacity in nearly all departments and thus offer a variety of useful perspectives from which to view the system as a whole. Exploring this family of women’s professions provides a clearer sense of the industrial logic that underwrote all such sectors.99

I will cite Hill’s research frequently throughout this dissertation, because her vision of female clerical workers as the key to deciphering a repressed industrial logic of Hollywood cinema aligns with my own conception of the modern mediatrix as an urgent link for feminist film historians faced with the difficulties of bringing unscreened histories of women’s film work into view. The methodological dexterity required to take on these kinds of histories is exemplified by Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality (2020), in which Genevieve Yue examines the “china girls” and “leader ladies” used to maintain color-balance from the lab to the projection booth. In order to reveal the centrality of a figure who would only “be glimpsed in a theater […] if a projectionist failed to switch reels at the correct time, allowing the ends of the film to run out,” Yue pairs archival research and interviews with former leader lady models (many of whom worked as secretaries in the film lab) with close analyses of projectionists’ personal leader lady collections and contemporary experimental films that use found footage spliced off the leader of film reels.100 She concludes that the leader lady is systematically hidden from view (and thereby left to languish on the margins of film history) because she risks “revealing the inner workings of

98 Erin Hill, Never Done: Women’s Work in Media Production, 4.
99 Ibid., 9.
100 Genevieve Yue, “The China Girl on the Margins of Film,” October 153 (2015): 98. See also Genevieve Yue, Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020). The essay cited here was adapted for the first chapter of this book.
the processes that bring film into being, disrupting a movie’s narrative reverie by exposing the constitutive seams of the film’s construction. When we see it, we realize there is a different system of signification at work behind the images we typically see: For every leading lady, there is an attendant leader lady.” Tantalizingly, the leader lady below, an emblematic vision in blonde, white, and red, was apparently rescued from the margins of a 1958 Eames IBM promotional short entitled *The Information Machine*. The harder we look, the harder it is to tell where the girl ends and the machine begins.

While this dissertation will, like Yue’s book, combine many methodologies to reveal the girls in the foundations and “constitutive seams” of film, it is based on a much more accessible audio-visual archive of primary sources, because unlike the china girl, hand-tinter, and cutter girl

101 Ibid., 108.

102 This leader lady from a 35mm print of *Information Machine* (dir. Charles and Ray Eames, 1958) can be found in the “Leader Lady Project” digital archive, hosted by the Chicago Film Society: https://www.chicagofilmsociety.org/projects/leaderladies/
in the film lab, operators and typists have been highly visible cinematic icons as long as they have been employed in the film industry. What remains remarkable about female clerical and communication workers, in contrast to their invisible mediatrix cousins, is how long they have remained hidden in plain sight on the studio lot and screen at the same time. Hooked up to cords and keyboards, onscreen operators and typists call cinema’s hybrid technological makeup, invisible girl workforce, and feminized materiality to the surface of text. But as if by magic, they have somehow not disrupted movies’ narrative reveries or film scholarship’s gender-blind approach to industrial readings of film, despite flamboyantly “exposing the workings of the processes that bring film into being”—both as emblems of the feminine “fuel,” as Erin Hill put it, on which studio systems run—and as flamboyant cyborgs armed with media-machines that hook them up to the machinery of cinema. This is why, building on Donna Haraway’s concept of the paradoxical “ubiquity and invisibility” of cyborgs, which she characterizes as highly suggestive modern mediating agents that are nonetheless “as hard to see politically as materially,” I describe the modern mediatrix as a potential theoretical link for feminist film historians. Connected by the rhetoric and imagery of weaving, delicate handiwork, receptivity, imagination and intuition, cinematic representations of girl operators and typists are ubiquitous, hyper-visible links to invisible forms of women’s work on the studio lot. Once disentangled from the encrypted patriarchal patterns into which they have been woven, these traces unveil the film industry’s ambivalent, flickering relationship to its own feminization and can be used to begin mapping a complex media infrastructural history of Hollywood based on an unstable and multivalent, but powerful and long-lasting, logic of feminized mediation.

103 Haraway, Manifestly Haraway, 13.
I have borrowed the term “media infrastructure” from Lisa Parks’ 2015 call for more media theorists to study the forces that invisibly fuel film shoots and screenings, from raw materials like electricity, plastics, and metals to the human workers who become a part of the integrated circuit of “human-technology relations.” Following Marx on the commodity, this theoretical approach seeks to expose the power dynamics, materials, bodies and interpersonal relations that are mystified by the spectacular end-product: the image on the screen. “Since infrastructures cannot be captured in a single frame,” writes Parks, “we must read media with an infrastructural disposition – that is, when viewing/consuming media we must think not only about what they represent and how they relate to a history of style, genre, or meaning but also think more elementally about what they are made of and how they arrived.” Moving beyond the well-worn image of the dream factory to the communicative, logistical, and distribution systems that structure film, Parks insists on a model that acknowledges, for example, how significantly the infrastructures of the mailroom and the telephone system have shaped the infrastructure of the film industry. I will take this model and run with it, placing a particular emphasis on how feminized infrastructures of pre-cinematic media shaped the film industry (my version of the media-matrix).

Taken together, the recent works of Hill, Yue, and Parks suggest that learning the gender history of telegraph networks, switchboards, and offices might play a crucial role in refining longstanding notions of film as a medium made of many media. By exchanging a loose sense of cinema as the hybrid apotheosis of all nineteenth-century media for a more precise palimpsest of feminized media infrastructures, we can start to figure out how constructions of gender, technology, spectacle, performance, labor and narrative become “layered upon one another over

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time, how they are part of a media archaeology,” as Parks puts it.105 The conspicuous rise of the modern mediatrix allows us to unpeel these layers from the outside in, to uncover the secrets, ruptures, and contradictions suppressed on the surface of popular culture.

The Euro-American standardization of the (white) white-collar working girl

As long as I remained an invisible worker, my image would be another invention.106

From the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century, the modern mediatrix went global. Led by England, France, and Germany, countries across the world adopted the American-born logic of white-collar feminization to structure their clerical, communications, and cinematic infrastructures.107 In a culture increasingly shaped by (and against) Hollywood, British telephonists complained that subscribers were conflating them with their saucy, flirtatious American counterparts on the screen.108 Meanwhile, Siegfried Kracauer worried that typists and telephone operators were too distractable at the movie theater, and in a Parisian café, Jean Epstein commented on a common spectacle of modern, mediated life: daily parades of typists jolted rudely out of other worlds…

Riding in a tram, four times a day one sees typists taking their elementary emotions out to graze in the pages of a book that is dirty and yet delicately covered in gray paper, a volume which they peruse with affection. Then comes that split-second of bewilderment—how comical to observe!—that overtakes them when the conductor interrupts an adulterous affair already in progress and pauses to ask for the six sous that make up the fare for their seat.109

105 Ibid.

106 This is a line pronounced by the collective, collaged telephone operator heroine-narrator of Caroline Martel’s film Phantom of the Operator (2004, Women Make Movies, 65 min.). It can be viewed via Kanopy.


Epstein’s affectionate scorn for the “elementary emotions” stimulated by “dirty” novels offers us a snapshot of the female mediator’s familiarly clashing worlds—“that split-second of bewilderment”—recast as a banally frequent experience, a vernacular punctuation of the working day. His typist is a creature of the “dirty” pulp paperback in two senses: she is always already lost in a trivial romantic plot, but she is also, like the books she reads, mass reproduced and widely circulated. The second sense frames Kracauer’s 1930 sociology of salaried workers, which opens with a witticism delivered by a secretary in response to the author’s questions about her life in the office: “But you can already find all that in novels,” the secretary insists. Kracauer disagrees: “You cannot, as the secretary thinks, find it all in novels. On the contrary, information about her and her kind is hard to obtain.”\(^{110}\) Kracauer’s dismissal of the “information” that novels about secretaries might offer him is legible through his rightful wariness of the standardizing influence of modern ideology on the new white-collar proletariat. Without explaining why he consistently singles out woman workers to make this point, Kracauer notes the emergence of standard types like "salesgirl, draper’s assistant, shorthand typist and so on, which are portrayed and at the same time cultivated in magazines and cinemas.”\(^{111}\) By the early twentieth century, the once-mysterious, muse-like figure of the female information worker had experienced a fall and come to be seen (by male leftist intellectuals and modernist writers, at least) as an ominous sign of the standardization of self, automation of mind, and dissolution of borders between the real and imaginary wrought by industrial modernity.

One of the most effective forms of global mystification produced by the mediatrix on the screen was the standardization of her whiteness. Precisely because female information workers

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\(^{111}\) Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 68.
were invisible to the public on a daily basis, it was necessary for their popular traces to be constructed as homogenously (non-ethnically) white, the last bastion of defense against the porous borders of modern media. Hollywood’s domination of the global film industry turned telegraph, telephone, and typewriter girls into the mass reproducible types of which Kracauer was so wary.

Like white-collar feminization itself, this European convention followed an American model. A telephone operator scene from the Harold Lloyd film *Number Please?* (1920) offers an exemplar of the (always implicitly white) white-collar worker’s cultural construction. In a comic reversal of an early cinematic device, Harold Lloyd is desperately trying to get on the phone with the woman he loves, while his competitor tries to get to her by car. At first, the call does not go through, because the telephone operators are gossiping. Their discourse is the noise in the network. When an operator does finally pick up Lloyd’s call, the noise is transferred to another source. As we see below right, the operator becomes the brightly lit, white center of a multi-racial, multilingual telephonic network, visibly overwhelmed by its cacophony.

Similarly, *Allo Berlin? Ici Paris! / Hallo Hallo? Hier Spricht Berlin!* (1932), a Franco-German telephone operator romantic comedy I will examine in Chapter 2, evokes the raucous reach of a
global, multi-racial telephone network and then spends the rest of the film gently guiding its two white European protagonists toward each other. Meanwhile, Chinese-Americans operators like the woman below, who manned bilingual switchboards in San Francisco’s Chinatown, can only be found in rare archival news footage, not reproduced in Hollywood films.¹¹²

The “mass” media archive of invisibly white feminine links assembled in this dissertation is fundamentally limited from this perspective. Far from an accurate depiction of the average female information worker or the range of her possible lived identities and experiences, it is more like a distorted mirror of a transatlantic imperial ideal. But deconstructing it will nonetheless serve the interests of all woman workers, because the cult of domesticity first used by Western Union and Bell to promote communications work as “genteel” in order to exclude immigrants and women of color later became the means of incorporating people of color into increasingly precarious and globalized mediating roles. Venus Green reminds us that by the time

¹¹² I would like to thank Xin Peng for this gift, footage from a Fox Movietone newsreel from the 1920s documenting the Chinatown Telephone Exchange.
Bell was obsolescing its last operators in the 1960s, they were all black women. Lisa Nakamura has shown how the rhetorical strategies originally used to recruit white teenage girls as telegraph operators shaped 1970s campaigns to recruit Navajo women to “weave” computer wires.\textsuperscript{113}

With the specters of Siri and third world call centers on the horizon, this dissertation will not seek out a form of ideal feminine subjectivity extractable from racial, patriarchal capitalism or capitalist media. That search ends in a feedback loop bounded by anxious antinomies of modernity: culture/nature, truth/illusion, original,copy, and (most notably for the mediatrix), distance/closeness and alienation/connection. Instead, in the tradition of Donna Haraway’s \textit{Cyborg Manifesto}, my project adopts the slashes and dashes mediating these antinomies (single working-class young white women, it turns out) as its space of play.\textsuperscript{114} I will anchor myself throughout with the “queer, composite creature” Virginia Woolf locates at the disjuncture between the grandiose, ineffable women imagined by literature and the generations of illiterate, insignificant women of history.\textsuperscript{115} The connections I make between woman workers and their distorted reflections in the mass media sphere expose the industrial and rhetorical materials through which this “odd monster” has been constructed and maintained over the past century and a half, despite the cracks created by her many internal contradictions and replaceable parts.


\textsuperscript{114} Haraway produces a similar list of “hegemonic dualisms” (I have stolen some from her) in order to describe the utopian bridge built by her cyborg. Her list, however, never zooms out from this gleaming vision to address the broader significance of the \textit{meta-medium} her cyborg has become, as in something that mediates many of the dialectical paradigms through which media technologies have been conceptualized. (Donna Haraway, \textit{Manifestly Haraway} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 59.)

\textsuperscript{115} Virginia Woolf, \textit{A Room of One’s Own} (London: Grafton, 1977), 40.
Chapter summaries

Each of my four chapters explores a different facet of the modern mediatrix. I begin in the United States in the 1860s, when Western Union began recruiting lady telegraphers and the Catholic Church premiered its Blessing of the Telegraph, with Mary cast as a pure channel for man’s natural use of electricity. Framed by this techno-utopian mother-figure, Chapter 1 examines the multi-media afterlives of three teenage girls who became enshrined in US popular history as the “first” users of the telegraph, telephone, and typewriter. Through close analyses of an 1873 biographical sketch of Samuel Morse, a 1948 Hollywood musical sponsored by Remington Rand, and Bernhard Siegert’s 1990s reading of Bell’s deaf wife as “the operator of all future operators,” I will excavate a century-long tradition of technological origin stories that cast a young woman with domestic ties to a male inventor as a magical bridge from Eureka moment to monopoly formation and mass feminization. To establish the modern mediatrix as a longstanding agent of industrial continuity, this chapter shows how inventors, entrepreneurs, and multi-generational companies used virginal foremothers to claim paternity over communications technologies and their feminized workforces. Many of the roles the Catholic and social Mediatrix encode—reader, audience, translator, diplomat, intercessor, and abstracted, alienated “laborer”—echo throughout the rest of dissertation.

Moving on to film-industrial and formal continuity, Chapter 2 proposes the girl operator as an essential link in cinematic syntax. In conversation with silent film scholars Raymond Bellour, Tom Gunning, Lynne Kirby, and Paul Young on the didactic role played by meta-technologies in proto-classical cinema, I argue that Bell’s 1915-1941 branding of its switchboard operators as “weavers of speech” made the girl operator heroines of early cross-cutting shorts legible to early American filmgoers as onscreen teachers of new montage techniques. While
operators have largely played peripheral roles in classical films, I demonstrate that two major transitional periods saw them rise to the surface of story en masse, as if temporarily hired to sew over a rupture. Through a comparative analysis of the connections forged by operator heroines in an early American silent film, *The Lonedale Operator* (D.W. Griffith, 1911), and an early Franco-German sound film, *Allo Berlin? Ici Paris!/Hallo Hallo? Hier Spricht Berlin!* (Julien Duvivier, 1932), this chapter reveals the cycles of girl activation and obsolescence that structure industrial film form.

Framed by close readings of the diaries of Adolf Hitler’s last private secretary, in which she described herself as trapped in a “blind spot” next to her dictator, Chapter 3 shows how a longstanding cultural interest in the mental effects of taking dictation daily from a disembodied male voice became intertwined with more immediate anxieties about secretaries’ heightened receptivity to media-savvy fascist dictators. This chapter locates the rise of the sound-struck secretary within a specific, highly symptomatic historical moment, frozen into transhistorical scholarly significance by Siegfried Kracauer’s famous Weimar essays, “The Mass Ornament” and “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies.” Through close readings of woman-authored tales of typist alienation and popular films about musical, mechanized typists, this chapter highlights the cinematic secretary’s role as a vital mediating link for fascist leaders seeking to “collectivize the hypnotic spell” and forge a paternal, romantic, and intimate relationship with the masses.

Moving to 1930s-1940s Hollywood, Chapter 4 uses the metallic echoes of taps to read RKO’s ten Astaire-Rogers musicals as allegories for the Production Code’s reliance on typists, and as encrypted channels to two fleetingly feminized languages, Morse and binary code. After demonstrating that in the 1930s, the resonance of typing and dancing taps created a sonic cue many Hollywood musicals took up with self-conscious glee, I argue that RKO’s telegraphic
branding and gendered divisions of dance labor also returned a repressed cultural memory to center-screen: the female Morse operator, transferred to teletype in the 1910s and scrubbed out of history by the 1920s. To make the case for the tap dancer as a screen surrogate for invisible, alienated, and forgotten incarnations of the modern mediatrix, I return to cultural constructions of clerical workers examined in previous chapters: virginal domestic heroines as mytho-historical agents of capitalist continuity, cinematic girl operators as iconic but contingent film-weavers, and alienated typists as “sound-struck” moviegoers, trapped in a blind spot at the heart of a male-voiced, mass-mediated network. I then conclude with a close analysis of an MGM musical released at the height of the US army’s recruitment of women as cryptographers, in which a chorus girl wins the war by tap-dancing in Morse code.

A postwar coda will draw out the clerical conduit’s transgressive potential, broadly hinted at by her narrative flexibility and explicitly reclaimed in the 1970s and 80s by feminist filmmakers (Laura Mulvey, Sally Potter, Julie Dash) and techno-scientists (Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant). With access to the codes of information capitalism, virginal electric muses and hysterical film fans become trickster figures, strikers, and decipherers of mystified technocultural matrilineages.

In placing “the complex intersections between woman and modernity” at the center of my investigation, I follow the example of a number of feminist Marxist, film-historical and semiotic studies of cyborgs, woman writers, novelistic heroines, and clerical workers. My project departs from these models, however, in its emphasis on intermedial fictions of femininity:

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116 In particular, I am thinking of Rita Felski’s emphasis on prelapsarian femininity and auratic decay in The Gender of Modernity, Andreas Huyssen’s work on malicious machine-women and the fraught relationship of masculine modernism to feminized mass culture (After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism), Laura Mulvey’s identification of Woman at the intersection of the Freudian and the commodity fetish (Fetishism and Curiosity), and Karen Redrobe’s interest in the vanishing woman as a figure “inextricably and compulsively bound up in the invention and development of film” (Vanishing Women).
fictional representations of women operating with, through, and as media technologies. The modern mediatrix is a meta-disciplinary and interdisciplinary link: she unites communications, media studies, media archaeology, the history of technology, and film.
O God, who walkest on the wings of the wind and workest alone marvelous things, grant, that whilst Thou transmittest quicker than the lightning by the power lent to this metal absent things hither and present things hence to another place, we may, instructed by new inventions and assisted by Thy grace, come more promptly and readily to Thee. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (*then the telegraph is sprinkled with holy water.*)^117

Chapter 1 – Mary the Bridge
Virgin Mothers, Daughters, and Brides of Modern Media

In the 1860s, the same decade Western Union began to systematically recruit white, unmarried “girls” between the ages of 17 and 22 as lady telegraphers, the Catholic Church premiered its “Blessing of the Telegraph” around the globe, with the Virgin Mary cast as a pure channel and maternal guide for man’s “natural” use of electricity. “One of the oldest blessings dealing with the technical sphere,” later followed by blessings of the train, electrical contrivance, and airplane, the blessing of the telegraph specifically invoked Mary in her long-debated role as “Mediatrix of all graces,” the preeminent mortal intermediary between God and humankind. Described by Catholic theologian Manfred Hauke as “the most disputed topic of modern Mariology,”^118 Mary’s status as Mediatrix peaked in global popularity and notoriety during the late nineteenth and twentieth century amidst multiple Church-certified Marian apparitions (1830, 1846, 1858), the 1854 papal definition of the Immaculate conception as dogma, and the 1896 foundation of a movement for the dogmatic definition of Mary’s universal mediation of grace. As I noted in the introduction, secular, metaphorical applications of “mediatrix”—an informal title for patronesses, benefactresses, female translators and diplomats—faded from common

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usage in the English language during the same period that telegraph, telephone, and typewriter operation became feminized across the U.S. and Western Europe. The 1865 blessing of the telegraph offers evidence of at least one major moment of explicit connection between the ancient intercessory role of the mediatrix and technological mediation.

This prayer, which can be found in English, German, and French translations of the liturgy as early as 1866, is meant to be accompanied by a procession from the local church to the local telegraph station and conclude with a sprinkling of holy water on the telegraph itself. The position it occupies in the Roman Ritual—after prayers for religious objects and before prayers for secular objects—epitomizes the mediating role it plays in the late-nineteenth-century Catholic worldview: the telegraph and other “technical means of communication and transport, the bell, the telegraph and the railway, are regarded as links between the spiritual or ecclesiastical and the material or secular sphere.” The source I will cite at length on this subject (because of its sharp analysis) is a 1942 essay, “The Blessing of the Telegraph,” written by John Hennig for Orates Fratres, a journal run by the monks of Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota since 1926. Hennig’s perspective on the blessing is particularly interesting, because he is clearly embittered by what he describes as the Church’s historically “optimistic view on technical contrivances,” the repercussions of which he reflects on in the context of “the present suffering in the world” wrought by technology during World War II.

119 As I have said elsewhere, this may be a linguistic foible of the English language because of the arcane “atrix” ending. I have yet to find evidence of female communications workers in Francophone contexts as “médiatrices” or in German-language contexts as “Mittlerinnen,” but in both languages the word has continued to be used colloquially as a feminine noun form of mediator.

120 Hennig, “The Blessing of the Telegraph,” 543.

121 Hennig, 546.
The main target of Hennig’s critique is the Blessing’s instruction that the telegraph is a discovery made by man of God’s marvelous heavenly powers, as suggested by the phrase “God, who walkest on the wings of the winds.” The invention of electricity, according to the Church, “is only the use of this marvelous power for the different and definite human purposes, such as the transmission of messages and the production of light.” The danger of the blessing’s conception of “electrical contrivances” as man-made discoveries of divine wonders is that by extension, mankind’s “natural use” of those discoveries is sanctified. “Thus technical contrivances are blessed as means of expediting human affairs and of attaining life everlasting. […] The telegraph works ‘quicker than lightning’ and leads us more ‘promptly to heaven.’” Like the mediatrix, in other words, the telegraph offers men a mortal channel to the spiritual realm.

Though the passage I have cited above concludes with the phrase “Through Christ our Lord. Amen,” it is, in fact, Mary who is twice called in to bless men’s natural uses of the telegraph in order to guide them “more promptly to heaven.” According to Hennig, Mary is given central place in the Blessing of the Telegraph because in her life, “we have the greatest example of a message from God being transmitted by an angel and leading ‘promptly’ to heaven.” By understanding the “message from God” as Christ and divine “transmission” as the immaculate conception, we can see that in the late nineteenth century, a Catholic origin myth of virgin-mediated communication mutated to mirror evolving techno-romantic cultural beliefs about the role of communications media in human society and the role of young single women.

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122 Hennig, 543, 546.

123 Ibid., 545. It is worth noting, anecdotally, that when my Catholic and Episcopal colleagues have tried to explain Mary’s mediating role in prayer, they seem unable to do so without analogies to the field of communications. One friend described Mary as an intermediary who can be “cc’d on an email to God.” Another described her as “a kind of secretary. She has God’s ear.”
(and their reproductive bodies) in an expanding technologically mediated world. The Catholic Church’s 1865 transformation of Mary Mediatrix into a “patroness of all electrical contrivances” through whom “the telegraph works ‘quicker than lightning’ and leads [men] more ‘promptly to heaven’” encoded an ancient theology of gendered mediation that predated and became entangled with the modern mediatrix’s foundational mystification under industrial capitalism as a “natural” feminine technology for patriarchal transmission and transaction. If, as we have seen, the Church’s abiding obsession with parsing the minutiae of Mary’s mediation might be regarded as one of the longest-running patriarchal campaigns to abstract women’s primacy in the creation of human life, the role imagined for her in the telegraph network offers something more like a novelty snapshot of the palimpsests of gendered alienation that shape modern myths of how media technologies are born, authored, disseminated to the public, and culturally reproduced over time.

In recent years, “inaugural moments” of invention and industry have been subject to rigorous critique by historians of science, technology, film and media. Christopher Keep argues that our desire for teleological truths and linear narratives makes us dangerously susceptible to the “genealogical fantasy of an absolute origin, in which we can trace the unbroken lineage of our modern technologies, like the computer and the internet, back to these

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124 Hennig, 543-546. Hennig points out that position the Blessing of the Telegraph occupies in the Roman Ritual—after prayers for religious objects and before prayers for secular objects—epitomizes the mediating role it plays in the late-nineteenth-century Catholic worldview: put simply, the telegraph and other “technical means of communication and transport, the bell, the telegraph and the railway, are regarded as links between the spiritual or ecclesiastical and the material or secular sphere.”

125 In particular I am thinking of all the patent wars around the phantasmagoria and the kaleidoscope, Charles Musser on Edison’s battle with the Lumiere brothers for recognition as “first” filmmaker, Francesco Casetti’s recent essay on three myths of origin for media archaeology, and Jane Gaines’ chapter on Alice Guy Blache’s relationship to the “first” narrative film: “In recent years the field trend has been not toward reinforcing but toward critiquing accounts of the invention of cinema and especially the nationalism that advances one ‘inaugural moment’ over another, whether French or German or American.” (Jane Gaines, Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries? (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 62)
founding and foundational father figures.”

Carolyn Marvin notes that in addition to the lure of founding fathers, national biases and commercial interests corrupt the integrity of absolute origin stories, revealing more about the “social drama in which technologies are used to negotiate power, authority, representation and knowledge” than about pivotal benchmarks in the history of technology. A growing body of work in the history of science has also drawn attention to how “domesticity as cultural ideology […] shaped the making of institutions, professions, and, indeed, conceptual landscaping of the sciences.”

As I will attempt to illustrate here, origin myths that mediate the birth of a new media technology through a virginal female body are shaped by a particularly powerful confluence of domestic, patriarchal, and capitalist ideology.

Framed by the techno-utopian role assigned to Mary in the Blessing of the Telegraph, this chapter will excavate a century-long tradition of media-technological origin myths that cast a young woman with domestic ties to a male inventor as a bridge from Eureka moment to monopoly formation and mass feminization. The three women I will highlight played pivotal roles in inaugurating Samuel Morse, Christopher Latham Sholes, and Alexander Graham Bell as

126 Christopher Keep, “‘Touching at a Distance: Telegraphy, Gender, and Henry James’s In the Cage,’” in Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sound, Touch, ed. Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 245.


129 Take, for example, the woman designated by Western Union as the “first female operator,” Emma Hunter of West Chester, Pennsylvania, who became a telegrapher for the Atlantic and Ohio Telegraph Company in 1851. Not only, as Thomas Jepsen points out, is it “clear that other women had worked as telegraphers before she did,” as early as the mid-1840s, but more importantly, Western Union designated Hunter as the first female operator in 1879, some twenty years after the company had first begun to recruit and train women and just one year after it had purchased the Atlantic and Ohio Telegraph Company. Western Union’s tribute to Hunter thus constituted a self-referential coup on two levels: as consecration of its highly successful employment strategy, now entered into history as a glorious tradition (rather than a progressive or even radical act, as it might have been interpreted in the 1850s), and of its ongoing monopoly formation. Emma Hunter may not have belonged to Western Union in 1851, but by 1879 her legacy did. (Thomas C. Jepsen, My Sisters Telegraphic: Women in the Telegraph Office, 1846-1850 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 5.)
the fathers of their respective inventions, the telegraph, typewriter, and telephone. But the stories circulated about these women in industry literature, popular history, journalism, and fiction also effectively replaced the real history of how and why multiple forms of low-level communications labor were feminized on an industrial scale throughout the second half of the nineteenth century with a mythic first moment model that anchored women to the media-machines they were always already designed to operate. Because no real or imagined telegraph, typewriter, or telephone operators existed at these inaugural moments, domestic heroines—young women of genteel upbringing linked to inventors and industrialists through kinship and marital networks—were retroactively cast as virgin mothers, daughters, and brides of modern media and gendered mediating labor.

To trace the development of this popular mytho-historical tradition, I will focus on three nineteenth-century American teenage girls who became enshrined in American popular history as the first of their kind: Annie Ellsworth, a reputed “friend” of Samuel Morse, the daughter of the first commissioner of patents, and much-mythologized “inditer” of the first telegraph message; Lilian Sholes, the daughter of Christopher Latham Sholes, the first woman photographed at a typewriter, and a key player in “softening” up the first typewriter manufacturer; and Mabel Hubbard, the deaf daughter of an early telephone investor who married Alexander Graham Bell, thus becoming, for media theorist Bernhard Siegert, the “the operator of all future operators.” With the exception of Siegert’s substantive writing on Hubbard, which I will engage in the last section of this chapter, media scholarship has largely relegated Mabel Hubbard, Annie Ellsworth, and Lilian Sholes to the margins of telegraph, telephone, and

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130 Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. Kevin Repp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 187. Sources are split about 50/50 on whether Sholes’ daughter has two or three ls in her name, but I will use “Lilian” throughout this chapter for the sake of consistency, with the exception of direct quotes that spell her name “Lillian.” The frequency of this typo in the press is rather amusing to me, given the subject.
typewriter history. There has been no coordinated effort made to chart or understand their afterlives in the popular imagination.

To establish these three women as longstanding agents of industrial continuity, this chapter will highlight pivotal moments in their multi-media afterlives when they resurfaced as fictionalized characters in popular historical accounts of telegraphic and typewriter origins. Through close analyses of an 1873 biographical sketch of Samuel Morse written by popular historian Benson Lossing, a 1948 Hollywood costume drama about the first female typist in Boston sponsored by Remington Rand, and a German media theorist’s 1990s creative gender analysis of telephone history, I will show how inventors, entrepreneurs, and multi-generational companies used virginal foremothers to claim paternity over communications technologies and their feminized workforces. Siegert’s participation in this well-worn tradition at the end of the twentieth century reveals the remarkable persistence of the mytho-historical mediatrix, a “third person” of technological history periodically revived to assure the seamless self-reproduction of patriarchal information capitalism. By excavating the traces of virgin mothers, daughters, and brides of modern media across popular literature and film, we can begin to map the evolving methods of cultural control and gendered ideology used to alienate woman workers from their labor history.

Virgin Mother # 1: Annie Ellsworth, Inditer of the First Telegraphic Message

In a fascinating essay that I take as an invitation to tie the 1860s techno-utopian Virgin Mary to the beginnings of girl-mediated technological origin myths, a prominent pastor in the DC-area recently speculated that the blessing of the telegraph’s rhetoric was directly influenced
by the seminal telegraphic phrase, “What hath God wrought?”  

Since 1844, the year the question was posed in Morse code over the wire and the story of its transmission began circulating in print, “What hath God Wrought?” has been widely and regularly cited as the first message ever sent by electric telegraph. Like later opening remarks made via media-machine—Christopher Latham Sholes’ string of Ws, typed out in a row on carbon paper (1867) and Thomas Edison’s recording of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” on the phonograph (1877)—it has a totemic place in history as a technological “first.” In recent scholarship, it has become shorthand for the telegraph’s monumental impact on global culture and society: productively evocative and ambiguous, the formulation of the question invites readings that range from genuine piety (a Biblical citation) to techno-utopian hubris (men of science and industry playing god).

The son of an episcopal minister and a savvily self-promotional inventor, Samuel Morse frequently invoked God’s hand in his long-awaited success in bringing the world the telegraph, which he described as “carrying blessing, giving encouragements and promptness to enterprise, throughout this vast country.”  

As we can see by comparing the blessing of the telegraph to a contemporary popular poem cited at the end of Benson J. Lossing’s 1873 biography of Morse, piety and techno-utopian hubris looked very similar in the late nineteenth century. Hennig tells us that “in the 1865 Blessing of the Telegraph, God is actually called the transmitter. Edison and Marconi, the electrician and the telegraph operator are instruments in the hand of God.”  

The 1873 poem cited by Lossing uses identical language to celebrate the transformation of these


132 A letter from Samuel Morse to his brother, Sidney Morse, Sterling Manuscripts and Library Box 22 (S.F.B. Morse, “History of proceedings in England to procure a Patent for my Telegraph,” 1847), p. 8.

133 Hennig, “The Blessing of the Telegraph,” 546.
human instruments of God into masters of divine instruments themselves: “See Franklin seize the Clouds, their bolts to bury; The Sun assigns his pencil to Daguerre, And Morse the lightning makes his secretary!”134

The word “secretary” is particularly suggestive for my purposes, because it evokes a figure missing from the story of the first telegraph message as it is remembered today, the third person in the blessed communications circuit of God, inventor, and public: Annie Ellsworth, the sixteen-year-old girl who—according to Morse—was present at the first telegraphic transmission and proffered the famous phrase, “What hath God wrought?” Compiling a coherent record of Annie’s life presents a certain degree of difficulty, because her textual traces fracture into stories of two different women: Miss Annie Ellsworth, the young girl who sent the first Telegraphic Message for her friend, Samuel Morse, and Mrs. Roswell Smith, the wife of a prominent journalist and editor. Annie was not an engineer or a writer, much less a professional operator. She was the daughter of the first commissioner of patents, Henry Ellsworth, and therefore fortuitously positioned in 1843 to inform Morse (a longtime friend of the Ellsworths, since their days at Yale) that a bill sponsoring telegraph construction had finally passed in the Senate. The legend, cultivated first by Morse and swiftly taken up by the popular press, was that in exchange for this wonderful news, the grateful inventor offered his friend’s daughter the chance to compose the first telegraphic transmission made possible by the senate bill.

Benson J. Lossing’s biographical sketch of Samuel Morse, “Professor Morse and the Telegraph,” was first published in 1873 in *Scribner’s Monthly*, and then reprinted (without any alterations) as part of the hugely popular anthology, *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit & Wisdom*, ed. W.J. Johnston (New York: W.J. Johnston, 1877), 25.

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Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit, and Wisdom in 1877. In fields ranging from cultural history to media, science and literary studies, Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes stars as the single most referenced artifact from nineteenth-century American telegraphic literature. The 150-page anthology contains writing and images drawn from the first thirty years of the telegraph’s commercial operation and was reprinted three times between 1877 and 1882. While the first edition was intended primarily for a reading public made up of operators, both the second and third contained prefaces by the editor, W.J. Johnson, indicating his “hope” that in its updated form, Lightning Flashes would “find friends among the great outside world as well” (second edition). 135 Taken together, the three editions capture a body of literature in transition, moving out of a technical subculture and into the mainstream.

My close reading will focus on the second printing of “Professor Morse and the Telegraph” in LF and ED, because of the mission that frames the anthology (to take stock of telegraphic culture) and the kinds of texts that surround Benson’s essay within it, predominantly examples of a late nineteenth-century literary subgenre Mark Goble has dubbed techno-romance: “ludicrously modern love stories, in which all the mechanics of the marriage plot are translated for a telegraphic world.” 136 This framework allows me to locate Lossing’s contribution in a peak period of American popular fascination with the telegraph, at the nexus of historiography, mythmaking, and fiction.

135 Preface to the third edition: “This edition is intended for those connected with telegraphy and also for the general reading public—for people who have no knowledge whatever of the art or business of telegraphy. […] It is therefore hoped that Lightning Flashes in its present form will prove of very considerable interest to the general reader, and afford a comprehensive and instructive insight into the mysteries of the electric telegraph, and of the inner life of that great and growing fraternity, the telegraphists, in reference to whose highly interesting history so little is known to the outside world.” (W.J. Johnston, Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit & Wisdom (New York: W.J. Johnston, 1877), 4.) For more on the different editions, see Mark Goble, Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and Mediated Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 328.

All three inform Lossing’s rendering of Samuel Morse. The sketch opens with a juxtaposition of two portraits: an engraving of a richly decorated, bespectacled, and bearded luminary and a highly literary description, of “a slender, handsome young man, whose honest expression of countenance, rich brown hair, dark magnetic eyes and courtesy of manner made a most favorable impression.”¹³⁷ Like a promise of things to come, Lossing’s engraving hangs over the “slender, handsome young man,” guaranteeing the narrative fulfillment of his visual potential as a foundational father figure.

The title page of *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes* notes that it contains “contributions from the pens of all the prominent writers in the ranks of telegraphic literature, as well as several well-known outsiders.”¹³⁸ Benson J. Lossing was one of the most well-known

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¹³⁷ Lossing, “Professor Morse and the Telegraph,” 17.

“outsiders” when the anthology was first published. A popular historian and engraver celebrated in his lifetime for the “charm” and nationalist fervor of his illustrated books on the American Revolution and Civil War, Lossing has since faded from cultural memory. He is remembered by some as an entrepreneurial hack, recklessly warping facts for “the sake of rhetorical effect” and profit, and by others as a pioneer of rigorous primary source usage, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, when he traversed the country gathering oral histories, consulting confiscated Confederate records, and corresponding with Great American Men on the subject of their heroism.139

Among the Great American Men with whom Lossing corresponded during the 1860s was Samuel Finley Breese Morse, by then famous around the world but particularly iconic in the United States, for his two ubiquitous “inventions,” the electromagnetic telegraph and Morse code. I have placed “inventions” in quotes because Morse’s patents and the credit he received for transforming mass communication on a world-historical scale were repeatedly contested throughout his lifetime and long after his death.140 A transnational, ensemble-cast account of the many men who, over multiple centuries, made incremental contributions to telegraphy, from mechanical semaphore to the galvanic battery, was unsuited to the single-minded spirit of nineteenth-century American techno-romanticism.

The essay Benson Lossing eventually wrote about Samuel Morse in 1873, almost a decade after their first correspondence, cites a surprising number of these contributions, but they

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139 Harold E. Mahan, Benson J. Lossing and Historical Writing in the United States: 1830-1890 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 107, 2. As a historical subject, Lossing is inconveniently hybrid, having dabbled in clockmaking and newspaper editing among other activities, for decades, before becoming a writer.

140 From 1843 to 1872, Morse was sued by multiple men who claimed to have provided him with the kind of technical information a painter would never learn on his own. As a historical figure, he has had other national narratives of invention to compete with: British histories of the telegraph might note the influence of Charles Wheatstone’s proposals for commercial uses of the electric telegraph in the 1830s; French accounts might start even earlier, with Claude Chappe’s mechanical semaphores or Ampere’s invention of the galvanic battery.
are all confined to a single bulky footnote.\footnote{This footnote contritely qualifies the sweeping statement, “But no telegraph proper—no instrument for writing at a distance—had yet been invented.” It reads: “In 1774, Le Sage constructed an electric semaphore with twenty-four wires corresponding to the 24 letters of the alphabet. In 1793, Claude Chappe established an aerial line of electric semaphores. From 1780 to 1800, German, Italian, and Spanish philosophers made interesting experiments in this direction. In 1810 Schweiger discovered the multiplying power of the magnet by an electric coil, and in 1819 Oersted perfected the discovery of electro-magnetism. Ronalds constructed an electric semaphore, which made signals at a distance of eight miles, in 1816. In 1825 Sturgeon invented the electro-magnet. In 1830 Professor Henry applied Schweiger’s coil to Sturgeon’s magnet, and wonderfully increased the magnetic force which Morse subsequently used. Arago, Faraday, Ampere, Gauss and Weber, and Steinheil had made many valuable advances towards the great discovery, and Wheatsone very nearly reached it.” (Lossing, 21)} The overwhelming aim of the essay is clearly to shore up Morse’s place in history as the one true, divinely inspired inventor of the telegraph, through a combination of overblown metaphorical language, anecdotal evidence of celebrities from Wordsworth to Daguerre prophesizing Morse’s greatness, and suspenseful narrative interplay between early promise and repeated disappointments, all teleologically oriented around a single turning point in Morse’s career, where a “young schoolgirl,” Miss Annie Ellsworth, stands like an angel of mercy holding out her hand in congratulation.\footnote{Lossing, 24.} This young schoolgirl, introduced on the brink of Morse’s despair, offered readers an origin myth to go along with the “first” telegraph and its “first” message: the “first” girl operator.

The turning point Lossing establishes as his narrative’s gravitational center is the U.S. Senate’s late-night decision in 1843 to approve a bill funding construction of the first telegraph line, between Baltimore and Washington D.C. This momentous decision carries Morse’s invention out of the private and into the public sphere, marked a year later by the transmission of the “first message” over the Baltimore-DC line: “What hath God Wrought?” Annie Ellsworth’s narratively overdetermined, ambiguously worded role in the transmission of this mythic first message grounds Lossing’s entire text in the timely intercession of a modern mediatrix.
As I noted earlier, Annie Ellsworth was first entered into history by Morse, who marked the sending of the first message with a handwritten note recording the date, time, place, and participation of Annie G. Ellsworth, followed by a transcription of the message itself from Morse code to English. Lossing reproduces a fragmented facsimile of this document across five pages of his ten-page story. Beginning with the note (which takes up half a page) and continuing with the ticker tape of the bilingual message (spread over the next four pages), it trickles out three or four letters at a time, topped by dots and dashes and dangling ceremonially above the continuing content of Lossing’s sketch (see images below).

Through this layout, the message literally overshadows the second half of Morse’s life. Annie’s precise role in its transmission, however, remains elusively meta-textual. The note reads:

This sentence was written from Washington by me at the Baltimore Terminus at 8:45 A.M. on Friday May 24th, 1844, being the first ever transmitted from Washington to Baltimore by Telegraph, and was indited by my much loved friend Annie G. Ellsworth.

Samuel F. B. Morse, Superintendent of Elec. Mag. Telegraphs.

The verbs Morse attributes to himself (“written”) and Annie (“indited”) evoke an ancient scene: Annie at Morse’s side, playing Muse to his Homer, singing a sentence into his ear while he
writes. The Telegraph and its function ("transmitted") appear in the clause between the two bodies, as if Morse wishes to nestle his invention safely in a human framework. Read consecutively, however, "written," "transmitted," and "indited" evoke a uniform, mechanical process. Even as Morse carefully adds another handwritten record to the enormous paper archive he will accumulate throughout this life to prove his authorship of the telegraph, his passive parallel syntax registers the emergence of a new form of writing that organizes all three verbs into a single telegraphic circuit.\textsuperscript{143}

The word "indited," attributed to Annie, is the most ambiguous of the triad. While Morse likely meant it as a synonym for "dictated," his choice of a term that in the nineteenth century also connoted "to put into written words, write, pen, inscribe, set down, or enter into writing,"\textsuperscript{144} with emphasis on the thought behind the words instead of the words themselves, suggests deliberate vagueness about the mechanics of the process. Annie is most useful in the liminal space between Morse and his message, mingled with the machine and emanating authentication.

Lossing builds on the ambiguity of "indited" with some elliptical formulations of his own. After a first reading of his sketch, one is left unsure if Annie Ellsworth chose the message, sent it herself over the wires (trusted with the operation of the instrument), or was even present in the Supreme Court chambers at 8:45 A.M., when the message was sent. The deal that Morse brokers with Annie, according to Lossing, is a message for a message: in exchange for "bearing

\textsuperscript{143} Here I am evoking the Morse family papers I examined at Sterling in Manuscripts & Archives, which included a substantial number of handwritten documents clearly archived as legal safeguards, along with a number of depositions, as well as the fact that until the 1840s, all mail was transported on trains. The fundamental significance of the electric telegraph has often been summarized in these terms: "it decisively separated data transmission from transportation, freeing the circulation of information from the constraints of physical movement." (Richard Menke, \textit{Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems} (Stanford, ca: Stanford University Press, 2008), 34)

\textsuperscript{144} "indite, v." OED Online, Oxford University Press: https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/94620?isAdvanced=false&result=2&rskey=k5HArv& (accessed September 27, 2019)
him such pleasant tidings, he assured her that she should send over the wires the first message, as her reward.” This phrasing suggests that Annie will not only choose the contents of the message, but will also operate the machine herself. One paragraph and one year later, however, Morse and his assistant sit on opposite ends of the Baltimore-D.C. line. Instead of the promised female operator, Lossing echoes Morse by delivering a series of passive statements (“this was the one which was subsequently sent”; “It was sent in triplicate in the dot-and-line language”; “It was the first message ever transmitted by a recording telegraph”) that replace human with mechanical agency and culminate in an image of Annie hovering somewhere over the wire, waiting for Morse to pick up her frequency: “Prof. Morse sent to Miss Ellsworth for her message, and it came.”

The final ambiguity left is the origin of the message itself, which Lossing accurately attributes to Annie’s mother, Nancy Ellsworth, although once again in a manner that seems unnecessarily circuitous: “Mrs. Ellsworth suggested a message which Prof. Morse referred to the daughter, for her approval.” Paired with the paternal origins of Annie’s first message delivery (“Father sent me to tell you that your bill was passed”), this sentence bears the weight of Lossing’s efforts to position Annie as a mediatrix between the two totemically gendered spheres of influence represented by her parents. By casting the two major actions attributed to Annie Ellsworth by popular legend—bringing Morse a message and sending the first telegraphic message—as dutiful intercessions on behalf of her devout mother and Patent Commissioner father, Lossing turns his heroine into an ideal agent of what Amy Kaplan famously dubbed “manifest domesticity.”

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145 Lossing, 24.

146 Ibid.
marriage between God and science, home and state, familial and industrial relations. Lossing hammers this point home by marking the first intercession with a handfasting ceremony of sorts: Annie’s opening move upon meeting Morse is to extend her hand in congratulation on behalf of her father, but it hangs in the air expectantly for several paragraphs, until Morse finally grasps the implication of the gesture. Thanking “his young friend […] again and again,” he seals his promise that she will send the first message by grasping her hand.

This ceremonial handshake is one of a few hints offered by Lossing that something more than happenstance or fate may have characterized Morse and Annie’s relationship. The most glaring hint is Lossing’s vehement insistence that his account is “simply and literally true,” as opposed to an unspecified version that has “roamed around Europe with various romantic material attached to it, originating mainly in the French imagination.”

As a brief investigation reveals, there is a phantom marriage plot lurking behind the legend of the chaste friendship formed between Samuel Morse and Miss Annie Ellsworth on a portentous March morning. According to historian Richard R. John, the 53-year-old Samuel Morse was not only “deeply in love” with 17-year-old Annie Ellsworth by 1844, but was also courting her with the knowledge of both her parents. This claim is supported by gushing letters written by Morse to his brother during this time, a love poem that Morse dedicated to Annie called “The Sun Dial” (published a few years after his death in a magazine edited by Annie’s eventual husband), and arguably most

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147 “According to the ideology of separate spheres, domesticity can be viewed as an anchor, a feminine counterforce to the male activity of territorial conquest. I argue, to the contrary, that domesticity is more mobile and less stabilizing; it travels in contradictory circuits both to expand and contract the boundaries of home and nation and to produce shifting conceptions of the foreign.” (Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” *American Literature* 70.3 (September 1998): 583.)

148 Lossing, 24.

of all by Henry Ellsworth’s avid support of Morse’s patent rights. John suggests that Ellsworth went to such great lengths to push Morse’s bill forward because he was buying his daughter a dowry. John also points out that very few of the details that Morse insisted on while writing Annie Ellsworth into his own history were true, most notably the timing and circumstances of the news he received: “In reality, the final vote had not occurred near midnight on March 3—after Morse had supposedly left the Capitol in despair—but, rather, much earlier in the day. Morse himself duly noted the enactment of his bill on March 3 in letters that he wrote […] on that day.” On an even more baroque note, not only did Morse have a daughter a few years older than Annie, but John notes that “it is conceivable that Morse himself had courted Anne’s mother several decades earlier when Morse had been a Yale undergraduate and Anne’s mother the same age as Anne.” This speculation infuses the apparently devout phrase offered by Annie’s mother with new bite (what, indeed, hath God wrought?), but more importantly, it gives us a sense of details that Morse and later Lossing did not deem suitable to include in the story of Professor Morse and his Telegraph.

It is crucial to distinguish between the uses Morse and Lossing each had for Annie Ellsworth as a modern mediatrix. For Morse, writing Annie into being in 1844 as mythic muse and messenger may have simply been the love-addled act of an aging lothario, as John suggests. But it seems much more likely—given how strategically Morse shored up his authorship of the telegraph through written documentation, public demonstrations, salon and royal court visits around the continent, and other forms of publicity—that he deliberately cast Annie as a messenger goddess to bless his career. Indeed, Morse’s choice of a sixteen-year-old girl with a politically influential father and pious mother to play the two-pronged role of first “Godly”

150 John, Network Nation, 49, 50.
message-bearer seems to have been carefully calculated to exploit the overlapping signification of secular and religious notions of the mediatrix, though the title Morse explicitly uses for Annie is “much loved friend.” Riffing on Msgr. Charles Pope’s suggestion that the wording of the 1865 Blessing of the Telegraph was influenced by the 1844 phrase “What Hath God Wrought?,” we might even speculate that the abstraction of Annie’s role in Morse’s girl-mediated telegraphic circuit offered a model for the Church’s efforts to negotiate its evolving relationship to modern technology through Mary’s ancient role as a blessed mortal medium for transmitting divine messages to the public. Like other public-facing inventors of the late nineteenth century, Morse knew how to weave a narrative compelling enough to capture the collective imagination and assure his place in history. By 1891, an article in Western Electrician entitled “Who Informed Morse of the Passage of the Telegraph Bill?” featuring an interview with Mrs. Harriet White, a “rival for this distinction,” demonstrated that questions of credit no longer revolved around Morse, but around the heroine he had designated as his harbinger of hope.151

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Annie’s status as the sender of the first message played a significant role in authenticating Morse’s status in the legal and popular imagination as the inventor of the electric telegraph.152 The melodrama of Morse’s struggle to get his bill through the Senate and Annie’s crucial role within it appears almost identically, with entire passages carried over in telegraphic journals and popular American historical writing from

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151 In the article, Mrs. Harriet White, widow of a senator from Indiana, appears as “a rival for this distinction,” claiming that she informed Morse of the passage of his bill (after being informed by her husband, here featured as the stalwart supporter in Henry Ellsworth’s stead) at midnight, hours before Annie arrived with the same news. Mrs. White also claims to have sent the “third or fourth message” over the wire, “the first one being written by a young woman with whom Mr. Morse had been very much infatuated, but who would never marry him.” (Harriet White, “Who Informed Morse of the Passage of the Telegraph Bill?” Western Electrician 8-9, November 21, 1891, p. 303.)

152 John, Network Nation, 51.
the 1870s through WWI.\textsuperscript{153} Artists’ renderings from this time feature Annie in one of two settings: 1) in the foyer of a boardinghouse, her head uncovered and arms outstretched to Morse, who descends a staircase with handkerchief in hand and a look of disbelief on his face, and 2) on the senate floor, hovering beside Morse while he composes the first telegraphic message.

The two lithographs above typify late-nineteenth-century representations of Annie: they figure her as a bridge between Morse and the public (a bringer of good tidings, a comely muse and mascot), first in a private domestic context and next, as though fated, in a \textit{public}, ceremonial space.\textsuperscript{154} She is shown to be at the heart of things, from the foyer to the senate floor, all without

ever touching the telegraph. By the time Samuel Morse died in 1872, women made up a significant number of the telegraphic workforce and were being actively recruited by Western Union as a cost-efficient, unorganized labor source. As heroines of telegraphic romances and detective stories, as mistresses of electricity, and as highly skilled mechanical laborers, they had captured the public imagination. It was in the midst of this feminization ferment that Annie Ellsworth became legible as a composite figure: at once an origin myth mediatrix for Morse, blessing his fatherhood of the telegraph, and the prototype for his second invention (and second child): the telegraph girl.

Lossing’s 1873 tale of telegraphic origins was written for readers accustomed to the idea of female telegraphers and fascinated by their fictionalized romantic adventures. Consequently, it should be no surprise that Lossing concluded his sketch with a message sent by a female telegraph operator at a public celebration held in Morse’s honor, one year before his death. In this part of the ceremony, the “most impressive” in a program featuring the unveiling of a statue of Morse and multiple speeches by Western Union representatives, we are again offered the image of Morse inaugurating a telegraphic innovation with the ceremonial aid of a modern mediatrix. But this second scene of transmission does not simply echo the first. The technical choreography of the 1871 scene, in which a message is tapped out by “Miss Cornell, a young telegraphic operator,” signed by Morse, and transmitted to “every other one of the 10,000 instruments in America,” reverses the choreography of the 1844 scene, in which a message was


155 Lossing, 26.
“indited” by Morse’s “much loved friend Annie G. Ellsworth,” tapped out by Morse, and received by his assistant Alfred Vail on the other end of the line.\textsuperscript{156}

From 1844 to 1871, the scope of the telegraph’s reach had expanded significantly, from one conversation between two people in neighboring cities to a message sent around the country. Its operation had moved out of the private sphere and into the industrial workplace (from “much loved friend” to “telegraphic operator”). The symmetry of the two illustrations above, both taken from late nineteenth-century newspapers, suggests that Lossing was not alone in connecting the ceremonial roles played by Miss Ellsworth and Miss Cornell.\textsuperscript{157} On the left, we see a domestic heroine dictating her message to Morse, who presides masterfully over the telegraph. On the

\textsuperscript{156} Lossing, 24-26. I have found another record where the telegrapher in question is cited as “Miss Sadie E. Cornwell” (“Inauguration of the Morse Statue,” \textit{Telegraph and telephone age: telegraphy-telephony-radio} 16, October 1, 1910, p.659.)

\textsuperscript{157} Image 1 (left): The original caption reads, “Samuel F.B. Morse, inventor of the first practical telegraph, is shown sending the first public telegram on May 24, 1844. The message, "What hath God wrought!" was sent from the Supreme Court Chamber in the Capitol at Washington over a 40-mile wire to Baltimore, Md.” (Photograph from personal collection.) Image 2: cover image of \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper}, July 1, 1871. The original caption reads: “New York City—The Morse Celebration at the Academy of Music, June 10\textsuperscript{th}—Professor Morse manipulating his signature to the message telegraphed by Miss Sadie E. Cornwell—see page 258.”
right, the mirror image assures us that the white-collar working-class women descended from Miss Ellsworth will not stray from her example.

In Lossing’s tale of long, arduous labor finally rewarded by federal investment and public recognition, these two figures form a teleological circuit of history, from the telegraph’s first transmission in the 1840s to its global tendrils “binding the nations of the earth in brotherhood” by the 1870s. Dissolving Annie’s agency, the sketch concludes with a return of the first message as auratic refrain: “Was that first message a chance communication, or a direct inspiration of the Almighty? ‘WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT!’” With an exclamation point, Lossing repeats the famous question as its own affirmative answer, anchoring Morse’s claim to historical significance in a myth of origins that simultaneously establishes a genteel genealogy for the feminization of telegraph operation. This move, arguably still subtextual in Lossing’s sketch, would soon rise to the surface of public discourse through the rapid feminization of two new media technologies: the typewriter and the telephone. In the process of modeling their industrial expansion on Western Union’s cost-efficient recruitment strategy, E. Remington Sholes and AT&T also inherited a narrative template from Lossing and his contemporaries in telegraphic literature: the origin myth of the modern mediatrix, a daughter of invention and a foremother of industry, for generations of white-collar woman workers to come.

**Virgin Mother #2: Lilian Sholes, Daughter of the Typewriter, Mother of a Multitude**

On September 12, 1923, the town of Ilion, New York hosted a ceremony to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the first “practical” typewriter and honor Christopher Latham Sholes,

158 This is a rhetorical strategy often adopted by Morse himself, who in depositions and patent applications repeatedly emphasizes the amount of “anxious labor and much expense incurred in years of devotedness to this invention.” (Morse, “History of proceedings in England to procure a patent for my telegraph,” p. 5.)

159 Lossing, 27.
finally memorialized as “the father of the typewriter.” Among the ceremony’s highlights, an article in the *Morning Oregonian* noted the unveiling of a monument to Sholes, an extensive speaking program, and a “pageant drill of 100 typewriter girls, followed by a procession.” Uncannily echoing the part played by Miss Cornell fifty years earlier in a similar ceremony for Samuel Morse, the rows of typists marching through Ilion offered spectacular evidence of the industrial expansion and definitive gendering of the typewriter by the early twentieth century. The cover illustration of a history of the typewriter published the same year pictured the father of the typewriter surrounded by hordes of daughters. As we see below, Sholes sits at his machine next to a long line of Pre-raphaelite muses who seem to emerge from his head and hover above the typewriter, their arms outstretched in gratitude, basking in the glow of his inventive genius.

Christopher Sholes as the father of all typists (1923)

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The illustration’s caption reads: “EMANCIPATION: I feel that I have done something for the women who have always had to work so hard. This will enable them more easily to earn a living.”\textsuperscript{161} For contemporary readers, this frame for Sholes’ legacy would have been familiar. Since his death in 1890, newspapers and popular histories had begun to characterize the typewriter as an \textit{emancipator} of generations of working women and Sholes as the benevolent father figure who had created the conditions for their “economic independence.”\textsuperscript{162}

Like the electric telegraph, the typewriter had emerged without clear paternity, in a fog of patent wars and competing inaugural narratives, but the fact that it had many potential daughters became apparent within its first year on the market. Early typewriter companies were quick to imagine their machines manned by young women in search of genteel employment, as an 1875 advertisement in \textit{The Nation} often cited as “the first typewriter advertisement” illustrates:

\begin{quote}
No invention has opened for women so broad and easy an avenue to profitable and suitable employment as the ‘Type-Writer,’ and it merits the careful consideration of all thoughtful and charitable persons interested in the subject of work for women. Mere girls are now earning from $10 to $20 per week with the ‘Type-Writer,’ and we can at once secure good situations for one hundred expert writers on it in court-rooms in this city. The public is cordially invited to call and inspect the working of the machine and obtain all information at our showrooms.\textsuperscript{163}
\end{quote}

Members of the public who took up the advertisement’s offer “to call and inspect the working of the machine” at the showroom witnessed the demonstration of another novel commercial product, one that would be used to sell typewriters for over a century: the typewriter girl.

\textsuperscript{161} John W. Vrooman, \textit{The Story of the Typewriter, 1873-1923} (Herkimer, NY: Herkimer County Historical Society, 1923), 1.

\textsuperscript{162} For example, see an article entitled “The Typewriter Revolution,” published in the Montgomery Advertiser on Feb 28, 1909: “According to the census of 1900 there were 26,246 male stenographers and typewriters in the United States, and 86,118 female. […] In this industrial revolution, which goes to the very roots of the social system, Christopher Latham Sholes and his idea are commanding factors. The typewriter has not only been the means of living and of opening new occupations, but for many women it has been a tremendous factor in the saving of time and labor.” (“The Typewriter Revolution,” \textit{The Montgomery Advertiser} 59, February 28, 1909, p.20.)

\textsuperscript{163} Quoted in Vrooman, 79. This advertisement is also cited as a first in Margery W. Davies, \textit{A Woman’s Place is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers 1870-1930} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 54.
In 1905, around the thirtieth anniversary of the typewriter, Christopher Sholes’ daughter Lilian made her first appearance in print, demanding that she and her father be given their rightful place in typewriter history. Her first and last written contribution to the Sholes legacy was published in the Christian Advocate as part of a broader retraction, in reference to a story called “The First Typewriter Operator” (1905) that Lilian had apparently read and found wanting. The story cited the “pioneer typewriter operator” (M.A. Saunders) and “pioneer manufacturer” (G.W.N. Yost) as a pair, as though one could not be understood without the other. Lilian’s letter to the Advocate, which offered her father and herself as the true original typewriter duo, must have made quite an impression, because it produced the following response: “We have ceased to publish statements from any source that a person or a thing is the only one of the kind left or the first of the kind, or that persons are the sole survivors or the only living witnesses.”

Inspired by this contrite promise, a flurry of articles in US newspapers continued to debate the identity of the first girl typewriter operator throughout the spring of 1905, with Lilian Sholes cast as a central, if elusively symbolic, character. Lilian had never been a “professional operator” and preferred not to be identified as such, one article noted, because her demonstration of the machine had preceded its commercial use, so pioneering machine “manipulators” like M.A. Saunders and James O. Olephine could hold onto their titles. Instead, following the logic of Christopher Sholes’ emancipatory paternity, journalists dubbed Lilian “Mother of a Multitude.”

Now often called “the first woman who ever wrote on a typewriter,” but more accurately described as the subject of the earliest mass-reproduced photograph of a woman at a typewriter,

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165 “She is Mother of a Multitude: Lillian Sholes of Milwaukee First Typewriter,” The Gazette (Cedar Rapids), February 15, 1905: https://type-writer.org/?p=5546 (sic)
Lilian Sholes tends to be cited fleetingly in media scholarship alongside her iconic 1872 portrait (see below).\textsuperscript{166}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{sholes.png}
\caption{Lilian Sholes as “The First Typist” (1872)}
\end{figure}

In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Friedrich Kittler includes the photograph but mentions Lilian in-text only once, identifying her, with implied skepticism, as “‘presumably’ the ‘first type-writer.’”\textsuperscript{167} The fact that Kittler captions the portrait “Sholes’ daughter at the Remington,” instead of “The First Typist,” as it is most often cited, suggests he is aware of the misleading


implications of the latter title, but he does not elaborate further. In Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System, Bernhard Siegert more brazenly describes Lilian Sholes as “daughter of the inventor of the Remington and the first female typist in history,” situating her at a multi-nodal pivot point for gendered divisions of discursive labor. The most extensive analysis I have found of the photograph itself, from 1924, dubs the image an “accidental prophesy,” wondering at the fateful forces that led a dutiful young lady to bang about on a typewriter:

What motive, we wonder, ever induced Miss Sholes to take such an interest in the machine, to learn to operate it, and to have her photograph taken seated before it? Probably it was only a daughter’s natural interest in her father’s invention. It is difficult to believe that Miss Sholes foresaw the wonderful future of the machine in connection with woman’s work. Yet, as an accidental prophesy, this photograph of the first woman who ever operated a typewriter should be of interest to every one of the vast army of women who today owe their living to the writing machine.

Thus commemorated, the photograph of Lilian Sholes has become a popular icon of the figure it appears to predict, despite the fact that Lilian herself was objecting verbally to her depiction as a typist in the public sphere thirty years after it was taken. Like Annie Ellsworth, she was sixteen years old when frozen into mytho-historical memory.

Interest in Lilian’s mediating role in the typewriter origin story spiked in the United States around mid-twentieth century, when a feature film and a radio play were released, each claiming to tell the story of the first female typist. Both The Shocking Miss Pilgrim (1947) and “The Reluctant Pioneer” (1951) were sponsored by manufacturing companies eager to assimilate Christopher Sholes’ legacy of emancipatory fatherhood into their corporate mythologies. Produced in the immediate wake of World War II, both also covertly addressed a female workforce recently rendered redundant across a range of industrial and intellectual fields.

168 Siegert, Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System, 193.

169 Vrooman, 50-53.
from riveting to cryptanalysis. It was in the midst of this period of regressive social re-
entrenchment that the forces of emancipatory fatherhood and feminist type-writing combined to
mystify the forced return of a generation of women to the (reassuringly domestic) sphere of
secretarial work.

I will begin with a close reading of “The Reluctant Pioneer,” because it is a fairly faithful
adaptation of the myth that circulated in the U.S. popular historical imaginary from the turn of
the century onward, while, as I will illustrate, The Shocking Miss Pilgrim had a more creative
approach to the tale of the first female typist.170 The 1951 radio play explicitly adopts Lilian as
its narrator (voiced by June Havoc) and structures the typewriter’s rise from faulty prototype to
ubiquitous office tool around two pivotal demonstrations she conducts. The first demonstration,
dated 1868 (“the year it begins”), takes place in Christopher Sholes’ living room before
Remington and his associates, who initially find the idea of “a woman operating a machine” very
“unusual.” The second is set at the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876, where Lilian performs for
an enthusiastic public. In an exact reproduction of Annie Ellsworth’s ritualistic transition from
private to public messenger-muse, this rendering of Lilian anchors her suitability for typewriter
operation and corporate diplomacy in a domestic space. In the narrative arc of “The Reluctant
Pioneer,” Lilian’s ability to “soften” up Remington and the “hard-headed businessmen” who
accompany him proves crucial, because her father is not a hard-headed businessman. By way of
a friendly filial intercession, science is linked to capital, but allowed to retain its purity: Sholes,
like Bell, will retain his eccentric inventor aura. Lilian’s first demonstration not only convinces

170 “The Reluctant Pioneer,” The Cavalcade of America (3 April 1951). The Cavalcade of America (1935-1953) was
a radio program that highlighted historical American inventors and innovators. It was sponsored by the DuPont
company of Wilmington, DE. Episodes often featured histories of objects sold by DuPont.
Remington to manufacture her father’s model; it also implicitly plants the seeds of mass feminization in Remington’s mind. As Lilian observes: “The Remington typewriter # 1 reached the market in 1875. Mr. Remington must have been quite impressed by my demonstration, because no longer did the thought of a woman operating a machine seem so unusual.” Together, in other words, Lilian and Remington make an unbeatable team: they defy sexists and luddites alike by placing rows of working-class women at machines.

In 1939, socialist husband-and-wife screenwriting team Frederica and Ernest Maas had begun to write a very different story about the commercial origins of the typewriter. Drawn to its inauguration as an object of public spectacle from World’s Fairs to shop windows, the husband-and-wife screenwriting team built a plot around the bitter battle waged between obsolescing male scriveners and the shiny new Lady Typewriter. The story they pedaled around the studio system in 1941, “Miss Pilgrim’s Progress,” featured a valiant young everywoman, Abigail Pilgrim, whose demonstrations of the “miraculous invention” soon attract the attention of a young, innovative businessman, who begins to train Abigail in shorthand, falling more deeply in love with her the more efficient she becomes.171 But when Abigail is sexually assaulted by an “offensive male scrivener,” the hero is killed in the ensuing scuffle.172 At the murder trial, which concludes the story, “the concept of women working in offices becomes a wide-open moral question, with churches, housewives, men, and women in all walks of life taking sides in the fray.”173 Defending the scrivener is a vengeful lawyer who was likewise thwarted in his attempt to ravish Miss Pilgrim. Defending Miss Pilgrim are a series of famous suffragettes, most notably

173 Ibid., 234.
Susan B. Anthony, whose appearance at the trial exculpates Abigail against the defense’s claim that her “feminine wiles” have turned the men in her office into helpless victims. The story’s explicit focus on workplace sexual harassment—not only as a regular occurrence for women in offices, but also as a systematically re-weaponized act of violence, first executed and then used to blame victims for inciting their aggressors—would have made for a unique Hollywood film.

But the politically charged historical drama the Maases imagined was never made. Sold to Twentieth Century Fox for a pittance by a lackluster agent, the story was left to “yellow and wither away in their archives” until 1946, when Darryl Zanuck resurrected its premise as a vehicle for studio star Betty Grable.174 Under the Maases’ horrified gaze, “Miss Pilgrim’s Progress” became The Shocking Miss Pilgrim, a musical comedy produced in close collaboration with Remington Rand that staged the “first” Lady Typewriter’s triumphant takeover of the clerk’s dominion as a bumpy but efficient road to matrimony between labor (Miss Pilgrim) and management (her handsome employer). Rewritten by George Seaton into a capitalist idyll starring Grable’s stockinged legs as ambassadors of feminism (charming male colleagues and employer alike into accepting, even desiring, women’s infiltration of their office), the final product bore little resemblance to the original intentions of its authors.

Remington Rand’s influence on The Shocking Miss Pilgrim extended beyond the elaborate publicity campaign it designed for the film’s release, “seeking to glorify its current products by aligning Grable’s character with contemporary office workers.”175 The film’s

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174 Ibid., 237.

175 “The studio provided Remington Rand with poster prints of Grable’s character, seated at ‘the first typewriter,’ along with parallel images of Grable dressed in modern clothing using the company’s current model. Local Remington sales divisions distributed them to movie theaters and department stores, which featured elaborate displays, contests, and events to promote the film. A ten-day Fresno, California competition to identify the city’s fastest typist made direct links between the historical film and contemporary career proficiency, as contestants competed for the new typewriter prize in a lobby display of old and new models.” (Emily Westkaemper, Selling
chronology and heroine were clearly both designed to create the illusion of an unbroken lineage from E. Remington & Sons, the first manufacturer of typewriters and typewriter girls, to Remington Rand, an office equipment conglomerate founded in 1927. In a story that begins with a Remington representative sending Miss Pilgrim to Boston and ends with her married and successfully leading a typewriter school, the Company is the only benevolent father in sight. It should be no surprise, given the self-reflexivity of this opening scene, that a phantom daughter hovers behind the image of the heroine: Lilian Sholes, the “mother of a multitude” for whom Miss Pilgrim is a fictive avatar.

*The Shocking Miss Pilgrim* opens with an intertitle designating June 10, 1874 (the day E. Remington & Sons distributed its first commercial model of the typewriter) as the day “women became free.” Like “The Reluctant Pioneer,” this mid-century memory deliberately erases a litany of contested firsts (marked by “at least 112 inventors” and centuries of design innovations) in order to present the collaboration of Christopher Sholes with Remington manufactures on the “Sholes and Gidden typewriter” as the origin story of the typewriter and its gender. The Maases’ original scenario played savvily with this strategic pairing of modern spectacles by placing its heroine in a shop window and the hero’s amorous gaze on the machine whirring beneath her fingertips. Instead of investigating the comic consequences of such mixed messages, *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim* brings the erotic spectacle into the office, where Miss Pilgrim

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Women’s History: Packaging Feminism in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2016), 149

176 Remington Rand was formed in 1927 through the merger of the Remington Typewriter Company and Rand Kardex Corporation. The Remington Typewriter Company was formed in 1886, when E. Remington and Sons sold its typewriter business to the Standard Typewriter Manufacturing Company, Inc. Crucially, this transaction included the rights to use the Remington name. In other words, the path from E. Remington & Sons to Remington Rand was very elliptical and largely based on the currency of the original family name. See Wilfred A. Beeching, *Century of the Typewriter* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1974) for the longer history of mergers and acquisitions.

becomes a moving image trace of Lilian Sholes. As the images below demonstrate, Betty Grable was cast as a Technicolor reboot of E. Remington & Son’s most iconic visual legacy. Not only were her dress and gestures similar, but Remington Rand made sure that Twentieth Century Fox could incorporate authentic artifacts: the machine Grable uses is the Sholes and Gidden typewriter featured in the famous photograph of Lilian Sholes.178

One of the consequences of transposing this iconic image without framing it explicitly in terms of demonstration is that Miss Pilgrim becomes an object to-be-stared-at while she tries to work. Being-stared-at is, in fact, the single most persistent professional burden Miss Pilgrim bears at the Pritchard Shipping Company. Using clerks’ monocles and telescopes as diegetic intermediaries, the camera leers longingly at her starched collar and stockinged legs.

178 For the airing of “The Reluctant Pioneer,” Remington Rand also donated a Remington #1, so that the clicks of the historic machine could be authentically reproduced on the air. I have found publicity images from the American Cavalcade studio of June Havoc standing over the Remington #1, but have yet to source them, which is why they are not included in the body of the chapter.
The campaign to configure Miss Pilgrim as a public erotic spectacle begins the day she arrives, when journalists swarm around the office building, peering through the large window where she perches in plain sight. As a cartoonist sketches her into the readymade frame provided by the window, his colleague reminds him to “be sure and get the typewriter in.”

This puckishly ambiguous directive establishes plausible deniability for the many male gazes following Miss Pilgrim into the office: they are always potentially ogling the machine.¹⁷⁹ While

¹⁷⁹ This is a joke “The Reluctant Pioneer” also makes, when Christopher Latham Sholes leads investors into his living room and says, “Here she is, Mr. Densmore: my writing machine.” (my emphasis)
it is the only verbal reference to the fact that in 1874, typewriter “meant both typing machine and female typist,” the film translates its uneasiness about the mixture of woman and machine into visual language by placing a panoply of grids between Miss Pilgrim’s body and her male spectators, allowing them to evaluate her form on the same plane as its mechanical prosthesis, through a rational mediating lens.

Using a grid to manage the excesses of the female body by cutting it into boxes is a hallowed tradition of Western art, as we see from the famous Dürer print above. It also evokes

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180 Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 183.
181 Albrecht Dürer, Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman, woodcut, ca. 1600, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/366555
the hallowed Catholic tradition, literalized after the 1860s with the Blessing of the Telegraph, of managing the Mediatrix’s reproductive matrix (womb) by turning it into a technological matrix (grid) for communications between God and humankind.

With the rise of the Taylorist office, typists were increasingly trained to type blind with empty minds in order to be optimally efficient mechanical relay stations for their employers’ compositions. While measures like these were shaped by broader (non-gendered) trends of white-collar Taylorization, they also clearly targeted a new unruly element in the system: we might think of them as efforts to filter out human excesses and isolate an extract of purified femininity maximally conducive to client satisfaction, smooth information flow, and the maintenance of a traditional social order. By the 1910s, the grid was a common motif in time-and-motion studies of speed typists, purportedly to focus the viewer’s gaze on the rapid interplay of fingers and keys.

Gilbreth Reforms a Typist (dir. Lillian Gilbreth, 1918)

The image above illustrates another effect of gridification: the synchronized typewriter and hands become two components of a single rationalized aesthetic regime. Evoking the Pygmalion
narrative imagined by the Maases, the film shown above is called *Gilbreth Reforms a Typist*. It presents the performance of Margaret B. Owen, the U.S. speed typing champion of 1918, as a demonstration of psychologist-engineer Lillian Gilbreth’s industrial pedagogy. Gilbreth, best known as half of the efficiency-obsessed parental couple from the 1948 novel *Cheaper by the Dozen*, would have made a fabulously queered Henry Higgins to Margaret Owens’ speed typist.¹⁸² The dynamic described by the title tantalizes by conjuring the image of a woman with a stopwatch leaning over another woman at a typewriter, but this subversion of the classical female typist/male employer choreography was never recorded as such. Here, the grid and clock take over, subsuming both female bodies into a rigid mechanical paradigm.

During World War II, Betty Grable was the grid pin-up girl *par excellence*.¹⁸³ In the photograph below, we see a grid overlaid on her semi-nude body used by the U.S. military to instruct soldiers in map reading. As Robert Westbrook writes, “this device was said to be an aid to concentration, but it is difficult not to view it also as a ‘targeting’ of Grable’s anatomy.”¹⁸⁴ Westbrook attributes Grable’s supremacy as a pin-up girl during World War II to her extreme whiteness and Fox-designed star persona as the model of an average modern girl. Like the limbs of Ziegfeld and tipper girls, “Grable’s legs were celebrated not as extraordinary but as ‘The Great American Average Legs: straight, perfectly rounded and shaped, but judged by the same

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¹⁸² The recent French romantic comedy *Populaire* (2012) riffs on Pygmalion through speed typing, but disappointingly casts its Henry Higgins as a businessman instead of a female time-and-motion specialist and its Eliza Doolittle as a country mouse turned incompetent secretary with latent digital talents who falls in love with her boss instead of an experienced, highly trained, professional speed typist.

¹⁸³ My thanks to John Durham Peters for discovering and sharing this image with me. The original photograph is archived in USAAFTC, Library of Congress (Robert Westbrook, “‘I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” *American Quarterly* 42.4 (Dec 1990): 603.)

¹⁸⁴ Robert Westbrook, “‘I Want a Girl,” 602.
In the map reading exercise, The Great American Average Legs fail gloriously at meeting military standards of dress and discipline.

In The Shocking Miss Pilgrim, the gridification of Betty Grable’s body is subtle but systematic, blending into backgrounds, architecture, and costume design. After the cartoonist sketches Miss Pilgrim through the grid provided by her office window, grids move to more

\[\text{185 Westbrook, “I Want a Girl,” 599.}\]
intimate, domestic spaces: they appear as patterns on Cynthia’s clothing and as panes of glass shining into her bedroom. These scenes show Miss Pilgrim internalizing and reproducing the grid as a bridge between public and private spheres. At home or at work, she is camera-ready, perfectly proportioned, and under control, moving in sync with her typewriter to the rhythm of the marriage plot.

Oddly enough, Miss Cynthia Pilgrim is also the only typewriter—indeed, the only working girl—in the entire city of Boston. Sent alone with her machine from her typewriter school’s first graduating class, she has no female friends her own age or solidarity in the office. Like most heroines of romantic comedies, she exhibits an exaggerated state of singledom, seemingly bereft of kin and left “in radical isolation from supportive female networks.”186 To draw her out of this radical isolation, the film establishes an array of possible kinship networks: 1) John Pritchard, the man who begrudgingly hires and eagerly flirts with Miss Pilgrim, representing marriage on the horizon; 2) Catherine Dennison, the free-spirited gentlewoman who offers Miss Pilgrim a place in her boarding house of Bohemians, representing an adoptive family of sorts; and 3) the Boston chapter of the suffragettes, another adoptive family, before whom Miss Pilgrim evangelizes the merits of “earning” equality in the workplace instead of “demanding” it with brass bands and speeches.

While superficially distinct, these affiliations combine to form a single stable structure of vertical integration: they all work together to sell the origin story of the typewriter through the refined social world built around its operator. The employer who courts Miss Pilgrim and the families that adopt her form a network of genteel patronage around the white-collar heroine, whose relationship to money accordingly becomes mystified to the point of quietly disappearing

from the film. After an initial disavowal of the subject—“I don’t care about the money, Mr. Pritchard”—Cynthia explains repeatedly that she became a typewriter “to show men that women can do men’s work.” Any reminder she earns a living is overshadowed by the social circles in which she circulates and the domestic rituals (shopping, flowers, embroidery, cleanliness) that register her effect on the office. With dinners provided by her boss, who insists that “labor as well as management must eat”; with her room and board provided by the black sheep of a wealthy Old Boston family who wishes to support the creative output of social “outcasts”; and with her radicalization provided by wealthy suffragettes more likely to become “next November’s cabinet members” than clerical workers, Cynthia never becomes a coherent economic subject. While she is “free” to sell her labor, having been liberated by the invention of the typewriter, she is still first and foremost a domestic heroine.

Cynthia’s mystified economic status is one of many mixed messages underlying The Shocking Miss Pilgrim’s seemingly straightforward “dual-focus” narrative. In a Hollywood musical, a dual-focus narrative splits the cast into two ideologically opposing groups, with the expectation of bringing them back together by the end of the film to sing in harmony. The central conflict in The Shocking Miss Pilgrim should be the Battle of the Sexes waged between Miss Pilgrim, who wishes to be taken seriously as an “efficient” worker, and her employer, John Pritchard, committed to his belief in the essential masculinity of the typewriter. But the Battle itself is riddled with historical fallacies, rhetorical deflections, and deliberately muddled dichotomies. John’s insistence, for example, that the typewriter is a man’s machine, which The Shocking Miss Pilgrim stages as the pervasive prejudice its heroine must overcome in order to emancipate future generations of woman workers, does not cohere with social histories of the

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typewriter’s integration into offices. As Margery Davies argues in the canonical *Woman’s Place is at the Typewriter*, “the feminization of stenographers and typists was markedly more rapid than” other kinds of clerical work, precisely because the new machine and its operation “had not been ‘sex-typed’ as masculine” (my emphasis). In short, through a facile but fundamental historical revision, *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim* gets away with setting a very low bar for both its protagonists: John’s only onus as a reformed feminist, by the end of the film, will be to admit that women, not men, make the best typists, thereby affirming the essential correctness of gendered labor divisions in 1947. Cynthia’s onus, in the face of John’s sexism, will be to lead the revolution with her “efficiency” at the typewriter, here cast as radical political action instead of a keyword of scientific management.

To avoid engaging with issues of gender, labor, and capitalism altogether, *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim* relies on John to doggedly redirect Cynthia’s political convictions towards flirtation. In response to her first attempt to challenge his objections to women in the workplace, John tells a story about a husband and wife who argued for fifty years over a trivial memory—namely, which weapon (a knife or scissors) was the cause of a cut the husband sustained years ago. Not only are their lives consumed by the unresolved argument, but the husband eventually murders his wife, screaming “KNIFE!” one last time as his wife slips beneath the waves. John concludes the story with its message: “So you see it’s quite simple. If we start an argument let’s just remember the old woman and the old man and we’ll stop instantly.”

As the echo of John cooing “knife” dissipates, let us consider the twofold implications of this proposal: 1) arguing about women’s rights is as trivial as arguing over a disputed personal

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188 Unlike female bookkeepers and accountants, who by the Civil War were infiltrating occupations traditionally defined as “men’s work,” Davies notes that “women who worked as typists did not face the argument that a typewriter was a machine fit only for men.” (Margery Davies, *Woman’s Place is at the Typewriter* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 55.)
memory, and 2) if Miss Pilgrim brings up the subject once too often, John may murder her. For the rest of the film, the “debate” that theoretically animates the entire narrative becomes a structuring absence: John perpetuates: every time Cynthia brings up women’s rights, John cuts her off with a grin: “Knife, Miss Pilgrim.” In the meantime, he replaces what would effectively be a labor dispute with encoded flirtation that openly mocks the discourse of labor negotiations, through sallies like, “I have always thought it would be a good thing if labor and management got together more often... talked things over... developed a more intimate relationship.” At one point in the film, John interrupts a suffragette meeting where Cynthia is the speaker to ask her out for dinner. By structuring the hero’s suit around these interruptions, the film weaponizes the marriage plot to suppress any possibility of meaningful political discourse.

Further muddling the terms of this largely unengaged debate is the intercession of Alice Pritchard, a prominent suffragette who is Cynthia’s most ardent supporter, but also John’s aunt and the owner of the Pritchard shipping company. As Cynthia becomes increasingly involved with the Boston chapter of the suffragette movement, her weekly speeches begin to intrude on her romantic relationship with John and he demands that she choose between them. While this ultimatum lands with appropriate drama and leads to a brief separation, the suggestion that there is a choice to be made is disingenuous, because the two characters pulling Cynthia in opposite directions (Alice and John) belong to the same corporation and the same family. John’s mother, first assumed to be an insufferable Bostonian puritan but quickly revealed to be utterly charming and down-to-earth, provides the final dent in the putative dichotomy between modern corporate feminism and old-fashioned old-money. (Mrs. Pritchard even owns a typewriter, which she has been using in secret, in order to avoid ruffling any feathers until she becomes a proficient typist herself). Together, Alice, Mrs. Pritchard, and Cynthia build a reassuring bridge for John to walk
across, one that unites the legacy and family values of an old company with the feminized modernity of a new one. By the end of the film, John will have made few to no concessions about women’s rights, but he will acknowledge that beautiful young women are a much more pleasant presence in the office than men or old, fat, and ugly women. This coup for feminism is accomplished through a rapid “bad date” montage of undesirable typists sent to replace Cynthia, which carries viewers seamlessly towards the catharsis of John’s reunion with his ideal female employee. In the final scene, John discovers that Cynthia is the culprit behind the monstrous montage of typists sent to replace her, when he visits her office to complain about the most recent gargoyle. The neat rows of attractive, efficient women in Cynthia’s typewriter school offer a knowing corrective to Pritchard’s ink-smudged, pipe-smoking clerks.

For Remington Rand, a corporate bridge built on three generations of modern mediatrixes adhered seamlessly to its advertising needs. The Shocking Miss Pilgrim begins with its heroine leaving her benevolent corporate fathers and ends in merger-marriage, an event that symbolically collapses the distance between E. Remington & Sons and Remington Rand, two companies tenuously linked by seventy years of mergers and acquisitions. Flanked by adoptive mothers and channeling the pioneering, filial legacy of “the mother of a multitude,” this Technicolor trace of Lilian Sholes continued the legacy launched by Samuel Morse in his ticker tape message and Benson Lossing in his 1873 biographical sketch. In The Shocking Miss Pilgrim (1947), the first woman to “man” a typewriter is, like Annie Ellsworth and Lilian Sholes, cast as a dutiful daughter and foremother to generations of women, but her primary mediating role involves assuring intergenerational industrial continuity by marrying into the company and using her mediating skills to reproduce typewriter girls. Charged with channeling the compatibility of commercial diplomacy, women’s emancipation, and the marriage plot, this mid-century Lilian
Sholes is a merger mediatrix who demonstrates—efficiently, attractively—that corporate continuity is an organic vehicle for economic growth and social change.

**Virgin Mother #3: Mabel Hubbard, operator of all future operators**

Like Annie Ellsworth and Lilian Sholes, Mabel Hubbard’s star began to rise in the popular sphere after the death of the inventor with whom she had been linked (Bell died in 1922). But Mabel only became a household name across the United States after the release of the 1939 film *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*, starring Don Ameche as “Alec” and Loretta Young as Mabel. There is reason to believe that the Zanuck-stamped, Remington-sponsored *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim* was at least partially modeled on this film, which was also produced by Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth-Century-Fox with the cooperation of a major communications monopoly (AT&T). *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* was such a big hit that it inspired a string of 1940s inventor biopics and turned “Ameche” into a colloquial term for telephone well into the 1950s. Knowing this, it is easy to imagine that the film served as a reference point for Zanuck while producing *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim*. As we see from the images below, which synthesize the first three shots after the opening credits, the two films have very similar industrial-domestic frames.

The translucent Bell insignia in the first shot establishes the film’s internal corporate infrastructure and filial genealogy, guaranteeing the authenticity of the text that overlays it,
which promises to reveal the “true” tale of Bell’s “great struggles” and “great love.” From the next two shots, we glean that both will commence in a “genteel” Boston boardinghouse in 1873 (just one year before the events of *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim*, when “women became free”). As we may suspect from the promise of the intertitle’s last line and the familiar private-public setting that follows, the overwhelming bulk of this film is devoted to the central mediating role played by the inventor’s great love, a young deaf woman named Mabel who not only launches his telephone research and helps him win a patent battle with Western Union, but also becomes the film’s central fetishistic stand-in for the erotic intimacy of telephonic discourse.

Mabel’s construction as erotically telephonic is shaped by Hollywood’s cringeworthy efforts to make white bourgeois femininity compatible with deafness in an audio-visual medium. This deaf heroine passes as hearing. She reads lips and speaks with effortless, integrative fluency. The only real mark of her sensory disability, beyond gently asking people to face her while they talk, is her tendency to hover very close to her lover’s ear. In the shot reproduced below, Mabel asks Bell to say I love you over and over again—“I want to hear you say it”—pressing her cheek to his so that she can *feel* (and thereby “hear”) the vibrations of his voice.
The resulting close-up constructs something like an ideal telephone conversation, with Mabel cast as a composite of the technology, translating the vibrations of the inventor’s voice, and its embodied trace—the breathy, feminine voice heard over the phone, whispering into a man’s ear across miles and miles. This analogy is cemented when, in response to Mabel’s efforts to freeze the moment into history—“don’t move… don’t even breathe… I want to remember this moment for all of my life, just as it is”—Bell suddenly remembers the reason he came to visit Mabel: “Oh! I forgot… what I came here to tell you… my telephone… I’ve got it! I’ve found a way to talk through a wire!” This revelation sutures Mabel’s “moment” to the telephone’s “moment” and casts her as a prophetess with an intuitive, romantic understanding of the historic media origin story in which she finds herself. By withholding the announcement until after Mabel has become a human telephone, *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* very intentionally conflates the stakes of romance and invention. In the film’s final climactic trial scene, Mabel’s love is the proof that wins Bell’s case against Western Union: she reads a letter “intended for her eyes alone” aloud to the court, which reveals that Bell invented the telephone, and more importantly, that he always had the public’s best interests at heart. The last line reads: “I do not care who gets the glory, so long as the world gets the benefit.” Through Mabel’s public reading of a private letter, Bell’s self-effacing love is extended to the whole world. In 1939, this ending reassured moviegoers that Bell Telephone’s ongoing monopolistic reign over telecommunications was at heart a selfless, organic enterprise. Like *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim*, *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* deployed its leading lady as a domestic bridge for inventors, entrepreneurs, and intergenerational monopolies. Taken together, these two auteur-produced Fox films also suggest that at the height of the classical era, Hollywood studios used girl-mediated histories of major
communications monopolies to naturalize and romanticize their own monopolistic market dominance.

Although he does not mention the iconic 1939 Hollywood film that solidified Mabel Hubbard’s place in telephone history, Bernhard Siegert’s fabulous late-twentieth century riff on her intercessory role carries over many of its central devices, most of all its prophetic tone. In two overlapping pieces on Hubbard from the 1990s (an essay in an edited volume and a book chapter) that both foreground gender “as a media-historical variable” of telephone history, Siegert stages the telephone’s scene of origin as a prefiguration of its industrial feminization. “The telephone,” he writes,

> offers a rare case where the scene of origin coincides with the reorganization of gender distribution. Telephone systems demand a third person, in whom all first and second persons are grounded—namely, the exchange office; historically the telephone also owes its invention to the mediating office of a third person. Her name was Mabel Hubbard.¹⁸⁹

In Siegert’s genealogy of gendered mediation, Mabel Hubbard is stuck in time: for the rest of history, she will be nineteen years old, bursting out of the schoolroom and into the arms of Alexander Graham Bell. The analogy Siegert makes between the “mediating office” performed by Mabel and the mediating office performed by thousands of newly minted female civil servants takes the reader on a teleological trajectory from an invention realized through the intercession of one American woman in 1874 to a nationalized network of women working in Germany thirty years later. By 1900, Siegert describes Prussian clerks and bureaucrats ceding inevitably to the influx of female voices, because male civil servants balk against the self-abdication required for operator work, having been trained to “be independent selves who hardly could be subjected to a prohibition of the use of their own words.”¹⁹⁰ It is through this abstraction

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of the exchange office—as a network that requires “third persons” to mediate between “first persons”—that Siegert dubs Mabel, a woman who never used a telephone herself but spent much of her life mediating the utterances and ambitions of her father and husband, “the operator of all future operators.”

The story Siegert tells is a mixture of marriage plot and disability studies: Miss Hubbard stars as its domestic heroine, “mixed up in a most curious way” with the invention of the telephone.191 Deaf since the age of five, Mabel meets Bell in the early 1870s through her father, Gardiner Greene Hubbard, who enrolls her in the school for the deaf where Bell teaches. Fresh from (unsuccessfully) lobbying Congress to nationalize the telegraph system, Hubbard soon becomes interested in the strides his daughter’s teacher is making in the development of “a storage medium for voice oscillations.”192 But Bell, a vague, eccentric scientist without capitalist ambitions, cannot be persuaded to pursue the market potential of his idea. As we have seen from similar tropes in tales of telegraphic and typewriter origins, this is the gap—between science and industry, private and public spheres—that must be bridged by a young woman. As Siegert puts it: “Bell had to be hooked up to the telephone by an operator.”193

So, Hubbard uses his daughter, whom Bell instantly loves, as bait to propel the young inventor toward exploring commercial applications of the telephone:

Thus, the deal eventually was brokered that produced the largest media conglomerate of all times: as dictated by her father, Mabel wrote to Bell, whom she feared more than loved, that she would not marry him unless he already had developed a patentable telephone. Hubbard sold his daughter to Bell for the price of the telephone. It was not just after, but even before, the telephone’s invention that women were ‘especially good at making it work.’194

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190 Siegert, Relays, 190.
191 Ibid., 188.
192 Ibid., 187.
193 Ibid.
In Siegert’s media-theoretical playground, Mabel is an operator because she cannot “speak” in the first person; through the oral method, she is forced to mediate her access to language through the throats and lips of others. He casts the intercession she makes on behalf of her father—to marry Bell and thereby assure the financial future of the telephone—as an extension of this self-alienated positionality. Real telephone operators who identify with the network (“Hello, this is Central”) rather than as a series of individual subjects thus become the inheritors of the self-alienation to which Mabel is subjected as a deaf American woman in the late nineteenth century.

While the analogy Siegert constructs is compelling (particularly in its evocation of a growing body of disability-inflected readings of the telephone, gramophone, and typewriter), it also mystifies a number of actual contributing factors to the feminization of telephone operation, most notably the relative cheapness and assumed docility of woman workers, as well as the precedent established by the industrial feminization of telegraph operation from the 1860s onward. Moreover, although Siegert’s use of Mabel riffs on a longstanding popular historical interest in her pivotal mediating role in telephone history, it is worth noting that other deaf students at Bell’s school were also associated with the telephone’s entry into the world, as we see from the headline of a 1938 New York Times obituary: “Pupil of Inventor of Telephone Dies: George T. Saunders, Deaf When a Boy, Had Alexander Bell as Special Tutor – INVENTION THEN FLOWERED – Mute’s Father, Interested in the Experiment, Provided the Money and a Laboratory.” With this alternative origin myth at hand, it becomes clear that Siegert

194 Ibid., 188.


intentionally selected a teenage girl on the cusp of merger-marriage, poised to reproduce generations of white-collar woman descendants.

What makes Bernhard Siegert’s origin myth of Mabel Hubbard distinct from the others examined in this chapter is its mixture of canny contextualization and naive reproduction. On the side of canny contextualization: both texts in which Mabel appears as Ur-operator connect the gendered legacy of the domestic novel to the feminization of information work. “The technical media of transmission […] opened up jobs for women at the nodes and switchboards of discourse, rather than relegating them to its source (like letters) or to the site of its reception (like books).”197 The major shift Siegert is identifying, in other words, is out of the living room and into a modern mediating office of discourse shaped by nineteenth-century transportation and communications industries. What lingers from the former, Siegert notes, is the belief that woman’s holy office is still as an agent of (re)production; hence his frequent references (in both essays) to the Imperial Postal and Telegraph Administration regulation that until the 1920s “allowed female telephone operators to be public servants only as long as they did not marry.”198 Siegert uses this bureaucratic trivia to show how marriage becomes “the solitary, self-sustaining criterion of gender” once women have moved to the center of the discourse network,199 but never discusses it in terms of the marriage plot or the cult of domesticity, either as ideological tools to be exploited by capital or as cultural conventions internalized by young women raised on pulp fiction and now stationed at the “nodes and switchboards of discourse.”

197 Siegert, Relays, 132.
198 Siegert, “Switchboards and Sex,” 80.
199 Ibid., 87.
Instead, he participates in the techno-romantic tradition by offering up his own domestic tale as an origin story for the feminization of telephone operation. The cherry on top is that despite her centrality to both essays, Mabel is actually one of three women Siegert designates as Ur-operators. In “Switchboards and Sex: The Nut(t) Case,” Siegert follows his Bell marriage plot with an extended digression about Eliza Doolittle, a character he claims was inspired by Bell’s deaf mother (Eliza): Ma Bell herself. For Siegert, the flower girl huffing before a flame and rounding out vowels that appear as jagged lines before her eyes performs another allegory of the oral method, and therefore of “third person” mediation. He makes a delightful case for the comparison. It is also telling that he seeks out a Mother of all operators to match the daughter-to-wife.

The third Ur-operator is Miss Emma Nutt, whom Siegert introduces as “the first woman telephone operator in history,” accurately noting that in 1878, “she was hired by the Boston Telephone Dispatch Company, the first firm founded under the license of Hubbard and Bell. Soon, thousands followed her.” The only woman in the genealogy who actually worked as a telephone operator, Nutt becomes a vessel for Siegert to demonstrate the synchronicity of the telephone and typewriter as entry points for women into the gender-destabilized discourse network of 1900. In “Switchboards and Sex: The Nut(t) Case,” he writes,

With Lilian Sholes, daughter of the inventor of the Remington and the first female typist, and with Emma Nutt, the first female telephone operator, the beginning of the end had come for asymmetrical distribution of genders in discourse. While the typewriter delivered ‘the expediency of a printing press’ into the hands not only of poets but also of stenotypists, the switchboard led to the perforation of gender boundaries in German civil service rights. These developments, incidentally, mutually augmented each other, just as new media in general are in fundamental solidarity among themselves and mutually interchangeable.

200 Ibid.
There is a paragraph in *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System* almost identical to this one, except for one crucial difference: instead of “Emma Nutt, the first female telephone operator,” Siegert pairs “Mabel Hubbard (the daughter of the future founder of AT&T)” with Lilian Sholes as the “beginning of the end [...] for asymmetrical distribution of genders in discourse.”\textsuperscript{201} In other words, sometime between 1993 and 1998, Siegert’s new women have become as “mutually interchangeable” as the new media they operate. This is a telling slippage, because it takes us to the heart of Siegert’s media-historical claim, an “end to asymmetrical distribution of genders in discourse” that depends on a direct domestic-industrial channel from one to many, in which the marriage of Mabel Hubbard in 1874 lays the groundwork for the groundbreaking employment of Emma Nutt in 1878 and all those who follow. This feminization fable travels, in accelerated fashion, along the same wire that Benson Lossing laid from Miss Ellsworth, muse-messenger in the 1840s, to Miss Cornell, telegraphic operator in the 1870s. It also highlights Lilian Sholes’ doubled symbolic value (as the daughter of the typewriter and its famed first user), which Siegert struggles to replicate by switching between Mabel Hubbard (daughter-wife of the telephone) and Emma Nutt (the “first” female operator). The complete tale of origin that Lilian Sholes seems to offer as a single iconic body (if we recall, she disputed this title herself) can only be channeled by Hubbard and Nutt in fragments, as lead and understudy in a single, abstracted media-historical context: the rise of the modern mediatrix.

**Conclusions**

Once women had become a stable fixture of the white-collar workforce, the “first” female telegraphers, telephonists, and typists had to be invented in order to gender the beginnings of the media-machines they now operated en masse. Emanating historical coherence and industrial

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 193.
paternalism, the three myths of origin I have deconstructed here all participate in this tradition without acknowledging that it exists. They deploy their first ladies as authenticating agents for the Great Men behind modern mass media and justify the increasingly dominant gender and class of technological mediation by tracing both to techno-romantic plots of domestic mediation. As a figure of pre-industrial gentility and electrical musedom, the modern mediatrix is the paternally sanctified technology that makes these narratives run. Through her intercession, which can be renewed when a renewal is needed, industrial interests become family values, loyalty to the company replaces worker solidarity, and femininity survives the paradoxes that threaten its stability as women take over the “nodes and switchboards of discourse.” Hooked up to new media through conventions defined by the domestic novel, nineteenth-century techno-romanticism, and perhaps (as I have speculated throughout) even the Catholic Church, the modern mediatrix subsumes real reasons for the feminization of modern communications work—corporate greed, war-time labor shortages, union sexism, and monopoly-based hiring strategies—into myths of manifest domesticity.

By the turn of the century, the domestic, young, white virginal archetypes built in the US around the feminization of tapping, switching, and typing had stabilized and gone global, absorbing new hybrid models—from teletypists to receptionists—with aplomb. From the 1910s through the 1940s, as communications and office work took on the lessons of Taylorism, becoming more mechanical, impersonal, and physically demanding, employers continued to exploit domestic images, increasingly with the explicit aim of suppressing the scars of industrialization on woman workers’ bodies, minds, and historical memories. In fact, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, both Western Union and AT&T systematically sublimated the mill girl’s fraught legacy by promoting their “girl operators” as graceful weavers of electrical
wires. Campaigns like these alleviated anxieties of both bourgeois subscribers and potential recruits by generating a nostalgic, de-industrialized image of white femininity that carefully distinguished increasingly factory-like white-collar workplaces from dust-ridden, immigrant-filled textile mills.

Epitomizing this trend, Julia Hansen’s “The Song of the Switchboard,” a poem published by AT&T to accompany its first “Weavers of Speech” ad campaign in 1915, brazenly inverted the politics of a classic critique of labor conditions under industrial capitalism, Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt.” In 1843, Hood’s poem had depicted weaving as an exhausting, oppressive, and unending task, brutally forced on woman workers: “With fingers weary and worn, / With eyelids heavy and red, / Plying her needle and thread – / Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!” Seventy years later, AT&T managed to simultaneously claim the operator’s weaving inheritance and erase all traces of woe and penury left by lived experience. As we see, the affect has changed but the rhythm remains the same: “With eager hearts and hands, / And wealth of cheery smiles, / The weavers work, the shuttle hums / Across the years and miles.”

As a corporate pastiche, “The Song of the Switchboard” offers a particularly unnerving trace of the patterns of feminization most expanding, rationalizing information industries sought to smooth over.

It also exemplifies the need for a systematic excavation of these patterns of feminization, from the expropriation and masculinization of feminine reproductive labor (like weaving and stitching) to the modern information industry’s ideological domestication of alienated, mechanical labor (like telegraph and telephone operation). Because these patterns were culturally invisible for so long, multiple conflated historical and class categories of weaving have successfully fueled the ideological gendering of a range of media-technological linking roles.

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from the late nineteenth century to the present. But luckily, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, these invisible patterns have also in many cases visibly shaped the narrative and industrial form of modern mass media, especially narrative film, so they can be recovered with the right tools.

In short, media archaeology, meet feminist techno-science. In the next chapter, I will leave Kittler and Siegert behind and bring together feminist film historians like Erin Hill, Kristen Hatch, and Lynne Kirby and feminist techno-scientists like Sadie Plant to explore the relationship between the “women who knitted the pieces of film together” on early film studio lots and the girl operators on the silver screen who taught early film viewers to weave together shots in their minds.
Film winders spin ceaselessly. [...] Her head bowed, arms ceaselessly moving, eyes intensely focused on the film strip, the motanzhnitsa [montagess] is at work.  

**Chapter 2 - Weavers of Film**  
**The Girl Operator Mends the Cut**

We now know that in the early days of cinema, the day-to-day work of editing was largely relegated to young women “with little or no professional training,” because, like telegraph and telephone work, it was considered menial, monotonous labor that would benefit from dexterous hands. As veteran Hollywood editor Walter Murch explained matter-of-factly in a 2003 interview: “it was a woman’s craft, seen as something like sewing. You knitted the pieces of film together.” For a time, skills that could be acquired in the cutting room offered women access to more authorial forms of editing. But the same domestic metaphors that opened these jobs up to women—combined with the seamlessness associated with classical editing—also assured that the techniques female film editors pioneered and any memory of their existence would be systematically absorbed into the films they assembled. As studio systems segregated along lines of creative male authorship and technical, interstitial female labor, film editing split into two subfields: the individual, male-dominated mental artistry of “editing” and the mass feminized handiwork of cutting, splicing, joining, gluing, and lacing. Noting the

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204 David Meuel, *Women Film Editors: Unseen Artists of American Cinema* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2016), 8. Meuel seems to have launched a wave of scholarship tying “sewing” and “knitting” to the early gendering of editing.


surprising number of women who defied this division of labor, feminist film scholars have, in recent years, triumphantly restored Rose Smith to her seat beside Griffith at the helm of complex continuity editing and Elizaveta Svilova to her co-authorship of a foundational Soviet montage film. Alongside these *auteur* restorations, an overlapping critical tradition has attempted to excavate a transatlantic film-industrial underclass of cutter girls, Klebberinnen, monteuses, and montazhnitsy. Adopting the weaving imagery threaded through both kinds of work as a starting point, I will explore how the flexible accumulation of women’s collective linking labor has shaped filmic grammar.

Cutting and joining film was, as Erin Hill has shown, one of many “deft-fingered” linking jobs feminized across the studio system, from hand-tinting and costume work to continuity writing, research, memo typing, switchboard operation and stenography. In her groundbreaking archival excavation of this pink-collar proletariat, Hill argues that “if film historians consider the classical Hollywood era’s mode of production a system, we ought to consider women this system’s mainstay, because studios were built on their low-cost backs and scaled through their brush and keystrokes.” The challenge, then, now facing feminist film historians is how to imaginatively uncover labor that is uncredited, embedded in “cultural

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invisibility,” and all but absent from the screen. To mediate my own investigation into the invisible sewing together of film, I will enlist two hypervisible cinematic icons: telegraph and telephone operators.

Over the past forty years, a growing body of film scholarship has underlined the role played by onscreen telegraphs and telephones in the codification of cross-cutting, one of the essential operations of classical cinematic syntax. Paul Young puts the critical consensus in deceptively simple terms: “It would be difficult to imagine the earliest complex story films made in the United States without the telephone and the telegraph.” By this Young means not only that both technologies “played prominent roles in many early films,” but also that their onscreen operation made it possible for audiences to “imagine” the narrative logic those films introduced. One of the first broad claims I want to make is that the onscreen operator should be drawn out from behind her machine and seen as a key player in the vernacularization of this logic. Not only did telegraph and telephone operators appear in a significant number of cross-cutting sequences throughout the 1910s, but their corporate and cultural construction as “weavers of speech” and genteel techno-pedagogues—there to diffuse disorientation and help with the difficulties of mastering new media—also made them singularly legible as demonstrators of an

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emerging narrative syntax. Moreover, the fact that operators receded into the margins of film once audiences could serve as their own “switchboard operators of narrative messages”—to quote Tom Gunning—suggests that the girl operator’s cinematic trace reproduces the 
contingency and flexibility demanded of feminized labor. 214 Both are comically captured in the 1916 promotional still for The Hazards of Helen reproduced below, which depicts its tomboy telegrapher heroine suspended in mid-air between moving cars. Helen’s arduous balancing act literalizes the precariousness of the girl operator’s mobility, trapped in limbo while leaping proactively from one machine to another.

This chapter proposes the girl operator as an essential link in film syntax and industrial history through the lens of her flexible weaving labor, which has predominantly relegated her to the peripheral role of mass replicable and iconic but fleeting intermediary: a non-character and structuring absence. But the two cinematic paradigm shifts I will draw out—narrative integration

214 Gunning, “Heard over the phone,” 195.
in the US (1909-1917) and sound conversion in Western Europe (1929-1934)—see girl operators suddenly rise to the surface of story and take over the screen, as if magically conjured, like one of Méliès’ vanishing ladies, to sew over major industrial ruptures and then gracefully disappear. By tying these strange spurts of girl operator films to two transitional periods that forced the film industry and film itself to conspicuously restructure along reassuringly patriarchal lines, I hope to illustrate some of the ways that the logic of feminized, flexible accumulation has been stitched into cinema itself. To provide a corporate telephonic framework for these two cinematic transitions, I will structure my investigation around AT&T’s most famous “speech-weaver” advertisements, “Weavers of Speech” (1915) and “Weaving the World of Speech” (1933). The two ads stand in for the move I will make from the US to Western Europe as the girl operator becomes a figure of global as well as national speech-weaving. Adopting the modern mediatrix as a theoretical tool allows us to recover lost links between real woman workers and apparitions on the screen across the shared motifs and conditions of gendered labor. For feminist film history, it also offers a chance to leave the individual male authorship model behind, along with its glaringly un-industrial values of “vision,” “credit,” and “genius.”

The girl operator on the screen reproduces the labor of the modern mediatrix most simply by miming the handiwork of repetitive, mechanical mediation. Indeed, I would argue it is precisely because operators’ role in classical cinematic infrastructure has largely replicated their professional role that neither their systematic marginalization within films nor their uniquely literal mediating role in film grammar have received much critical attention. Switching in and out of shots with discreet efficiency, classical operators put “real” characters into conversation and take care, upon departing, to mend the cuts created by their appearances. To illustrate what this means in grammatical terms, before moving on to the material metaphors of weaving, I
will analyze two canonical cinematic switchboard sequences that exemplify the classical
operator’s narrative marginalization (these are isolated instances within otherwise operator-less
feature-length plots) and establish the operator, dash, and ellipsis as uniquely intertwined agents
of cinematic syntax.

The first sequence, from Alfred Hitchcock’s British melodrama, *Easy Virtue* (1928), has
long been cited by film scholars as a virtuosic example of silent film language. Hitchcock
famously described this sequence, which lasts all of one minute and ten seconds, as a
“monologue without words,” because of his operator’s rapturous reaction to the marriage
proposal she hears over the line. Her expressive face translates an invisible telephone
conversation between the film’s romantic leads into a visible conclusion: the answer is yes. The
conditions for this “monologue” are set up by a prefatory intertitle, which informs us our hero is
eagerly awaiting his heroine’s phone call: “As the evening wore on, so John’s patience wore out,
until—.”

After an abrupt cut, we see a medium shot of the operator in profile, lifting her right hand to the
switchboard as if taking hold of the trailing dash to complete her own shot transition. While the
intertitular dash presages this cut, reassuring us in advance that the marriage plot is underway, it

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216 Ibid. The Hitchcock quote is originally from his iconic 1962 interview with François Truffaut.
also opens up a lack the operator must sew over manually. Through the meta-technology of the telephone, she appears to pop out of the cut and hook herself into the narrative network, where she takes on the role of audience avatar, turning her attention from the novel beneath her gaze to the romantic dialogue in her ear. The dash’s deployment here as a kind of proto-cut corresponds to the way montage theorists textualized shot breakdowns throughout the 1920s, as in Eisenstein’s 1924 shorthand for a “chain” of shots: “the gun is cocked—the shot fired—the bullet strikes—the victim falls.” More generally, Hitchcock’s pairing of the dash and operator invites us to apply film semioticians’ preferred terminology of cinematic “language” and “syntax,” through which editing operations that register graphically become legible within an implied narrative framework as “punctuation marks.” Hitchcock’s operator can thus be seen, on a number of levels, as a translator (from linguistic to cinematic syntax, from textual to body language) and a connector (across characters, shots, and narrative worlds).

In the second fleeting but canonical classical switchboard sequence I will highlight, the titillating extent of the telephone operator’s reach is simultaneously evoked and elided through the use of switch-like punctuation marks. As we see below, the opening title of *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) offers a portrait of the telephone network and its infinitely receding lines of telephone girls, overlaid by a grandiose message of telephonic connectivity.

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Significantly, the graphic lines created by the ellipsis and dashes mimic the structure of switching, like the dash in *Easy Virtue*. But while the fetishistic image seems to solidify the link between girls and machine, the text effaces their bodies and labor behind the all-consuming significance of the telephone: “the telephone is the unseen link between a million lives… It is the servant of our common needs— —” (my emphases) In a bit of baroque overkill, the word “unseen” even obscures one operator’s face. This gap between image and text is echoed in the film’s plot, which is devoid of operators because the conflict is catalyzed by an “open line.” The operators are, in other words, the structuring absence of the entire film, which creates all its suspense out of the housewife heroine’s bedbound entrapment, alone in the middle of a sprawling telephone network filled with unreachable female helpers. This paradox encapsulates the diegetic operator’s defining dialectic as a hyper-visible, eroticized popular icon of invisible industrial linking labor. Like the opening titles above, which brazenly play peek-a-boo by juxtaposing lines of operators with a description of the telephone as the “unseen link between a million lives,” film scholars have largely ignored the vital formal function performed by gendered linking laborers. This would seem to be a significant omission, given the field’s longtime obsession with the editing operations through which a reconstructed “piece-meal”
reality becomes a seamless narrative whole. For feminist film theory in particular, the idea that this seamless whole was mediated by weaving women offers an urgent alternative to the surgical rhetoric and patriarchal narratives typically used to describe women’s place in film form.

Weavers of Speech

From 1915 to 1941, AT&T ran one of its most successful and enduring advertising campaigns: the “Weavers of Speech” series. As April Middeljans has shown, Bell’s campaign not only defined the operator as a genteel, domestic figure—an angel of the wires, a “midwife of messages”—it also introduced “speech-weaver” and “thought-weaver” into popular discourse as synonyms for operator. While later slogans—like “the Voice with a Smile” and “Hello Girls”—would emphasize telephone workers’ dulcet tones, “Weavers of speech” highlighted their hands, perpetually in motion, always invisibly at work, threading calls through the network. If the company’s nickname for its telephone operators caught on quickly and stuck, it was likely because it carried over the central metaphor that had been used to market women as “natural” telegraph operators for over fifty years.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Americans had been inundated with depictions of female telegraph operators that tamed their technological mastery by coupling it with feminine handiwork, like knitting, weaving, and sewing. In industry literature from the 1860s, when women’s eligibility for telegraph work was still a topic of heated debate, so-called lady telegraphists were primarily figured through the tasks they performed while waiting for

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messages, “employing their spare minutes with knitting pins, light needlework and books.” In popular literature, while they wove “a girdle round the globe,” their intimate access to a bustling communications network spun out into the “mental weaving of untold tales” and “piecing together [of] all sorts of mysteries.” In visual culture, they appeared as electric goddesses of manifest domesticity laying spools of metal wire across the country. John Gast’s widely reprinted painting, *American Progress* (1872), epitomizes the heroic imagery of such works. Manifest destiny, classical republicanism, and the techno-utopian promise of telegraphy are wedded in the figure of Columbia, whose steady gait guides rows of men across vast plains and into the future, literally carrying enlightenment (note the sun at her back) from East to West. Like the white heroines of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, this telegraph operator mediates the permeable border of separate spheres by ceremonially enacting “the process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien,” embodied by the Native Americans running away from her *progressive* glow.

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224 Henry James, “In the Cage” [1898], *The Turn of the Screw & In the Cage* (New York: Random House, 2001), 12.

It seems clear, in short, that AT&T’s “Weavers of Speech” campaign used the telegraph operator’s metaphorical armature to extend the conceptual space of the home to the switchboard and establish the telephone operator as a serene seamstress. The original 1915 ad reads:

Upon the magic looms of the Bell System, tens of millions of telephone messages are daily woven into a marvelous fabric, representing the countless activities of a busy people. Day and night, invisible hands shift the shuttles to and fro, weaving the thoughts of men and women into a pattern which, if it could be seen as a tapestry, would tell a dramatic story of our business and social life. [...] Out of sight of the subscribers, these weavers of speech sit silently at the switchboards, swiftly and skillfully interlacing the cords which guide the human voice over the country in all directions.226

In this description, telephone operators are simultaneously cast as capable weavers of a vast, sprawling national pattern, “skillfully interlacing the cords which guide the human voice over the country in all directions,” and as blindly imbedded within that pattern, unable to see the whole

226 “Weavers of Speech,” American Telephone and Telegraph, December 1915, Box 2061, AT&T Archives.
themselves: “a pattern which, if it could be seen as a tapestry, would tell a dramatic story of our business and social life.” (my emphases) In short, while the advertisement plays on analogies between sewing, switching, and storytelling—implicitly conjuring mythic models of narrative-weaving women, like Arachne, Penelope, and Philomela—it also refuses to identify its speech-weavers as story-tellers. Instead, Bell’s tapestry, woven “skillfully” by “invisible hands,” audaciously weds the language of artisanal spinning to a textbook example of alienated labor, in which none of the weavers can see the pattern they are all a part of designing. Domesticity operates as the central mystifying medium in this exchange, turning an underpaid industrial workforce into silent sewing fingers.

The illustration featured in the advertisement, presiding majestically above its text, offers a clearer picture of the speech-weaver’s designated role in the pattern. As we see below, she is quite simply holding the whole thing together, her arms outstretched to thread bunches of telephone tendrils into multiple cities at once.
Trapped between the telephone poles and public life, she is at once central and anchored to an uneasy middle, unable to adopt her own perspective. Borrowing Bernhard Siegert’s term for the bureaucratization of in-betweenness, we might call her a “third person,” a conduit with no subject position beyond those she weaves together. But as the only human figure in the illustration, she also takes on the pivotal function of demonstrating a figurative syntax of telephony. The threads she holds up materialize the ephemeral magic of electrically collapsed time and space. Her very presence domesticates the sprawling landscape of modern communication.

While I will focus on the operator’s role in the vernacularization of cross-cutting in the next section, it is worth noting that the speech-weavers illustration also mimics the tryptic composition of many single-frame editing experiments from the 1910s, as the examples below should suggest in shorthand. As Eileen Bowser and Jan Olsson have shown, split-screens, cut-outs, and masques used to represent telephone conversations graphically (instead of diachronically) register the formal influence of postcards and magazine illustrations on early film aesthetics, as well as the switchboard operator’s ephemeral, shifting place in the silent film phone network.

227 Bernhard Siegert, Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 190.
For Olsson, these experiments, while ultimately subordinated to the industrial standard of diachronic causality metonymized by cross-cutting, still offer film scholars “an important tool for the tuning and demarcating of area codes prior to the dissemination of the Hollywood directory.”²²⁸ (For those wondering, the Hollywood directory is, unfortunately, not literally available for consultation; it is Olsson’s shorthand for the system of codes and conventions standardized and mass reproduced through the studio system that have become second nature to a century of viewers. Like many meta-media theorists, Olsson delights in reflexive mechanical metaphors.)

A glance back at Bell’s first Weavers of Speech illustration reminds us that the “area codes” of telephonic aesthetics were also being tuned and demarcated off-screen. While the three locations the Bell operator bundles as cords between her fingers float on an aerial plane, there is nothing ambiguous about the image’s internal grammar, with its lone female figure cast as central spatiotemporal anchor and cord conduit, a doubling that anticipates her pivotal role in tuning and demarcating the logic of cross-cutting. The still, serene center of a symbolic switching apparatus, she presents us with an idiom for embodied joining that cushions the many cuts to come: a pedagogical pantomime of the essential structure of a switchback. Reproduced below, this illustration demonstrates the girl operator’s potential as a transitional media object.

By “transitional media object,” a play on infant-psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s famous formulation, I mean not only that the girl operator’s mass reproduction in popular literature, industry images, and early films created clear connections for a global audience across multiple representational practices, but also that her elegant, mechanical prostheses marked her as a cyborg specifically designed to smooth over encounters with new media. Under the north star of the switchboard operator’s popular signification, the daintily dangled threads create a composite figure—at once modern and mystifying—that absorbs the erotic threat of the machine-woman and shocks of industrial feminization into a domesticated system of blindly automatic, discursive embroidery and genteel public pedagogy.

**Narrativization era: the telegraph operator teaches cross-cutting**

By 1915, the same year AT&T branded its invisible woman workers weavers of speech, so-called girl operators had become a familiar fixture of American films and serials, swiftly and skillfully interlacing the cords of complex narratives, guiding spectators from one telegraph station to another, across the country and back again. Indeed, during the single-reel era,
melodramas structured formally around the adventures of girl operators switching, sending and
tapping frenetically from their stations became so popular that the phrase “girl operator story”
was a common feature of film trade journals and fan magazines.229 In the context of a budding
international film market of mass-reproduced shorts and serials, themselves drawn from a
transnational mélange of literary and theatrical sources, many plot devices reappear identically
across company and national lines.230 The girl operator is in peril, the girl operator is saving the
day, the girl operator is distracted, the girl operator is vengeful, the girl operator is gossiping.
These forms of agency—which in a Taylorist communications network can only be categorized
as excess—are the tropes that catalyze cross-cutting. The appellation “girl operator,” initially
applied to female Morse telegraph operators, was by the 1910s an umbrella term that reflected
the global gendering of a spate of low-level communications roles, from Morse telegraphy and
teletype to wireless and switchboard operation. The continuous circuit of femininity it evoked
also disguised the obsolescence encoded into each apparatus and each kind of girl operation.

With the caveat that most films from the silent era have been lost and many remain to be
identified, a preliminary selection of the most successful and widely seen girl operator films in
the United States from 1908 to 1917 would include: The Medicine Bottle (Biograph, 1909), The
Express Envelope (Kalem, 1911), The Lonedale Operator (Biograph, 1911), The Girl and Her
Trust (Biograph, 1912), The Grit of the Girl Telegrapher (Kalem, 1912), The Yeggman
(Reliance, 1912), Lea Telefonista (Leah the Telephone Girl, Società Italiana Cines, 1912), Le
Nain (The Dwarf, Gaumont, 1912), My Baby’s Voice (Thanhouser, 1912), The Telephone Girl

229 See, for example, this Moving Picture World synopsis: “THE EXPRESS MESSENGER (1915) – A girl operator
story, with Florence Crawford in the leading part. The crooked express messenger and his pal try to make away with
the big sum of money, but she manages to outwit them.” (The Moving Picture World, February 6, 1915, p.828.)

230 For an excellent analysis of the transatlantic circuit of telegraphic theater, see Christopher Grobe, “Every Nerve
and the Lady (Biograph, 1913), A Desperate Chance (Kalem, 1913), The Telegraph Operator (Éclair American, 1913), The Treasure Train (IMP, 1914), The Express Messenger (Reliance, 1915), A Tragedy of the Rails (Edison, 1915), The Girl at the Key (Edison, 1915), The Woman (Paramount, 1915), The Telegraph Operator’s Daughter (Bison, 1916), With a Life at Stake (Mustang, 1916), and all 119 episodes of The Hazards of Helen (Kalem, 1914-1917), the longest running serial ever made.²³¹

Film scholars have by no means ignored all these films. The Lonedale Operator and The Girl and Her Trust in particular, directed by self-proclaimed inventor of the switchback, D.W. Griffith, were canonized long ago and are still used in introductory film courses to illustrate the function of the train and telegraph as diegetic tutors of audiences learning to read narrative films. This tradition can be traced with some specificity to Raymond Bellour’s 1979 structuralist analysis of The Lonedale Operator, which made Griffith’s first girl operator short a particularly popular pedagogical example of “alternation” as narration.²³² That said, as I have already suggested, most scholarship on silent film telegraphy and telephony has highlighted the agency of the apparatus, rather than the girl operator, who typically gets fleeting mention as a recurring character, along with train conductors and robbers, or as a symptom of social anxieties about gendered mis-uses of technology writ large, which groups her with hysterical housewives and oblivious little girls.²³³

²³¹ See Lynne Kirby on Kalem’s re-release of The Grit of the Girl Telegrapher (1912) as an episode of The Hazards of Helen (Kirby, Parallel Tracks, 113). The transnational list of girl operator films assembled here suggests telegraph girls were an exclusively North American export, while French and Italian film companies participated in the telephone girl tradition early on. This is likely because Morse operation was feminized in the US, Canada, and England during the late nineteenth century, but not globally, like telephone operation. I curated this list primarily from synopses in Motion Picture News and The Moving Picture World.

²³² Bellour, “To Alternate/To Narrate,” 262.

²³³ The other major body of work on telephonic film comes out of feminist psychoanalytic film theory on women’s voices. See Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Amy Lawrence, Echo and Narcissus: Women’s Voices in Classical Hollywood
The major exceptions to this rule are Lynne Kirby and Tom Gunning, who both highlight the human mediating labor behind *The Lonedale Operator*’s alternations and extend Raymond Bellour’s single-text analysis to the “split trajectory” that looms over girl operator films throughout the teens. As Kirby demonstrates, “one path pulls our filmic heroines into ever more active scenarios and public action,” culminating in the virile stunts performed by serial queens like Helen Holmes, who played railroad telegraphist “Helen” to great acclaim from 1914 to 1917. The other path, augured by Griffith’s infamous fetishization of vulnerable, white femininity, traps the girl operator in a “girl-train” circuit of alternation that links “gender-coding” with classical storytelling, ultimately displacing her from her temporary role as mechanical intermediary to the dyad structure of heterosexual romance. In this section, following Bellour, Kirby, and Gunning, I will use *The Lonedale Operator* to make a few points about the girl operator’s unique shot-weaving skills and what I would characterize as her planned obsolescence out of narrative film.

Like many of the melodramas for which it became a blueprint, *The Lonedale Operator* triangulates around three figures: criminals, rescuers, and an intrepid telegraph operator trapped at her station, desperately trying to get in touch with the rescuers in order to alert them to the presence of criminals outside her door. Throughout the suspenseful span of the rescue, our sense

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236 Kirby, *Parallel Tracks*, 106.
of the operator’s physical entrapment is increasingly undermined by the far-reaching cross-cutting sequences launched by her hand at the sounder. As we see in the consecutive shots below, taken from the film’s earliest cross-cutting sequence, the operator’s first taps establish a visible rhythm, geographic center, and diegetic crisis (SOS!) from which to launch all proceeding alternations. Moreover, her theatrical finger-tapping creates an audio-visual link for accompanists to synchronize the sounds of the telegraph to her choreography and then use them to stitch over the ruptures created by quick cuts.237

From left to right, frame 1 shows the thieves outside Lonedale station, frame 2 shows the girl operator sending an SOS, frame 3 shows the second operator receiving the SOS, and frame 4 shows the second operator alerting the engineer that his damsel is in distress.

Something more ephemeral, the female telegraphic imagination, also clearly plays a role in the film. After mobilizing her rescuers, our heroine continues to mediate the story’s syntax from a single location: while other characters run in and out of shots, she remains in one place, but her absorbed, distant expression betrays a restless mind leaping from one station to another.

Christopher Grobe’s research on the overwhelming number of telegraphs and telephones that flooded American popular theater in the late nineteenth century suggests that moviegoers might have already known how to read the faces of girl operators when they first appeared on the

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237 The index finger-tapping that became the standard technique for cinematic representations of Morse telegraphy was inaccurate. A real Morse operator would be pressing down on the sounder with her thumb and palm in a much subtler fashion. My speculation on the audio-visual function served by this convention is based on Eileen Bowser’s note: “the advice given to the musician in the case of rapid alternation of scenes was to select the dominant mood and stick with it.” (Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 58)
Among many novel dramatic opportunities provided by both technologies, Grobe singles out the development of a new mode of realist performance associated with how operators look and act while listening to something out of the audience’s range, from a Morse message they can’t decipher to a call they can’t hear. As Grobe argues, citing Gertrude Stein’s 1897 declaration of an emerging acting style “that had to do with telegraph operators,” this uniquely modern, mechanically mediated perceptual mode made new demands on spectators and performers alike. Drawn into real-time exchanges that trafficked in melodrama through partial vocalization, encryption, suspense, and changing facial expressions, spectators became self-satisfied decoders of corporeal messages: “the new acting flattered audiences with the thought that they were essential to the meaning of performance—that their own feats of decoding were what made the drama tick.” While the diegetic use of media-machines had come to be seen as a tired theatrical trick by the time Griffith’s operators hit theaters, the operator’s absorbed, automatic navigation between two worlds remained a popular attraction.

With this in mind, I would suggest that for most audiences viewing the The Lonedale Operator, the girl operator’s way of looking like she’s listening offered a readily legible apparatus of alternation for the entire film story. This is conveyed during the rescue sequence by


239 Christopher Grobe, “Why It’s ‘easier to act with a telephone than a man,’” Theatre Survey 57.2 (May 2016): 190.
the constant motion of her hands and *absent-mindedness* of her gaze, both holding the threads together even as they split into multiple frames of action, but we can also trace it to her first appearance in the film, strolling, daydreaming and reading a novel. Film scholars, it must be said, rarely emphasize this entrance, which casts the heroine as a consumer of thrilling pulp fiction *before* her beau enters the frame, almost as if she has conjured up a hero for herself.

Like *The Lonedale Operator, The Girl and Her Trust* and *Lea Telefonista* each begin with a lone heroine “engrossed” in the latest lurid novel, until her reading is interrupted by a male interloper. The “real” story can only begin once she puts down her book and begins to flirt. In these and other single reel-era melodramas, we might argue that the girl operator’s fantasy world—metonymized as a paperback—is the fuel the film-story runs on, which can only take cinematic form through the medium of her telegraphic mind. Novelistic language becomes filmic language, in other words, through the girl operator’s “double conscience” and “feeling for connection,” modern, gendered skills that allow her to hold multiple codes, locations, and plot

240 "‘Hello, hello,’ shouts the enraged colonel, but no response. This is because Leah, the prettiest girl at the switchboard, is too much engrossed in an interesting novel, and will not be interrupted.” (“Leah, The Telephone Girl,” *The Moving Picture World*, April-June 1912, p.954.)
points in her head at once, all while demonstrating the manual labor of flashing between shots.\(^{241}\)

Thus, the shot-weaver emerges, directing cinematic operations from a small room behind the scenes, forging imaginative, as well as mechanical, connections across cuts.

Lynne Kirby and Tom Gunning correlate the marginalization of girl operators from center-screen by 1917 with the marginalization of women’s labor in all kinds of rationalizing industries, including Hollywood, but I would argue that a number of elements in *The Lonedale Operator* suggest these shot-weavers were, from the first, enlisted as a stop-gap measure. For one, the heroine is *not* the titular character, but an impromptu substitute for her father, the actual Lonedale operator. At the very inception of the girl operator’s cinematic reign, in other words, we find a convivial wink of reassurance to displaced male workers and bourgeois viewers: the girl is *not* a permanent agent; on the contrary, she is a temp. This detail is crucial to draw out because it bridges the gap between the girl operator as an emerging cinematic linking apparatus and low-level communications work as a field that required women to leave the workplace once they wed. Teleologically stitched into the marriage plot, Griffith’s daughter-heroine reifies the “marriage bar” policy instituted by Western Union and Bell to keep their operator workforces young, single, and entry-level.\(^{242}\) Indeed, in its structural adherence to this policy, the “girl operator story” phenomenon begins to look less like a proto-feminist heterotopia on the edge of a Fordist film cliff and more like a corporate campaign designed, in Ned Schantz’s words, “to regulate the necessary but risky business of setting woman in motion, so as to transfer her from her father’s to her husband’s house.”\(^{243}\)

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then neatly curtailing her fledgling career with a kiss, Griffith subsumes the public network she navigates into a single domestic transfer (see the shorthand for this conversion process below).

The rural circuit of daughter-operator-wife through which Griffith channels his film also epitomizes the anachronism of telegraph girl films made from 1911 to 1917. It is no accident *The Lonedale Operator* takes place in the country, rather than the city, and that its heroine embodies a correspondingly nostalgic femininity, as if to blunt the bite of her inherent modernity. One key to understanding this paradox is that the female Morse operator was already becoming obsolete by 1911. Like reanimated phantoms of a fading workforce, the rise of cinematic girl telegraphers actually coincided with the disappearance of women from Morse telegraphy across the United States. From 1900 to 1915, as Thomas Jepsen has shown, teletype’s automatic translation of Morse messages steadily wiped out the need for operators fluent in the language of dots and dashes.\textsuperscript{244} By the end of World War I, a new gender division in commercial telegraphy was naturalized, between the skilled, semiotic work performed by a few lingering male Morse operators and the de-skilled, automatic labor performed by assembly lines of female tele-typists.

\textsuperscript{244} Jepsen, *My Sisters Telegraphic*, 11.
Teletype has not overtaken but clearly waits in the wings of *The Lonedale Operator*, even peeping out now and then. As Gunning points out, Griffith hems in his imaginative mediatrix with a single threatening shot of her Taylorist future in the form of a typist, huddled in a dark corner of the payroll office. This flash of the “future,” however, calls the category of the “present” into question. Framed by the heroine’s temp status, it offers a fairly literal visual syntax for the schizoid temporal logic the film seeks to occupy. As Morse operators, Griffith’s girls and their ilk float uncertainly in relation to their time. While their electric heroics and montage messaging fuel cinematic modernity, they are never allowed to exist in the present.

Meanwhile, switchboard operators, an expanding gendered workforce still very much installed at the nodes of national discourse in the 1910s, invariably get coded as disruptive, vain, and gossipy, arguably because their organized labor still presents a threat to the network. From this perspective, the sub-generic split in the 1910s between heroic lone operator and gossip-at-the-switchboard films (evoked below) shows us two seemingly opposed methods used to demonstrate the logic of cross-cutting while managing the female communications worker’s access to co-worker solidarity: either isolate her in the country, put her in danger, and couple her with a male engineer, or put her in a room with other women and code their talk as disruptive. The only way for a telephone operator to be heroic is if she is alone at her station, like Griffith’s “telephone girl” on the top right.

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247 Olsson, “Framing Silent Calls,” 162.
In the 1910s, girl operator stories split into two subgenres: lone operator films (top) and gossip-at-the-switchboard films (bottom). Left to right, the lone operator films are *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), *The Girl and Her Trust* (1912), and *The Telephone Girl and the Lady* (1913). The gossip-at-the-switchboard girl operator films are *The Medicine Bottle* (1909), *Le Nain* (1912), and *Number, Please?* (1920).

As female Morse operators faded from mass cultural memory, switchboard operators became iconic on a global scale. By 1933, AT&T’s newest speech-weaver ad, “Weaving the World of Speech,” announced their transnational legibility as cultural characters and pioneering purveyors of long-distance telephone service, binding continents together by carrying subscribers’ voices to “London, Paris, Berlin—Madrid, Rome, Bucharest—Capetown, Manila, Sydney” and “many other cities overseas.”\(^{248}\) Although cinematic switchboard operators were largely reduced to mediating the margins of narrative film in the 1920s, they also had a shadow career throughout the decade as stars of advertisements and industrial films. Riffing on Miriam Hansen’s concept of “vernacular modernism,” Jane Gaines has insisted we resurface the female

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\(^{248}\) “Weaving the World of Speech,” *American Telephone and Telegraph*, October 1933, Box 2061, AT&T Archives.
screenwriters behind the “serial queen fast-paced editing” that influenced Soviet montage filmmakers, for a better understanding of how their work was used to turn Hollywood style into an exportable, adaptable syntax and then efficiently replaced by “the narrative structure they had helped to develop.” 249 By locating Helen the telegrapher and her fellow serial queens at the intersection of continuity editing, montage, and female redundancy, Gaines also evokes the girl operator’s exportable formal legacy. In the 1930s European conversion-era films I will highlight in the next section, this legacy comes through as a kind of irrepresible vernacular modernism. All five films open with telephonic montage sequences meant to evoke contemporary industrial films and as a result, their operator heroines are trailed by an ambiguous mixture of corporate and modernist syntax, making them particularly potent vessels for early sound films that anxiously cling to montage aesthetics in the context of talkie cacophony.

249 Gaines, Pink-Slipped, 182, 192.
Sound conversion: the switchboard operator as montage mistress and translator

From 1929 to 1934, European film companies scrambled to compete with Hollywood’s monopolistic expansion by forging links across borders to negotiate cheap, efficient models of transnational co-production that might make up for the fall of Babel, now that intertitles could no longer be cut out and replaced, as they had been for decades, to “translate” a film into another language. While the US, France, Britain, Italy and Germany divided up the European market, newly formed sound film companies like Tobis-Klangfilm adapted microphones, tube amplifiers and telephones from communications industries to film production. Meanwhile, early experiments in dubbing and subtitles met with little success. French audiences, especially, expressed concern that the limitations of onsite sound recording would compromise the sophisticated expressivity of silent film editing.

Between 1932 and 1934, no fewer than five European romantic comedies about switchboard operators premiered: Âllo Mademoiselle (France, 1932), Allo Berlin? Ici Paris! / Hallo Hallo! Hier Spricht Berlin! (France/Germany, 1932), Fräulein – Falsch Verbunden (Germany, 1932), La Telefonista (Italy, 1932), and Give Her a Ring (England, 1934). All five films boasted synchronized sound, musical numbers, and (even more novel at the time) complex, rapid editing sequences throughout that did not destroy the illusion of continuous conversation.

Among these conversion-era operator films, Allo Berlin? Ici Paris! / Hallo Hallo! Hier Spricht Berlin! received the most press coverage, most likely because it was directed by Julien Duvivier, an up-and-coming auteur often compared to René Clair. French and German critics


alike praised Duvivier for his self-conscious reliance on montage to structure the leads’
telephonically mediated flirtations, a choice that set the film apart from the much-maligned
“cinéma parlant” (talking cinema).252 As one French journalist enthused, “On se réjouit surtout
de voir enfin un film qui n’est pas un découpage plus ou moins respectueux d’un pièce, mais
bien un film de cinéma, conçu pour le cinéma et exécuté cinématographiquement. Cela peut
paraître un compliment banal. Eh bien, non! Aujourd’hui, c’est presqu’un… miracle qu’un film
soit du cinéma et non du théâtre.” [We rejoice to finally see a film that is not primarily defined
with respect to a play, but is, in fact, a cinematic film, conceived for the cinema and executed
cinematographically. This might seem like a banal compliment. But it isn’t! Today, it’s almost…
a miracle for a film to be cinematic instead of theatrical.]253 While most reviews of Allo Berlin?
Ici Paris! emphasized the film’s “pure” cinematographic properties, particularly its editing,
many also celebrated the Franco-German friendship advertised by its conditions of co-production
and its diegesis (a romance between switchboard operators stationed in Paris and Berlin).254 With
half the cast from Germany and half from France, the film was shot in both languages and
released in two versions, one with French subtitles and the other with German subtitles.
Newspaper advertisements, laden with wires, lightning bolts, and telephone poles, suggested the
ture form of “true cinema” was telephonic.

252 Ibid., 65.


254 For example: “The parallelism between the Paris Central and Berlin is well mapped without becoming
systematic. […] The premise, through simple, serves the cause of Franco-German rapprochement much better than a
N’a Pas Besoin d’Argent,” Le Cinema, January 22, 1933, p.20.
If the press was reticent about how many operator films showed up at the box office in the early 1930s, it was likely because at least three were different versions of the same film, a phenomenon explained by the prevalence of Multiple Language Version (MLV) films among US, French, German, English, Austrian, and Italian studio releases at the time. 255 For European studios, in particular, MLV films seemed to offer the last hope for resistance against Hollywood’s global market domination: in reference to their capacity to transcend national bounds, UFA producer Erich Pommer called them the “Esperanto” of sound cinema. 256 Most articles on the subject from this period are elegiac but tentatively hopeful. They mourn a prelapsarian era when “the silent film was the international link between nations,” but also gesture towards the heterotopian possibilities suggested by the new Babel in formation on studio lots outside Berlin. An article published in the Neues Wiener Journal in November, 1932 offers Allo Berlin? Ici Paris! as an exemplar of the MLV’s potential to restore the broken link between French and German film industries. 257

255 The only acknowledgement I have found of the phenomenon is this review of Allo Berlin Ici Paris: “The telephone is very useful for filmmakers, at least for the purpose of providing a title. Maurice Tourneur calls his latest production Allo! Mademoiselle!” (my translation) (“L’Ecran et Ses Vedettes,” La Vie Parisienne, September 17, 1932, p.777) Note: the director of Allo Mademoiselle is Maurice Champreux.

256 Nancy P. Nenno, “Language, the Voice and Esperantism in Early German Sound Film: The Case of ‘Niemandsland,’” Colloquia Germanica 44.3 (2011): 283.
Significantly, Duvivier’s film was also an exception to most MLV production because it incorporated two languages at once, justifying their co-mingling through a bilingual plot (most other polyglot films from this time were war dramas featuring soldiers speaking in their native languages). More often, MLV films followed the trend exemplified by Fräulein – Falsch Verbunden, La Telefonista, and Give Her a Ring, three separate films with three separate casts, released in three separate countries, but all adapted from the same screenplay and produced through a coalition of German, Italian, and English film companies. All three are musical comedies about a telephonic romance between a comely young switchboard operator and the director of the telephone office where she works. From one version to another, scenes line up shot for shot and musical numbers retain their original melodies.

For all these echoes, the single most significant bridge among all three versions is the girl operator, whose presence activates montage, modernity, and the marriage plot. 1932 was not only a year for polyglot and MLV operator films: the box office success of Allo Mademoiselle and Un Coup de Telephone suggests that telephones and their operators were broadly perceived as agents of technological, historical, and cultural continuity, perfectly poised to smooth over ruptures created by the crisis of conversion. These films exploited the switchboard operator’s American origins and globalization to cast her as a kind of transnational technological diplomat: a mediatrix of multiple languages, nations, and cinematic forms.

But as with the rise of cinematic Morse operators in the midst of real Morse operators’ transfer to teletype, there is an odd synchronicity between the switchboard operator’s activation on the screen and obsolescence at work. The 1930s not only saw the transition to sound and

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257 “Französische Filmstadt Berlin: Verbrüderung zwischen deutschen und französischen Künstlern,” Neues Wiener Journal, August 5, 1932, p.9. This journalist uses the word “Bindeglied,” which I have translated as “link.”

expansion of long distance calling; they also saw the first automatic dialing systems being installed across Europe.\textsuperscript{259} This did not mean that switchboard operators disappeared completely, but it \textit{did} mean that male sound engineers would take over the discourse of manual, mechanical expertise from then on, leaving operators with only their voices and smiles to sell their service. In the images below, taken from the GPO film unit’s 1933 montage-heavy industrial film, \textit{The Coming of the Dial}, we see this transition staged as a competition between two gendered skills: engineering and operation.

![Lone “handy” engineer](image1.png) ![Chorus line of automated operators](image2.png)

The male engineer (left) is pictured alone and absorbed at his station, delicately threading wires through a switchboard. With his fingers in focus, he resembles a skilled artisanal weaver. The rows of leftover female operators (right), by contrast, register primarily as mass replicable, promotional aesthetic icons, multiplying kaleidoscopically out of the background. Beneath glowing faces and shining headsets, their hands fade from focus under cover of darkness.

\textsuperscript{259} The technology for automatic dialing was available from 1891 onwards, but most countries were slow to use it to replace female operators, who provided a PR service that far outweighed the benefits of automation. The question of why the US was so slow frames Kenneth Lipartito’s article, “When Women Were Switches: Technology, Work, and Gender in the Telephone Industry, 1890-1920,” \textit{The American Historical Review} 99.4 (October 1994): 1075-1111.
While a number of female film editors survived the transition to sound, as Kristen Hatch has shown, they too felt crowded in by a new class of “experts,” sound engineers sent from studios and communications companies to “teach” women how to edit sound films. Hatch quotes Margaret Booth, one of the most famous female editors who made the transition, on the subject of these engineers: “sound was their background, and they all knew everything. And they didn’t know a damn thing, but they ‘knew everything.’”

These new forms of gender-segregation offer a possible historical lens through which to read Allo Berlin Ici Paris’ structural illusion of a heterosexually gender-balanced telephone network. Although the film opens with a montage sequence riffing on contemporary industrials that evokes the vast, sprawling expanse of the global telephone network and its female-dominated, multiracial workforce (top row), the rest of its narrative is organized around a white, domestic quartet: two German boys and two French girls (bottom row).

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260 Hatch, “Cutting Women.”
In this transitional film, as in *The Lonedale Operator*, montage is first catalyzed by the girl at her station but ultimately funneled into romantic dialogue. The contrast between our naïve protagonists and their mischievous co-workers also establishes a moral dichotomy between good (honest, pure, romantic) and bad (interfering, misleading, spying) use of the telephone that pedagogically transfers the switchboard operator’s training to a transnational civilian populace newly equipped to make direct calls. In a finale that definitively marks the film-world’s transition from switchboard operation to automatic dialing, *Allo Berlin Ici Paris* ends with its operators relieved of their headsets and restored to in-person communication through the timely appearance of a room full of rotary phones.

One of the most remarkable links among the five 1932 European operator films highlighted here is that at least three of them, and most likely four (I have yet to find a viewable version of *Give Her a Ring*) conclude in a Berlin telephone bar, with a word of love shared over the “Tischtelefon” (table telephone). A Weimar-era fad that had apparently become a major continental tourist attraction by the early 1930s, telephone bars offered patrons the chance to sit at numbered tables, call each other over their table telephones to flirt from across the room, and circulate discreet messages, champagne, or cocaine in ornate pneumatic tubes.261

In *Allo Berlin Ici Paris*, Duvivier uses the table telephone to resolve the film’s romantic narrative and the cut at the heart of its eponymous binary. While the MC explains how the telephone bar works, Duvivier’s camera pans 180 degrees from one side of the room to the other, demonstratively not cutting between any of the tables, which are arranged in a circle to mimic the shape of a dial.

As we see from a shorthand for one of these pans (above), the meta-technology restoring cinematic continuity is also a novelty object the film uses to displace the operator from her original role. With her pensive face overlaid by the subtitle, “Regardez cette nouveauté” (look at this novelty), Lili the operator gives way to the newest machine invented to replace her.

As cyber-feminists like Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant have shown, under racial, patriarchal capitalism, automation and “feminization” go hand in hand: “since the industrial revolution, and with every subsequent phase of technological change,” writes Plant, “it has been the case that the more sophisticated the machines, the more female the workforce becomes.”

Plant and Lisa Nakamura both read weaving as an Ur-craft for this palimpsest, a kind of material and metaphorical tissue that links the first “spinsters” (women at spinning wheels) subjected to the mechanical rhythms of the power loom to the “flexible labor of women of color” whose “nimble fingers” still disproportionately bear the burden of electronic manufacturing. While weaving has most often been invoked by employers as a force of domestication to naturalize profit-motivated policies, it also offers feminist media historians today a thread to follow through the feminization of telegraph and telephone operation, one that highlights the gendered

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handiwork hidden at the heart of modern media infrastructure and narrative form. The invisible work of women of color in the globalized, integrated circuit thus become legible as “the latest in the long and twisted line of micro-processes which emerge from a tangle of telephone lines, dials, operators, cables, tones, switches, and plugs; the keys, carriages, and cases of typewriters; the punched-card programs of calculators, pianolas, and looms; flying shuttles, spinning wheels.”\(^{264}\) By approaching telegraph and switchboard operation as tangles in a “long and twisted” line of feminized weaving labor, we can recover a repressed history of the feminine fingerprints left on texts, textiles, and other new narrative media.

The only major film I know of framed didactically by the handiwork of a woman at an editing bench also adopts weaving women as its central mediating mechanism. Man with a Movie Camera’s attention to its cuts, to the means of its production and the largely female workforce that makes the whole system go offers a telling counterexample to classical cinema’s systematic stitching over the feminized linking labor on which it runs.\(^{265}\)

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\(^{264}\) Plant, 75.

\(^{265}\) While the cutter girls of the Soviet film industry are conspicuously absent from Svilova’s artisanally edited film, we can imaginatively weave them in with the help of another recently recovered mother of montage. In Esfir Shub’s 1927 ode to the montazhnitsa (montagess), we find a haunting echo of Bell’s speech-weaving verse: “Film winders spin ceaselessly. […] Her head bowed, arms ceaselessly moving, eyes intensely focused on the film strip, the montazhnitsa is at work.” (Alla Gadassik, “Esfir Shub on Women in the Editing Room: ‘The Work of Montazhnitsi’ (1927),” Apparatus 6.)
I interpret the final sequence—in which the weaver, typist, telephone operator, and film editor are all woven into a rhythmic continuum of synchronized hands and machines, so that every gesture becomes an echo and rhyme of another feminized form of work—as an invitation from Elizaveta Svilova, the darting eyes overseeing this sequence, to replace film theory’s preferred language of “suture” with industrial weaving, which materially and laboriously undergirds both montage and continuity editing.\(^{266}\) Approaching the operator as a weaver of film and film itself as a woven medium at once exposes the layers of feminization underlying classical cinematic

\(^{266}\) See Kaganovsky, “Film Editing as Women’s Work,” *Apparatus* 6 (2018). As Kaganovsky illustrates, industrial cutting was gendered female in both French (monteuses) and German (Cutterinnen, Kleberinnen), in addition to Russian. For an overview of how suture theory has been deployed by film scholars, see Kaja Silverman, “Suture,” *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
syntax and offers a way out of the violent, medicalized signifying practices of most twentieth-century film theory, from Walter Benjamin’s description of the film editor as a “surgeon” who penetrates into the flesh of reality to Laura Mulvey’s theorization of the woman in classical cinema as perennial splice victim, cut up and sutured onscreen.  

During this chapter, I hope, among other things, to have offered some context for an understanding that it is no accident the heroine of Riddles of the Sphinx (1977), Mulvey’s most famous counter-classical editing experiment, was a switchboard operator. As we see below, the intertitles that frame the switchboard sequence are very different from the domestic frame that encloses classical and transitional cinematic girl operators. Oddly cropped, as if to mimic the fragmented sensory experience and constrained communications of women at switchboards, the text offers us access to the mind of the mediatrix, but the camera—panning orbitally instead of penetrating the space—restricts access to her industrially fetishized face.

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With capitalism’s dialectical “need” for and “punishment” of its female intermediaries verbalized as a fragmented internal monologue, the occluded images and dispersed sounds of women’s telephone work resist formal and aesthetic mystification. In this canonical retort to patriarchal film editing, switchboard operators are restored to a space of worker solidarity, protected from the camera gaze, and woven into a sonic envelope of women’s talk.

I will conclude with one last pair of cross-cutting sequences. Released in 1913, a year Charles Musser has called “the mid point in a dissolve” for the early studio era, Thanhouser’s *The Evidence of the Film* is the only evidence I have found in a narrative film of the gendered history of film editing. As a conspicuous anomaly, it proves the general rule of the cutter girl’s invisibility, but also covertly hooks her up to the transitional telephone girl.

Set on a studio lot, *The Evidence of the Film* has a melodramatic plot structured around a meta-cinematic investigation: exploiting the chaotic environment of the film set, a corrupt broker robs a messenger boy in transit with $20,000, replacing the envelope he drops on the ground with a “dummy” package. The crime happens to be caught on camera, but the film is sent to the studio before it can be apprehended by the police. So, the messenger boy calls his sister, a cutter girl, on the telephone, to enlist her detective skills: with resourceful efficiency, she uncovers the cinematic evidence of the crime, cuts out the relevant shot, and shows it to the judge. A screening at the studio is then arranged, where the film crew and police triumphantly watch the crime projected on the screen.

I have constructed a shorthand below for the two cross-cutting sequences at the heart of the film that hook our heroine into the plot and ensure its resolution.

Cross-cutting sequence 1:

The first cross-cutting sequence, like many made during the narrativization era, uses a girl at the telephone to model the logic of interlocking shots. The message has been received. Help is on its way. The second, like a crazy bridge from the cinema of attractions to continuity editing via *Man with a Movie Camera*, turns self-reflexively on the process of editing itself. After witnessing the scene of the crime through the cutter girl’s eyes, we are jerked back into the studio, where we see her stand up from her bench, as if still processing what she has detected. Together, the two sequences create a puckish link between the alternations activated by the girl at the telephone and the girl at the editing bench.
On one level, this link highlights the standardization of the white-collar woman worker in the age of her cinemetic reproducibility. The cutter girl’s uniform is almost identical to the one worn by Griffith’s iconic girl operator. But the link also offers us critical insight into the essential reflexivity of the imaginative shot-weaving work the mediatrix is periodically enlisted to perform onscreen. The final point I want to make, then, is about a dominant form of feminized mediation in another sphere of the film industry: spectatorship.

Like the telegraph and telephone operators we have seen switch seamlessly between novelistic and cinematic imaginaries, cutter girls in the early studio era were perceived as intuitively attuned to “what the public wants to see.” As Florence Osborne explains in a 1924 Motion Picture Magazine article about the quickness and resourcefulness of female film editors: “They can sit in a stuffy cutting-room and see themselves looking at the picture before an audience.” With this evocative image in mind, which recalls the Lonedale operator’s ability to hold two locations in her mind at once, we can see Thanhouser’s cutter girl not only as a diegetic techno-pedagogue equipped with telephonic and filmic prostheses, but even more tantalizingly, as a vital mental mediatrix for the film industry’s female-dominated audience. Suture theory, as we may recall, holds that the final resolution of a film’s ruptures and lacks happens in the mind.

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269 Quoted by Hatch in “Cutting Women.”
of the spectator, not on the screen. One way to read the two cross-cutting sequences above is through the cutter girl’s ability to visualize what she hears over the phone, which leads her to correctly identify the footage her public wants to see. Far from forcing us to pursue a claim to editing as authorship, this rare scene of the double-minded cutter stitching herself and the audience into the cinematic illusion offers us the chance to expose a forgotten feedback loop of girl-on-girl mediation hidden in the cut of industrial film form.
Chapter 3 - Dictation and the Dictator
Tracing the Rise of the Sound-struck Secretary

The two previous chapters have given us all the trappings to assemble the secretary, whom we might call the ultimate mediatrix. A one-woman Gesamtkunstwerk of feminized clerical and communications work, the secretary combines the talents of the Morse operator, telephone operator, and typist. She can operate a typewriter, answer the phone, take dictation from a human voice or dictaphone, and write and decipher code (stenographic notation, instead of dots and dashes). She is also trained to exhibit a level of receptivity bordering on telepathy for the dictations of her presumed male employer. Removed from the typing pool, the dictatorial dyad seems to promise worker de-alienation by replacing mechanized anonymity with heterosexual intimacy, but like the other paternal-romantic relationships I examine in this dissertation, from inventor/virginal electric muse to engineer/girl operator, it actually mystifies an exploitative system of gendered labor segregation. In an ideal dyad, the secretary transcribes automatically but also anticipates her dictator’s thoughts, melding her mind and perspective with his, all while cycling through a rolodex of feminine mediating roles, from wife and mother to uncredited editor, fly on the wall, and sympathetic audience. But as we will see in this chapter, these traits also make her a dangerously porous and unstable medium. Even in a blind spot, she tends to know more than she should and take down everything she hears.


271 I am invoking Wagner’s notion of the total work of art here (following a suggestion from Robyn Creswell) to plant the idea of the modern mediatrix as a hypnotic audio-visual illusion, as well as a multi-media worker.
One such secretary tells us that on a calm summer morning in 1943, Adolf Hitler dreamed of a day after the war was won, when he would write his memoirs surrounded by his secretaries. “And my two old secretaries will be with me, typing. The young ones will all be married and leave, and when I’m old the older secretaries will still be able to keep up with my speed.”\textsuperscript{272} Hitler standing on the terrace, dreaming out loud about his postwar retirement from public life for an intimate audience of secretaries, officers, and officers’ wives: this heterotopian moment of imagined postwar domestic dictation, delivered by the Great Dictator and taken down by his private secretary, marks the turning point in Traudl Junge’s uniquely close-to account of her iconic employer. The memoir based on her 1942-1945 diaries became an instant bestseller upon its publication in 1947 and has since been widely reprinted, translated, and adapted to film. In Junge’s surreal everyday observations at the Eagle’s Nest, Hitler appears mostly as an affable conversation partner and incorrigible matchmaker, who loves opera and bemoans the whiteness of his knees, which make it impossible for him to wear shorts. The “old” Junge (as she will later call herself) admits, “I never again felt that I belonged anywhere in just the same way.” After the war is lost, she will remember with “warmth” how “protected” she had felt “in the middle of the forest, in that community, with that father figure.”\textsuperscript{273}

When the Führer approaches Junge for the last time one April day in 1945 to dictate his final will and political testament, she barely recognizes the “weak, weary voice” that “used to race through dictation so energetically that I could hardly keep up.”\textsuperscript{274} It is only once Junge realizes that her Great Dictator’s voice no longer holds power that she knows the end is near. But


\textsuperscript{273} Junge, \textit{Until the Final Hour: Hitler’s Last Secretary}, 218.

\textsuperscript{274} Junge, 182.
this intuition of storms ahead, based on a specialized secretarial receptivity to her boss’s typical vocal tones, does not lead Junge quickly or simply to a clearer view of the world beyond Hitler’s perspective. When the Führer finally kills himself, she realizes with surprise that she feels angry, even though she saw it coming. Although Junge will later articulate feelings of extreme guilt and horror at her passive participation in the crimes of the Third Reich, her first reaction is as a member of a captive audience rudely abandoned by director, star, and the entire absorbing spectacle all at once: “But he’s left us in such a state of emptiness and helplessness! He’s simply gone away, and with him the hypnotic compulsion under which we were living has gone too.”

I believe there are unmined depths to be found in the sonic dimensions of Junge’s account of her receptivity as an audience of fascist voice and discourse, most tantalizingly in the relationship between dictation and dictatorship. In this case, both were mediated by the receptive ear and swift shorthand of a twenty-two-year-old private secretary. Junge’s uniquely alienated standpoint has long been metaphorized through images of obscured and distorted vision. Most famously, the puckish title of the 2002 Austrian documentary Blind Spot: Hitler’s Secretary riffs on the clerical resonances of a common expression. In classical dictation choreography, the dictator stands in the secretary’s blind spot, so she cannot see him without turning around from her shorthand pad or typewriter. This set-up trains her to receive a disembodied male voice. At the keyboard, she also “types blind” (without looking at the letters beneath her fingertips). In at least two ways then, the blind spot offers a bridge between a perspectival limitation shared by all binocular creatures and a uniquely modern, gendered professional positionality. This bridge appears to exonerate Junge in shorthand—she was located in a historical blind spot (weren’t we?

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275 Ibid., 188.
all?). While Junge herself frequently articulates her paradoxical position through visual metaphors, she also emphasizes the importance of her dictator’s voice.\textsuperscript{276}

In this chapter, I will foreground the richly intertwined sonic and psychological implications of “receptivity” in my own analysis of the secretary’s modern, inter-medial symptomatic sensorium. There are rich palimpsests of secretarial signification imbedded in the “blind spot,” the “dazzled” spectators in a cave or bunker, and the “narrow view” from the seat next to Hitler, but I am more interested in the link between the power a fascist leader’s voice held over the woman who took dictation from him daily and the transnational audience that listened to his voice on the radio for many years.\textsuperscript{277} In his famous essay, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” Theodor Adorno argues that one of the greatest challenges dictators face is how to extend the power of 1-1 dynamics like hypnosis, therapeutic transference, and falling in love to millions of people. According to Adorno, the key is to “collectivize the hypnotic spell” artificially, by setting up hierarchies of intermediate dictators and surrendering subjects to make each person feel personally addressed.\textsuperscript{278} It is worth noting at the outset that a woman directed the most famous (and arguably most effective) fascist propaganda film designed along these lines. Leni Riefenstahl’s iconic quick cuts between medium shots of Hitler, close-ups from the crowd, and medium shots of officer orators at the Nuremberg Rally show us one way a dictator’s hypnotic spell was collectivized in 1935. As I

\textsuperscript{276} For example: “Once I had thought that here at the centre of events, the place to which all threads ran, you would have the best and widest view of all, [though] it was not until I had gone through with it to the bitter end and returned to ordinary life that I could see it as clearly as that.” (Junge, 104)

\textsuperscript{277} In the essays that frame a recent reprint of Junge’s memoir, editor Melissa Müller describes her subject as a young woman “dazzled,” like many other young women in Germany, by Hitler’s personality and “aura,” and notes that her “view of him was extremely narrow.” (Melissa Müller (ed.), \textit{Until the Final Hour: Hitler’s Last Secretary}, 217, 7.)

will try to demonstrate in this chapter, another was through the cinematic secretary in the audience, a conduit between dictator and masses that could be activated over speaker systems, set to music, and tuned to many masters’ voices.

Several popular European films released around the same time as *Triumph of the Will*, at the height of Hitler’s mass-mediated powers, suggest that the secretary was a well-known avatar for hypnotized listeners long before Traudl Junge’s diaries became a global sensation. Secretaries were ubiquitous characters in European entertainment film throughout the 1930s, but as I will illustrate, over the course of the decade they metamorphosed from much-mythologized links among European nations into allegorical test subjects for the power of mass hypnosis by ear. This chapter will explore how a longstanding cultural interest in the mental effects of mechanical listening and blind typing became intertwined with more immediate anxieties about women workers’ susceptibility to the disembodied voices of fascist orators. After tracing some ancient and modern foundations for this phenomenon, I will zoom in on two transnational cinematic co-productions from the 1930s about secretaries, both launched in Germany and reproduced around Western Europe. Respectively released in the years before and after the dawn of the Third Reich, *Die Privatsekretärin* (dir. Wilhelm Thiele, 1931) and *Vergiss Mein Nicht* (dir. Augusto Genina, 1935) were also vehicles for Hitler’s favorite German and Italian musical stars. The purpose of pairing these two clusters of apparently benign musical entertainment films is to tie the rise of the sound-struck secretary on European screens to the rise of media-savvy
dictators like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. One of the secondary claims I will make in this chapter is that Renate Muller and Beniamino Gigli became incognito ambassadors for their dictators by crossing national borders through the fleeting film-industrial phenomenon of multiple language version film production.

Unlike the French and Italian versions of these films, the British remakes—*Sunshine Susie* (dir. Victor Saville, 1931) and *Forget Me Not* (dir. Zoltan Korda, 1936)—both carried over Hitler’s favorite stars and several soupcons of fascist ideology, thereby establishing their secretarial heroines as nodes of transnational contagion and communicability, as well as communication. To decipher the mixed messaging of this mid-decade moment, my final readings will highlight the British film industry’s uneven adaptation of a new allegorical project: saving the nation’s audiences from German and Italian voices (maybe even with the help of Hollywood). Released the same year as *Forget Me Not* by the same iconic Jewish producer, the final British film I will examine, *Men Are Not Gods* (dir. Walter Reisch, 1936), offered a seemingly knowing nationalist retort by bending its secretarial heroine’s ear with Shakespeare and ultimately showing her how to escape the Master’s Voice. But the film’s internal contradictions also suggest that there are certain fascist lures it is unprepared to pit its lily-white, blond protagonist against, most notably racism.

The secretaries examined in this chapter would feel at home in Friedrich Kittler’s scholarship. His *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* introduces an army of literary and historical typists as a disruptive, destabilizingly gendered discursive workforce (The writer’s hand has left the text! The woman reader is in the office!), but then largely focuses on the mental effects of their typing on the male writers who dictate to them. Kittler delightfully excavates Mark Twain’s first typewritten manuscript, Friedrich Nietzsche’s transition to telegraphic aphorisms, and Henry
James’ compositional adherence to the rhythm of his secretary’s Remington keystrokes, so that “only the clanking of the typewriter induced sentences in the writer.”²⁷⁹ Kittler does not, however, linger in the mind of the secretary. He is more interested in how this female network becomes incorporated into new creative process and social mechanisms, their dexterous fingers evolved to the task from centuries of needlework and spinet practice.

A number of feminist scholars, most notably Angelika Führlich, Pamela Thurschwell, Leah Price, and Katherine Biers, have filled in the gaps of Kittler’s master narrative by highlighting the rich semiotic play, class politics, alienation, agency, and erotic performances of women at typewriters.²⁸⁰ To add to these revisionist efforts and establish the cultural conditions for the secretary’s perceived susceptibility to men’s voices, mass ideology, and fascist media by the 1930s, I will begin by tracing the rise of a thoroughly modern disease I call “secretary’s syndrome” in the Euro-American cultural imagination. Across a range of case studies from short stories, speed typing manuals, modernist plays, and novels, we will see that secretary’s syndrome combines a new kind of industrialized semiotic alienation with several layers of gendered media maladies, from overheated novel-reading to rabid film fandom. Symptoms may include a disorganized sensorium, staccato stuttering, unconscious mental processes stimulated by typing, and a heightened receptivity to the sound of a disembodied male voice. With a focus on this last symptom in particular, the broader project of this chapter will be to add the sound-struck secretary to the European cultural canon of mad, mechanized modern life. While this ever-expanding list includes androids, shell-shocked soldiers, compulsive gamblers, and—most iconic in film and media studies—the nerve-wracked, machine-like factory worker (think Charlie

²⁷⁹ Friedrich Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999), 216.
Chaplin jolting balletically along an assembly line), nerve-wrecked and absent-minded female information workers have largely been left out. In ways that overlap with their mediatrix cousins, secretaries are “home-baked” hysterics and office-trained neurasthenics. As we will see, their mechanized movements and habitual professional forays in and out of other worlds through typewriters and dictaphones intertwine with their well-known weakness for the music hall and movie theater, turning them into uniquely porous interfaces between business and romance, reality and fantasy, the leader and the masses.281

But these modern mediatrixes are also modeled on an older feminine model of aural receptivity. The Virgin Mary’s impregnation by ear, if we recall from the introduction, anchors all her other mediating powers, most importantly her ability to mediate between God and humankind. The classic scene of divine paternal transmission (reproduced in the two paintings below) offers a foundational cultural myth for the secretary’s construction as a natural listener in 1930s Nazi Germany, where the state-subsidized radio receivers were called “Volksempfänger,” literally people’s conceivers. Like Mary, the secretary can transmit her Master’s “word” through her body whether he is present or sends an intermediary. Most often, as we see below on the right, this intermediary stands in the mediatrix’s blind spot, as if in anticipation of both therapeutic and dictatorial choreography.282 The engraving on the left, stolen from Kittler, reminds us that secretaries were professionally attuned to the sounds of men, music, and media-machines.

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281 I am deploying “home-baked” somewhat ironically here, riffing on Karl Marx’s notion of commodities having home-baked natural forms: “Commodities come into the world in the form of use-values, or commodity-bodies, such as iron, linen, wheat, and son on. That is their home-baked natural form.” (Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, transl. Paul Reitter, ed. Paul North (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 9)

282 The Mary painting next to the Kittler image is Master Bertram, *St Peter (Grabow) Altarpiece: Annunciation*, 1379-83, tempera on wood, 80 x 57 cm, courtesy of the web gallery of art: [https://www.wga.hu/archivee.html?/html/m/master/bertram/grabow4.html](https://www.wga.hu/archivee.html?/html/m/master/bertram/grabow4.html) The far right is the left panel of Rogier van der Weyden, *Saint Columba altarpiece*, c. 1455, courtesy of the Alte Pinakotheek, Munich.
The Female Clerical Worker as a Natural Mechanical Listener

The notion of the female clerical worker as a natural mechanical listener goes back to the feminization of telegraphy, when telegraph networks shifted from a visible system of dots and dashes, legible by eye, to a more efficient audile system legible by ear. As Jonathan Sterne puts it, “The noise that began as a by-product of the machine’s printing processes became over time its most important aspect.” By the 1870s, Anthony Trollope noted another result of the telegraph system’s adoption of *listening* as its primary mediating technique: the obsolescence of workers who could not adapt to it. In “The Telegraph Girl,” a short story Trollope wrote in 1877 inspired by a visit to the London telegraph office, which employed 800 women at the time, an intergenerational split emerges between two types of female telegraphers. The story pits a spinsterish literary lady telegraphist, trained to read messages as she reads books, against a younger, more mass-culturally attuned girl operator, whose music hall mentality makes her a

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brutally efficient aural conduit. Lucy, the titular “telegraph girl,” falls in the former category.

“No one,” writes Trollope,

could read and use her telegraphic literature more rapidly or correctly than Lucy Graham. But now that this system of little tinkling sounds was coming up—a system which seemed to be very pleasant to those females who were gifted with musical aptitudes—she found herself to be less quick, less expert, less useful than her neighbors. [...] She had endeavored to force her ears to do that which her ears were not capable of accomplishing. She had failed, and to-day had owned to herself that she must fail. But Sophy had been one of the first to catch the tinkling sounds. 284

In Trollope’s story, Lucy is saved from professional obsolescence by marriage to an engineer.

Outside the story, the construction of the thoroughly modern musical girl worker continued as women took over the piano-like keyboards of modern discourse around the world.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of US and European typists, stenographers, and secretaries were women, and most women hired to type typed “blind.” First premiered in 1888 on a competitive speed typing stage in Cincinnati and adopted as the global office standard by the early twentieth century, the blind typing method called for typists “to use all ten fingers at the keyboard and to keep their eyes steadily on the copy,” relying on a memorized internal map of the keyboard to direct their fingers. Christopher Keep argues that it was only once the blind typing method became dominant that the typist truly became “an aperture through which words passed ‘unread.’” 285 In an article titled “Blinded by the Type,” Keep persuasively correlates the standardization of this method with the gendering of the secretary’s unique brand of discursive alienation and “non-subjecthood”:

Pitman’s method of ‘blind’ or ‘touch’ typing is not simply a disciplinary regiment, a battery of exercises and techniques for ensuring the speed and accuracy of mechanical transcription. Its effects do not stop at the level of the nerves, muscles, and conditioned reflexes of the body, but penetrate deeper into the very being of the subject. [...] Possessed by the thoughts and words of her employer, the female typist enters into the social relation of the mode of information as less


than a subject proper; she ‘must be content,’ as the guidebook Careers for Girls suggests, ‘to efface herself, to consider herself as the receptacle of her employer’s thoughts, words, etc.’ It is, I would argue, this fit between the culturally accepted sense of women as non-subjects and typist as absent which allowed the gendering of the typewriter as a specifically feminine attribute.\(^{286}\)

After rather ominously linking the gendering of the typewriter to the non-subjecthood of the typist (as Bernhard Siegert does with the telephone operator), Keep goes on to show some other-worldly ways super-secretaries like Theodora Bosanquet attained a uniquely modern, gendered form of authorship by exploiting the popular aura attached to women’s ability to efface themselves and become possessed by their employers’ thoughts. In *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, Bosanquet has a cameo as the fetish object behind the Remington that dictates the rhythms of Henry James’ dictatorial style—long, winding, and never-ending sentences. But as Keep reminds us, Bosanquet was also a published commentator on her own secretarial career, an enthusiastic spiritualist, and a celebrity literary secretary who cannily positioned herself as a medium who took dictation from the voices of dead male authors, including her former employer.\(^{287}\) The point I want to take from this wonderful literary-historical anecdote is that not every female clerical worker simply became a blind (empty, automatic) conduit once typing became a blind (“unread”) activity. While the rise of the Taylorist office saw lines of typists increasingly measured against clocks, metronomes, and gramophones, the secretary, like the spiritual medium, remained prized for her personalized intuition, empathy, and receptivity, along with her ability to type blind. As Pamela Thurschwell puts it,

> the perfect secretary imbibes information and regurgitates it, but not automatically. In the secretarial economy, if some of her knowledge has been forgotten (or has passed through her and out the other side, so to speak), enough has adhered to her to make her more than simply an agent of mechanical reproduction. Under this definition, the best medium is not herself unmediating. She identifies and sympathizes—changes rather than simply transmits information.\(^{288}\)

\(^{286}\) Keep, “Blinded by the Type,” 159.

\(^{287}\) See John Durham Peters, Pamela Thurschwell, and Jill Galvan for more on Bosanquet’s mediumship.
In short, the secretary was never an automatic agent of mechanical reproduction and did not “simply” become one once she stopped looking at what she wrote. But the question of what a woman’s mind could possibly be doing (perhaps without her conscious knowledge) in the midst of highly mechanized discursive mediating work did become the basis for a transatlantic cultural genealogy of absent- and double-minded female clerical workers, from the American telegraph girl heroine of Ella Cheever Thayer’s 1879 novel *Wired Love*, who lives in “two worlds,” to the Italian typist heroine of Ada Negri’s 1928 short story, “The Movies,” who “sits motionless at the typewriter, daydreaming,” while the film she saw the night before plays over and over again in her head. In uncanny tandem with the rise of psychoanalysis, the trope of the secretary’s wandering mind opened up an everyday portal to the clerical unconscious, accessible by ear.

**Constructing the clerical unconscious: Freudian typos, transpositions, staccato stutters**

Instead of tuning into the spirit world to take dictation from the ghost of Henry James, typists in twentieth-century literature daydreamed to the beat of their key-strokes and took dictation from the men on their minds. In O. Henry’s “Springtime à la Carte” (1906), the earliest fictional account of stenographic symptomatics I have found, a love-struck typist named Sarah accidentally adds her faraway sweetheart’s name to a restaurant menu she is transcribing, after being plunged into a Proustian reverie by the rhythm of her fingers dancing “like midgets above

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a summer stream.” The unlikely lunch special that results from this typewriter-induced trance (“DEAREST WALTER, WITH HARD-BOILED EGGS”) ultimately leads the typist’s lover directly to her door. The story ends abruptly on the menu item punch line, after briefly offering the illusion of an entirely random reunion. The reader is thus left to put the pieces together on her own: the opening lines of an imagined letter have gotten mixed up with the copy and as a result, a meaningful message has been transmitted from Sarah’s unconscious to the tips of her fingers and onto the page. O. Henry’s mechanical twist on a Freudian slip—which we might dub a Freudian typo—simultaneously diagnoses Sarah as a noisy medium for transcription and a potentially magical one for reception. While “absently” typing, “with her mind and heart in the meadow lane with her young farmer,” Sarah becomes something like a radio receiver or antenna, capable of flagging down a fly-by beau through the mundane medium of a typed-up menu.

That said, the method is risky and the message itself leaves much to be desired. One imagines Sarah would have been less than delighted had a different Walter responded to her call. It can be dangerous to send a message intended for one person through a mass medium.

As offices became increasingly automated, typewriter trances took on a regular rhythm, but paperwork continued to register errant traces of typists’ absent minds. Industry literature by psychotechnicians and speed typists sought to account for this pesky phenomenon through metaphors of communications overload and breakdown. In 1918, world champion speed typist Marjorie B. Owen offered her presumed student-readers a pseudo-psychoanalytic explanation for what she called “transpositions,” the mistakes typists made when their minds got in the way. In The Secret of Typewriting Speed, Owen writes:

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There are many different theories as to what causes a typist to make certain kinds of errors called 'transpositions.' After long observation and much thought, I am convinced that there are several causes. I think the chief one is lack of coordination of hand and mind. The impulses of the sensory nerves are not coordinately handled by the motor nerves, which condition is doubtless occasioned by lack of concentration of the mind. A good illustration of this would be to compare the conditions at the brain center to a 'relay' telegraph office, where the messages are coming in more rapidly than the operators are able to transmit them, and as a consequence the messages soon become congested.293

With efficient and transparent mediation in mind, rather than the narrative delights of discursive derailment, Owen advises the typist who wants to stop making transpositions to slow down until her “nerve center” is “unconsciously controlled” by the coordination of “keys, brain, and fingers” necessary to type automatically and accurately.294 Anticipating Chaplin’s tramp in Modern Times (1936), the speed typist must mold her mind and movements to those of the machine if she is to remain employed. It is only in the sense of rote that Owen explicitly uses the word “unconscious,” while mistakes made because of “a lack of concentration of the mind” are attributed to faulty human mechanics: a bad case of telegraphic congestion. Implicitly, there are two kinds of unconsciousness positioned as antinomies by this diagnosis: one is idle, wandering, imaginative, human (this will cause transpositions); the other repetitive, mechanical, transparent (this is the Taylorist ideal).

Owen’s certainty that transparency was possible and desirable found an unlikely echo in the work of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who in 1934 dreamed of a day when processing text would be so automated that the mechanical mental worker’s mind could occupy itself elsewhere, writing poetry or plotting revolution. As we have seen, automated typing does have the capacity to induce trances, open up the secretary’s mind, and release bits of her unconscious onto text. But Gramsci asks us to imagine “stenographers and typists” reaching a mental state of

293 Margaret B. Owen, The Secret of Typewriting Speed (Chicago: Forbes & Co., 1918), 56. Owen is also the speed typist featured in the Lillian Gilbreth short film, Gilbreth Trains A Typist (1918), which I analyzed in Chapter 1.

294 Owen, The Secret of Typewriting Speed, 58.
“complete freedom” that can be separated and preserved from the effects of mechanization on the body.\textsuperscript{295} In fact, because of the nerve-wracking, mind-numbing, repetitive conditions of their work, female clerical workers often exhibit symptoms that resonate with neurasthenia, but unlike the mute jolting of the factory worker or shell-shocked soldier, the secretary’s symptoms also register \textit{discursively} through the many media-machines she operates. In Sophie Treadwell’s experimental play \textit{Machinal}, which premiered in New York City in 1928, the discursive effects of the typist’s particular brand of neurasthenia are on full display. They are launched on a cacophonous wave of office noises and culminate allegorically in a thoroughly modern death by electric chair. As we see from the excerpt below, the play’s unnamed clerical protagonist, “Young Woman,” can only speak in fits and starts.\textsuperscript{296} Deliciously described by Treadwell as “a woman who murders her husband—an ordinary young woman, any woman,” this stuttering typist has clearly internalized the staccato rhythms of her machine.\textsuperscript{297}


\textsuperscript{297} Treadwell, \textit{Machinal}, xi.
In what sounds like a hysteric’s fragmented speech and reads like something between stenographic shorthand, a telegram, and a modernist poem, this (externalized) internal monologue turns fragments of the quintessential desk couple romance plot into an acute emotional crisis created by the industrially blurred borders between work and sex. “To the subdued accompaniment of the office sounds and voices,” the young woman is faced with a classic secretarial scenario: she is being sexually harassed by her dictator and must now decide whether to marry him or face unemployment. Warring thoughts clamor in her head: she is disgusted by him, but she wants a baby. Most of all, she is impoverished and exhausted and can’t think straight but knows she must rest to work and work to rest. The crush and rush of work in the city, the echo of the alarm clock, and the need to survive press on her an inevitable conclusion: “job—no job—no money—installments due—no money—money—George H. Jones—.” Katherine Biers argues that the triumph of Treadwell’s play lies in her “sonic rather
than visual exploration of her protagonist’s desiring journey from office to electric chair.”

As Biers observes, the play is accompanied by a clamor of mechanical sounds throughout, from telephones, adding machines, and typewriters to the last sounds we hear, the intermingled moans of the young woman dying, electric sparks flying, and the tittering of telegraphic instruments transmitting news of the event around the world. In the sonically overstimulating, dystopian techno-world of *Machinal*, the whole system seems designed to keep its heroine alienated, mechanically symptomatic, and trapped in a traumatic feedback loop with her dictator.

**Women at typewriters in 1930s Europe: happy musical links or redundant human beings?**

By 1930, in a haunting echo of Anthony Trollope’s interest in technological schisms between old and new forms of gendered mediating labor, cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer explicitly reads the gramophone music used to train typists as an industrial tool designed to keep the salaried masses unconsciously overworked and inter-generationally redundant. In his famous sociological study of white-collar workers, *Die Angestellten* (The Salaried Masses, 1930), Kracauer describes “an industrial plant that hires girls straight from high school,” where

> the wily teacher Winds up a gramophone and the pupils have to type in time with its tunes. When the merry military marches ring out, they all march ahead twice as lightly. The rotation speed of the record is gradually increased, and without the girls really noticing it they tap faster and faster. In their training years they turn into speed typists—music has wrought the cheaply purchased miracle.

This “cheaply purchased miracle,” as we soon discover, also allows the industrial plant to get rid of higher-paid senior typists. When the “brisker gramophone girls” were “released” into the office, they immediately out-typed all their elder colleagues. “Since the latter had no music in

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their bodies,” they were eventually let go. Kracauer lingers on this anecdote to critique the coordinated rhythms of mass culture and industrial capitalism, but his analysis also reproduces a longer tradition of casting the new mechanical girl worker as a symptom of industrial modernity, instead of a symptomatic industrial laborer. For both Kracauer and Trollope, the lines between the horrors of industrialized modern labor and the horrifying musical girl automaton are rather blurred. As Andreas Huyssen and Angelika Führlich have both noted, a palpable scorn for the new “type” of working woman pervades Kracauer’s Weimar-era work. From his famous analysis of the fascistically synchronized tipper girls on the stage to his camp critique of “Little Miss Typists” as natural mimics who “model themselves after the examples they see on the screen,” Kracauer seems unable to separate the corruptive forces of modern spectacle and ideology from the inherent corruptibility of the modern feminized audience.

In all his writing about modern female spectators, Kracauer does not dwell on the actual films about typists that typists are supposedly mimicking. As Angelika Führlich has shown, these films belong to a subgenre that was “extraordinarily popular at the time,” but “today receive[s] scant attention and [is] scarcely acknowledged.” Among Führlich’s many examples of so-called Bürofilme (office films) and Angestelltenfilme (salaried worker/white-collar films), I will

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300 Kracauer, The Salaried Masses, 55.

301 Referring to the Weimar-era writings of Adorno and Kracauer, Andreas Huyssen writes, “Examples such as these show that the inscription of the feminine on the notion of mass culture, which seems to have its primary place in the late 19th century, did not relinquish its hold, even among those critics who did much to overcome the 19th century mystification of mass culture and woman.” (Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). See also Angelika Führlich on Kracauer’s “condescending attitude toward female spectators and their cinematic desires” (Angelika Führlich, “Woman and Typewriter: Gender, Technology, and Work in Late Weimar Film,” Women in German Yearbook 16 (2000): 153.)


focus on *Die Privatsekretärin* (dir. Wilhelm Thiele, 1931), because it was a musical comedy and therefore placed an explicit emphasis on secretarial sounds, and because it was a multiple language version film, so its reach extended across Europe. The same year, remakes were made in Italy (*La Segretaria Privata*), England (*Sunshine Susie*), and France (*Dactylo*), where a sequel also followed in 1934 (*Dactylo se Marie*).304

Binding all these nations together was the transnationally legible cinematic secretary, born in Hollywood and remodeled in Berlin. Renate Müller, known as Hitler’s favorite actress at the time, not only played the lead in *Die Privatsekretärin*; she also served as a one-woman link between Germany and England by reprising her role in the British remake directed by Victor Saville, which is set in Vienna, has a distinctly Volkisch operetta flavor, and echoes with German, Austrian, and British accents. The fascist ideology that follows *Sunshine Susie* across national borders still hides under cover of a familiar clerical musical mechanical regime.305 But the film’s awkward efforts to integrate its German and Austrian influences also presage a European film-industrial schism on the horizon. In the mid-1930s, the MLV film production model largely died out and its remnants looked very different from the first dreams espoused by national studio heads of a cinematic Esperanto designed for European audiences, capable of drowning out the jazzy modernity of Hollywood sound films.306 In the years leading up to the war, the last MLV film productions subtly re-organized along political lines, with an increase in

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304 *Die Privatsekretärin* (dir. Wilhelm Thiele, 1931); *Sunshine Susie* (dir. Victor Saville, 1931); *La Segretaria Privata* (dir. Goffredo Alessandrini, 1931); *Dactylo* (dir. Wilhelm Thiele, 1931); *Dactylo Se Marie* (dir. René Pujol and Joe May, 1934). These films were all based on a novel by Hungarian author Istvan Szomahazy.

305 Führlich describes Müller as an exemplar of the “clean young girl” idealized by Nazism: “Played exclusively by blond actresses, this image of the ‘säuberes junges Mädchen,’ purified and cleansed from a threatening notion of dark, threatening female sexuality, must be understood within the context of discourses of race and national identity that were gaining ground in the late Weimar years.” (Führlich, “Woman and Typewriter,” 162)

306 The model was briefly revived, though not as systematically, in the 1960s and 70s, among European communist countries. I have seen at least one Poland-GDR-Soviet Union science fiction film, courtesy of Masha Shpolberg.
collaborations among German, Italian, and Austrian film companies. By then *Die Privatsekretärin* was banned from German theaters, because its star had fallen out of favor with the Nazi Party for taking a Jewish lover. She committed suicide in 1937 in anticipation of capture. With these horizons in view, *Sunshine Susie* (1931) becomes doubly legible as a prelapsarian attempt to construct a European cinematic secretary for European audiences and as a highly symptomatic and ideologically slippery film.

*Sunshine Susie* most conspicuously mingles fascist and capitalist aesthetics through the audio-visual spectacle of clerical choreography. The main point I want to make about this odd cultural composite of a film is that it musicalizes a foundational myth of feminized clerical work: the straight road from the typists’ pool to the boss’s office and heart. Like most secretarial heroines, Susie becomes a true protagonist by leaving the de-individuated crowd and joining a “desk couple,” to lift a Kittlerism. Within the film’s musical moral economy, the move she makes allows us to distinguish between two kinds of sonic secretarial environments—the collective, choral typing pool and the intimate dictatorial duet.
Like Kracauer’s gramophone girls, the typists in *Sunshine Susie* match their movements to the music without “really noticing it.” Uncannily, they don’t sing: instead, while their impotent manager—who dreams of being a conductor—waves his arms around to no one in the next room, all the typists jerk their heads and hands in tandem like marionettes manipulated by invisible strings. Close-ups of their typewriters show us fragments of lyrics being tapped out to the cheerful, marching tune: “Ever trying / never crying…this is a happy life.” Still humming the last bars of the melody, Susie leaves the typing pool, but its alienated acoustic conditions follow her to the boss’s office: at first, she does not recognize the voice of the bank director. Mistaking him for a lowly clerk, she enlists his dictation skills and then berates him for looking at her instead of the documents he should be reading aloud. “What a fool you are with figures,” she exclaims in frustration. “If you had an important job, the bank would be broke in a fortnight.” By the time Susie has realized her mistake, her disarming obliviousness has landed her a job as the director’s private secretary and then as his wife. This conclusion neatly ties up any lingering questions we might have about whether being a private secretary actually means being spoken to rather than spoken through. But Susie’s disoriented clerical sensorium, which automatically guides her toward the appropriate husband/father/boss, suggests that a powerful combination of ideological and industrial forces have shaped her fate.

One of the main reasons Kracauer does not explore novels about secretaries, as he explains to a secretary on a train in the opening to *Die Angestellten*, is that the cultural phenomenon is clearly so ubiquitous because it is “anxious to prevent anyone noticing anything there.” To complicate Kracauer’s claim that “you cannot, as the secretary thinks, find it all in the novels,” because they are all simply too mystifying, I will counter Sunshine Susie’s musical
mechanization with an Austrian woman-authored modernist tale of typist alienation released the same year.\footnote{Kracauer, \textit{The Salaried Masses}, 28.} As its title immediately informs us, \textit{Bin ich ein überflüssiger Mensch?} (Am I a Redundant Human Being, 1931), like \textit{Machinal}, has few illusions about the “happiness” of clerical work.\footnote{Interestingly, \textit{Machinal} also had its British debut in 1931 under the title \textit{The Life Machine}. It is tempting imagining a British secretary seeing \textit{Sunshine Susie} and \textit{The Life Machine} in a single afternoon. Surely the ideological and sonic contradictions between the two would be too great to bear?} Instead of landing one melodic typist position that leads seamlessly to promotion, individuation, and matrimony, Aloisia Schmidt slogs despairingly through several dead-end clerical jobs, each more debilitatingly cacophonous than the next. In her first day at an office, she notes:

> What downright stupefied me, what made me completely useless, was the cacophony of new sounds beating down on me. It wasn’t only the office noises—it was Work itself that screeched at me; it was, you could say, intensity itself become audible. After an hour, I was so exhausted from the effort of concentrating on my task that I was close to tears.\footnote{Mela Hartwig, \textit{Am I a Redundant Human Being?}, transl. Kerri A. Pierce (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), 29. I know I should have this all in German and can only blame time constraints.}

In the wake of this harrowing first day, the “stupefying” echo of industrial semiotic work takes a psycho-sensory toll on Aloisia’s sense of self, making her dangerously susceptible to the temptations of both the theater and the mob. For Mela Hartwig, a former typist herself, there is no conflation of femininity, automatism, and corruptibility. The miserable conditions of clerical work—which conjure the nerve-wracking noise of the factory in Marx’s \textit{Capital}—are clearly responsible for this secretary’s susceptibility to mass media spectacles and mob mentality.\footnote{“Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity.” (Marx, 548) On one level, Aloisia is a champion speed typist’s nightmare: a hopelessly schizoid conduit, unable to coordinate her brain and fingers. “When it came time to take dictation, I’d have to make up whole passages myself, simply because the notes were indecipherable. […] I groped around the keys like a blind person. My fingers couldn’t find their way; they were constantly stumbling over one another.” (Hartwig, 45) But on another level, she is also a kind of parodically ideal typist, because she remains unconscious of what she processes: “I never tried to understand the content of the letter that I wrote. I was simply content to perform mechanical tasks.” (Hartwig, 49)
After her first visit to the theater, Aloisia is “completely enchanted” and decides to become an actress, because she likes the idea of working for two hours a day, but more importantly, “the idea of slipping from one costume into another, from one life into another.” This kind of ontological fluidity, which she also finds in novels (“I read in order to forget myself, to slip from one life into another”) seems more appealing, intuitive, and attainable than clerical competence, romance, or co-worker solidarity, all of which leave her feeling numb, useless, and alone.311

Though she is a frequent film and theatergoer, she eschews political crowds, because she recognizes a response within herself she cannot control. Recalling how she felt as a teenager when war was declared and a noisy mob assembled in the streets, Aloisia observes with evocative precision, “I didn’t lose consciousness, but I did lose consciousness of myself. I melted into the giant body called The Mob. [...] The mania that ruled this many-headed beast overwhelmed me until my feelings too were heightened to a sense of prodigious arousal.”312

Years later, at a socialist worker’s meeting, she feels the same response and recoils at her “unwilling” receptivity:

> Even though I wasn’t really involved with the proceedings, I still became excited, unwillingly, simply because everyone else around me was. I couldn’t grasp what the speaker was saying at first—my mind refused to submit to his eloquence. Before I knew what had happened, however, this small amount of will seemed to disappear into the mass around me. As I began to melt into the common fervor, I started to feel a wild, vague fear. I felt like I was suffocating. I rose from my seat and lurched out of the hall. As the door shut behind me, I had the thought that I’d just barely escaped some nameless danger.313

Because Aloisia’s antenna is somewhat damaged, she conflates the medium with the message. Sensing only the lure of another master’s voice drawing her into an inchoate crowd, she runs away from socialism and back to the theater, where she can slip into other lives more safely. But

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311 Hartwig, *Am I a Redundant Human Being?*, 34.
312 Hartwig, 24.
313 Ibid., 78.
soon all the boundaries collapse there too. The second half of the novel is overtaken by Aloisia’s obsessive pursuit of a flighty actress named Elizabeth, whom she initially idealizes as a chameleonlike portal and later sees as a mirror of her own emptiness. When Elizabeth commits suicide, the alienated stenographer experimentally takes over her life—“In order to put myself in her shoes, I exchanged our names in my mind. I traded hearts with her”—and transfers her obsession to Elizabeth’s leftover lover, the mysterious (fittingly Kafkaesque) Egon Z.”

Hartwig’s novel ends on a bleak note of eternal return, with Aloisia installed at another dead-end clerical job and considering getting back to “reality” by marrying a dull accountant, though she is held back by her certainty that “because he’s a zero just like me—a redundant human being […]—marrying him would be like multiplying myself with myself, zero with zero.” Through an internal monologue bludgeoned into submission by the everyday myths and rhythms of clerical life, Am I a Redundant Human Being? answers its own question in the affirmative again and again with merciless consistency. Hartwig leaves us with a heroine resigned to be a zero x zero with “no fate at all.”

The Master’s Voice in the Mother Tongue: Competing for the secretary’s ear

If in 1931, the modernist literary typist was a perilously porous portal, exhausted and ready to submit to a life of redundancy, by 1935, the popular cinematic secretary had an urgent project to distract her: finding the right voice to follow in an increasingly schizophrenic mediasphere. On European screens, the secretary’s hypersensitized ear registered the rise of a new kind of public figure: the great dictator. The final constellation of films I will examine are all overwrought, heavily scored melodramas in which young, attractive secretaries are propelled

314 Ibid., 105.
315 Ibid., 150, 51. This ending is very similar to Henry James, In the Cage (1898).
compulsively from their typewriters to the theater by a disembodied male voice. With the geographic poles of this circuit synthesized in shorthand below, we can see that *Forget Me Not* (Zoltan Korda, 1936) and *Men Are Not Gods* (Walter Reisch, 1936) both explicitly link the secretary’s professional dynamic with her dictator to her later position in the audience, listening with rapture to a male performer onstage. The film depicted in the top row, *Forget Me Not*, was a British remake of *Vergiss Mein Nicht* (Augustino Genina, 1935), a German/Italian co-production. Images from *Vergiss Mein Nicht* are not included here because they are not available, but we can assume, based on the shot-for-shot fidelity typically favored by MLV remakes, that it has an identical narrative skeleton to *Forget Me Not*.

*Forget Me Not* (Britain, 1936), a remake of *Vergiss Mein Nicht* (Germany/Italy, 1935)

*Men Are Not Gods* (Britain, 1936), a British response to *Forget Me Not*

While *Vergiss Mein Nicht*, *Forget Me Not*, and *Men Are Not Gods* all offer nationally-coded high art forms as their framing meta-media (Opera and Shakespearean theater), the fact that they
also use the gramophone, telephone, and radio as intermediate forms of sonic seduction to lure their secretarial listeners to the brink of ruin suggests that mass media and the charismatic voices they carry are the predominant concerns of this mid-decade moment. These films offer a snapshot of a liminal period when European countries flirting with fascism visibly competed for the ear of the secretary, a mass subject trained by the acoustic conditions of her work to fall into trances, respond to unseen men’s voices, and love many male dictators in her life.

As I suggested in the introduction, cheap radio sets played a crucial mediating role in this character’s cultural construction. In a 1934 history of radio titled *The Master’s Voice*, James Rorty observed that both Mussolini and Hitler promptly seized control of radio upon assuming power and used it to extend their rule. At the moment Hitler’s use of radio knows no political boundaries. […] It is safe to say that in the next great war, radio will constitute a major offensive weapon, second only in effectiveness to the airplane.316

Launched in 1933 during Joseph Goebbels’ first year as propaganda minister, the Volksempfänger-program was one of the most powerful propaganda tools weaponized by the Third Reich. It made radio reception technology affordable for the general public through the medium of mass-reproduced, state-subsidized people’s receivers (or, as we recall, more literally translated, “people’s conceivers”). Notoriously, these state-designed devices struggled to pick up signals from anywhere but Germany and Austria, thereby tunneling their German listeners into a single echo chamber of ideology, while Adolf Hitler broadcast “words [that] reached far beyond the borders of the Reich.” His speeches were broadcast live to “literally dozens of countries, from Lithuania to Uruguay. The Nazis provided simultaneous translations of the Führer’s

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Countries under threat of Nazi invasion found their radios flooded with German content. As Czech journalist Milena Jesenská put it in 1938:

For five years all that people in the borderlands have had to do is to turn a switch and Nazi ideology from the German stations has flowed directly into their homes—it goes without saying that they all tuned into stations that they could understand! [...] By now they are all perfectly schooled, sweet-talked and bullied, repeating parrot-fashion phrases about their national space.

In 1935, Britain was still far from regarding itself as vulnerable to an embodied Nazi invasion (unlike “faraway countries” like Czechoslovakia), but its movie theaters had been invaded by the disembodied voice of Hitler and Mussolini’s favorite opera singer.

**Forget Me Not: The tenor’s voice hypnotizes secretaries around the world**

The link between fascist dictators speechifying and opera stars singing is more meaningful than it might initially seem. In 1932, as Susan Buck-Morss has shown, Adolf Hitler began to cultivate his iconic oratory style under the direction of opera singer Paul Devrient, practicing “his facial expressions in front of a mirror in order to have what he believed was the proper effect.”

The Führer was also famously a tenor, which suggests that opera singer Beniamino Gigli, the star of *Vergiss Mein Nicht* and *Forget Me Not*, was a particularly well-tuned intermediary for his voice.

Like Adolf Hitler, as film historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat has shown, Benito Mussolini self-fashioned as a majestic body and voice at the center of a vast multi-media propaganda network: “a father figure, director of spectacle, and ‘supervido’ protagonist of audiovisual communication.

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317 David Vaughan, “The Master’s Voice,” The Guardian (October 9, 2008). The question of whether Volksempfänger were intentionally designed with low signals is still hotly debated on online forums, and I personally have a difficult time discerning the difference between technical accuracy and Holocaust denialism.

318 Quoted in Vaughan, “The Master’s Voice.”

[...] The image of the Duce—his stage name—structures the public representation of all other men in Fascist Italy, from his fellow officials to male stars, male figures in advertisements, and the ‘ordinary Italians’ who appear in both fiction and nonfiction cinema.”  

Beniamino Gigli’s status as a representative for multiple dictators in the public eye is reflected in the 1935 photograph of a street in Rome below, in which Mussolini appears to conduct an orchestra of advertisements, while Gigli waits for his cue inside a poster for *Vergiss Mein Nicht* (released in Italy under the title *No Ti Scordar Di Me*). While the tenor would not publicly align himself with Mussolini’s regime until 1937, when he recorded the Italian Fascist National Anthem, this image suggests that it was actually the release of *Vergiss Mein Nicht* that established him as a totemic dictatorial intermediary.

The poster in the top righthand corner depicts the Duce as an orator delivering a full-bodied, full-throated speech to the public, implicitly translated by the text below him. His brandished finger and raised jaw suggest a man fleetingly frozen in mid-dictation by a deferential (low-angled)

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camera, rather than a portrait sitter compliantly gazing into space or making eye contact with the viewer. This is a vocal dynamo barely contained by the regime of the still image, the poster seems to say. The message he brings the masses comes directly from God. Lit from above, Mussolini is visibly anointed. The positioning of the poster itself above all other media architecture in view also extends the glow and growl of his message to an assembly of intermediate forms: posters and signs gather beneath the swing of his arm like a captive audience. A conspicuous lone face in this audience, Gigli is also cast as an iconic human emissary, whose voice is recognized all over the world and whose face is becoming increasingly visible to foreign audiences through the medium of film.

When Alexander Korda purchased the British rights to *Vergiss Mein Nicht*, he also purchased Gigli, the main attraction, known around the world as Hitler and Mussolini’s favorite tenor at the time, but British advertisements for *Forget Me Not* were careful to avoid associating him with any one national tradition or political movement, instead inviting moviegoers to hear the “World’s Greatest Tenor Singing Arias from World-Famous Operas.” Meanwhile, Austrian actress Magda Schneider was replaced by Joan Gardner, a British actress best known for being the director’s wife and producer’s sister-in-law (thus serving, among other things, as a link to British racial purity for the Korda brothers, two Jewish Eastern European emigres rising fast in the British film industry).

I find this substitution particularly interesting because in 1935 Gardner was a relative unknown, while Schneider was one of Hitler’s favorite actresses (and perhaps his lover?) and her star persona seemed to be modeled on Renate Muller’s Nazi-compatible working-girl likeability.

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In 1932, the year of her screen debut, Schneider starred in at least three MLV musical comedies where she played a clerical heroine, most notably Fräulein—Falsch Verbunden (1932), which, as we may recall from the previous chapter, was remade in Italy as La Telefonista (1932) and in England as Give Her a Ring (1934). German-language film reviews of Schneider’s first leading role highlighted her harmony with the pink-collar masses writ large, observing that Schneider “kann gut sprechen und ein bisschen singen und ist gerade so lebenshungrig und auf sich selbst gestellt wie alle diese kleinen Stenotypistinnen, Verkäuferinnen, oder Mädchen von der Post” (can speak well, sing a little, and is as hungry for life and as self-reliant as all these little stenotypists, shopgirls, or postal girls). But unlike 1931-vintage Renate Muller, who could be adapted to British cinema as Sunshine Susie, Magda Schneider was exclusively sold as a German star. In 1931 and 1932, the word “alle” (all) might have still harbored the promise of a harmonious continental clerical audience. By 1935, the national interests dividing German and Austrian stenotypists from British and French stenotypists had become more pointed, but the voices that followed them continued to cross national borders. As we see below, both “Liselotte” (Schneider) and “Helen” (Gardner) are paralyzed by the same Italian opera singer, who shows an odd preference for Wagner and seems to sing to each of them alone.

322 “Fraulein—Falsch Verbunden,” Illustrierter Film-Kurier 23.01 (1932). My translation. Fraulein Falsch Verbunden is about a telephone operator trapped between two voices—the voice of an opera singer, which she falls for over the line, and the voice of the telephone director, whom she eventually marries, once all the wires are uncrossed.
Through the mediation of the cinematic tenor—who combines the crooner’s faraway erotic intimacy with the dictator’s authoritative orality—fascist leaders can travel from one country to another, hypnotizing all the secretaries in Europe.

I still don’t have a viewable copy of *Vergiss Mein Nicht*, due to pandemic-related research obstacles, so I am basing my close analysis on *Forget Me Not*, which has the same plot, score, and fascist opera star. Channeling the magical reach of the dictator’s voice over international waters, *Forget Me Not* starts on a ship in transit from London to New York, where the secretarial heroine, Helen, meets a charming, dissipated officer named Hugh. She falls hard that night, while listening to a love song by “Enzo Curti, world-famous tenor,” over the ship loudspeaker. But instead of cathecting to the voice’s owner, Helen kisses the man next to her and
is haunted by the memory of their night together long after she meets and marries Curti, *every time she hears him sing*.

Helen’s unlikely hook-up with the world-famous tenor is crucially achieved through three successive scenes of dictation, each of which depends on her unique receptivity to disembodied voices. In the first scene, we see Helen sound-struck by Curti’s song, searching for the source of the music, while Hugh stands in her blind spot, creating a gap she can fill with him. In the second, we see Hugh’s jealous girlfriend deliberately conducting a loud conversation about his many conquests at a table behind Helen, also in her blind spot. Devastated by the deliberately broadcast pillow talk she overhears, Helen leaves Hugh and returns with her employer to London. Finally, on the right, we see Helen’s employer encouraging her to go to the theater, from her blind spot, while she sits at her typewriter.

Once Helen has been successfully transported to the tenor, the film’s pedagogical arc does not involve her getting *over* her excessive receptivity to the music, so much as *transferring* her attention to the right source. At performance after performance, Helen plays the part of a compulsive surrendering subject, gently weeping to the vibrations of her husband’s voice while imagining another man. The film is, in fact, primarily made up of montage sequences from Curti’s World Tour, which ricochet the viewer between long, lingering shots of Curti singing and long, lingering shots of Helen listening, interspersed with graphics of a globe, city names, and a
predominantly Wagnerian array of opera titles. Some of the dissolve-heavy listening sequences bear a distinct resemblance to the dream imagery favored by 1940s Nazi musicals.\textsuperscript{323}

Offstage, Enzo is far from a seductive figure. He can’t really speak German or English, but he is a sad, sweet widower and he does have a very cute son. By becoming a mother, Helen learns to bliss out over lullabies instead of kaleidoscopic memories and regrets. Don’t turn off the radio, this film seems to say, just listen with an ear for the voice of the father and home. But where is “home” exactly, in \textit{Forget Me Not}’s kaleidoscopic mix-up of national identities and voices? Is it in the Italian singer’s voice? In the German music? The British heroine’s ear? Over international waters, where the three first meet and get mixed up? And what do we make of the fact that this British film was made by the Kordas, two Hungarian Jews who ended up in the British film industry by the mid-1930s after a decade of migrations from Budapest to Berlin, Hollywood, and finally London? The Kordas’ forced leapfrog from one national film-industrial node to another in the years leading up to World War II offers an eerie counter-narrative to the seamless cultural mobility depicted in \textit{Forget Me Not}’s world tour montage, still seemingly shored up by its conditions of coproduction.

Two months after the release of \textit{Forget Me Not}, a second Alexander Korda film about a sound-struck secretary appeared in British movie theaters under the quelling title \textit{Men Are Not}

\textsuperscript{323} As Rüdiger Suchsland’s recent documentary \textit{Hitler’s Hollywood} (2017) makes plain, \textit{Triumph of the Will}’s modernist quick cuts were a stylistic exception to a Nazi film industry dominated by epic musical melodramas often culminating in grandiose acts of personal self-sacrifice for the good of the Volk.
Gods. A so-called “quota-quickie,” *Men Are Not Gods* was shot cheaply and quickly with a domestic audience in mind, rather than the transnational audiences targeted by MLV films.\(^{324}\) Directed by Hungarian Jewish émigré Walter Reisch, the film was also co-written by British writer GB Stern, best known for the “Matriarch” series, a quintet of novels inspired by her eclectic, cosmopolitan Jewish family’s misadventures across Hungary, Poland, Russia, Austria, and England.\(^{325}\) By 1936, when *Men Are Not Gods* was released, the first four novels in the series had been published, one had been staged as a play, and G.B. Stern was working sporadically as a screenwriter for the British industry. I am inclined to hold her responsible for the film’s intertextual sophistication and pseudo-modernist play on the addled mind of the secretary in the audience. More broadly, the film’s host of Jewish, Eastern European authors registers the difficulty of constructing a single allegorical test subject for an increasingly mixed British public.

**Men Are Not Gods: or, how to reorganize a secretary’s sensorium**

If *Forget Me Not* unspools a covert fascist sonic regime, then *Men Are Not Gods* appears to offer a plucky British retort: it begins and ends with “God Save the Queen,” explicitly dubs its secretarial heroine Ann Williams a “representative of the great public,” and bends her ear with Shakespeare at the Savoy instead of Wagner around the world. The man whose voice hypnotizes

\(^{324}\) For more on British quota-quickies in the 1930s, see Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

\(^{325}\) Iris Wright was also a co-writer on *Men Are Not Gods*, although she is not always credited as such, perhaps simply because she was not as famous as Stern. I hope to find more materials on her in future research trips to England (\#covid). Katie Trumpener introduced me to G.B. Stern many years ago, first by noting that she wrote this film (!), next by guiding me toward the Matriarch series (which in turn led to an orals list on theVirago Modern Classics), and finally by guiding me toward her delightful books on Jane Austen. For more on how Stern’s Austen writings and novels fit into a genealogy of modernist British woman writers who cast Austen as a mother of the novel, see Katie Trumpener, “The Virago Jane Austen,” in *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, ed. Deidre Lynch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Stern also interestingly converted to Catholicism late in life, as she details in her many memoirs. I am still on the search for mentions of the Mediatrix in her work.
this secretary serves as a clear counter-model to Hitler and Mussolini’s favorite opera singer. In 1936, Sebastian Shaw, a veteran British stage actor and up-an-coming screen leading man, was known to his domestic audience as an audaciously modern adaptor of traditional Shakespearean dramatic style. The naturalistic gestures and elocution he favored in his performances made his voice readily adaptable for the cinema, a kind of aural shorthand for the compatibility of British theater and film. *Men Are Not Gods* conveys this compatibility through the metric used to capture the three-tiered success of its meta-theatrical star: “His picture hangs in the Royal Academy, in the offices of the film companies, and in the hearts of the women.” Gertrude Lawrence, by contrast, another British national stage treasure, played Shaw’s wife and Desdemona, but was not deemed celluloid-ready, despite the added West End value she brought to the film. One imagines this may have been related to her perceived lack of power over women’s hearts. Interestingly, though Ann Williams is meant to be a working-class British woman on a literal diegetic level, which we glean from her habit of bursting into bouts of Cockney slang, she was also played by Miriam Hopkins, an American actress at the height of her Hollywood career. This conspicuous casting choice (Hopkins is the only non-Brit onscreen) in turn casts Ann as a hybrid clerical creature—part classical Hollywood secretary from the screen, part British secretary in the audience—drawn to stars and spectacles like a moth to a flame.

Tracing the trajectory of Ann’s sonic seduction will require paying close attention to the social and technological mechanisms that program her behavior throughout the film. To frame my close reading, I will borrow one of the film’s most condescending lines, pronounced with great gravity by Ann’s employer as an explanation for her swift fall. “Every woman *unconsciously* loves every man on earth, though she may not know him personally. Consequently, when she meets him, that love functions *automatically.*” (my emphases) It goes
without saying that this aphorism rankles the contemporary feminist ear, but as Dominic Pettman observes, it also “speaks to the cultural anxieties and curiosity which are emerging at a time when the most ‘human’ of experiences—intimacy or love—is increasingly mediated by the technologies which link one agent to another.” While the surface plot of *Men Are Not Gods* focuses on one-to-one relationships—secretary and dictator, husband and wife, fan and star—its central techno-social concern is the artificially personal connection that can be forged between a magically amplified, collectively worshipped male voice and an anonymous woman somewhere in the crowd.

The interplay between the automatic and the unconscious dictates Ann’s professional, aesthetic, and romantic experiences, launched from the nexus of her stenographic susceptibility to sound and mechanized working body. The story really begins when Ann precipitously alters her employer’s scathing review of a young actor’s tepid West End opening night performance as Othello. Moved by his wife (and co-star) Barbara’s desperate entreaty, “one woman to another,” to save her marriage by sparing his ego, Ann falls into a kind of overwrought trance and finds herself at her desk, typing up a rhapsodic homage to Edmond Davies’ magnificence on the London stage.

To indicate the gravity, frenzy, and mental complexity of this paradigm shift, director Walter Reisch conjures up an orchestral constellation of cinematic effects: as Anna examines the original version of the review, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s “Othello” Suite crescendos and the camera zooms dramatically onto her face, blurring as it approaches her inscrutable gaze; a voice-over of Skeates’ parting words—“I never read my own article”—follows the zoom, and Ann looks directly into the camera for about three seconds. This shot, which momentarily collapses

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the fourth wall and invites us into the heroine’s mind, provides the break that launches her into motion and back toward her typewriter, but this time with a difference.

Despite the significance of a secretary’s transgression into authorship, the alteration she makes is actually as mechanical as her standard operating mode. In the heat of the moment, rather than compose an entirely original review, Ann simply removes the phrase “by no means,” making an inverted version of Skeates’ most sweeping censure the centerpiece of her revision. Her hands tremble and the music rises, but this turbulent affective atmosphere belies the automatism of her act. She is, in fact, more malfunctioning parrot (an analogy suggested by a parrot’s squawk in the following scene) than a triumphant author, artist, or creator. Pursued by her dictator’s voice, propelled by romance and the rhythm of the typewriter keys, Ann experiences a coalescence of unconscious and automatic forces as she types up the edited review that accordingly begins to manifest in her behavior.

After being fired for her editorial intervention, she heads to the theater to see Othello, but the crowd jostles her out into the hall. Disoriented and divorced from the visual spectacle onstage, Ann falls in love with the star as his first soliloquy drifts over the speaker system. Sound-struck, she quickly becomes Davies’ most devoted fan, and his voice follows her everywhere. In an echo of Forget Me Not’s world tour sequence, a montage of the next few
weeks (marked by interspersed shots of diary entries, calendar dates, and the applauding gallery) shows the ex-secretary attending successive performances with unwavering enthusiasm. In the theater and the streets, a battle of seduction plays out between acoustic and optical technologies as Ann attempts to pursue Davies from an appropriate distance by putting up a series of screens between her body and his.

Because Ann’s status as a disinterested spectator has been compromised by her extraordinary intervention in Davies’ career, these efforts seem doomed from the start. They are further compromised by a burgeoning friendship with Davies, ironically encouraged by his wife, who invites Ann over for dinner after the show as a gesture of thanks. Thus, the sound-struck secretary begins her road to “representative of the great public” as an individual with an over-determined connection to the actor onstage. Fueled in equal parts by her attraction to Davies and loyalty to Barbara, Ann systematically assembles the trappings of cinematic spectatorship to keep herself from crossing the line between fantasy and reality.

Instead of waiting outside the stage door or the Savoy with the other autograph hounds, for instance, Ann fades into the audience and aims her opera glasses at Othello, thereby translating his impact from onstage body to onscreen image. This is a divide she will insist on later in the film, on the brink of erotic transgression, when Davies claims that he can feel her eyes burning into his while he performs. Resistant to this evocation of “what Deleuze and Guattari call the ‘four eye machine,’ the face-to-face encounter where two people lose themselves in each other’s gaze (the romantic trope, par excellence),” Ann demands that Davies acknowledge the screen between them: “My eyes? It’s the lenses of my opera glasses!”

Leaving the theater, she follows his image to the Royal Academy, where she can safely spend

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hours gazing lovingly at his portrait. It is significant that in both these spectatorial modes, Davies’ blackface remains intact: his makeup acts as a second screen, evoking a recent cinematic reference (Tommy mockingly calls him Al Jolson) and neutralizing the threat of Ann’s obsession by obscuring the man behind the role.

The film’s choice of a white actor to play Shakespeare’s Moor—instead of Paul Robeson, for example, who played Othello at the Savoy in 1930 and starred in a Korda film in 1935—also speaks to the perspectival limitations of its apparent resistance project. While, as we have seen, *Men Are Not God*’s soundtrack draws heavily on a piece of music by an African-American composer (Coleridge-Taylor), racialized people are entirely absent from its visual regime. This gap between black background and white-washed foreground is echoed by the gap between *Men Are Not God*’s invisible emigré Jewish authors and its insistently, homogenously domestic, white British diegesis. Reading with these repressions in mind, we might suggest that the film is sonically haunted by its inability to fully register the role played by racism in the appeal of fascist voices for British audiences. We can thus see Ann’s many efforts to screen herself from

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328 When Robeson played Othello at the Savoy, he was initially barred from entering the theater’s hotel and restaurant. This introduction quickly dispelled a prevailing domestic assumption that Robeson would find England a welcoming respite from his home, where Jim Crow reigned. From start to finish, the production was overrun with anxious gossip about the affair he was having with his white female co-star, and London theater critics unwittingly parroted the racist rhetoric used to review the last black actor to play Othello in London: Ira Aldridge. Like Aldridge in the 1830s, Robeson was sized up as a man emanating “natural” impulses and intuitions rather than as a highly trained actor with style or sophistication. What challenge did it really present, critics demanded, as they had a century earlier, for a (sensual, overpowering) black man to play a (sensual, overpowering) black man? The threat of transparency takes on a new guise through this distorted lens. (Michael A. Morrison, “Paul Robeson’s Othello at the Savoy Theatre, 1930,” *New Theatre Quarterly*, 27.2 (2011): 114-140.) Robeson is also uncannily mixed up in this story because he was working between the US and British film industries during this time. In 1935, he starred in *Sanders of the River*, a British adventure film set in Colonial Nigeria, directed by Zoltan Korda and produced by Alexander Korda. Notoriously, the finished film was dedicated to “the handful of white men whose everyday work is an unsung saga of courage and efficiency,” an apparent celebration of colonial rule to which Robeson vehemently objected. In 1938, he quipped with bitterness: "It is the only film of mine that can be shown in Italy or Germany, for it shows the negro as Fascist states desire him - savage and childish." (Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: Open Road Media, 1989), 182.)

329 In 1936, the same year *Forget Me Not* and *Men Are Not Gods* were released, Robeson starred as an opera singer in the British film *Song of Freedom* (J. Elder Willis, 1936). No secretaries sadly.
Davies’ body not only as a gesture of self-preservation against slippery social boundaries, but also more specifically as a symptom of the film’s anxious awareness that racial and ethnic difference are potential fissures in its domestic defense against fascist ideology. Under the secretary’s meticulously mediated gaze, Edmond Davies, a creature of flesh and blood, dissolves into a flickering signifier, made of text, paint, and moving light.

While optical technologies allow Ann to contain her desire within the bounded, abstracted relationship between subject-spectator and object-performer, sound media dangerously dissolve the borders between flicker and flesh. Because Ann’s thirst for Othello’s dulcet tones cannot be sated by two hours of Shakespearean verse every night at the theater, she regularly calls him at home, listening in rapt silence to the echo of his tentative, telephonic voice: “Hello? Hello… Hello, who is this?” The next shot shows Davies out of makeup and costume, casually attired in a silk robe, smoking his pipe and reclining on a sofa. Through the telephone, Ann’s access to Davies crosses the line from public to private space, simultaneously implicating his unadorned body and reinstating the reign of the disembodied voice to which she has been hyper-sensitized as a secretary.

This hypersensitivity manifests itself not only in Ann’s overwhelming desire for aural stimulation, but also in the disorganization of her sensorium, as though the link between her sight and hearing has been damaged by her daily occupation and acoustically initiated theatrical education. This becomes evident in a scene early on in the film, when Ann repeatedly misattributes questions posed to her by Davies, turning instead to Barbara for confirmation. Unconsciously reiterating the choreography of her profession, she also has a tendency to face away from her interlocutors as they speak to her. Tommy’s flirtation device of choice—showing
Ann a portrait of the girl he’s going to marry by holding up a mirror to her face—suggests that a reflective surface is required to look her in the eye.

Later in the film, at the peak of Ann’s maniacal (but still unblemished) fandom, Barbara invites the ex-secretary to the Savoy for lunch, only to abandon her with an apology and assurance of her swift return. Ann has just sat down in an armchair by the window, when Davie’s strides abruptly into the room. As he picks up the telephone to call the front desk, we see an enigmatic smile spread over Ann’s face: there is the voice—that pure, resonant melody—divorced from the married man’s problematic body. In the brief period before the two bodies face each other and Edmond reveals his feelings, Ann has the luxury of desynchronizing image from sound to dwell in a prelapsarian cinematic space where she engages with the whirring gears of her own imagination rather than the mixed-up forces (voice and body, Othello and Davies) of real life.
The echoes of Davies’ voice also pursue her through other bodies. Tommy—the hapless, long-limbed obits journalist pre-ordained as secretarial love interest and discarded for a star—becomes the unwitting emissary of his nemesis by staging an impromptu Othello recitation in the courtyard of Ann’s house. Tommy’s exaggerated oratory style and the raucous response he elicits from Ann’s neighbors, who gather on their balconies to abuse him, offer us an implicit counter-theatrics to the West End stage. In fact, this scene adheres to a dichotomy established by Tommy’s interactions with Skeates at the Daily Globe, where he revels in everything that British cultural elitism disdains: he gambles, flirts, and leaps about like a restless acrobat; a caricatural incarnation of 30s-vintage Cary Grant, he is primed to become one half of a desk couple and plunge into a series of comical misadventures that culminate in marriage. Balanced against Skeates, the last bastion of taste, decorum, and British *uppercrustiness*, Tommy stands in for Hollywood and mass entertainment, and as evidence of upset narrative norms. By bringing Othello’s lines, dressed-down and amplified, to Ann’s doorstep, Tommy enacts the fall from high to low culture, the gap between the “legitimate theatre” and the music hall, and the desecration of Shakespeare by the cinema. As such, he balances out the dangerous ambiguity.
introduced by his American co-star. Every time Ann refuses his advances, audiences are reassured that this is not in fact Miriam Hopkins, Hollywood star, but a plucky home-grown British secretary intuitively drawn to Shakespeare over office banter. With the operatic star of *Forget Me Not* in mind, we might also read Tommy as a reassuringly deflated image of a mini-dictator, whose canned phrases and hapless attempts to win over the crowd not only fall flat, but actually instigate a joyous, spontaneous resistance. Nonetheless, his becomes one among three male voices that pursue Ann throughout the film, assaulting her receptive ear and foreshadowing the climactic acoustic invasion that finally breaks down her resistance to Davies’ romantic advances.

The film’s climactic acoustic invasion comes over the radio. Having decided, in the face of Edmond-the-man’s rudely real lust and immodest proposal, to abandon the theater altogether, Ann sits down to an evening of white-knuckled abstinence. The tension is palpable: when a neighbor stops in and asks if Ann will accompany her to *Othello* that evening, the recovering addict practically screams her out of the room. Finally, desperate for a distraction from the voices in her head, Ann turns on the radio in her bedroom.

This is, of course, her first mistake, because what should be broadcast on the radio but the most popular West End hit of the year, sung by the most popular star? Horrified, she cuts off the lilting Shakespearean verses with a decisive flick of the wrist, but like an un-slayable beast, Davies’ voice perseveres. For just a moment, we are left to speculate impotently about the sound’s source—bewildered by a roving acousmetre—and follow Ann’s frantic search around the room. Through the window, she sees a neighbor listening to his radio, so she closes the

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330 Based on the meticulous day-to-day research conducted by Mass Observation investigators and volunteer diarists during this time, we know that by the second half of the 1930s, British moviegoers were increasingly inspired to boo and hiss at images of Hitler and Mussolini when they appeared on the screen.
window. But the voice perseveres and Ann screams in frustration. Reisch’s camera cuts to the ceiling fan: someone is tuning in on the second floor. Imperiled by the shoddy architecture and close quarters of her home (another class indicator, like the courtyard scene), Ann grabs her hat and runs out into the street, but escape proves impossible. The further she runs, the more completely Davies’ voice fills the air—from a car radio, from neighboring houses, and finally from the heavens above. As the “Othello” suite crescendos, thunder cracks the sky and a storm breaks, drenching Ann, who has collapsed tragically on a bench. For this shot (a slow, ominous pan from the car radio to the tempestuous sky), Stern and Wright select an excerpt from Act I, Scene III in which Othello recalls his courtship of Desdemona. The passage is bitter and ironic, culminating in a roar: “THIS ONLY IS THE WITCHCRAFT I HAVE USED.”

In this scene, as in many throughout the film, Reisch deliberately blurs the lines between the orchestral crescendo of the score within the broadcast play and its rendering of Ann’s affective crescendo. The next shot shows her walking meekly toward Davies in Hyde Park, her umbrella bowed by the totality of her defeat. As the two mortals stand together in the rain, Davies spouts maudlin platitudes that echo emptily in the wake of his divinely electrified techno-oration, and Anne replies in monotone. Drained of breath for banter, excuses, or arguments, she can only assent to his requests. Engulfed by the technologically extended reach of his voice, she has finally lost her own. Their faces disappear beneath the umbrellas, definitively divorcing voice from body and sound from source. As we see below, they look a little like human microphones.
Ann’s Fall plunges her into a new world of radiophonic cinema, in which the human gesture has finally submitted to its acousmatic translation.

But in 1936, the stakes are too high for a totemic secretarial representative of the British masses to remain under the thrall of the wrong radiophonic voice, so *Men Are Not Gods* throws a wrench in the surround-system by bringing Davies’ wife back to the Daily Post with a piece of news: she is pregnant. Barbara appeals to Ann’s sympathetic, romantic spirit in a scene that inevitably recalls the film’s opening encounter between the two women and adheres to the symmetrical structure established by the film’s opening and closing shots. To reclaim her voice, Ann must, like a psychoanalytic patient or hero in a medieval romance, systematically reverse the steps that led to her Fall by returning to its point of origin.

The first step is reorganizing the secretary’s sensorium: when Barbara first enters the shot, we see Ann standing with her back to her, true to stenographic form, reacting into empty space. By the end of the scene, however, once Ann has pronounced her intention to give Davies back to his wife, she is deliberately facing Barbara. Reisch stages the symmetrical shot with evocative drama: the two women mirror each other’s gestures across an empty desk (the original
“secretary”), sealing their pact over the symbolic absence of male employers, colleagues, and spouses.

In the first scene of *Men Are Not Gods*, Barbara’s entreaty sends Ann straight to her typewriter and into a mechanical trance: in response to her second entreaty, Ann self-consciously separates herself from the machine by handwriting a letter: “Edmond, it’s such ages since I wrote a letter instead of typing it, that’s the only reason why my writing is so shaky. But I’m absolutely firm in my resolution. It has got to be over between us! You belong to Barbara as long as she lives.” The contrast between the two inscription modes stands in for Ann’s *Bildung*, convalescence, and budding re-embodiment (see below).
But Davies’ reading of the letter returns it to a mechanical mode: the camera follows his narrow
gaze, unfolding the contents line by line, replicating the exhibition method of a typewriter. It
soon becomes clear, as Davies folds the letter into his pocket and begins to stride in time to
nascent strains of the “Othello” Suite, that Ann’s syndrome has not disappeared: like an air-
bound virus, it has simply transferred to Davies.

Accordingly, his automatic unconscious is called into action: in the next shot, while
writing autographs for fans outside the Savoy (an autopilot-mode that evokes secretarial
transcription, despite the authorial connotations of a signature), Davies finds himself scrawling a
phrase from Ann’s letter instead of his name: “as long as.” Shocked by his involuntary
inscription, Davies looks directly into the camera in a moment that immediately recalls Ann’s
aborted inspection of her employer’s review. Across the film’s symmetrical narrative arc, their
gazes lock in a cinematic-telepathic mutation of the four eye machine. The hyper-mediated link
created between their minds in this moment overwhelms a fragmented audio-visual regime of
concealed faces, off-screen voices, and desynchronized bodies.

“As long as” refers to the last line in Ann’s letter, intended to return Davies to his wife
but interpreted by its reader as a challenge to discard the obstacle in his path. Reisch literalizes
Davies’ tunnel vision by filtering it through his cigarette. In an inversion of Ann’s opera glass, a
screen that allowed her, for a time, to separate the flicker of Othello from the flesh of Edmond
Davies, the cigarette becomes a tunnel that carries Davies over the threshold from reality to
murderous fantasy. The fact that this is how his hypnosis manifests suggestively splits the British
populace into two kinds of hypnotized subjects: lovelorn women compulsively driven to
surrender and rage-filled men compulsively driven to kill. If the Shakespearean actor is initially
positioned as a pure British Baritone, poised to drown out the slippery signification of an Italian
tenor singing Wagner, by the end of the film he looks much more like a man transformed into a monster by the enormity of his own vocal impact.

Like *Forget Me Not*, *Men Are Not Gods* saves its secretary by reminding her of the sanctity of marriage and family. But it also gives her the final word, or at least the final sound. In the film’s last meta-theatrical scene, Ann attends her last performance of Othello and watches with growing horror as Davies goes off-script and begins to fling his Desdemona across the stage. The tension rises, she stands up in her seat, and finally, when the infamous strangulation scene approaches, Ann lets out an epic shriek that fills the theater, drowns out the orchestra, and jolts Davies out of a potentially murderous trance. Thus, the secretary ends her enslavement to the disembodied male voice by piercing the air, preventing a murder, and more importantly, halting the performance. Her intervention is motivated by a set of specific circumstances, but symbolically constitutes both a return to the naïve kinetoscope spectator who ducks to avoid the oncoming train and a projection of the sound-struck audience member, disoriented by the acoustic contagion of mass-mediated modernity.

*Men Are Not Gods* concludes, disturbingly enough, in marital reconciliation between Edmond and Barbara, contrite in the face of their imminent parental responsibilities. Her job done and peace restored, our secretarial heroine emerges from the electro-shock fantasy to which she has been subjected by her own stenographic sensorium vowing to ‘go on being… the representative of the gallery, the symbol of the unreserved seat, the enthusiastic audience and applause.’” While this film casts the secretary as a contagiously hysterical audience member, easily disoriented by mass-mediated male voices, it also still seeks to deploy her as a positive pedagogical model for the (correctly) hypnotized masses. The audience is more important than
ever, this film seems to say, as Ann stands for *God Save the Queen*, along with the rest of the diegetic crowd: your nation needs you to listen with the people’s ear, not your own.  

**Conclusions: Leaving the Theater, back at the Eagle’s Nest…**

The sound-struck secretary’s proliferation on European screens in the mid-1930s suggests that she played a vital mediating role for leaders seeking to forge an intimate, romantic, and paternal relationship with the masses. Following Adorno’s theory (via Freud) that even the most compelling orators can only artificially collectivize the hypnotic spell by setting up intermediate 1-1 bonds, I have tried to demonstrate that the secretary-dictator relationship was perceived as a particularly potent medium for performing this witchcraft in the European popular sphere. As we saw in *Men Are Not Gods*, this perception was shared by nations defending their borders against dictatorial infiltration.

To conclude, I will return to Traudl Junge’s 1942-1945 diaries, which inform us that Mussolini visited Hitler at the Eagle’s Nest and the two dictators went to the opera. After the show, Hitler complains to Junge about the distractions and musical *mésalliances* that disrupt the flow of the performance:

> People were sitting in the boxes and the stalls dressed in fine clothes, gossiping on about their personal concerns, while the singers were doing their best. We didn’t arrive until the middle of the second act, and I couldn’t believe my ears when suddenly the opera broke off to play the Italian national anthem, the German national anthem and the Horst Wessel song. I felt very awkward and embarrassed for the singers and musicians.  

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331 In concert with the film’s Shakespearean meta-theatrical frame, the totemic cinematic setting of this last scene also serves to balance out Hopkins’ lingering Hollywood aura. A *Motion Picture Herald* article from 1936 informs us that *Men Are Not God’s* Savoy sequences were all actually shot on location at the Alhambra theater, which famously “gave the British public its first sight of the new wonder of moving pictures.” Because the Alhambra was demolished immediately after production on the film concluded, “seventeen hundred extras made up the last audience.” (“Alhambra Finishes,” *Motion Picture Herald* 124-125, Sept-Oct 1936, p.57)

332 Junge, *Before the Final Hour: Hitler’s Last Secretary*, 89.
Intuitively identifying with the performers onstage, the Führer scoffs at the clumsy symbolism of wedding Italian opera, a German military march, and both nations’ fascist national anthems. Based on Junge’s daily ethnography, we are meant to understand that Hitler’s tastes are too refined for such a display, but his critique more importantly registers a practiced performer’s irritation that the opera’s hypnotic audio-visual hold over the audience has been spliced into a much more fragmented, cacophonous, and participatory spectacle. But he need not worry. His last secretary is taking down the scathing review.333

Junge’s diaries never indicate that she openly questioned Hitler’s leadership during her time at the Eagle’s Nest, but they do reveal a young woman intermittently uneasy about her isolation from the world outside, which she tends to articulate (true to secretarial form) through theatrical and mechanical metaphors. In idle moments, Junge has begun to feel oddly trapped in the wings of history, as if she was “standing behind the scenes and didn’t know what was happening onstage. Only the director knew the play, all the rest of us just learned our parts, and no one knew exactly what part anyone was playing.”334 Tellingly, this formulation recalls the liminal spaces behind the scenes where Helen and Ann are first sound-struck. During Mussolini’s visit, in a similar liminal space (in the office, doing paperwork while two dictators meet in the main house), Junge’s uneasiness finally comes to a head:

I can’t say anything about Mussolini’s visit itself, because I stayed behind at the deserted Berghof with several other people and was in the office, catching up with my work. [...] At this time I felt curiously restless when I was alone; it was a sense of discomfort that I couldn’t explain to myself. It wasn’t the mountains that oppressed my spirits but the whole weight of the machinery into which I had found my way, and which was now holding me tightly in its thousand arms.335

333 Junge sees her dictator as an eccentric aesthete and a leader acutely aware of the power his voice holds over the masses: “He knew very well that his voice was an important instrument of his power; his words intoxicated the people and carried them away.” But she never connects the two. I assume Junge did not know Hitler trained his vocal cords and oratory choreography under the tutelage of an opera singer, but then again, it is dangerous to assume what a secretary does and does not know. (Junge, 147)

334 Junge, 104.
The highly evocative image at the end of this excerpt, which evokes the Thousand-Year Reich without explicitly textualizing it as such, reminds us of the many layers of professional and historical perspective, conscious and unconscious knowledge, transcription, editing, and authorship mediating our access to Junge’s narrative voice. Reading *Until the Final Hour* can quickly become a game of obsessively parsing moments like the one above, where Junge’s clerical unconscious seems to give her coded hints to the world-shattering revelations on the horizon. Over the course of consuming the memoir, the reader is invariably led to ponder: is the baring of the “machinery” staged in these moments the “old” Junge’s doing (an anxious act of postwar editing?) or actual evidence of what a twenty-two-year-old secretary knew, without *consciously* knowing?

As we have seen in this chapter, questions about conscious and unconscious knowledge have haunted fictional depictions of female clerical workers, from O. Henry’s Freudian typo-spouting stenographer to Ann Williams, whose hypnotic spell was catalyzed by a portentous, trance-like act of editing. Through the lens of “secretary’s syndrome,” I have tried to read the sound-struck secretary in the audience as a symptomatic, alienated industrial laborer, instead of a symptom of industrial modernity’s discontents. Making this shift contextualizes and complicates a canonical film-historical division of modern worker-spectators into shocked, neurasthenic male factory workers and mimetic, hysterical little shopgirls. But it also reminds us that the sound-struck secretary is not only an allegory of automatism, passivity, and receptivity. Her true danger lies in the unruly range of her latent discursive agency and imagination, which may be activated at any point by a mechanical intermediary, co-worker or even a novel, and disrupt the flow of the patriarchal discourse network. While Junge may have found herself so tightly bound by the

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335 Ibid., 90.
machinery of Nazism that she could only channel discourse passively, *blindly*, the publication of her diaries long ago remediated that perspective.
Years of work expire in an instant. It’s as if my feet don’t belong to me anymore and I forget… I forget my steps.  

Chapter 4 - Phantom of the (Morse) Operator
How to Crack Codes with Typists and Tap Dancers

In *Ship Ahoy* (1942), a wartime MGM musical comedy starring tap star Eleanor Powell and radio star Red Skelton, there are two scenes in which Powell tap dances in Morse code. This is, at least, the diegetic conceit of these scenes, though a contemporary viewer might be hard-pressed to translate Powell’s taps in real time. They offer by far the most compelling interludes in an otherwise strained screwball plot about a tap dancer named Tallulah (Powell) who is tricked by Japanese spies into transporting the most powerful magnetic mine in history to Puerto Rico. In transit with her troupe, Tallulah meets Merton Kibble (Skelton in his first film role, fresh from radio), a hypochondriac radio writer whose many imaginary illnesses have successfully kept him out of military action. The leads fall in love at first sight (despite Skelton’s face-for-radio and inability to dance), but a series of miscommunications based on false information and mixed-up sensory cues soon tear them apart, leaving only three minutes for their reunion to land before the credits roll. The first Morse message Tallulah sends, in the form of a dance lesson, is a message of love to Merton. The second, sent during her final dance number to CIA agents sitting in the audience, proves the key to the film’s resolution, both in thwarting the

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336 This is a quote from a woman called the Tap Dancer in Sally Potter’s film, *The Gold Diggers* (1983).

337 I can’t assure the reader with confidence that the messages sent through Tallulah’s taps are really in Morse code. But it is perhaps more important to note that “simulated Morse clicks” come out of a theatrical tradition that dates back to the late nineteenth century, as we saw in Chapter 2. (Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 34)
enemy’s plans and in convincing her co-star she is not an enemy spy. The two messages Tallulah taps out, “Darling I love you” and “Farno leaving boat with mine,” reiterate two longstanding fictive functions of the telegraph: as an agent of romance and a way to save the day. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine moviegoers intuitively making a connection between Tallulah and a female Morse telegrapher, because by 1942, women with a professional knowledge of Morse code had not been seen at the movies (on the screen or in the audience) for over two decades.

Richard Dyer argues that Hollywood tap-dance encodes an “extremely complex” history of different meanings, which have “little to do with the intrinsic meanings of hard, short, percussive, syncopated sounds arranged in patterns and produced by the movements of feet, and everything to do with the significance such sounds acquire from their place within the network of signs in a given culture at a given point of time.” In the spirit of the playful semiotic approach proposed by Dyer, that different bodies, choreographic formations, and cultural contexts “may suggest different ways of reading the taps,” I will attempt to demonstrate over the course of this chapter that the image of a woman tap-dancing in Morse code—a language she can read, translate, and perform at top speed—should be read as a symptom of a culturally repressed history of gendered information labor, surging to the surface of screen from a recent subterranean past.

As we saw in previous chapters, lady telegraphists played recurring roles in late nineteenth-century American romance literature, isolated at their rural stations, pining for a kind message in a secret language from an unseen man. From 1909 to 1918, valiant “girl operators” took over the silver screen, fighting off bandits, hopping train cars, and sending silent SOS signals to alert honorable men of their distress. But over the next twenty years, cinematic

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telephone operators took over love at a distance, the secretary took over detective work, and telegrapher characters became overwhelmingly male, relegated to war movies and Westerns. Put simply, between World War I and World War II, the cultural work of the female Morse operator seemed to slip out of sight, along with the public perception of telegraphy as a female profession.

In 1942, an MGM studio newsletter proudly “reported that the ‘first ever girl’ had been hired as an assistant telegraph operator in the telegraph department, with its masculine technology, because of wartime staff shortages.” The same year saw the female lead of MGM’s film *Ship Ahoy* explaining to her beau that she learned Morse code “for a number in a show” before standing up to demonstrate the affinity between telegraphy and tap dancing. Together, Tallulah’s staged explanation and the ease with which Merton swallows it demonstrate how powerful two decades of cultural amnesia can be, that training as a chorus girl would sound more plausible to American audiences than a professional background in the “masculine technology” of the telegraph. Moreover, the fact that there is no hint Tallulah would have training as a cryptographer reveals how invisible the presence of women coding and decoding was at the very peak of their international impact. This invisibility was assured well into (and long after) the war by a magical affinity between the immediate need for secrecy and a decades-long history of increasingly stratified gender divisions of white-collar labor, which made it easy for women to decipher codes under cover of clerical work. As one wartime coder would put it years later, “Almost everybody thought we were nothing but secretaries.”

Primarily designed to inundate Americans with rousing, propagandistic escapism on the eve of war, *Ship Ahoy*

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seems to call women coders to the surface of text despite itself. Finding out why and how this happens—in the early 1940s, in a Hollywood musical, between two oddly mismatched stars, and most importantly, transmitted through the language of tap dancing—will be the aim of this chapter.

The questions “why didn’t we know?” and “what happened to what was once known” have preoccupied feminist film historians for nearly fifty years, particularly in reference to the many female directors, producers, and writers active in the silent film industry. Jane Gaines points out that it has taken an oddly long time since the 1970s for feminist scholarship to catch up to the archival traces of these women, hidden in plain sight. Feminist media theorists and historians of technology have similarly wondered at how long it has taken to find traces of female computers, cryptographers, and other proto-coders, given how many women occupied those professions from the late 1930s through the 1960s. I invoke both of these feminist historiographic archetypes—the woman film pioneer and the proto-programmer—because their dramas of archival traces hidden in plain sight are prefigured by the culturally repressed legacy of the Morse operator.


342 Gaines notes, “A comprehensive intellectual history needs to explain why, after the reference to women as silent film directors in one of the earliest issues of *Women and Film* (1973), the field still largely assumed that there were very few women and that those few were minor figures.” (Gaines, *Pink-Slipped*, 18) Meanwhile, Erin Hill’s recent book, *Never Done* (2016), offers a biting criticism of the elitist priorities of feminist film historians by pointing out that women’s work has not exactly been absent from media production throughout the past century. She reminds us it has been there all along in costume departments, editing (script girls, splice girls), animation (tinters), and at the center of paper-based bureaucracies and communications networks.

Although in 1880, female telegraphers played an active role in the US popular imagination and made up twenty-five per cent of the U.S. telegraphic workforce, by the 1930s and 40s, histories of telegraphy mentioned women only peripherally, if at all.\textsuperscript{344} As I noted in chapter 2, we can date the cultural obsolescence of the female Morse operator to 1900-1915, the period during which commercial telegraphic companies and offices replaced most of their Morse operators with Teletype operators. “Following the development of the Teletype, the functions of the telegraph operator began to resemble those of a typist.”\textsuperscript{345} Thomas Jepsen’s account of the “gendering of the occupation of telegrapher” figures the girl operator’s professional trajectory in terms of a technological shift that led to industrialized gender segregation, de-skilled discursive labor, and lower pay. Simply put, it shows us the moment of alienation staged as a cut between mind and machine: by 1915, women had lost professional access to Morse code.

This loss is not only evocatively semiotic for a feminist historical narrative: as Jepsen points out, it also preemptively cut women off from the language that would become the basis for binary code. “The telegrapher’s work, like that of a modern computer programmer, consisted of translating English-language instructions in machine-readable codes. Morse code is, in fact, a direct ancestor of the American National Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) codes used by software programmers.”\textsuperscript{346} It was only through their mass recruitment as cryptanalysts and human computers during World War II that female clerical workers

\textsuperscript{344} Jepsen, 198. According to Jepsen, it was not until 1988 that a book about telegraphy featured a comprehensive study of women operators. He accounts for this wave of amnesia by referring broadly to the sexism that has overshadowed labor movements, increasingly automatized offices, and historical scholarship itself.

\textsuperscript{345} Messages were entered on a machine with a typewriter keyboard; at the receiving end, automatic printers printed out the text. A skilled operator who could decipher the Morse code dots and dashes was no longer needed. The introduction of the Teletype led to gendering of the occupation of telegrapher; almost all Teletype operators were women. Thus as the total number of telegraphers declined in the mid-twentieth century, the percentage of women employed in the industry increased. (Jepsen, 11)

\textsuperscript{346} Jepsen, 195.
temporarily returned to multilingual, mechanical-semiotic work in the early days of cybernetics, data processing and information theory. As Jennifer Light has shown, because of the sexual divisions of labor standardized across a number of white-collar workforces during the intervening decades, college-educated women working as engineers and highly skilled programmers in the early 1940s were placed in the same wage and skill category as “stenographer typists” and “scanning girl.”

I use these two accounts to read the cultural work of the Morse operator and the female cryptographer as displaced and absorbed into the cultural work of the secretary, typist, and stenographer throughout the 1920s and 1930s, rather than disappeared altogether. Removed from her solitary station, where she had been a lone popular heroine, she joined typist’s pools and Taylorized offices, becoming a mechanized member of a homogenous crowd. But this apparently clean break was haunted by lingering traces of the female Morse operator’s repressed legacy. Many male Morse operators and a few lingering female Morse operators continued to work throughout the early twentieth century at train stations and on commercial and military ships.

More importantly for my purposes, the expansion of Marconi’s radio telegraph system into a mass medium for entertainment and broadcasting carried with it echoes of Morse code, which was deployed as a branding device in the visual and aural iconography of radio shows and early sound films. Tap dancing musicals, in particular, fostered an aural resonance between Morse telegraphy and typing that elided the major gaps—in wages, discursive agency, and popular characterization—between the two kinds of work.

To make the case for the tap dancer as a screen surrogate for invisible, alienated, and forgotten incarnations of the modern mediatrix, this chapter uses the metallic echoes of taps to read RKO’s ten Astaire-Rogers musicals as anxious allegories for the Production Code’s reliance on female typists, and as encrypted channels to two fleetingly feminized languages, Morse and binary code. Forgotten phantoms rise symptomatically to the surface when old media (like radio, telegraphs, and typewriters) are conjured to advertise a new medium (like sound film) to the public. After demonstrating that in the 1930s, the resonance of typing and dancing taps created a sonic cue that Hollywood musicals broadly took up with self-conscious glee, I will argue that RKO’s iconic Morse branding and gendered divisions of dance labor also covertly returned a repressed cultural memory to center-screen: the female Morse operator. With an emphasis on the ten RKO (Radio Pictures) musicals starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, my focus will be on how conservative ideology is deployed to re-contain what has been unleashed with the advent of sound, so that audiences (then and now) consume the traces of a cultural memory without processing its implications. Through a highly codified system of sexist industrial and narrative practices, from the dubbing of Rogers’ taps to her perennial role as a dizzy, mixed up dame, these films curbed their female lead’s discursive agency to shore up social codes that the echo of coding women threatened to destabilize.
Introducing the Marconi Musical

Learning to read the taps, of course, offers the key to deciphering these codes. With this in mind, I have coined the term Marconi Musical to designate a historically bounded, technologically reflexive subgenre of Hollywood musicals made during the first decade of sound cinema that deployed tap dancing as syntax, spectacle, and subterranean semiotic system. Guglielmo Marconi is usually credited as the inventor of radio but might more realistically be described as a significant contributor to the development of what was known for during the 1910s and 1920s as a wireless telegraph system. Because I will be offering RKO’s Astaire-Rogers films as paradigmatic examples of the Marconi musical, I have lifted the name from a Gershwin song sung by Ginger Rogers in Shall We Dance (1937), dedicated to the triumphs of new technologies and their inventors over skeptics. In this serenade to Masters of Industry, which quickly dissolves into a dance of romantic revelation, Marconi shows up somewhere between Edison and Ford:

They told Marconi wireless was a phony, it's the same old lie
They laughed at me wanting you, said I was reaching for the moon
But oh, you came through, now they'll have to change their tune

These lyrics—uncannily similar in techno-romantic tone to the late-nineteenth century poems about Edison, Morse, and Daguerre explored in Chapter 1—exemplify the collapse of capitalist, romantic, and musical connections orchestrated by RKO through its incorporation of radio into the plots of its films. “You came through” means, not only “you showed up”, but also “your transmission came through.” “They’ll have to change their tune” refers to the recourses left to commercial competitors and the public when faced with a new technological order, but also to the irresistible pull of a song that conveys a clear message of reciprocal love. The main (industrial and romantic) anxiety undergirding this encoded language is the possibility of a missed or misinterpreted message.
The multifarious meanings of taps in Marconi musicals trace three intertwined industrial changes that took place throughout the 1930s: 1) the integration of sound technology into Hollywood film production and radio iconography into Hollywood films, 2) the development of an elaborate bureaucratic system that circulated the paper traces of every film in progress through Joseph Breen’s Production Code Administration, and 3) the paradoxically simultaneous increased marginalization and ubiquity of women working in film production, annexed after the silent era to two major roles on the studio lot: actress and clerical conduit. Fitting these three changes into a single subgenre allows a number of recurring narrative devices to become legible as complex industrial metonymies, from the self-identifying Morse message that opens every RKO film to the doubled discourse, miscommunicated messages, and coded courtship dances reiterated in every Astaire-Rogers romance.

To demonstrate what I mean by this, I will compare tap sequences from two Marconi musicals made in the 1930s: Warner Brothers’ *Ready, Willing and Able* (1937) and RKO’s *The Gay Divorcee* (1934). One of the first functions of this comparative close reading will be to demonstrate that films made during this period were self-consciously exploiting analogies among tap dancers, typewriters, and telegraphy. Each studio would do so differently, according to its characteristic plots and productions: WB was known for its ensemble backstage musicals armed with plucky chorus girls valiantly trying to make it at the height of the Great Depression. RKO was known for its heterosexual duo-driven escapist screwball fantasies led by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, flirting and fighting their way to a decade-long repeating happy ending.

Juxtaposing these staples of studio authorship reveals two paradigmatic poles of a cinematic battle, as Joel Dinerstein has argued, “between Busby Berkeley’s vision of dancers

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pressed into abstract patterns to serve the camera, and Fred Astaire’s insistence that the individual human body be filmed as a flowing, continuous continuity.” The thunder of synchronized taps created by typists in “Too Marvelous for Words” reflects Warner Brothers’ typical treatment of women’s bodies in its musicals, as interchangeable cogs in a masterful machine designed by Berkeley. The phantom operator that haunts “Don’t Let it Bother You,” as I will argue, reflects RKO’s uniquely intimate relationship to radio and preference for dualistic narratives organized around a single couple.

Together, these two tap sequences should offer some preliminary tools to explore the relationship among three figures: 1) the phantom Morse operator, haunting early sound films through radio iconography and the metallic echo of tap dancing; 2) the Hollywood studio stenographer, invisibly efficient but evoked at the interstices of mechanized chorus lines and screwball miscommunications; and 3) the female tap dancing star, most often manufactured by male choreographers and sound engineers and alienated from the production of her performance.

**Ready, Willing, and Able: a symphony of secretaries**

During Hollywood’s long, self-reflexive transition to sound, the ubiquity of living female typists, stenographers, and secretaries established an ideal aural analogy for the staccato sounds of tap dancing. This analogy was not only exploited for musical purposes, as we saw in Chapter 3, but also for publicity: to advertise typewriters, tap stars, and remind working-class women of how much they had in common with celebrated screen performers. In one of the more absurd examples of this practice, *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* designated Ann Miller “the world’s fastest tap dancer” in the early 1940s for reaching a rate of “598 taps per minute in a contest with a

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typist.” The implication of this set up—that typists and tap dancers were both expert operators of their “machines”—was reiterated soon after the contest by RKO announcing its plan to insure Miller’s legs for one million dollars. This conspicuous commodification of a tap dancer’s legs stood in grotesque contrast to longstanding demands made by unionized chorus girls and typists to have their equipment (tap shoes and typewriters) provided by their employers.

The dance number, “Too Marvelous for Words,” from Warner Brother’s backstage musical, _Ready, Willing, and Able_ (dir. Ray Enright, 1937), deploys the typewriter (meaning woman and machine) as its central operating metaphor. In this number, choreographed quintessentially by Busby Berkeley, typewriters are props and characters; they provide the orchestral accompaniment and synchronized choreography to scenes of dictation, and most dramatically, their architecture is the blueprint for a spectacular set piece.

It should therefore come as no surprise that this is the only scene from a film explicitly cited by Friedrich Kittler in _Discourse Networks 1800/1900_. Kittler reads the image of “revue girls” dancing across the keys of the giant typewriter as an allegory for the typewriter girl going to the movies. In his cosmology, the typewriter girl’s avid movie-going means that cinematic fantasies follow her to the heart of the discourse network, infecting the textual production she mediates with dreams of marriage and musedom. Movies rehearse her status as a fraught fetish object, caught between one and many: the _Eternal Feminine_ of literary fame and the many clerical workers employed in modern offices meet on the screen, where secretaries can identify with stars. The theoretical paradigm Kittler constructs from this scene does not do it justice,
however. He devotes one sentence to *Ready, Willing, and Able*, in which he misattributes its authorship to Billy Wilder and conflates the revue girls in the image (dropped upside down into the typewriter) with the heterosexual leading couple actually dancing across the keys. These mistakes offer a telling example of Kittler’s slipshod treatment of films in general, as cabinets of curiosity that perform his theories rather than as texts with their own systems of discursive and industrial production.

As Jane Feuer has argued, the Hollywood musical’s most powerful magic act involves eliding the labor involved in its production by consistently staging apparently effortless, spontaneous spectacles of human performance. In “Too Marvelous for Words,” this ideological elision is reinforced by the title’s self-reflexive discursive denial, but begins to burst at the seams of the number’s *labored* central analogy, between typists and tap dancers. Beyond presenting a potpourri of discursive fetish objects for the media archaeologist, the opening section of this number also stages a major part of its own production process. *Ready, Willing, and Able* shows us the fetishized fate of the clerical workers who, as Erin Hill has argued, were “arguably most important” to Hollywood studios’ daily workflow at the peak of the studio era, “the women who produced and maintained the sea of paperwork on which each production

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floated."\textsuperscript{354} Put simply, \textit{Ready, Willing, and Able} draws inspiration not only from a pervasive popular trope, but also from its studio’s feminized internal communications network.

At Warner Brothers, female clerical workers occupied every department on the studio lot while relegated geographically to its peripheries.\textsuperscript{355} Like chorus girls in a Berkeley kaleidoscope, they were arranged in circles to support the creative, credited work being done at the center.

“Too Marvelous for Words” begins in a private library (above left), where a handsome executive dictates a love letter to his lone secretary, a handful of stenographers, and some twenty typists arranged around him, tapping out a heavy collective beat while tittering at the sentimental lyrics. The number of women occupying each of three roles reflects a hierarchical division of clerical labor standard in most offices by the 1920s, “with typist (who merely typed up documents and notes) held in low regard, stenographer (who took dictation in face-to-face sessions with executives) only slightly higher, and secretaries (who provided support to executives) held in highest esteem because of the requisite intelligence and interpersonal competency.”\textsuperscript{356} The three units are united, however, by their employer’s opening call: “Now is the time for all good girls to come to the aid of the boss!” Dutifully, marvelously, they comply.

In fact, their “boss” first proffers the line “you’re just too marvelous” in reference to his secretary, who has offered to turn his dry, business-like verbiage into amorous verse. As he dictates, she alternates between echoing his words and making her own additions, playing the role of “office wife” that Rosemary Pringle writes “distinguished the secretary from other

\textsuperscript{354} Hill, \textit{Never Done}, 4.

\textsuperscript{355} Hill offers studio lot blueprints as archival evidence of the geographic ghettoization of feminized forms of labor in the studio system. While the occupations she focuses on also include script girls, seamstresses, and makeup artists, the most significant part of her research is devoted to clerical workers. As she points out, black workers are excluded from this kind of blueprint analysis because they were denied access to most spaces on the studio lot.

\textsuperscript{356} Hill, 22.
clerical workers, notably stenographers.”357 The stenographers combine the creative efforts of the pair into a single shorthand epistle and the typists tap out the combined copy, creating a final product signed by a single man. The seamless progress of this assembly line depends on two steps: 1) that the “good girls” in the room take on the roles of muse, writing partner, editor, and mechanical medium, and 2) that afterwards, they gracefully abdicate all credit to the creative genius of their boss. The rewards of clerical work in classical Hollywood seem to hinge on this implicit exchange, with marriage held up as Holy Grail in place of promotion, a byline, or even “words,” for which the clerical worker is, of course, much too marvelous.358

Efficiently completed and coherently authored, the letter passes from lover to beloved in the cut between shots, carried over by “messengerette,” another attractive node in the studio communications network.359 For the next part of the number, we are transported across town to an ornate boudoir where a woman in a silk shift receives the letter, reads it aloud, and begins to type out a response (unfortunately she seems to have no accomplished typists in her employ, despite the number of idle young women in negligees huddled around her offering suggestions). As she types, the image dissolves into a close-up of a typewriter (reprinted below) lined with long, black shapely legs waving across the page. As the camera zooms out and the legs appear to sink into the organs of the typewriter, a man and a woman are revealed tapping in tandem across the keys.


358 The exchange of authorial credit for marriage is literalized in Warner Brothers’ *The Gold Diggers of 1935* (1935): a stenographer cajoles her employer into “autographing” the love song she has written on his behalf. Her goal, as it turns out, is not to make it as a songwriter, but to force a marriage proposal out of her boss, who has unknowingly signed love song lyrics addressed to his stenographer. A day after he signs the document, he receives a telegram (through Western Union) informing him that he is being sued for breach of contract.

359 Hill, 98.
The perspective of this shot, staged along the discursive mechanics of the typewriter, establishes a parallel between chorines and typists based as much on their collective anonymity and mechanization as their shared staccato sound.\textsuperscript{360} It also positions two female performers (chorus girls and stars) in hierarchical tension, leaving one lost in the undifferentiated wake of the other. Just as the clerical workers in the previous scene were absorbed into the streamlined system and authorial vision of their boss, individual chorines in Warner Brothers musicals get absorbed into the glittering kaleidoscopic formations designed by Busby Berkeley, the only choreographer regularly described by film historians as an \textit{auteur}\.\textsuperscript{361} With black in the wings and

\textsuperscript{360} Hill describes depictions of typists in Hollywood studio tour films as uniformly collective and dehumanizing. Workers featured appear in groups with their heads turned away from the camera and lowered over their machines: “Depicted in this way, the workers are mere extensions of the technology they operate: mechanical assets rather than human resources.” (Hill, 76) This description resonates with Christopher Keep’s argument about the “cultural work” performed by “typewriter girls” around the turn of the century to control and contain the disruptive impact of the New Woman. Susan Glenn makes a similar argument about Broadway’s coterminal cultivation of the chorus girl, highlighting the full-blown system of discourse and representation that had developed by the 1920s to configure chorus girls as “mechanized, standardized products of the stage.” (Glenn, 188) Their creation was performed in public figuratively through the rhetoric of “the Ziegfeld Touch” and literally by Broadway choreographer Ned Wayburn, who described the chorus girl as “a creation as completely thought out, moved about, wired and flounced, beribboned and set dancing, as any automaton.” (Glenn, 179)
white on the stage, the typewriter also conspicuously cannibalizes an army of black female
dancers to fuel the steps of the white couple up front. The line of shapely black legs dropped into
the organs of the giant typewriter thus tells three intimately related stories of 1930s Hollywood
musical production: 1) the mechanized discursive labor performed by women that is ultimately
absorbed like ink into the final shooting scripts of films, 2) the collective, anonymous labor
performed by chorines, their movements synchronized and sacrificed to the individuality of a
leading couple, and 3) the black dancers and choreographers whose creative labor disappeared
behind an all-white visual regime under cover of a new genre, the code-era Hollywood dance
musical. The image of romantic text being turned into dance foregrounds one of the basic
narrative codes of this genre, which replaces scenes of sex and seduction with romantically
encoded choreography organized around a white heterosexual couple.

The Gay Divorcee (RKO, 1934): phantom of the operator

In contrast to Warner Brothers’ self-conscious comparison of typewriter and chorus girl
taps, RKO conjured the phantom of the female Morse operator accidentally, through a corporate
sonic signature—a radio tower delivering a Morse message—that tied telegraphy to tap dancing.
Rhymed with a forgotten feminized language, RKO’s dance musicals recalled the Morse
operator’s alienation and obsolescence to the surface of text by reproducing eerily familiar
gendered divisions of tapping labor.

361 Berkeley directed his first film for Warner Brothers in 1935, after many years of becoming famous for his
kaleidoscopic chorine formations. The Gold Diggers of 1935 includes a major musical number in which fifty
chorines play the piano, arranged around one another in lines, spirals, and concentric circles. While this number does
not explicitly include typewriters, the familiar posture of the young women at their machines and close-ups of
painted fingernails tapping on keyboards strongly suggest the trappings of a glamorized typing pool.

362 Glenn, 155.
“Don’t Let it Bother You,” the opening number of RKO’s first Astaire-Rogers vehicle, *The Gay Divorcee* (dir. Mark Sandrich, 1934), offers the earliest and most conspicuous example of the phantom operator peeking out from behind tap dancers in an Astaire-Rogers film. As we see below, a group of brunette chorines rotate in a circle while appearing to tap out a message with their fingers, which also operate as dancing doll legs. Initially, shot from afar (left), these women look more like telegraph operators than tap dancers.\(^{363}\) Their fingers move to the sound of a staccato beat, appearing to compose a message, while their feet remain stationary. But as the camera zooms in (right), their bodies recede into darkness, leaving only a line-up of tap-dancing dolls in their wake.

Staged in the space of this zoom is a snapshot of the female Morse operator’s cultural obsolescence through the transfer of her finger taps to the female tap dancer. These shots,

\(^{363}\) Significantly, their fingering technique is consistent with silent film representations of telegraphy, rather than professional standards of Morse code transmission. The correct form involves grasping the sides of the key button with thumb, middle finger, and index finger on top, while working the key from the wrist. This form was standard until the development of Teletype, but by no means as evocative as one or two frenetically tapping fingers. In silent cinema, the cinematic effect of the finger-tapping technique is two-fold: it registers with more emotional force and offers a clearer image of the sound that telegraphs make. It is also important to recall that silent films were never silent, as Rick Altman has shown: screenings of silent films and serials featuring telegraphy were most likely accompanied by a percussive or staccato wind instrument that recreated the sound of sending. I am particularly interested in the reappearance of the finger-tapping technique in “Don’t Let it Bother You,” because it is playing with audio-visual expectations left over from silent film exhibition.
prefaced like all RKO films by the self-identifying Morse message of a radio tower, illustrate sound cinema’s selective inheritance of industrial motifs. If the first shot conjures some version of Tallulah learning the Code “for a number in a show,” with her cultural inheritance in evidence as a hybrid chorus-girl-operator doll, then the second makes a point to hide that evidence, collapsing dancer and operator into a doll ventriloquized acousmatically and animated artificially through the manipulations of figures in shadow. These dolls mediate discursive agency instead of producing it themselves. The mediatrix is absorbed into the medium.

At an industrial level, the zoom serves to publicize RKO’s newly inaugurated post-synchronization process. The Gay Divorcee was the first film made at RKO to use re-recording, the practice of recording separate image and sound tracks and then mixing them in post-production:364 by 1936, RKO would boast a “100 per cent dubbed product.”365 As Rick Altman writes, “more than any other type of film, the musical has resorted to dubbing, rerecording, looping, post synchronization, and other techniques which involve separate recording of the image and diegetic music.”366 Over the next ten years, re-recording would become the standard for almost all studio films, but in the early to mid-1930s, musicals dominated as sites for sound-sync experimentation. The sequences of pure attraction announced by the openings of dance numbers provided ideal spaces for these experiments to be put on display, often through

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364 “Spivak recalled that at RKO they were recording vocalists simultaneously with either an orchestra or a playback of the accompaniment until The Gay Divorcee (October 1934), when they started to record two tracks and mix them in post-production. The Gay Divorcee was in production from June to August of 1934 and thus is concurrent with the earliest published discussions of push-pull recording in JSMPE (July 1934).” (Lea Jacobs, “The Innovation of Re-recording in the Hollywood Studios,” Film History 24.1 (2012): 23.)


366 Rick Altman, The American Film Musical (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 64.
fetishizing focus on the mouths and legs of female tap dancers, whose voices and taps were also often not their own.\textsuperscript{367}

As a number of sound studies scholars have shown by comparing the reflexive fictions of \textit{Singin’ in the Rain} (1952) with the realities of its production, “very high stakes are involved in the alignment of the female voice with the female image” in classical Hollywood cinema.\textsuperscript{368} As Kaja Silverman explains, “the rule of synchronization simultaneously holds more fully and necessitates more coercion with the female than with the male voice.”\textsuperscript{369} The notion of Hollywood’s gendered sonic regime was first theorized by Silverman in the 1980s and an array of feminist film theorists have since written a great deal about Hollywood’s habit of reproducing missing, switched, and cut-up women’s voices.\textsuperscript{370} I have come to think of this gendered sonic regime primarily in terms of the alienated labor demanded of both screen actresses operating as silent bodies and voice actresses whose bodies have been deemed unfit for the screen. Neither is given authority over a coherent performance from start to finish. Instead, measured against a technological standard rarely applied to male performers, they are fused together to make an audio-visual android.\textsuperscript{371}

\textsuperscript{367} In particular I am thinking of the famous zoom into Ginger Rogers’s mouth during the opening number of \textit{Gold Diggers of 1933} (1933).

\textsuperscript{368} Kaja Silverman, \textit{The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 46. Others who have written on the production repressions of \textit{Singin’ in the Rain} include most notably Michel Chion, Richard Dyer, Peter Wollen, and Carol Clover.

\textsuperscript{369} Silverman, \textit{The Acoustic Mirror}, 46.


\textsuperscript{371} The seeming importance of a coherent audio-visual performance is actually culturally specific. As Amanda Weidman has shown, in India, splitting the two became the standard early on. Certain skills were associated specifically with dub-singers, who were also star performers in their own right. This is in contrast to the Hollywood system, which does not credit its dubbers and instead relies on an illusion that represses the two bodies joined in one screen trace. (Amanda Weidman, “voice,” \textit{Keywords in Sound} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015))
The images from “Don’t Let it Bother You” offer us a clue to the power dynamics also at play in dubbing women’s taps, a strange subcategory of post-synchronization I will explore in more detail later in this chapter. In the reverse audio-visual striptease staged above, what begins as the exposure of an illusion turns into its reconstitution as the chorus girls’ legs fade into darkness, their finger-dolls transformed into the only plausible source of sound onscreen. With the figures behind them simultaneously obscured and un-gendered, the dolls become fraught figurations of the sonic regime to which female tap dancers were subjected in the plots and productions of 1930s Hollywood musicals. Uncannily, this sequence seems to suggest that the violent act of erasing the Morse operator has carried over into the rewiring of the chorus girl for post-synchronization. Indeed, I think of these two forms of alienation as intimately connected, with the chorus girl appearing to reproduce the symptoms of the Morse operator’s loss of access to encoded language by transmitting one jumbled, nonsensical message after another.

Clinching the connection between telegraph operator and tap shoe is another industrial novelty woven into the zoom from dancers to dolls: the distinctive, techno-inflected echo of tap shoes with flat metallic toes and heels, which made taps onscreen sound much more like typewriters and telegraphs than they ever had before. Metal taps were still relatively new in 1934, as Constance Vallis Hill demonstrates through a catalog of testimonials from famous American tap dancers and choreographers, all dating their first pairs of shoes with metal taps to sometime between 1931 and 1933. “Early styles of tap dancing,” notes Hill, “utilized various footwear: hard-sole shoes, clogs, clip-soled clogs, boots, and hard-sole shoes affixed with jingle taps, hobnails, even soda caps.”

\[372\] The standardization of flat metal taps, isolated from this

\[372\] Constance Vallis Hill, Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 83.
diverse array of antic sounds and makeshift materials, suggests a deliberate emphasis on a clean, crisp sound designed to pierce through ambient noise and background music. Though no one has ever made this claim explicitly, it seems likely that the sound of tap dancing was adapted in the early 1930s to suit the high acoustic demands of experimental sound systems on film sets. After 1933, Hollywood tap would no longer register the traces of multiple ethnic dance traditions aurally: it was whitewashed and mechanically inflected.

Black dancers’ marginal roles in Astaire-Rogers film testify to the power of this purge: they appear as performers in variety shows, synchronized ship workers, servants, and street urchins circulating around the edges of musical numbers and banished from the plot. Flying Down to Rio (1933) is the first and last Astaire-Rogers film to feature a central character of color. Tellingly, it is also the first and last to register different kinds of tap sounds. Set in Brazil, the film establishes two competing kinds of sound: a wooden, hollow shuffle for the “Brazilian” dancers (likely played by Mexican and African-American dancers) and a sharp metal twang for the newly arrived all-white American dancing troupe. Although battles between different forms of dance would become a diegetic staple in Astaire-Rogers musicals, after 1933 they largely suppressed the black and Irish origins of American tap dancing. Instead, a folksy or jazzy “American” (read: white) hoofing style was typically contrasted with elitist European (Russian or French) ballet.

The machinic sound quality of tap dancing disguised its embodied debts and ongoing thefts, turning it into a uniquely modern screen subject that invited literal and figurative allusions to a panoply of sound-producing machines, from metronomes and typewriters to machine guns, trains and telegraphs (all classic tap sequences). For Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, however, these allusions manifested differently across gender lines. Astaire’s encounters with the

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373 Tapping also offered early sound film productions a simpler medium for re-recording than dialogue because standard tap shoes produced sounds from both heel and toe taps. Spectators will always hear more taps than they can see in a single step. This audio-visual elision is the basis for the title of Brian Seibert’s recent bestseller, What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

374 Roberta (1935), Shall We Dance (1937), and later The Band Wagon (1953) all feature ballet as a competing form with American hoofing. British upper-crustiness also often competes with laid-back American showmanship, as in Top Hat (1935) and Royal Wedding (1951). Italian is as racialized as these films get.
machines around him are joyful and creative. In *Shall We Dance*, the gleeful dancer riffs off the scratches on a phonograph record, repeating the same phrase over and over again with his feet until he falls out of line in a cascade of laughter. Later, he appears to spontaneously choreograph a dance routine to the rhythm of a ship’s engine. In *Barkleys of Broadway*, he headlines a number with four pairs of disembodied tap shoes as his back-up dancers. Rather than suggesting the sacrifice of human thought and movement to the rhythms of the machine, these scenes show a man who can turn mechanically reproducible sound into an opportunity for play.

Astaire’s technological mastery engenders rhetorically rich dancing. He often thinks his way into his dances: an idle thought buoyed by absent-minded finger tapping turns quickly into a sweeping step, launching him into song. Ginger Rogers does not think out her dances: she is pulled into them, teetering on her heels. Behind this dynamic, which so consistently pervades the pair’s films, is Rogers’ alienated performance. While Astaire, a seminally “cinematic dancer,” exercised total creative control over all his dance numbers from start to finish, Rogers was perched on high heels that could never have produced the thudding steps audiences heard in theaters. While Rogers sang her own songs, her taps were dubbed by Hermes Pan, the queer male choreographer who would spend the rest of his career collaborating with Fred Astaire. Like the girl operator transferred to Teletype, Rogers is split from the coherence and discursive

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375 Astaire reportedly drew inspiration for the routine from a cement mixer on the RKO lot. For another routine, he cites a riveting machine as his inspiration.

376 Joel Dinerstein argues that the metallic sound of taps and the “process by which African Americans stylized machine rhythms and aesthetics through inquiry, experiment, and social experience” offered Americans a playfully reflective antithesis to the oppressive rhythms of industrial labor (Dinerstein, 4). He cites Fred Astaire and Bill Robinson as two major heroes of this process.

377 This is a claim upheld by most dance scholars, even those frustrated with how much Astaire’s cinematic legacy has overshadowed many tap dancers of color. Astaire famously refused to be filmed in close-up and invented what would be called the “Astaire Dolly,” designed to track his movements fluidly from afar. (Seibert, 238)
agency of her labor: the “acute Hibernian wit” and “satire, resounded in the feet” dance scholars associate with the rhetorical artistry of tap dancing belongs to Astaire, but not to her.\textsuperscript{378}

True to this production paradigm, “Don’t Let it Bother You” concludes by asserting male dominance in the white heterosexual tap duo, with a shot of Fred Astaire picking up one of the abandoned dolls and making it dance across the table. The fact that that Rogers had made her name in Hollywood by playing a string of blonde chorus girls in Warner Brothers musicals registers transparently here, as does Astaire’s reputation as a virtuosic stage performer and choreographer. Channeling the Pygmalion persona RKO’s publicity department had already begun to plug for its newest rising star,\textsuperscript{379} Astaire chuckles to himself, apparently charmed by the ease with which he manipulates his pliant partner.

\textsuperscript{378} Vallis Hill, 17.

\textsuperscript{379} “Astaire’s control and masculinity were carefully shored up by the RKP publicity machine. Media reporting on Astaire obsessed on two themes: how hard he worked to choreograph and perfect their dances and how intent on and successful he was at controlling every aspect of his career. Lest anyone think dancing an effete avocation, the press reported avidly and extensively on preparations for each new Astaire film. While Rogers was typically involved in the numerous other films she made between their musicals, Astaire and his assistant Hermes Pan spent an average of eight weeks before filming ever started, choreographing and perfecting the dances, which Pan would then teach to Rogers at night. These stories are full of images of the dancers exhausted, disheveled, with bleeding feet after hours and hours of grueling rehearsals, all designed to emphasize that the ‘seemingly smooth, effortless dancing scenes’ are ‘result of long, painful rehearsal.’” (Margaret T. McFadden, “Shall We Dance? Gender and Class Conflict in Astaire-Rogers Musicals,” \textit{Women’s Studies} 37.6 (2008): 698.)
This is the model for the dancing team of Astaire and Rogers we are offered as viewers, long before the female lead makes her entrance. Prefaced by RKO’s telegraph tower logo, the transfer of taps from a chorus line of finger-tapping operators to a manually manipulated doll prefigures the sonic regime to which Ginger Rogers would be subjected throughout her ten-year tenure as Galatea to Fred Astaire’s Pygmalion. By the end of the scene, women’s breathing bodies have been totally removed from the screen, replaced by the image of a man smugly manipulating the legs of his doll. Off-screen, the chorines can still be heard singing their eerie refrain: “Don’t let it bother you… everything will be okay!”

**RKO: A Sound-era Studio for Radio Listeners**

RKO’s relationship to radio and telegraphy is the major reason I will spend the rest of this chapter inside that studio’s most successful string of films, all produced during the first decade of its operation. Founded in 1928 through the merger of a vaudeville theater chain (KAO), a film studio (FBO), and a radio corporation (RCA), RKO’s original organizing logic was to retool the technology of radio for sound film production, ideally while converting longstanding radio audiences seamlessly to the cinema. As Paul Young has demonstrated in his
work on the many connections fostered between cinema and other media during Hollywood’s transition to sound, most studios “encouraged the public to consume sync sound films in terms of the technologies of recording and amplification that made telephony, phonography, and radio possible.”\textsuperscript{380} Young writes that radio received particular emphasis in film plots and advertising because of its association with the “electrifying spirit of the twenties,” which Hollywood was eager to transfer to screens during the Great Depression, without inheriting its blackness.\textsuperscript{381} The case study Young offers for this phenomenon is \textit{King Kong} (1933), a film that put RKO on the studio map through the “dense interweave of music, dialogue and effects” made possible by RCA’s new variable-area system and made visible by the image of a gorilla perched on a skyscraper like an antenna on a radio tower (below left).\textsuperscript{382} Through the gorilla’s embodiment of “nearly every myth of black savagery and monstrous miscegenation that racially paranoid critics of broadcasting fired off at radio jazz,” Young reads this shot as “an indication of the film’s impulse to purge itself of the jazz-radio beast that the cinema has willingly invited in.”\textsuperscript{383} Purged of blackness, the radio tower would become RKO’s hallmark image (below right). It emanated the electrifying spirit of a purified Jazz Age through bolts of lightning, declaring Morse code as its original language.

\textsuperscript{380} Paul Young, \textit{Cinema Dreams Its Rivals: Media Fantasy Films from Radio to the Internet} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 88.

\textsuperscript{381} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{383} Young, 115.
Another telling example from 1933 is *Flying Down to Rio*, RKO’s first film with Astaire and Rogers (as a secondary couple), and the first film to incorporate RCA into its plot. Over the course of the decade, RKO regularly used its radio branch as an exhibition window to advertise songs from its musicals: both Astaire and Rogers performed their most popular numbers on the radio (Rogers sang; Astaire sang and tapped). Radio City Music Hall, named for and operated by RCA in the 1930s, offers a paradigmatic example of how intertwined RKO’s musical and radio productions were during this period: in August 1935, the legendary venue hosted both the premiere of *Top Hat* (1935) and the first broadcast of Astaire’s Hit Parade radio show.\(^{384}\)

Like all Astaire-Rogers films, *Flying Down to Rio* is as much a screwball comedy as it is a musical.\(^{385}\) As such, it exploits the ironic disjuncture between what its characters understand to be separate storylines and what the audience knows to be comically intertwined. This disjuncture allows for spectators to derive satisfaction from the process of watching a series of

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\(^{385}\) When film historians write about Astaire-Rogers films, they often note their generic hybridity just before using them to pad genealogies of the screwball comedy or dance musical. Rick Altman, for example, observes that, “it is hard not to draw the parallel between the antics of the Astaire/Rogers team and their quarrelsome counterparts in the exactly contemporary screwball comedy.” (Altman, 167)
miscommunications unfold with the knowledge that their ultimate recognition as such will herald the narrative’s resolution and the main characters’ reconciliation.

In *Flying Down to Rio*, the first miscommunication is launched by the simultaneous composition of two RCA radiograms.386

The appearance of RCA in *Flying Down to Rio* operates not only as vertically integrated product placement, but also as the film’s major narrative catalyst. The two main characters, Roger and Belinha, have just met in Miami and are both, unbeknownst to either, on their way to Rio de Janeiro to meet the same man: Julio, Belinha’s fiancé and Roger’s best friend. The two radiograms will be transmitted smoothly to their destination, true to the promise illustrated above of “world wide wireless.” But, as the barrier between the two lovers’ radiogram booths indicates, it will be a long time before they can communicate properly with each other.

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386 In Warner Brothers films from the same period, Western Union appears above telegrams.
The wall dividing a couple through the center of the frame is a common Code-era romantic comedy device, particularly in intimate settings that demand a superficial division between the sexes.\textsuperscript{387} It also evokes a common workplace practice in late nineteenth-century telegraph offices: Jepsen writes that in smaller offices, “partitions and even cabinets were occasionally built to ensure privacy for the female operators,” while in larger offices, large screens segregated the sexes.\textsuperscript{388} While these measures were ostensibly instituted to protect vulnerable women from the predation of their male co-workers (or as it was likely articulated, to protect vulnerable men from their titillating female co-workers), Jepsen claims that sex-segregated offices also established the conditions for gendered skill segregation.

A tension between seamless technologically mediated communication and inefficient, obstacle-ridden embodied communication pervades the telegraphic, telephonic, and typewriter romances I have examined throughout this dissertation. This tension hinges on a mixed metaphor of modern femininity that imagines women paradoxically clogging the channels of a system fueled by female efficiency and mechanization. This mixture certainly undergirded public debates about female telegraphers in the late nineteenth century, their erotic embodiment of

\textsuperscript{387} Some of the most famous examples include the hanging cloth room divider in \textit{It Happened One Night}, the final door-swinging scene from \textit{The Awful Truth}, and the hotel rooms connected by an elusive key in \textit{Shall We Dance}.

\textsuperscript{388} Jepsen, 27.
electrical promise precariously balanced against inherited anxieties about their physical vulnerability and technical ineptitude. Carolyn Marvin writes that attempts to separate these two mythologies largely failed (despite the use of cabinets, partitions and screens), leaving behind a legacy of fictional female telegraph operators appearing to careen between the two poles, unable to decide whether they wanted financial independence and respect in the workplace or escape from that struggle through marriage. This fictive oscillation also reflected a professional reality faced by female clerical workers from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, as we have seen in previous chapters: the “marriage bar,” which in many firms and offices forced women to retire once they wed.

My understanding of the screwball dame and her zigzag trajectory through the marriage plot carries the symptomatic impact of these mixed messages. In Astaire-Rogers musicals, there is a slippery slope from a “poor little thing who has had her life all mixed up” (The Gay Divorcee) to the “screwy dames” from which police officers must protect innocent men (Top Hat). Both are epithets used to describe characters played by Ginger Rogers who have recently rebuffed the advances of characters played by Fred Astaire, thereby revealing their disorientation in the romantic teleology of the Astaire-Rogers universe. Rogers’ unwillingness to submit as quickly as Astaire to this teleology is a recurring motif in their films together. Because their pairing is preordained from the moment they are cast, this apparent glitch in the system actually functions as its most important narrative charge. Again and again, Astaire is given the onus, not of setting Rogers straight, but of mixing her up so much more that she has to be led laughing to the altar. This process will finally be literalized in Carefree (1938), an explicitly radio-themed

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389 Marvin, 65.

390 Hill, 20.
Astaire-Rogers film, by the ironic slippage between Fred Astaire’s stated assurance that Ginger Rogers is a “dizzy, maladjusted female who can’t make up her mind” and the fact that he has to hypnotize her several times in order to make her fit the part.

With a close reading of Carefree and return to Ship Ahoy on its horizon, the rest of this chapter will explore films made from 1934 to 1938 starring Astaire and Rogers that earned RKO the moniker, “the biggest little major of them all.”391 While a huge amount of critical work has been devoted to Astaire, Rogers, and the coherent multi-film text of Astaire-Rogers musicals,392 few have sought to read these films in terms of the axes I find most evocative: their tripartite industrial inheritance (radio, theater, film); their riffs on gendered sound engineering practices (haunted by the phantom of the operator); the bureaucratic nightmares of circulating misinformation they conjure and diffuse (haunted by the studio stenographer); and most importantly, the dizzy, mixed up female at the center of the maelstrom.

The Motion Picture Production Code: screwball systems breakdown

In order to begin decoding these films, we must first become versed in their coded construction. The production and box office reign of the seven Astaire-Rogers films made from 1934 to 1938 span the first systematic bureaucratization and narrative integration of the Motion Picture Production Code. Between 1933 and 1934, the sheer amount of paperwork produced in negotiations between Hollywood studios and the Code Administration increased exponentially, creating the need for an expanded clerical workforce that could process the daily documents of all the major studios. As Thomas Doherty writes in his book on Breen and the Production Code,

391 See Betty Lasky, RKO: The Biggest Little Major of Them All (Santa Monica: Roundtable Publishers, 1989).
“Under the Breen Office, the chosen medium for censorship was paper, not celluloid.” Implicit in this statement is the problem that Hollywood’s self-regulating system was solving: the narrative incoherence and material damage caused by regional and international censors cutting out scenes they found to contain unacceptable dialogue or imagery. Before Hollywood’s transition to sound, these cuts had been replaced by intertitles in order to fill in narrative gaps for the audience. “Early sound technology,” writes Richard Maltby, “drastically restricted this malleability, since any subsequent editing of a print would destroy synchronization.” Consequently, one of the Code’s earliest functions was to establish a stamp of respectability that addressed the rules of most regional and state censorship boards, thereby keeping splicers away from studio celluloid. The Production Code’s official seal, which prefaced every code-era film, was never actually withheld. Below is the seal given to The Gay Divorcee (Certificate No. 282), a film stalked throughout its production by Code concerns about innuendo, cultural caricatures, and the light treatment of divorce. Like any moviegoer in the 1930s, my understanding of Astaire-Rogers films begins with both the RKO logo (right) and the Production Code seal (left).


In practice, the push-and-pull of negotiations between the PCA and Hollywood studios required the implementation of a paper-based bureaucracy as efficient, streamlined, and feminized as the studio system itself. As Doherty describes it,

> The scene was less like the pressure-cooker bedlam of the newspaper racket in *His Girl Friday* (1941) than the steady rhythms of the insurance company in *Double Indemnity* (1944), where male executives gave dictation and the rat-tat-tat of manual typewriters clicked out fifty words per minute with sufficient force to penetrate two layers of carbon paper.\(^{395}\)

Under the PCA, films were put under ongoing, systematic review at every level of production, from raunchy song lyrics to suggestive dialogue and skimpy costumes. While male Code officers working under Breen learned to ventriloquize his distinctive brash tone and forge his signature, women typed out every expletive, sex scene, whiff of interracial romance, and act of violence ostensibly being removed for their moral protection.

Previous studies on the visual and narrative *codes* established during the systematic integration of the Production Code tend to chart a covert channel of communication between mischievous writers and sophisticated movie-going audiences. In particular, Andrew Sarris, Richard Maltby, Janet Greene, Thomas Doherty and Patricia White have centered a dialectical relationship between producer and public, with the Code invoked as multi-faceted, misunderstood mediator between the two. Doherty describes film spectatorship during this period as “an exercise in *deciphering* and *decoding* allusions, nuances, and ellipses”; Maltby defines the Code-era narrative conventions developed by Hollywood studios as a system of “*encoding* representations of sexuality in such a way that a preexistent knowledge was required

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to gain access to it,” and White retools the traces left by the Code in film narratives as a “semiotic code,” which can reveal dream texts to the discerning viewer.396 (my emphases)

My approach does not disavow this dichotomy or its specialized discourse. Instead it dives into both, seeking a meta-message sent between two female labor forces (the starlet and clerical conduit) central to Hollywood production and ideology. Rather than reading Astaire-Rogers films through the Production Code by falling into the rhetorical slippage between Code and codes or by reimagining it as a “grid,” like Lea Jacobs,397 I imagine the classical Hollywood studio stenographer as a central mediating figure and imaginary recipient of the jumbled messages sent through the taps of female dancers onscreen. Bolstered by Erin Hill’s rigorous archival research in the “sea of paperwork,” phone calls, and telegrams fueled by Hollywood’s clerical feminized workforce, I have dreamed up this feminist myth at the interstices of wishful thinking and real, material conditions, in an echo of the utopian space opened up by a musical number in an otherwise linear narrative film.

It goes something like this: Exhausted by the daily toil of mediating patriarchal discourse, the classical Hollywood stenographer (or typist, or tele-typist) seeks solace in the banter and romantic adventures of women on the screen. But when she goes to see Marconi musicals, the sound of tapping distracts her. It reminds her of her work but conjures no connection with the source or significance of the sound. Instead of language or encoded meaning, she finds only scattered traces of a lost connection: references to radio and rhythmic sequences of taps seem to evoke something very important, but she is no longer equipped to decipher the messages.

396 Doherty, 97; Maltby, 64; Patricia White, “Reading the Code(s),” unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 7.

397 “Because industry self-regulation functioned as a sort of machine for registering and internalizing social conflict, it provides an extraordinarily fruitful means of contextualizing film analysis. In the case studies presented here, I have sought to examine films through the grid of the MPPDA’s concerns.” (Lea Jacobs, The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film 1928-1942 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 25.)
covert channel of communication is established between star and secretary, but the code remains un-cracked. This is not only because of the clerical worker’s automation; her ability to connect is also obstructed by an array of intervening codes, from PCA suppressions, mechanized movements of chorus lines, and type-ridden anxiety of screwball miscommunications to the alienated labor of the female dancing star, whose sounds and signals are taken out of her control.

Since the publication of Andrew Sarris’s seminal essay, “The Sex Comedy without Sex” (1978), film historians have largely accepted the notion of a symptomatic relationship between the institution of the Production Code and the emergence of screwball comedy, although Jane Greene takes issue with the facile critical practice of quoting Sarris without exploring the many complex narrative, rhetorical, and visual strategies used by screwball filmmakers to work winkingly within the strictures of the Code. Sarris’ model is pop Freudian, with screwball comedy starring as superego, produced through a war of wits waged between the ego (the Breen administration) and the Id (Hollywood writers, producers, and directors, eager to offer the masses what they want). In generic terms, if slapstick is the Id out for an antic stroll, then screwball offers an eternally erupting superego, with its repressions poking to the surface until they explode in the last twenty minutes of the film, only to be re-contained through matrimony. Put most simply, in Sarris’ words, sex is replaced by courtship and cartwheels.

Greene responds with a catalog of the gag concepts—denial mechanism, switch image, switch-assessment gag, mutual interference gag, double-meaning gag—deployed at different stages of the Production Code’s implementation. She reconstitutes their architecture through readings of classic screwball comedies and their paper traces in the MPPDA archive.


Negotiations over scenes of dialogue read like battles of wit themselves, with one party trying to evade the sophisticated decoding skills of the other, while both lay claim to a contested category of plausible deniability. Despite the hyper-textual signification Greene attributes to these paper traces, however, she never fully connects the proliferation of gag concepts that play out scenes of thwarted, lost, and encoded communication to the seamless communications system through which scripts, letters, memos, and Production Code seals were circulated during Code-era film production.

Richard Maltby casts Astaire-Rogers musicals as the Production Code’s caricatural “culmination” and singles out Ginger Rogers’ career as a road map for the development of its encoded representations. Lining up her greatest hits in the 1930s, he writes, “from Anytime Annie in 42nd Street (‘She only said no once—and then she couldn’t hear the question’), she progressed, via RKO’s musicals, to Bachelor Mother (1939), where the comedy is constructed around the resolute failure of the central characters to recognize the sexual suggestiveness of the situations they are placed in.”400 In RKO musicals, this refusal to recognize is rendered hysterical by the fact that Rogers has to do it over and over again with the same man in different situations. As if echoing this hysteria, the same arguments over suggestive dialogue, lyrics and plot lines seem to show up again and again in the MPPDA archives for Astaire-Rogers films.

A production anecdote from The Gay Divorcee cited by Martha P. Nochimson offers a telling example of how the characteristic plots of Astaire-Rogers films, which “tended to feature obstacles that had to do with internal confusion, miscommunication, and misperception.”401

400 Maltby, 64.

mirrored the negotiations between the studio and PCA offices. In an account dripping with irony, Nochimson describes

a brouhaha almost as hilarious as the misrecognitions in the movie that lasted several weeks when the PCA became nervous about the lyrics of a song in the movie that was actually called ‘Let’s K-knock K-knees’ but that had somehow been misspelled in the documents they had, or misread, as ‘Pets Knock Knees.’ In a series of perfectly serious memos, the PCA dunned the production team of *The Gay Divorcee* with requests to see the lyrics of ‘Pets Knock Knees,’ which they claimed they couldn’t find in the script pages that had been sent to them.  

Nochimson makes a crucial point after this description, which is that the original misunderstanding clearly arose from a typo. The Freudian typo is a trope I have explored in previous chapters: a ghost in the machine that reveals a female hand and a wandering mind, thereby sparking the amorous attentions of the male reader. It is a message sent through apparent sense, a phatic signal that momentarily imperils the illusion of communication without conduits. But like Greene, Nochimson stops short of the implications: that is, the anxious resonance between screwball comedies about men disoriented by “screwy dames” and a bloated bureaucratic system dependent on the mechanized, mimetic capacities of female typists. Yet Astaire-Rogers films are full of evidence that this resonance was not ironic or incidental, as Nochimson suggests. Not only do they run rampant with misleading telegrams, un-received messages and illegible letters; they also thrive on a recurring motif of men flailing behind women who have caused an internal rupture and then disappeared without a trace.

Fred Astaire begins almost every RKO musical as a self-sustaining system, celebrating his freedom from strings, connections, and the women attached to them.  

The recurring appearance of a single extraordinary, yet ordinary woman (Rogers) cracks this system open,

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402 Ibid., 322.

403 “No strings and no connections; no ties to my affections; I’m fancy free and free for anything fancy…” (lyrics from “Fancy Free,” Astaire’s opening number in *Top Hat*)
revealing a channel that sends him careening across countries and country clubs searching for the body on the other end: extraordinary, because she is a star and the only one for him; ordinary, because she could be any woman.

Invariably, the object of his affection breaks the connection, recalling the breaks that punctuate Morse flirtations in telegraphic romances. In both *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) and *Top Hat* (1935), Fred Astaire insists he has been waiting tirelessly by the telephone for Rogers’ call. In *Swing Time*, Astaire tracks an elusive Rogers down to the dance studio where she works: when asked what kind of instructor he would like, he provides measurements, hair color, and a “cute button nose” as criteria, as if searching for a prototypical chorus girl or typist. The persistent difficulty Astaire has in locating Rogers stems on the one hand from a narrative imperative to keep pushing them apart for most of the film and on the other from the questions that underpin much of her screwiness: whether Rogers is one or many, ordinary or extraordinary, utterly unique or easily replaceable.

In *The Gay Divorcee*, the dizzy dame to blame is Mimi Glossop (Ginger Rogers), although her destined mate, Guy Holden (Fred Astaire), will not know her name until halfway through the film. In a typically slapstick meet-cute, Mimi is forced to accept Guy’s raincoat after he rips the back of her skirt trying to pry a small part of it out of her locked trunk. Infuriated by the indignity of the situation and Guy’s delight in it, Mimi refuses his offer to come call for his coat the next day, instead insisting upon sending it back by mail. She does not tell him her name, number, or address.

The next day, Guy receives a package with his coat inside it, but no note. While Guy languishes in despair, his friend Egbert (also coincidentally Mimi’s lawyer, unbeknownst to Guy) proceeds to analyze the handwriting on the address:
It’s very neat. The Os and the As are very open. That means extravagance. Oh and look at the way she crosses her Ts! That denotes temper. She makes little circles instead of dots. That’s dreadful. That’s an unfailing sign of vanity.

Unmoved by Egbert’s graphological conclusions, Guy declares his determination to find the woman responsible for his distress. Deadpan, Egbert replies, “Well that shouldn’t be difficult. After all, there are only three million women in London.” This line launches the Cole Porter standard, “Needle in a Haystack,” which Guy sings plaintively as he wanders through London on an impossible mission to not only find, but more importantly, distinguish Mimi from the myriad phantom faces of neatly dressed young white women conjured in a series of cascading dissolves.

In this scenario, Mimi’s disappearance is of her own design, but the difficulty of tracing her package back to her through a sea of lookalikes also evokes a common condition of classical Hollywood clerical labor: what Doherty calls the “shared credential.” While Production Code memos were typed up almost exclusively by women, they were always signed by their male superiors, with a few notable secretarial exceptions. This practice produced the archival illusion that sustained an image of men whispering behind closed doors about what immoral content would corrupt impressionable feminine minds, when the reality involved those very

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404 Doherty, 83.

405 Peggy Robertson is one of a handful of secretaries who had a credited role in creative and executive decision-making during the studio era, ultimately becoming a producer. Her signature in the top right hand corner of a studio memo to the PCA from the production of *Marnie* (1964) shows us an exception that proves the rule. Because the memo offers a defense of the rape scene that Hitchcock famously insisted on including in the face of vehement opposition from the PCA, it also stages an ironic upheaval of the Code’s patriarchal protective paradigm.
feminine minds reading and reproducing every line, scene, and image deemed unacceptable for their consumption. Above, these women are shown evanescent, fading in and out of our line of vision.

**Ginger Rogers: working girl star and striking screwball dame**

As the case of Mimi suggests, screwball dames predate the genre to which film historians like Sarris have retroactively attached them. Despite the accepted contemporary practice of characterizing films from the early 1930s like *Twentieth Century* (1934) and *It Happened One Night* (1934) as quintessential screwball comedies, Jane Greene points out the term was not actually used in the US trade and popular press until 1936. “Its earliest appearance in reference to a film,” writes Greene, “is the 1936 Variety review of *My Man Godfrey*, which states, ‘Miss Lombard has played screwball dames before, but none so screwy as this one.’”

Interestingly, despite Sarris’ loose historical treatment of the emergence of screwball as a genre, he attributes its rise, in no uncertain terms, to the “incredible assortment of gifted comedienues” present in Hollywood during the 1930s. In a rhapsodic list that includes Carole Lombard, Irene Dunne, Jean Arthur, Myrna Loy, Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, and Rosalind Russell, Ginger Rogers headlines as “the shop girl who rose to stardom.” This epithet is apt on a number of levels: it could apply to Rogers’ class background (raised in Texas by a single mother who rose from secretary to scenario writer), the working girl roles she often played (chorus girls, shop girls, secretaries, and telephone operators), and the industrious persona RKO

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407 Sarris, 15.

408 Ibid.
sold to the press, often as an explanation for her multiple divorces.\(^{409}\) In 1940, *Time* Magazine described Rogers as “the flesh-and-blood symbol of the All-American working girl,” a description that contrasted sharply with Fred Astaire’s aura of upper class elegance and idleness. In the words of a characteristic profile of Astaire, “New York debutantes liked him, but there were grave doubts concerning his ability to charm shopgirls and stenographers.”\(^{410}\)

Throughout the 1930s, Ginger Rogers became the mediatrix reassuring the public of her co-star’s “ability to charm shopgirls and stenographers,” a role haunted by moving images of dolls, phantom young women, and other copies of Rogers’ body that circulated within her films. These copies literalized the mass reproducibility of Rogers’ star image and its resonance with white, working class female audiences, but also highlighted the disposability of her labor, something Rogers fought fiercely against during her tenure at RKO. In 1936, she went on strike for higher pay and a lighter workload, refusing to start shooting *Swing Time* until her demands were met.\(^{411}\) Not only was Rogers paid much less than Astaire, who had negotiated a new contract with RKO earlier that year;\(^{412}\) she also received half the salary of supporting actors.

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\(^{409}\) Rogers plays a telephone girl in *Rafter Romance* (1933) and *Tom, Dick, and Harry* (1941). She plays a chorus girl in *42nd Street* (1933) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933). She plays a secretary in *Having a Wonderful Time* (1938) and *Kitty Foyle* (1941), for which she won an Oscar. A note on this working girl star’s mother: Lela Owens McMath’s life and multiple careers, which Rogers narrates with passionate admiration in her autobiography (it takes up multiple chapter before Rogers gets to her own birth), remain unrecorded by feminist film historians. In accounts of Astaire-Rogers films, Rogers’ mother is cited as her manager, an assistant costume designer, and a constant presence on the studio lot. But it is only in Rogers’ autobiography that we learn of McMath’s triumphant rise from single mother secretary to award-winning journalist (apparently deeply invested in criminal justice reform) and silent film scenario writer (a glance at IMDB confirms her credentials). During Rogers’ adolescent vaudeville career, her mother wrote all of her jokes. Her descriptions of McMath’s “trusty, big old Underwood typewriter” are particularly tantalizing. (Ginger Rogers, *Ginger: My Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 27.)

\(^{410}\) McFadden, 696.

\(^{411}\) Ibid., 701.

Edward Everett Horton and Victor Moore. RKO eventually buckled in the interest of keeping their highest grossing team together, but sought revenge within the film itself.

Deep into the romantic plot of *Swing Time*, John “Lucky” Garnett (Astaire) finds himself on the outs with Penny Carrol (Rogers), having failed to show up for their dance audition. In order to win back her favor, he hosts a two-man picket line outside her hotel room, pacing back and forth down the hallway, wearing a sign that reads, “Penny Carrol *unfair to* John Garnett.” While he and his butler (Moore) march, Penny’s female friend shouts out reassurances—“Keep up the good work boys, the public is with you”—that explicitly figure the two men as workers on strike and Penny as a stubborn employer, unwilling to “arbitrate.” Co-written by Allan Scott, a long-time Astaire-Rogers screenwriter (*Roberta, Top Hat, and Follow the Fleet*), this scene clearly constructs a joke at Rogers’ expense. While ironically reversing her position from striker to employer, a move that masks the unequal working conditions she had struck against, the image of Astaire and Moore awaiting her decision still stages the reality of Rogers holding up production. Thus, the scene establishes Rogers’ male costars as beleaguered victims of her
“greed” and “ego,” two vices Rogers writes RKO attributed to her when she first made her demands.413

Such insults were commonly levied against unladylike organizers and strikers, starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, as female telegraphers, typists, and tap dancers began to join unions. Susan Glenn has persuasively argued that the “gold digger” emerged as a popular trope in the 1910s to sew over the perceived contradiction between the chorus girl’s status as mass-marketeted product and her increasing insistence on her proletarian power.414 Tellingly, the act of mapping the “gold digger” onto the chorus girl eroticized and depoliticized the economic threat she posed.415

Lea Jacobs argues that screwball posed problems for the PCA “insofar as the plots revolved around misinterpretations, around the difficulty of knowing the truth about the heroine’s putatively guilty past.”416 The “difficulty of knowing the truth” is also encoded into the screwy dame’s infinitely digressive path toward matrimony. Like the marriage bar in 1930s offices, matrimony hovers on the horizon of Astaire-Rogers films. But with each successive installment (consumed by audiences like episodes in a film serial), Rogers remains in circulation: from The Gay Divorcee (1934) to Carefree (1938), we follow her from divorce to marriage to ambivalent engagement and back again. There are dangers to leaving a commodity in circulation

413 McFadden, 701.

414 Glenn, 203.

415 As I continue to catalog the many pejorative traits attributed to Rogers, as a character (“extravagance,” “temper,” “vanity,” “screwy dame,” “dizzy, maladjusted female”) and a worker (“greed” and “ego”), it is worth noting the number of synonyms for “whore” that were banned by the Production Code. From 1939 to 1956, out of the 39 words and phrases prohibited by the PCA, 14 were coded female. They include: “alley cat (applied to a woman); bat (applied to a woman); broad (applied to a woman) [...] chippie; cocotte [...] fanny [...] hot (applied to a woman) […] Madam (relating to prostitution) […] slut (applied to a woman); SOB; son-of-a-tart; tart […] traveling salesman and farmer’s daughter jokes; whore.” Insults directed towards men, by contrast, number four (and two of these—“fairy” and “nancy”—deploy femininity as a weapon). (Motion Picture Production Code - Addition of 1934 to 1939)

416 Lea Jacobs, Wages of Sin, 113.
for too long. One danger is that the commodity will decide it has proletarian power and attempt to strike, unionize, or make any number of egotistical demands. Another danger is that it will depreciate in value over time: the specter of this threat hangs over Rogers in the midst of potentially compromising misinterpretations, as Jacobs writes, but also through the cardboard, paper and wax doppelgangers that accompany her onscreen. In the next section, I will focus on the antinomies that rise to the surface of Astaire-Rogers films—between worker and commodity, body and machine, image and sound—through Ginger Rogers’ symptomatically split and copied body. These copies not only highlight the technological reproducibility and mass appeal of Rogers’ image, as I noted earlier; they also point snidely to the machine-woman created for the screen by male choreographers and sound engineers. While Fred Astaire stands in for these creative occupations by leading dance numbers and playing with machines, Rogers advertises Astaire’s virtuosity and RKO’s technological prowess by producing, in Kaja Silverman’s words, “sound that escapes her own understanding, testifying only to the artistry of a superior force.”

Not only does she tap out jumbled messages that a typist in the audience can no longer decipher, having forgotten a formerly feminized code; the taps themselves have been removed and replaced. Instead of transmitting and interpreting encrypted messages, Rogers becomes an instrument of mechanical mediation.

**Pygmalion and Galatea: dubbing, dolls and doppelgängers**

In this section, I will extend Kaja Silverman’s claims about how sexist voice-dubbing practices manifest symptomatically in classical Hollywood films to the systematic dubbing of Ginger Rogers’ taps in all her films with Fred Astaire. Taps by no means carry the

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phenomenological weight of voices, but they are the signs of modern human agency in RKO’s economy of sound-producing machines and virtuosic play. From *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) to *Carefree* (1938), I will argue that the effects of tap dubbing take such a toll on Rogers’ coherence as an audio-visual performer that they ultimately lead to a kind of sonic explosion, releasing her slapstick sonic Id to wreak cacophony on the world around her.

This process begins, as I have already shown, with the finger dolls and phantom women haunting Guy’s search for Mimi in *The Gay Divorcee*. It does not end, however, once he finds her. In fact, the reappearance of Mimi’s body seems to necessitate a design for its replacement. Guy, channeling Fred Astaire’s famous technological resourcefulness, immediately proves up to the task. Eager to escape the hotel room where Rodolfo Tonetti, hapless gigolo turned chaperone, is watching his every movement, Guy designs a makeshift cinematic machine out of a gramophone, a lamp, and a pair of paper dolls, which projects the shadow of a couple dancing to music on the opposite wall (below). Having thus choreographed, engineered, and projected the illusion of Mimi and himself dancing chastely in their room, he absconds with the real woman and leaves Tonetti to play the part of naïve spectator in Plato’s cave.

![Image](image.jpg)

Tonetti’s assumption that the shadows on the wall represent Guy and Mimi reenacts filmgoers’ assumptions about the sounds seemingly produced by Astaire and Rogers in their musicals.
Guy’s turn as director-choreographer-sound engineer exposes the one-sided creative process behind this illusion. The blurred shadow cast by his puppets (above right)—discernibly human but not necessarily male and female—evokes the real un-screenable shadow behind every dance number: two men dancing cheek to cheek in a secluded rehearsal room. While RKO’s publicity department emphasized the blood and sweat that went into the musical numbers designed by Hermes Pan and Fred Astaire, as well as the physical resemblance between the two men, Pan’s sexuality was a non-subject outside of Hollywood. Here, it appears as surface-level subtext, through the image of Rogers’ body as paper screen for Pan’s dancing and through the presence of a wannabe gigolo designed to comically colonize and thereby diffuse any threatening undercurrents of homosexuality.418

In Top Hat and Shall We Dance, as in The Gay Divorcee, the systematic duplication of Ginger Rogers’ body reveals a significant fissure at the heart of the Astaire-Rogers narrative: these films refuse to match their male and female lead at the most basic numerical level, despite the rule of two that, according to Rick Altman, governs the Hollywood musical. Astaire-Rogers films, in particular, present themselves as fundamentally dualistic, built around the biting back-and-forth banter and duet dance numbers of one couple, led by mirrored sidekicks through a series of miscommunications to their matrimonial horizon. In this conceit, they appear to adhere to the dialectical structure of telegraphic romances, with their dance numbers most explicitly standing in for Morse flirtation. But the tension between Astaire’s singularity and Rogers’

418 While Tonetti did pose a problem to the PCA, it was because of concerns over The Gay Divorcee’s distribution in Italy. Breen worried that Italian audiences would be offended by the film’s parodic representation of its one Italian character as effeminate, ineffective, and absurd. Like many secondary characters in screwball comedies, Tonetti also functions as a caricatural foil for the leads, rendering their personalities and chemistry more plausible by contrast: tuned to Cabaret pitch, Rodolfo’s Euro-trash bravado and effete, laughable efforts at seducing Mimi serve to shore up the aptly named Guy’s potentially ambiguous masculinity. Both Adam Knee and David Lugowski have noted the pervasive use of queer foils to shore up Astaire’s masculinity. (Adam Knee, "Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: Modernizing Class," Glamour in a Golden Age (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2010), 206.)
multiplicity bursts symptomatically to the surface of their films together. In practice, the slippage from dancing star to chorus line that stalks Rogers in her films with Astaire echoes the fate of the girl operator in the popular imagination, fallen from the role of lone Morse novelistic heroine into the collective mechanization of the tele-typists’ pool.

Consider, for instance, the two shots of silhouettes below, each occupying the utopian space of a musical number. The first shot, as I have argued, reveals a queer male body missing from the screen but central to the production process of Astaire-Rogers films. The second, taken from Astaire’s infamous blackface homage to Bill Robinson in Swing Time (1936), reveals the obtrusive absence of black men’s dancing bodies from Astaire-Rogers films, despite their centrality to the history of jazz, swing, tap, and the Hollywood musical itself. In both numbers, Astaire plays the magician who can conjure and co-opt the shadows of these suppressed bodies to his own ends.

Now compare the images below from the titular musical numbers of Top Hat (1935) and Shall We Dance (1937), recalling that between the two productions both Astaire and Rogers demanded adjustments to their contracts with RKO. In “Top Hat, White Tie and Tails,” Jerry Travers (Astaire, below left) finds himself surrounded by an army of lookalikes. In response, he lifts his cane and shoots down all pretenders to his image, deploying his taps as machine gunfire.
Faced with an almost identical situation in “Shall We Dance” (a stage full of chorus girls wearing masks of Rogers’ face), Linda Keene (Rogers, right) does not eliminate her competitors. Instead, she joins them onstage, putting on a mask and fading into the surrounding line-up.

These screen sirens, sutured together from leggy chorus girls and close-up, cut-up glamor shots of Ginger Rogers, infinitely reiterate the primacy of Rogers’ identity as a reproduced and circulated image over her occupation as a performer. At the level of plot, the dance number is intended to demonstrate Petrov’s (Astaire’s) love for Linda (after she refuses to dance with him, he decides he will do so, whether or not she participates in person). The scene’s underlying code, however, tapped out by legs belonging to an army of other women, offers a cautionary tale to the solo female tap dancer who demands a higher salary. She is, as the film reminds us, easily replaceable, with the right men, the right tools, and a chorus line on hand.419

419 Rogers complains in her autobiography that throughout her career, reporters have misrepresented her as a former chorus girl, conflating her early film roles with her professional past. (Rogers, 133) In fact, Rogers made her Broadway debut with Top Speed in 1929 as a credited cast member, while Hermes Pan, also a member of the cast, was a chorus boy. She also complains about the long, painful experience of having a plaster mold made from her face: “Every time the scene with the girls and the masks comes on the screen,” she writes, “I turn away because I just can’t bear to look at that horrible mask and its dozen copies.” (Rogers, 212)
Underlying Petrov’s dubious message of love, one could argue, is an attempt to recreate his first romantic encounter with Linda, which was also his first encounter with her technologically mediated and multiplied image, in a flipbook.

This gadget-based origin story casts Rogers, not as a cinematic dancer, like Astaire (inspired by riveting machines and cement mixers on the studio lot), but as a stack of static images waiting to be animated by a man into moving picture magic.

According to Rogers, of all the directors she worked with at RKO, Mark Sandrich most consistently represented her as an object awaiting animation (the phrase Rogers uses in her autobiography is “clothes hanger”). This metaphor is literalized in Shall We Dance, the fourth of five Astaire-Rogers films Sandrich would direct, by the appearance of a mannequin that looks exactly like Linda. In the shot below, we see Linda’s agent placing the mannequin (“left over from a show,” like Tallulah’s knowledge of Morse Code) into Petrov’s bed in order to set up a shot that establishes photographic “proof” the two stars are married. This scene gently mocks the constraints of the Production Code by demonstrating that the only way a man and a woman can be filmed together in a single bed is if one of them is made of plastic.

420 Rogers, 179.
For my purposes, the most striking part of the scene is Edward Everett Horton’s reaction to the confusing sensory spectacle of the mannequin, which he initially mistakes for Linda herself. Horton’s double takes pervade *The Gay Divorcee, Top Hat,* and *Shall We Dance,* in which he plays successive incarnations of a clumsy companion, conveying the staggered comprehension of a spectator first fooled and then shocked by the thinly veiled miscommunications promulgated by the Production Code.

As Petrov’s hapless employer in *Shall We Dance,* he finds an unparalleled ontological challenge in the copies of Ginger Rogers that mingle with the original. Informed he is attempting to converse with a dummy, Horton yells, “I know she’s a dummy. I said so all along: a tap-dancing dummy!” The multiple meanings imbedded “unconsciously” in this exclamation—which collapses stupidity, muteness, and a ventriloquist’s doll—definitively explode the illusion of Rogers as a coherent audio-visual performer. Like the news-reading public imagined by Linda’s agent when he poses her mannequin for a shot, Horton struggles to distinguish the star, the woman, and the lithe, young android constructed in the cut of sound and image.

Among Astaire-Rogers films, I would argue *Shall We Dance* offers a particularly splintered, self-reflexive representation of Rogers because it is so late in the series. By 1937,
RKO’s box office success with its premiere dancing team was beginning to wane. The burden of this lag seems to have fallen on Rogers’ body, charged with reproducing novelty from recycled plot lines. In *Shall We Dance*, because both Astaire and Rogers play musical stars, the results of this process register even more self-reflexively than usual. By the end of the film, as Linda is transferred from the care of her male manager to her future husband, spectators are left to ponder a series of unresolved questions about her body, sonic agency, and exchange value.

**Carefree: In my dream I was a radio dial**

These are the questions that animate *Carefree* (1938), a film about the pains and pleasures of radio and psychoanalysis. Dedicated to Fred Astaire, the screenplay relegates tap to the realm of the unconscious, perhaps drawing inspiration from Hermes Pan’s oft-quoted characterization of Astaire as a dancer who “hypnotizes his audience as he dances into thinking as he thinks.” In the film, Astaire plays Tony Flagg, a successful psychiatrist and recovered dancer who has been taught through psychoanalysis to reject the gay life he thought he wanted and repress all foot-tapping, knee-kicking impulses. These impulses rise back to the surface when Tony meets Amanda Cooper (Rogers), a radio singer sent to Tony to be cured of her ambivalence about her upcoming marriage. Through a series of miscommunications and

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421 Adam Knee also represents *Shall We Dance* as a tipping point for Astaire and Rogers and adds that, “an awareness of a surfeit of repetitions of formula becomes evident at this stage at an extra-textual level as well, in that Rogers now chose to increase the frequency of her appearances in non-Astaire vehicles (she made three other features before her next with Astaire) and even Astaire appeared in a first starring role without Rogers (in *A Damsel in Distress*).” (Knee, 217)


423 “We all try to escape reality. We all want to be something or someone entirely different. Why, when I was a kid I wanted to be a cop, then a soldier, then a fireman, then a dancer. You remember how stagestruck I was. Then Dr. Von Helm psychoanalyzed me and showed me the reason. What I thought I wanted was a gay life. Psychoanalysis showed me I was wrong.” (Allan Scott and Ernest Pagano, *Screenplay of Carefree, dedicated with admiration, respect and affection to Fred Astaire* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), 7.)
missteps, Tony’s efforts to access Amanda’s “subconscious mind” go wonderfully awry and her Id is unleashed at an office, at a country club, in the streets, and on the air.

In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman argues that psychoanalysis has provided classic Hollywood cinema with another strategy for cutting women off from their voices, which she calls “the talking cure.” Silverman observes that an “astonishing” number of women’s films from the 1940s feature a male doctor who induces a female patient “to articulate desires she never knew she had, and […] then interprets them for her.”424 Within this paradigm, Silverman fixes on the question of agency and seems particularly repulsed by the idea of a woman’s interiority being *injected* into her, “through an action on the body […] in order to that a cluster of memories can then be projected both onto the doctor’s diagnostic ‘screen’ and onto our cinematic screen.”425

One of the interesting things about *Carefree* (1938) is that it follows this model closely, up to a point. Throughout the course of Amanda’s treatment, Tony not only interprets her dreams; he also gives her multiple anesthetics to release her inhibitions and thereby access her “subconscious mind.” Crucially, however, neither method finds a simple medium in Amanda’s body: instead of offering Tony unfiltered testimony for him to interpret on her behalf, Amanda systematically intervenes in her own analysis, thereby creating the conditions for a real release of her (sonic) inhibitions.

Amanda’s first visit to Tony’s office launches this process, in typical Astaire-Rogers fashion, with a sensory screw-up. Encouraged by her fiancé, Steve (Ralph Bellamy), to seek help from his good friend Tony, Amanda is all smiles upon first meeting him. Charmed in turn, Tony leaves Amanda in his office and asks her to wait for him. In his absence, a record next to his desk

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424 Silverman, 65.

425 Ibid., 59.
turns on spontaneously and begins to play the Dictaphone message he recorded while awaiting her arrival.

Initially confused about the source of the sound (tinny and reverberating, so spectators can tell it is a diegetic recording), then amused at Tony snide comments about his female patients—“what she needs is a good spanking”—Amanda suddenly loses her sense of humor upon hearing herself characterized as “another one of those dizzy, maladjusted females who can’t make up their minds.” Provoked by this (wire) tap into Tony’s “subconscious mind,” she changes tune upon his return, stealing his chair, sneering at his hypotheses, and in general challenging the idea there is anything wrong with her he could possibly fix. There is great satisfaction in watching Tony’s perplexed reaction at having the tables turned on him within a deeply entrenched Hollywood paradigm. The first session ends with his sputtering exclamation, “I wish you would understand that I am only trying to help you find yourself!” to which Amanda retorts, “Well, if I ever get lost, I’ll call on you!”

Amanda’s coldness towards Tony proves fleeting, however, as doctor and patient spend more time together. Soon Amanda begins to dream of dancing with Tony, which she correctly interprets (according to the narrative codes that govern their universe) as a sign of her love for him. Realizing that in order to maintain his interest, she must provide satisfying symptoms of
maladjustment, Amanda concocts a dream to tell so fantastical it will keep her on his couch for years to come. Fantastical, that is, in its frills: the random objects that litter Amanda’s narration, selected around Tony’s office, distract from its meaningful core, a nightmarish account of enraged crowds, mechanized performance, and gendered sound regimes that bleeds prophetically into her subsequent adventures. This meaningful core begins with Amanda’s description of herself as a radio dial:

It seemed that all night long there were thousands of people turning me off… and turning me on… and turning me off… and turning me on… and half the time I was singing and the other half I was advertising. And then there were voices… thousands of voices… and then they started to chase me, to persecute me.

Tony is, of course, very excited about this dream, which he uses to diagnose Amanda with a bevy of neuroses, each more absurdly named than the next. In fact, this kind of technologically conjured symptomatic testimony had a precedent, but not one Tony Flagg would think of because it did not get turned into anything more specific than something between neurasthenia and hysteria. As Carolyn Marvin shows in *When Old Technologies Were New*, electrical technologies like the telegraph, the radio, and the telephone had induced hysteria from the 1870s onwards. Amanda tells Tony she has been having this nightmare of her life as a radio dial for 11 years, a number that ties the original site of trauma to 1927, the symbolic year of Hollywood’s transition to sound, when women were first detached from their voices and taps.

Calling his colleague in, Tony explains that the next step of treatment involves administering an anesthetic, so they can “talk” to Amanda’s subconscious mind and uncover the desires she represses in her daily life. Here we see Silverman’s reading coming into play: Tony implies Amanda’s interiority can only be reached if extracted “through an action on the body.”

The two doctors lead Amanda into an adjacent room, where her body is laid out on a table and

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426 Silverman, 59.
her mouth covered by what looks like a nitrous oxide mask. After administering the anesthetic, the doctors wait for evidence that her lungs have filled with gas, observing a balloon as it bloats and contracts. These successive images—of the two doctors huddled over Amanda’s prone body and the close-up on her externalized breathing—recall Rogers’ dollification in previous films (particularly the mannequin from *Shall We Dance*), but here seem to stage an aural reattachment procedure instead of exposing a cut. To me, the images also bear a striking resemblance to the android construction from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), particularly in light of the chase scene that follows, in which Amanda channels the unfettered, entropic spirit of the “False Maria.”

When Amanda wakes up, she is mischievous, scornful of authority, and intent on making as much noise as possible, as if finally returning to the sounds of her own body after an interminable exile. Finally unleashed, the mediatrix revolts against her audio-visual alienation! The scene that follows shows Amanda leaving Tony’s office in a giddy trance, rushed out by her fiancé to get to the radio station on time. Because of her premature extraction, Amanda follows Tony’s last directive—“I want you to do whatever you want to do and say whatever you want to say”—in public rather than in the privacy of his office, to the consternation of various middle-

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427 The golden phonograph lungs of the android from *L’Eve Future*, the inspiration for *Metropolis*, strike me as similar to the white, externalized lung shown here, as if they have been stored in the lab and reattached.
aged men in positions of authority. The three major pranks that syncopate her carefree spree involve wresting control of sound production from these men.

First, she steals a metal clicker from the elevator operator in Tony’s building and uses it as a tap-dubbing device, dancing out a little jig while creating the sound of a rhythmic tap sequence behind her head. Thus, through an improvised cinematic construction that recalls Astaire’s paper doll waltz machine, Amanda displays her knowledge of re-recorded sound, subverting the system that typically incorporates her as a visual medium. Note the design on her dress during this scene, which seems to double as a heart struck by arrows and a visual rhyme with the RKO telegraph tower.

Next, Amanda spots two workers carrying a huge sheet of glass and begins to search for a weapon heavy enough to shatter it (one gropes bashfully toward a glass ceiling metaphor here…). Finally, appropriating a policeman’s baton, she flings it across the street and jumps for joy as the cacophony of broken glass produces cries of protest and incites a crowd to chase her down the street. Her dream of aural pursuit fulfilled (“and then they started to chase me”), Amanda finally reaches the radio station, where she proceeds to sabotage her own broadcast by refusing to say her lines, instead mocking the product she has been hired to advertise. The radio
show’s portly, gray-haired sponsors grumble in perplexed distress, separated from their rogue representative by a pane of glass that inevitably recalls the one Amanda has just smashed.

Ginger Rogers’s slapstick sound rebellion in Carefree stages the comic unraveling of a tightly wound intersection of codes formed through the emergence of sound film. Within the Astaire-Rogers universe, this unraveling is legible through Rogers’ eight-film-tenure as a replaceable doll, dubbed and alienated from her own artistry. With World War II on the horizon, we can also read it as an early sign of the return of a latent tapping workforce: women with a knowledge of code. Female coders, as we have seen, reappeared fleetingly during world wars, when a stop-gap workforce for commercial telegraphy with a knowledge of ciphers was more urgently needed than the continued repression of a phantom form of feminized labor. While female Morse operators were employed as spies during the Civil War and World War I, films made after 1920 tended to represent female spies in what were by that time perceived as more traditionally gendered professions: typist, telephone operator, dancer, singer and seamstress. One example of this trend is Dark Journey (1938), a British romantic thriller set during World War I, starring Vivien Leigh as an undercover double agent who sews encrypted messages into the seams of haute couture women’s clothing. Once deciphered by male operatives, her messages are sent in Morse code between male telegraphers from Paris to London. England was in fact already recruiting women in code-breaking work by 1938. The United States Navy and army began their recruitment of female cryptanalysts in 1941, primarily targeting women’s colleges around the country. Recruits were asked if they liked crossword puzzles, told to tell others they “emptied trash cans and sharpened pencils” and presented as the first of their kind. “Whether women can

428 Jepsen, 81.
take it over successfully… remains to be proved.” By 1945, more than 2/3 of both British and US code-breaking workforces were women.

At the height of the transnational global recruitment of women as coders and code-breakers, Morse code returned to the silver screen through music, resounding with renewed urgency. In 1941, the V for Victory campaign introduced British and European audiences to the distinctive Morse code rhythm for V, “the same rhythm as the opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, which became the identification signal of the BBC European service” and a vernacular sign of resistance in narrative films. Like the impromptu Marseillaise medley in Casablanca (1942), percussive performances of the V-rhythm conveyed an impassioned anti-fascist position: in The Day Will Dawn, a British war drama released two months before Ship Ahoy, “Norwegians defy a compulsory German entertainment by […] tapping it on tapletops and stamping it with their feet until the band takes it up in a musical rendition.”

In the United States, by 1942, telegrams, encrypted messages, and the sound of the telegraph had become ubiquitous cinematic motifs and overloaded agents of semiotic play: they registered in the American popular imagination as signifiers of militarization, espionage, resistance, and as harbingers of death. In William Saroyan’s The Human Comedy (1943), the first telegram delivered by Homer, the messenger boy hero, carries news of a soldier’s death to his mother. “For all people who never receive telegrams the appearance of a messenger at the

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429 Mundy, 17.


431 Ibid., 960.
front door is full of terrible implications. Homer knew that Mrs. Rosa Sandoval was shocked to see him.”

The nationalist imperative of Hollywood film production launched by the bombing of Pearl Harbor—“to maintain the continued flow of wholesome entertainment as an essential contribution to military and civilian moral and national spirit”—also launched a new cycle of musical comedies and a public debate about the messages the Motion Picture Production Code had been repressing and encrypting throughout the past decade. In reference to the Production Code’s decline after WWII, Thomas Doherty writes, “Hollywood cinema had always been packed with subterranean meaning and laced with overt moralizing, but WWII thrust the cultural power of the medium straight to the surface” (my emphasis). Like many of the film scholars cited in this chapter, Doherty slips easily from one meaning of code (a system of principles and regulations) into another (a language, mode of encryption, or subtext), mingling its figurative applications with a mobile semiotic lens. I have likewise benefited from the richly blurred boundaries of these categories for my own blend of psychoanalytic and Marxist readings of the miscommunications, encoded gender dynamics, and unconscious anxieties about feminine mediation that animate Astaire-Rogers films. But the literally encoded tap-dancing that punctuates *Ship Ahoy* (1942), a film that joyously marked the beginning of the end of the Code with a spate of brazen jokes about censorship, suggests that insights into these mingled meanings can also be found in wartime films themselves.

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433 Doherty, 154.

434 Ibid., 153.
To pad its narrative skeleton, *Ship Ahoy* relies heavily on musical comedy conventions standardized by Astaire-Rogers films in the 1930s, from ship deck meet-cutes to quirky sidekicks, screwball dames, innuendo-laced flirtation, and the deployment of dance as the language of love. But with an ironically graceless incarnation of Astaire at its helm, *Ship Ahoy* also mocks the carefree model it has inherited and explicitly relocates its priorities from the Riviera to the front lines of the war. Through Tallulah’s transformation from duped, naïve instrument of transport to a master of the code who deciphers, exposes, and produces new messages, the film replaces vulgar radio drama with international intrigue, channels the legacy of tap-dubbed automata and mechanized secretaries into the triumph of an autonomous tap-telegrapher, and offers viewers a reflection of their own *bildung* towards savvy sophistication. If these trajectories are much more clearly marked than the double-talk and double takes of the 1930s, it is because in 1942, the message is no longer a euphemistic cocktail of marriage, love, and sex transmitted through the steps of the Continental. Instead, it is written out in capital letters: “AMERICA NEEDS YOUR MONEY BUY DEFENSE BONDS AND STAMPS EVERY DAY.” Its credits streaming over a parting image of the cast clad in army uniforms, *Ship Ahoy* produces an echo of the tripartite union of radio, theater, and film that led to the formation of RKO, uniting radio (Skelton), dance (Powell) and industry (MGM) to galvanize an army of men on the front lines and women in the workforce. Read through this lens, Tallulah’s coded taps still contain top secrets of submerged media, hidden bodies and stolen steps, but they also herald the return of telegraphy and imminent transformation of a generation of secretaries and stenographers into code-breakers. The radio puns and telegram gags that pervade the film turn the search for Code and codes into a self-reflexive game that exposes the tension between a highly codified generic inheritance and a code-ridden contemporary political context. Tallulah’s
role in winning the war against the Japanese through her Broadway-trained coded taps is rendered particularly uncanny by the recently resurfaced legacy of Genevieve Grotjan, a cryptanalyst whose discovery of the key to breaking the Japanese diplomatic code, “Purple,” in September 1940 made it possible for the allies to decrypt Japanese diplomatic messages throughout the war.

I will conclude by suggesting a final reading of Tallulah’s taps, through the lens of Eleanor Powell’s exceptionally authorial star persona. Constance Valis Hill notes that despite far outnumbering their male counterparts, female tap dancers have largely gone unnamed—more often credited (in an echo of clerical conventions) as ‘chorus girl,’ ‘partner to,’ and ‘Queen of.’ A contemporary of Astaire and Rogers, Powell was an exception that proved the rule. Throughout the 1930s, she was one of MGM’s leading musical stars, appearing in several of their “Broadway Melody” films, the 1930s counterpart to WB’s Gold Diggers series and RKO’s Astaire-Rogers cycle. She tended to be cast as a dancer in a dancing couple and often appeared as a solo performer at the front of a choral crowd. While chorus girls were being swallowed whole into typewriters and Ginger Rogers was being hypnotized and collapsed into crowds of identical blond chorus girls, Powell became a sought-after better half, a performer who could be counted on to do most of the creative work in a heterosexual dance couple scenario, no matter the male partner. Famously, Astaire himself noted of Powell, with whom he co-starred in Broadway Melody of 1936 and Broadway Melody of 1940, “Her tap work was individual. She ‘put ‘em down’ like a man, no ricky-ricky-sissy stuff with Ellie. She really knocked out a tap dance in a class by herself.” (241) As we see from the framegrab below of one of their dances

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435 Vallis Hill, 4.
The final element that cemented Powell’s authorship of her own screen image, and perhaps the respect she earned from Fred Astaire, was the control she exercised over the design, dubbing, and editing of her own tap sequences. As dance critic Brian Siebert notes, helpfully comparing her to Astaire,

Powell wasn’t your average starlet. For one thing, she did her own choreography. Like Astaire, she educated herself about the camera and learned to sit in the editing room when her numbers were being cut. She also dubbed her own taps. (Marjorie Lane dubbed much of her singing.) To ensure the right tempos, Powell first did her routine while the orchestra was recording, muffling her taps on a mattress. During filming, she danced to that recording and only later did she lay down the shoe music, watching her filmed image and synchronizing with the score through headphones as she tapped on a maple board in shoes more practical than those she wore onscreen.436

What I love about this thorough description of Powell’s participation in so many levels of the production process is that its totalizing impact is blunted by the presence of Marjorie Lane, the invisible voice still shoring up the illusion of Powell’s authenticity as an audio-visual performer.
Marjorie shows us the lie of the idea of a singular, “individual,” or de-alienated form of authorship in a system like Hollywood. There are many invisible, unscreenable bodies hidden behind arduously constructed white female bodies in 1930s musicals, as we have seen from the examples of Hermes Pan, the queer male shadow behind Roger’s taps, and Bill Robinson, the black male shadow behind Fred Astaire’s blackface “homage.” Like Astaire in this sense as well, Powell built her screen career by co-opting the unseen shadows of black performers. At MGM, according to Seibert, she “hired a stable of black tap dancers, including [Cholly Atkins], to come to her studio and supply her with ideas and steps. She would take what she thought she could use.”

I include this detail to make the point that the studio system was designed to make sure that an exception to its logic—Powell, as a white female tap auteur in control of the means of her production—did not disrupt Hollywood’s systematic exploitation of marginal, invisible, and uncredited workers. On the contrary, her image became another screen disguising racist codes.

But the advent of World War II did effect an interesting change in Powell’s casting that I believe gives us the final piece to understand why the heroine of Ship Ahoy seems to exhibit so much more agency, knowledge, and semiotic skill than her hero. As Mary Ann Doane has shown, the so-called “woman’s film” was born in the midst of the gender reversals and dispersals caused by World War II. “Due to the war and the enlistment of large numbers of young men in the armed forces, film producers assumed that cinema audiences would be predominantly female, […] which resulted in a situation wherein female stars and films addressed to women became more central to the industry.”

This was a liminal period of social and industrial flux, in other words (much like the serial queen era, which lasted the span of World War I), characterized

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437 Ibid., 254.

by an increased number of women in the workforce and an increased industry-wide production of woman-driven film narratives intended to foster relationships between female stars and their female fans. It also ended, like the serial queen era, with the systematic displacement of female workers from their wartime positions and the re-entrenchment of pre-war divisions of gendered labor. “There is an intensity and an aberrant quality” in 1940s women’s films, writes Doane, “which is linked to the ideological upheaval signaled by a redefinition of sexual roles and the reorganization of the family during the war years. The very speed of moving women into and out of the work force (the ‘Rosie the Riveter’ phenomenon) creates ideological imperatives which are quite explicit in the films.”

In Ship Ahoy, Tallulah’s construction as an accidental coder and spy perfectly happy to marry or return to dancing, her first calling, after a brief bout of spontaneous heroism, suggests Hollywood musicals were smoothing out the ideological upheaval of the Rosie the Riveter effect as soon as it began. But Eleanor Powell’s virtuosity as a dancer, creatively adapting her tap skills to the new encoded needs of her industry, also demonstratively compensates for a lack of wartime male dancing talent.

Throughout the 1930s, RKO had risen to the challenge of selling the slightly anemic, British- and queer-seeming Fred Astaire as an attractive leading man to shop-girls and stenographers through his partnership with Ginger Rogers, America’s favorite working girl star. Once the United States entered the war, MGM faced a new challenge while preparing a slate of musical comedies for a presumed primarily female audience: how to cast and narratively frame male stars in a new moral economy of patriotic enlistment? As Jane Greene demonstrated in her 2019 SCMS talk on Hollywood masculinity during World War II, one of the main solutions found for this quandary was the development of a new cinematic category of neurotic

439 Ibid.
masculinity right on the (still save-able) cusp of cowardice, so that male characters could have a narratively acceptable reason for not being at war, but be prepared to enlist by the end of the film. With many leading male stars in combat, this dovetailed neatly with the appearance of a new crop of comics from radio, like Bob Hope and Red Skelton. It is through this contextualized lens that we can finally understand the heroic role Tallulah plays in the film, why RKO’s radio branding is popping up in an MGM film, and why Merton can’t dance, but that fact doesn’t pose a threat to the heterosexual musical order.

Significantly, Tallulah’s first cluster of coded taps in *Ship Ahoy* is prefigured by the cacophony of Merton’s typists. In an early scene in the film, Merton is shown dictating three stories simultaneously to his three typists. As he moves from one story to another, the typists become so absorbed in his narration that their taps seem to drum them into his stories. His questions about their *discursive* labor—“Where are you?”—elicit *diegetic* responses like “I’m in the arms of a zombie” and “I’m locked in the cabinet with Wonder Lad.” These typists are part muse, medium, and paradigmatic fan, slipping easily into mass-market fantasies to identify with the female characters. Their collective unconscious murmur (left) creates an ironic backdrop to Tallulah’s solo decoding demonstration (right), explicitly differentiating the embodied, affective mediation of the typist from the intellectual, discursive agency of the Morse telegrapher.
The juxtaposition of these two figures also reminds us, however, that this lone female coder, never identified as such and neatly tied up in wedlock by the end of the film, is trapped in an inescapable feedback loop with more automated, unskilled forms of gendered mediating labor. This, as we have seen from the case of the female Morse operator—obsolesced, wiped from cultural memory, and replaced by armies of typists—is the feedback loop of modern feminized information labor, which expands in times of war, or in the early phases of an industry, only to contract once the war ends, or once the industry innovates, automates, and stabilizes. The pattern continues with the history of women’s role in computing. “In the 1940s, writes Mar Hicks,” computer operation and programming was viewed as women’s work—but by the 1960s, as computing gained prominence and influence, men displaced the thousands of women who had been pioneers in a feminized field of endeavor, and the field acquired a distinctly masculine image.” What I have attempted to demonstrate here, by revealing the repressed cultural memories of coding women that haunt classical Hollywood tap-dancing musicals, is that the apparently inane gimmick of a woman tap-dancing in Morse code offers a key to mapping the repetitive patterns of expansion and contraction that have, over the past century, turned female clerical workers into a flexible standing reserve—a latent, largely flattened out, but periodically revived “natural” resource—for coding and code-breaking labor.

Coda: On Ciphers, Illusions, and Signs of Solidarity

Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to increase my chances of cracking cultural
codes by multiplying the code-breakers in my archive. “Codes are broken not by solitary
individuals,” as Liza Mundy, the author of Code Girls, reminds us,

but by groups of people trading pieces of things they have learned and noticed and collected, little
glittering bits of numbers and other useful items they have stored up in their heads like magpies,
things they remember while looking over one another’s shoulders, pointing out patterns that turn
out to be the key that unlocks the code. One of the best code-breaking assets is a good memory,
and the only thing better than one person with a good memory is a lot of people with good
memories.441

In a clerical twist on the Marxian notion that industrial capitalism has ensured its own downfall
by training the proletariat to work together as a machine, this passage hints at the subversive
interpretive power that can be harnessed by interlinked feminine mediating minds.

In the 1940s, Mundy’s code girls pointed out patterns from within a military-industrial
project that would discard them once the war was won. As we saw in the case of the Remington
Rand-sponsored Shocking Miss Pilgrim (1948), Hollywood films helped communications
monopolies restore pre-war gendered divisions of clerical labor. Amidst waves of office
automation in the 1950s, they also mystified female office workers’ planned obsolescence by
conflating it with the threat of spinsterhood. In Desk Set (1957), a Hepburn-Tracy romantic
comedy sponsored by IBM, marriage to the efficiency expert becomes the solution to imminent
replacement by a computer. Romantic band-aids like this one unconsciously replayed long-
suppressed systems of feminization: spinster only came to mean obsolete woman once women at
spinning wheels were replaced by men at power looms.442

441 Mundy, Code Girls, 22.
442 See Deborah Valenze, “The Quarrel with Women’s Work: Spinning and the Displacement of Female Labor,” in
But with the rise of the new left, civil rights and anti-colonial movements, feminist Marxism, techno-science, and film theory, the cinematic trace of the modern mediatrix began to change. By the 1970s and 80s, a spate of independent feminist filmmakers had created a new generation of self-aware clerical characters who worked together to resist patriarchal linguistic, labor, and narrative systems. With access to the codes of information capitalism, alienated speech-weavers and hypnotized secretaries became trickster figures, strikers, and decipherers of mystified techno-cultural matrilineages. In Laura Mulvey’s *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Britain, 1977), as we saw in Chapter 2, a switchboard operator evades the fetishistic flesh-focus of the camera and organizes her co-workers over the wire to win a daycare center at work. In Agnès Varda’s *Sans Toit Ni Loi* (Vagabond, France, 1985), an ex-secretary takes to the open road, in search of independence from the men who dictate her life.

In Sally Potter’s *The Gold Diggers* (Britain, 1983), a black female computer clerk asks her white male manager for “more information about these figures I’m typing … to know what’s underneath it.” After being brushed off, she finds solidarity with a white woman called “the Tap Dancer” who observes, “it’s as if my feet don’t belong to me anymore and I forget… I forget my steps.” And in Julie Dash’s *Illusions* (USA, 1983), set on a Hollywood studio lot in 1942, two black female film workers—a secretary and a voice actress—reflect on how the film industry has distorted and effaced their history, turning them into illusions. Even Hollywood had a new mold.
for secretaries during this period: launched from a typewriter beat Dolly Parton wrote to the taps of her acrylic nails, *9 to 5* (USA, 1980) pits three beleaguered female office workers against their tyrannical boss. Taken together, these films all seem to optimistically show the late modern mediatrix beginning to study her alienated legacy, form alliances with other women workers, and revolt against century-long palimpsests of feminization.

For my final reading of the dissertation, I will focus on Dash’s *Illusions*, because it picks up many of the themes from Chapter 4, most notably ties between cryptanalysis and cultural code-breaking, Hollywood’s wartime transformations, unscreenable bodies dubbed into musical soundtracks, and secretaries who work the system invisibly under cover of whiteness. “The first segment of her planned series about the lives of black women in the United States from the turn of the century to the year 2000,” *Illusions* was celebrated for its “filmic narrative wherein the black female protagonist subversively claims” the terrain of Hollywood cinema.443 Anticipating the methodology of Cheryl Dunye’s *Watermelon Woman* (1996), it revised Hollywood history to make a place for black female film workers. The protagonist, Mignon, played by Lonette McKee, is “more than a secretary now,” as she tells her mother on the phone, but she is also an exemplary studio secretary, in that she does the multifaceted mediating work of a producer—casting, reshoots, managing alcoholic directors—without getting creative credit or an executive salary. This familiarly feminized flexibility is made possible by the mass departure of male film workers to the war, which the film evokes through an acoustic tangle of Morse code, machine gunfire, and swing music, juxtaposed with stock WWII footage of white and black soldiers. But Mignon’s extra-secretarial agency is also made possible by her coworkers’ perception that she is

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white. This premise establishes a limit to the industrial reserve logic of feminized clerical labor, reminding us that the mediatrix’s intermittent expansions are contingent on her “genteel” femininity (Venus Green’s coded word for operator whiteness).444

Mignon’s self-encryption turns the film into a play of encoded social relations. This is literalized from its opening Morse echoes to our first sight of Mignon, reading a telegram about Native American coders. Dash sets the scene up like a film noir, creating a sound bridge with an authoritative male voiceover (a soon-to-be revealed propaganda officer dictating to a stenographer) that carries us from an aerial shot of the studio lot to the glass door of an office. Dash uses the familiarity of the establishing shot sequence to immediately rupture the viewer’s vision of classical Hollywood history. After glossing over the totemic figure of the director (never seen in person throughout the film), we cut into the heart of things, the place where the real work gets done: the office, where invisible film workers—censors, secretaries, telephone operators, voice actors, and janitors—can be seen.

The first worker we see is a black janitor, whose hand slides across the door with a washcloth, casually exploding its visual rhyme with whitewashed Hollywood conventions.445 Next, we cut to a telephone operator fielding calls at the switchboard. Following the flow of the propaganda

444 It is worth noting that Lonette McKee became the first African-American woman to play Julie in Show Boat on Broadway the same year she starred in this film.

445 Apparently, this was Charles Burnett’s hand! (Phyllis Rauch Klotman (ed.), Screenplays of the African American Experience (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 193.)
officer’s dictation, Dash dollies us around the office, shielding Mignon from view while she comes through the door. We see the telegram before we see her face. Suggestively mingled with the shadow of the departing janitor, still visible through the glass, she first appears as an elegant suit and pair of white gloves, daintily taking the telegram handed to her by the telephone operator (an echo of the messengerette hand-off in *Ready, Willing, and Able*). Mignon takes her gloves off, but leaves her femme fatale-style veil on while reading the telegram:

AMERICAN INDIANS OUTWIT ENEMY - speaking over the air in their Navahoe language Indians in the U.S. Armed Forces can deliver and receive messages in a code the enemy is unable to break! - US Office of War Information.

Inspired, Mignon pitches the story as a movie to her boss, but is rebuffed (“Who cares about a few Indians talking mumbo jumbo?”). This is the first of many scenes where white characters make casually racist statements in Mignon’s presence, because, as bell hooks notes, they are “unable to ‘see’ that race informs their looking relations.”

Perhaps following James Baldwin’s famous characterization of Hollywood-made blackness as a white “cipher,” Dash uses the telegram to cast coding as a means of communicating covertly with other non-white people while inscribed within mystifying white supremacist systems.

This trope continues with the introduction of the second protagonist, Esther Jeeter, a black voice actress hired to re-record a musical number that has fallen out of sync. In the sound booth, the feminine gears and male engineers of the classical Hollywood musical are exposed. Clearly riffing on *Singin’ in the Rain*, Dash uses re-recording to expose the artificial construction

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446 hooks, ibid.

447 “One wonders, it is true, if Negroes are really going to become the ciphers this movie makes them out to be; but, since they have until now survived public images even more appalling, one is encouraged to hope, for their sake and the sake of the Republic, that they will continue to prove themselves incorrigible. Besides, life does not produce ciphers like these: when people have become this empty they are not ciphers any longer, but monsters. The creation of such ciphers proves, however, that Americans are far from empty; they are, on the contrary, very deeply disturbed.” (James Baldwin, “Carmen Jones: The Dark is Light Enough,” *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 53-54).
of the white female star. Esther is the alienated laborer charged with sewing herself into the film by syncing her words to the spectacle on the screen. Meanwhile, Mignon stays behind the screen, hidden in plain sight. We watch with double vision while she bristles at the sound engineers’ nostalgic reminiscences about the studio before the war: “I liked the colored tap dancers best…but they got drafted too.” It is in the hidden heart of this triangulation of unseeing, incognito, and technologically mediated gazes that Dash makes her most pointed intervention in Hollywood history, becoming an invisible mediatrix herself.

While the scene begins, as we see above, with the musical’s Frankenstein act in full view, it soon leaves the frame behind to focus on Esther’s face, upturned and smiling guilelessly while she sings. This zoom-in on an imagined movie feels like a restoration act of sorts. We seem to see Esther as Mignon sees her—joyous, perfectly lit, and centered on the screen. But this restoration is also more complex than it appears. Esther’s voice is not, in fact, her own, but the voice of Ella Fitzgerald, who was cast in her only classical Hollywood film role in 1942.448

448 The film was Ride 'Em Cowboy (dir. Arthur Lubin, 1942).
With this iconic substitution in mind, we can re-read the camera’s loving inspection of Esther’s mouth as a camp double entendre. It mimics 1930s musical conventions for visualizing synchronization (see Ginger Roger’s frontal gaze and open mouth below), while covertly creating a new kind of audio-visual android, a radically rewired black Hollywood starlet. Instead of trying to recover a natural harmony between voice and body (this is the real illusion), Dash leans into the cuts, which can never be fully sewn over. Mignon knows this too. As she screams at the propaganda officer in the last scene: “Your scissors and your papers have eliminated my participation in the history of this country.” But Dash can also make invisible cuts, as she demonstrates here. From behind the scenes, through the double consciousness of a veiled mediatrix, she can engineer her own doll and disrupt the coherent flow of film history.

The second half of Illusions is spent on Esther and Mignon’s relationship. With practiced discretion, Mignon gets Esther water, tea, and a bonus for her extra work, while the secretaries look on in bemusement. As bell hooks notes,

Though she is passing to gain access to the machinery of cultural production represented by film, Mignon continually asserts her ties to black community. The bond between her and the young black woman singer Esther Jeeter is affirmed by caring gestures of affirmation, often expressed by eye-to-eye contact, the direct unmediated gaze of recognition. […] It is this process of mirrored recognition that enables both black women to define their reality, apart from the reality
imposed upon them by structures of domination. The shared gaze of the two women reinforces their solidarity.\textsuperscript{449}

The two eye machine cuts across the ciphers that keep Mignon’s white co-workers oblivious, allowing her—for a moment—to let her guard down (at one point, the singer reassures a nervous Mignon: “Don’t worry, they can’t tell like we can”). Though Ester leaves the office and Mignon stays, Dash creates a cut that carries their conversation out onto the studio lot, leaving it unclear if they are actually meeting later that day or brought together in Mignon’s mind. She is after all, a producer of Hollywood musicals. It would make sense for her to adopt the utopian, liminal space of the musical number as a model for her daydreams. As the camera follows the two women through a maze of empty soundstages, they talk about going to the movies, embodying the collective screen dreams of a nation, and having agency over how that happens. When Esther asks Mignon if she ever wanted to be an actress, she says:

I went with a friend to a party. We overheard a producer talking, blasting a movie critic. He said history is not what actually happened, even if it’s written in a book. The real history, the history that most people will remember and believe in, is what they see on the silver screen. I never wanted to be an actress. I thought I could do something here. I wanted to be where history is made, where it is rewritten on film. It’s like, people will always remember and believe that the actor Don Ameche invented the telephone or that Claudette Colbert looked like Cleopatra. People remember films about themselves, what they want, what they love, what they fear most. Here we’re nothing but props in their stories. Musical props or dancing props or comic relief. I came into this world of moving shadows and I made this work for me… Now I’ve become an illusion, just like the stories made here. I mean they think of me one way; yet, I’m another way. They see me but they can’t recognize me.

Just before Mignon begins this monologue, Dash cuts away from her face, transforming the anecdote into an ambivalent elegy to a montage of old Hollywood film production footage. Her reference to Don Ameche may spark a memory of Mabel Hubbard, one of the electric mediatrixes with whom we began our journey. Here, true to form, she hides in the heart of film history, behind her machine and male inventor, waiting until the next time she is called to the

\textsuperscript{449} hooks, 128-130.
surface of cinematic text to shape what people “remember and believe.” While Mignon speaks of moving shadows and musical props, the swing soundtrack returns, bridging the gaps between the cuts of history and illusions of cinema.

Dash leaves us with a final radically re-encrypted Hollywood intertext. In the last shot of the two women together, they are framed by soundstage doors, with their arms crossed over their chests, in an uncanny reproduction of John Wayne’s iconic exit from *The Searchers* (1956).

This is a new cut, the film seems to say. Instead of an old white man defeated by his racism (specifically a racism structured around protecting white femininity) and frozen like a monument into cultural memory—we now have a dialogue between two hidden black woman film workers, ready to decipher and dismantle the cultural memories that codify them without including them. Looking at the two images side by side also suggestively brings Esther and Mignon face to face with a confused and ashamed John Wayne. In a reversal of the typewriter’s absorption of black chorus girl legs in “Too Marvelous for Words,” Dash creates a magical portal that resembles a splice between two pieces of celluloid, designed to reveal the black women cut out of Hollywood film history and production.

Standing at the intersection of multiple media channels, suspended in heterotopia and trapped in a stop-gap: the portal is the place where the mediatrix does her work. As I noted at the start of this dissertation, the modern mediatrix is a uniquely flexible cultural character. She was
designed to encrypt the ebbs and flows of capital and has done so on a global scale across a range of media for over a century, from telegraphic romance novels to girl operator melodramas, Hollywood musicals, and experimental feminist films. Her hyper-visible rise in the cultural imagination exposes the intertwined feminized logics and legacies of modern communication, office work, and film. But she has also been an unruly medium, intermittent editor, and entropic source of noise. Through Dash’s authorial revision, she becomes a subversive cinematic re-coder of her own history, though she fears she may have become an illusion in the process. From the telegraph to the computer, the modern mediatrix is the all-too-human techno-tie that binds film to media studies. By deciphering her mass media traces, we can turn screens and veils into critical links for a cultural genealogy of modern feminized media and mediating labor.
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