KILLIAN O'DWYER[1]

(NON) LIFE ON THE LINE

Crisis Calls with Animals

ABSTRACT

Animals are telephones, Derrida muses, and sometimes the other way around. This comment, while abstract, speaks to a history of animal life that has haunted the telephone since its inception, with questions of life and nonlife hovering in the balance. Whether it is the use of pigs' bladders for the first Chinese telephones, the moth-eaten fur of Thomas Watson's stuffed family cat, or the frogs' legs that Luigi Galvani exposed to electricity, the telephone has consistently mediated the divide between the categories of who and what—'who' referring to those considered to be above the law or protected by it, and 'what' to those who remain outside the law and by extension, the grasp of justice. Instead of avoiding this history of animal suffering, Derrida picks up the telephone to call upon the "question of the animal" as a conversation that can wait no longer. If, as Derrida tells us, animals are telephones and vice versa, then they demand the same attentive urgency given to the insistent clamour of an incoming call, where the consistent lack of certainty regarding who or what is on the other end always prevails. This article is about how the means, medium and materiality of the telephone is indebted to animals, how telecommunication has mediated a tenuous 'conference call' between technoscience, spectrality and animal vulnerability since its introduction, and how listening-as-reading becomes a way of touching upon those who normally remain unheard in times of crisis.

KEY WORDS: animals, Derrida, electricity, hauntology, speech, telephony, voice

[1] Killian O'Dwyer is a Graduate Tutor and PhD researcher at Goldsmiths, University of London, as well as the Programme Coordinator for the MA in Historical and Sustainable Architecture at New York University.

INTRODUCTION

Touching through the telephone, this is a call beyond the human voice.
It demands listening with other ears – ears that are courageous
and never closed. This is long-distance calling,
calling across species, texts and worlds.
—Sarah Jackson[2]

But this shared situation puts us on the wireless line of the telephone,
even before being *"on line,"* as they say nowadays, and it gives us to think
what a line is and what it is not when it describes a certain line
between those who, as is the case, are devoted to the line of writing . . .
—Jacques Derrida[3]

During the coronavirus pandemic, I worked for a medical helpline in the United Kingdom, triaging patients over the telephone for a wide array of health-related issues. Faced with mounting uncertainty about how to sustain my doctoral studies in visual cultures and my life in London, I turned to the health sector with a moralistic desire to protect life in times of crisis. During each shift, I would respond to a wide range of urgent or emergency situations, which flooded the telephone line in what can only be articulated as a never-ending stream of pain, suffering, loss and trauma. Chest pain, anaphylaxis, obstetric complications, or potential cardiac arrest—all worked their way seamlessly through the telephone line to my dutifully waiting ear.

Triaging an emergency call in particular was an experience like no other. Within seconds, I was transported sonorously along telephonic lines of communication into a living room, kitchen, car park or public building, where a crisis or catastrophic event was already in progress. Whether it was trying to prevent someone from jumping from the top of a building or coaching another to start chest compressions on a loved one, the situation always required a supple mind and a firm yet supportive voice. With no eyes on scene, I would create mental images of the room, people, nearby objects, and unforeseen obstacles, wrestling with each and every potential eventuality that could delay the emergency services arriving on scene in time. Sightlessly feeling my way along telephonic lines of communication, I would virtually insert myself into the call, dictating all necessary actions required on scene. In moments like these, my voice represented a node in the chain of survival, and whatever travelled back through the receiver would become a virtual approximation of human vitals, pulse rates, heart beats, and breath. The tele-presence of another who always remained unseen.

2 Sarah Jackson, "Derrida on the Line," *Derrida Today* 10, no. 2 (2017): 157.

3 Jacques Derrida, *H. C. for Life, That Is to Say...* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 18.

Thinking back to times of crisis, where I would clutch the receiver to my ear, trying to discern through the crackling sound of interference whether an unconscious someone on the other end was even breathing, I would become hyper-aware of *hearing what I was not hearing*, namely, the absence of any human voice, speech, or breathing pattern. On the telephone, listening became a method for reading audible signs of life. During emergency calls, life was made rare, precarious, and vulnerable, always under threat from some unforeseen outcome or inevitable conclusion. Yet this phone line always seemed to be very much "alive." It would click, hiss, wail, and screech; noises that could be mistaken for a passing moan, a feeble word, breath, or animal sound. In these moments between life and death, where life was literally on the line, I would question who or what was being fed back to me through the telephone. Who or what, human or animal, life or non-life? Was I listening to the tail-end of a death rattle or perhaps another, more cryptic cry for help?

Questions of life and non-life, significantly in relation to animals, have haunted the telephone since its inception. Whether it is the use of pigs' bladders as tympanums for the first Chinese telephones,[4] the moth-eaten fur of Thomas Watson's stuffed family cat as an exciter for the "frictional electric machine,"[5] or the frogs' legs that Luigi Galvani exposed to electricity to prove that animal tissue contained an imperceptible nervous fluid of concentrated electrical energy,[6] the telephone has consistently mediated the divide between *who* is considered living and *what* is cast as non-living throughout history. "Animals," Derrida writes in *H. C. for Life*, "are telephones and sometimes the other way around, and they multiply, in the *prolifauny* of all their animal, human and divine metamorphoses."[7] Rather than avoiding this history of animal suffering endured in the name of progress, Derrida picks up the telephone to call upon the 'question of the animal' as a conversation that can wait no longer. If, as Derrida tells us, animals are telephones and vice versa, then they demand the same attentive urgency given to the insistent clamour of an incoming call, where the consistent lack of certainty regarding who or what is on the other end prevails.

Bringing animals and the telephone together in this way might risk, to borrow from Lynn Turner in "Telefoam," an association being drawn with the concept of 'animal-machine' proposed by Descartes in *A Discourse on the Method*, where animals are figured as engines of repetition and reaction, cut off from the capacity to respond as such.[8] However, Derrida's suggestion that telephony is in fact a "poetico-technical invention" where animals multiply and a 'prolifauny' (a pun on 'proliferate' and 'fauna') of spectral creatures that gnaw away at the margins of thought, supplants any

4 Avital Ronnell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 296.

5 Thomas Watson, *Exploring Life: The Autobiography of Thomas A. Watson* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1926), 5.

6 Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 148.

7 Derrida, *H. C. for Life,* 100-102 (emphasis added).

8 Lynn Turner, "Telefoam: Species on the Shores of Cixous and Derrida," *European Journal of English Studies* 18, no. 2 (2014): 160.

possible notion of purity assigned to the human voice or the guarantee of an 'authentic' response.[9] As Naomi Waltham-Smith writes with reference to Derrida in *Shattering Biopolitics,* the telephone is always comprised of multiple voices continually displacing and replacing each other, "animal, inanimate, ghost, voice *for* voice" sounds that chase after one another in an endless chain of echoes.[10] The poetico-technical aspects of the telephone participate, according to Nicolas Royle, in a deconstructive transformation of the "question of the subject," where the metaphysical certitudes of being, knowing, truth, space and time are placed under erasure.[11]

This article is about how the means, medium and materiality of the telephone are indebted to animals, how telecommunication has mediated a tenuous 'conference call' between technoscience, spectrality and animal vulnerability since its introduction, and how listening-as-reading becomes a way of including those who normally remain unheard in times of crisis. Dialling in science, poetry, memory and ghosts, the telephone engages not only the ear of the listening subject but also the limits of the philosophical mind, where, as Turner suggests, the proximate relationship forged between the human voice and the telephone is undermined by the non-species-specific nature of communication itself.[12]

AHOY-HOY

Thinking back now of the solemnity of answering calls in times of crisis, it strikes me that a so-called 'positive outcome' for the caller was somehow contingent on the manifestation of human speech. My disembodied voice, travelling through the telephone, appeared to be a vital mechanism in the preservation of life, albeit the continuation of that which is decidedly human. For scholars of Derrida, the suggestion that life itself is somehow sustained by the power of speech poses immediate and immense discomfort. Any dutiful reader of *Of Grammatology,* in which Derrida diagnoses all of Western reason as an epistemic structure which privileges human presence *a priori*, would be quick to point out that telecommunication itself (*tēle*; "far off") exemplifies an idealised economy of being-present through a reliance on spoken word alone.[13]

9 Naomi Waltham-Smith, "*Homofaunie*: Non-human Tonalities of Listening in Derrida and Cixous," *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 11 (Winter 2021): 73.

10 Naomi Waltham-Smith, *Shattering Biopolitics: Militant Listening and the Sound of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 144.

11 Nicholas Royle, "Derrida's Language (Bin Laden on the Telephone)," *Mosaic: an Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 179.

12 Ronell, *The Telephone Book,* 2; Turner, "Telefoam," 162.

13 Derrida himself would clearly challenge this 'technology of information' (telecommunication) in an interview on language (recorded in *Points...* as taking place over the telephone) where he cautions that, similar to the way in which a letter may never arrive at its destination, a phone call cannot guarantee that the call to being will be received or indeed answered by a presupposed 'self' present within itself. Jacques Derrida, "Language: (*Le Monde* on the Telephone)" in *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 179-80.

In *Of Grammatology,* Derrida is deeply suspicious of the overwhelming investment in this *call to being* by Western philosophers who often equate the phenomenon of speech with the immediacy of presence, as that which is deemed closest to the self and is thus presumed to be innately 'natural,' 'originary' and 'pure.'[14] For Heidegger, for whom Derrida retains a certain intellectual curiosity, speech manifests as the significant structuring of worldly intelligibility, "to which being-with belongs, and which maintains itself in a particular way of heedful being-with-one-another."[15] Hearing-oneself-speak, according to Derrida, performs an auto-affection of the subject, whereby a presupposed ideal (such as "Being") is produced without recourse to an object or signifier external to its constitution.[16] As Derrida explains in *Speech and Phenomena:*

> To speak to someone is doubtless to hear oneself speak, to be heard by oneself; but at the same time, if one is heard by another, to speak is to make him *repeat immediately* in himself the hearing-oneself-speak in the very form in which I effectuate it.[17]

Thus, 'pure auto-affection' is the experience of producing oneself spontaneously from within, where the call to being is proclaimed through the 'natural' manifestation of speech.[18] This auto-affective internal call to being is indeed communicable with others, Heidegger confirms in *Being and Time*, but, he argues, its transmission is contingent on the fact that the receiver is already 'attuned-with' what he calls Dasein,[19] the relation of being to a being, or, the 'being-there' where entities present themselves for who or what they are in the world.[20] In this sense, communication is positioned as an entirely human enterprise, in which human beings alone, according to Heidegger, can express the existential possibilities of 'attunement'—the ability to disclose one's own existence in the world with one another via discourse.[21]

Heidegger's caveat regarding communication in *Being and Time* is the continuation of a troubling hierarchal distinction between humans and animals that has pervaded philosophy since the writings of Aristotle. In *Politics*, Aristotle credits humans alone as sole recipients of "Nature's gift"—the capacity for speech—which *she* uses to distinguish *man* from other critters as a "political animal" par excellence.[22]

14 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the translator's preface to *Of Grammatology* by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), xix.

15 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 156.

16 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 20.

17 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison and Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 80.

18 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 98.

19 Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 157.

20 Heidegger, 11.

21 Heidegger, 157.

22 Aristotle, "Book One," in *Politics,* trans. Benjamin Jowett (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 5.

Whereas the "mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain," Aristotle claims, "the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and . . . likewise the just and unjust."[23] In other words, while animals may make noise or even produce a voice, they are deemed to be incapable of rendering these sounds into articulate words.[24] As Akira Mizuta Lippit explains in *Electric Animal,* Aristotle's thesis that animals can merely cry not only supplements the classical opposition between word and sound, it also suggests that the capacity for speech alone carries the greatest implications for life; namely, the foundation of justice and, as a result, any protection promised by the rule of the law.[25]

"Human speech," Lippit continues, is the opposite of the animal cry, since it "exceeds its function as communication and actually performs, with each utterance, the subject" (auto-affection).[26] Thus, framing animals as deprived of speech and therefore the ability to auto-affect suggests that they are in fact incapable of reflection, imagination, and foresight. This characterisation acts as a decree which denies non-speaking animals the capacity for reason and consciousness, and ensures *the* animal's exclusion from the realm of law and order, which is very much in the tradition of philosophers such as Descartes, Rousseau and Heidegger.[27] For Derrida, this distinction is vital when responding to the question of who or what; who referring to those considered to be above the law or protected by it, and what to those who remain outside the law and by extension, the grasp of justice.[28]

The animal cry, therefore, is positioned throughout philosophy as an ambiguous discriminator used to distinguish life from nonlife, word from sound, and who from what. This question of who or what in particular, one that the cry of the animal is forced to uphold, sentences nonhuman animals to what Derrida calls a "non-criminal putting to death."[29] As Cary Wolfe explains in *Before the Law,* the animal, denied of speech, symbolically secures the category of the human and the system of law itself, but only at its own expense (and subsequent demise).[30] For a legal system to make a judgement, it must be able to make a distinction between who and what, and, as a result, sacrifice that which does not align with the category of the human subject. In this sense, the animal that is incapable of proclaiming *who* it 'is' is therefore excluded from a system that penalises the unlawful premediated killing of a subject.

23 Aristotle, "Book One," 5.

24 Lynn Turner, "Voice," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies,* ed. Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 520.

25 Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 31.

26 Lippit, *Electric Animal,* 14.

27 Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 7.

28 Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign Volume 1,* trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 60.

29 Jacques Derrida, "Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject" in *Points…Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 278.

30 Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 8-9.

A 'non-criminal putting to death,' which animals are forced to experience according to Derrida, is not seen as murder. Instead, it is a *dénégation* (a denial or contradiction) that upholds the distinction between *what* is killable and *who* is murderable.[31] The immanence and power of law, therefore, as the system that regulates what is just and unjust, is entirely contingent on this difference between who or what, and *who* is thus able to submit oneself as *present* before the laws of life.

How then does something like the telephone perform what Nicholas Royle calls a deconstructive transformation of the question of the subject, as mentioned earlier? If the telephone transmits speech from one mouth to another ear, how is it removed from what Derrida calls auto-affection? Does the telephone not succeed in symbolically putting the animal to death by continuing this privatization of speech? Not only does the telephone transmit speech, it also effects a certain reduction of exteriority, according to Eric Prenowitz, a diminution of "physical space and the visible, material body" that is enough to annul the distance between subjects.[32] Auto-affection and the telephone, then, ring together as two operations of an eerie mechanical repetition, Prenowitz warns, of "the same solipsistic auto-affective routine," with "each (inter)locutor imprisoned within his or her own phenomenological reduction of the world."[33]

Yet, the telephone does more than this, with lightspeed precision. As Prenowitz brilliantly highlights, the telephone performs a sort of telephonic deconstruction of presence by detaching the voice from a body and displacing what would otherwise be considered an inaccessible inner state or quality unto another, more enigmatic inner network: the telephone switchboard.[34] According to its purported function, the telephone annuls distance, but only by undermining the very concept of distance, or in other words, the ability to distinguish between a who or a what.[35] By offering a voice that is both at a distance and inside one's own head, Sarah Jackson argues, the telephone crosses wires between thinking and writing, inside and outside, self and other, life and nonlife.[36] The telephonic voice therefore acts as a source of interference, a force that is without a body, one that menaces the structural effects of language and, perhaps, any possible interpretation given to the animal cry.[37] Thus, the telephone undermines any and all distinctions between presence and absence, where the voice appears as some sort of shadow or ghost which, according to Prenowitz, imparts two *species of speech*: the spectral ventriloquism or copycat call of human speech, and the inventive *prolifauny* of life itself.[38] Telephony, one could argue, is inherently animal.

31 Derrida, "Eating Well," 283.
32 Eric Prenowitz, "Crossing Lines: Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous on the Phone," *Discourse* 30, no 1/2 (Winter and Spring, 2008): 128.
33 Prenowitz, 128.
34 Prenowitz, 137-38.
35 Prenowitz, 147.
36 Jackson, "Derrida on the Line," 143.
37 Jackson, 143.
38 Prenowitz, "Crossing Lines," 125.

ELLO, ELLO, ELLO

Returning to the experience of answering calls in times of crisis, it would seem that my disembodied voice was not, as suggested earlier, a vital node implicated in the preservation of life, but rather a complication of this difference between presence and absence, or life and nonlife. As Jackson argues, there is something about the insistent ringing, the clamouring silence, the uncanny choreography of listening and speaking, that disrupts our metaphysical assumptions of proximity and distance, being and non-being.[39] The multiple voices of the telephone—disembodied, ventriloquised, and spectral—undermine that self-assuredness of human exceptionalism that is frequently portrayed as the power to harness and instrumentalise technology in a modern age.[40] Telephony itself is a profound complexity of what counts as life, power, and communication, in which the question of who or what is calling exposes the human subject to a vulnerable finitude shared with other animals[41]—listening carefully, with care, to voices soon displaced and replaced, animated and spectralized—the same care given to every possible opportunity of hearing a response, but of which there is no guarantee.

Telephone triage is all about listening, about "reading with your ears,"[42] about extending and reaching out to perform acts of care through the actions of another. In every instance, call handlers listen to possible descriptions of events unfolding completely out of sight. It is impossible to say whether what is allegedly happening is a true or fair reflection of the event itself. All information given by the caller is only ever an approximation of a potentiality that could or could not be unfolding (if it has not already happened as a past, or even a future, event). While call handlers may ask probing questions to determine the accuracy of the situation, the baseline principle is that one must believe the caller's description; the information provided must be acted upon as if it were the real thing. Therefore, in this sense, CPR has the potential to be delivered on someone who is breathing perfectly fine on their own. Or it might be delivered incorrectly, or on someone who is long dead. We cannot even be sure that there really 'is' someone on the other end who requires chest compressions. Every call, to follow a similar vein in Derrida's writing on the gift or the postal, has the potential to be a hoax. In the same way that a letter may never arrive at its destination, Derrida tells us, a phone call cannot guarantee that it will be received or indeed answered by a presupposed 'self' present within itself—and neither can we guarantee that every call is truthful or genuine.[43]

However, call handlers follow protocol and deliver life-saving interventions until the emergency services arrive, whether it is required or not. And while call handlers do not have eyes on scene, they are performing, in a way, agency in a

39 Jackson, "Derrida on the Line," 143.
40 Turner, "Telefoam," 160.
41 Turner, 168.
42 Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, ii.
43 Derrida, "Language," 179-80.

different space and time. Delivering telephonic first aid, whether it is guiding someone on how to staunch a wound or perform chest compressions, is an attempt by a call handler to inhabit an unseeable event and to touch upon life, or indeed nonlife, with ears located elsewhere. The voice that gives instructions remotely from a long distance is heard by a body elsewhere and, in the case of an emergency such as cardiac arrest, attempts to reanimate life over the telephone. An event such as this is undeniably paradoxical, when approached with the same philosophical treatment of the power of speech as earlier.

With the telephone, one is never sure about what is happening, in the same way that the voice it eventually projects blurs the lines between proximity and distance, presence and absence, silence and speaking.[44] This voice, which Derrida describes in *Acts of Literature* as a "telephonic interiority," is a multiplication of interior voices at work *within* the voice from the first phone call to the simplest of vocalisations.[45] The telephonic event, to rehash Waltham-Smith in *Shattering Biopolitics,* is equally comprised of multiple events that continually displace and replace each other as spectral occurrences, with that which counts as life not being clear-cut anymore. Therefore, the eventfulness of each telephone call is always a mediation between different states of undecidability, in the same way that every telephonic voice is always a multiplicity of animal, ghostly and machine voices.

To say that telephone triage is an attempt to touch upon life or nonlife, or to reanimate life itself, is to conjure forth a parallel history of technological mediation with the dead that has existed since the nineteenth century.[46] As Jeremy Sconce writes in *Haunted Media,* cultural mythologies about the living qualities of televisual and telephonic technologies have proliferated since the dawn of telegraphy in the 1840s, where the electronic circuitry of the telegraphic machine made possible the instantaneous exchange of messages through the complete absence of bodies themselves.[47] The sense of disembodied communion accompanying this new telegraphic device sparked the rise of a new religious and political movement in the United States within five years of its invention. Modern spiritualism, conceived as a spiritual science informed by the doctrines of mesmerism, electrophysiology and reformist Christianity, promoted the idea that the dead were continually in contact with the living, and that communion with the spirit world was possible through guided séance.[48] Within years of spiritualism's appearance, the United States witnessed the advent of both the electromagnetic and spiritual telegraphs as media that could presumably overcome the seemingly unassailable void of death itself.[49] Therefore, the dawn of the information age which began prior to the Second

44 Jackson, "Derrida on the Line," 145.

45 Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," in *Acts of Literature,* ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 171-72.

46 Shukin, *Animal Capital*, 149.

47 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 20.

48 Sconce, *Haunted Media,* 12.

49 Sconce, 12.

Industrial Revolution was marked by its historic interrelationship with spirituality, where inanimate media and human mediums began to overlap in their purported gift to commune with spirits from the other side.[50]

For Derrida, the notion that televisual or aural technologies act as proverbial thresholds for the departed is indeed reflective of how media itself is neither living nor dead. In *Specters of Marx,* Derrida notes that media technology, which determines the spacing of public space (the news, telecommunications, techno-tele-discursivity, and techno-tele-iconicity), is resolutely spectral.[51] Through media devices, images and words are neither present nor absent; owing to their illusory liveliness, they do not belong to the discourse on the Being of beings (Heidegger's 'attunement'), or even to that on the essence of life and death.[52] Instead, as Derrida tells us in *Spectres of Marx*, they are spectres that are part of a 'hauntology' that disturbs the categories of ontology and theology, as atemporal images and voices which are "out of joint" with the progression of linear time.[53] Media, then, haunts us as a "battle of phantoms," as a series of ghosts that return to speak with those who receive them in the present.[54] The telephone does not escape this so-called battle. During an interview between French actress Pascale Ogier and Jacques Derrida, staged in Ken McMullen's film *Ghost Dance*, Derrida's explanation of how cinema is spectral is interrupted by the sound of a ringing telephone. Before picking up the handset and speaking with whatever voice is on the line Derrida proclaims, "Now, the telephone is a ghost."[55] Derrida's comment, coupled with his previous statement that animals are telephones and vice versa, gestures to a curious history, a three-way call between the telephone, spectrality and animality, in which the bodies of animals constitute a key component to the earliest iteration of telephone devices and the energy that sustains their material function.

As Nicole Shukin carefully outlines in *Animal Capital,* telephony is packed with the material and talismanic incorporation of animal parts,[56] including the bladder of pigs, legs of frogs, or the ear or larynx of felines. All of these animals have been included in the many of the successive experiments carried out by humans in the hopes of achieving instantaneous, affective communication between bodies separated across space and time.[57] Before patenting the first practical telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, along with his brother Melville, decided to "sacrifice their pet cat" in the name of science in an attempt to replicate Joseph Faber's speaking machine.[58] Calling upon a medical student to euthanize the cat painlessly in order to

50 Sconce, 25.
51 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 63.
52 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 63.
53 Derrida, 201-202.
54 *Ghost Dance,* dir. Ken McMullen (Channel 4, 1983).
55 *Ghost Dance*.
56 Shukin, *Animal Capital,* 148.
57 Shukin, 139.
58 Robert V. Bruce, *Bell: Alexander Graham Bell and the Conquest for Solitude* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 36.

extract its larynx, the two brothers watched in horror as their family pet raced around the room in agony after their friend quickly poured nitric acid down its throat, before finally killing it with a laceration to one of its major arteries. While the horror of this experience lived on in Bell's memory for over half a century, animal suffering has long been part and parcel of a telecommunication industry that subjects nonhuman creatures to dehumanising practices for the sake of cultural development.[59]

The most potent of all inhumane practices performed in the name of human expansion, Shukin points out in *Animal Capital,* is the forced connection between animal bodies and the energy on which the telephony runs: electricity. During the 1780s, anatomist and obstetrician Luigi Galvani standardized the practice of inducing electrical reflexes out of severed frogs' legs in order to prove his hypothesis that animals were the ideal conductors of a naturally occurring electricity within the body.[60] As the influential anthropologist Edward B. Tylor writes when reflecting on generally accepted theories espoused during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, electricity was reported to be an invisible fluid passing in and out of solid bodies, a fact widely believed before it was debunked almost half a century later.[61] Galvani, as one of the principle originators of this theory, argued that animal tissue in particular was a significantly charged depository of electricity itself.[62] Over the course of several years, Galvani applied electrical stimulation to severed frogs' legs, gaining much satisfaction from the reflexive jerks and motions that ensued.[63]

Galvani's belief that the animal body could act as a medium for channelling the metaphysical current of animal spirits, the elusive entities thought to be messengers of the soul that influenced or informed sensation and will, evidences a history of telecommunication tightly intermeshed with animality itself.[64] As Shukin argues in *Animal Capital:*

> the fetishism of communication played out in the flesh of Galvani's 'animal conductors' subsequently cathects onto the promise of virtual mobility sparked by a series of technological media of communication: early telegraphs and telephones, the cinematic apparatus, mobile phones, and wireless Internet devices.[65]

Electricity, therefore, inscribes the animal materially and metaphorically into the vision and products of technological advancement, whereby much of the historic suffering of animals is rendered invisible in the aural and visual cultures of today. Besides powering the telephone, electricity has also served to reify film, the moving image, by experimenting on animals and dismembering their bodies. In 1903,

59 Bruce, *Bell*, 36.
60 Shukin, *Animal Capital*, 131.
61 Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom Volume II* (London: John Murray, 1920), 142.
62 Shukin, *Animal Capital,* 148.
63 Shukin, *Animal Capital,* 147.
64 Shukin, *Animal Capital,* 132; Marco Piccolino, "Luigi Galvani's Path to Animal Electricity," *Comptes Rendus Biologies* 329, no. 5-6 (2006): 304.
65 Shukin, *Animal Capital,* 139.

inventor of the motion picture camera Thomas Edison filmed the execution of an elephant at Coney Island's Luna Park for killing three people in retaliation to years of physical abuse.[66] Topsy the elephant was electrocuted to death in front of a thousand-strong crowd, which Edison turned into a motion picture that was then screened as a form of entertainment.[67] By making a record of this death that can be restaged time and again, Edison symbolically denied Topsy the right to die. Instead, her torturous ending can be reproduced endlessly for an expectant audience, further cementing one of cinema's founding principles to not only evidence the durational effects of time but also to harness the spectacle of life and death.[68]

Is the telephone not then, to borrow from Lippit, a vast mausoleum of animal suffering?[69] Are animals not tied irrevocably to electricity itself, welded to this energy source through a cruel history of human exceptionalism? There is no denying the telephone's incorporation of animals both symbolically and materially—still, whether the animals that power these technologies are truly dead is a fanciful question worth asking. Every time we pick up the telephone we are communicating not only with ghosts, Derrida reminds us, but joining a *prolifauny* of animal, human and divine metamorphoses. Detached from a body, the telephonic voice, as already mentioned, is a species of speech, comprised of multiple voices that are inanimate and ghostly. The telephone speaks for itself and by itself, according to Prenowitz. It produces or performs a metonymical elimination of the body as the very possibility of a voice without a body.[70] This disembodied voice is only ever a copycat of the real thing, if such a real thing were to even exist (again, to think of Derrida and the postal, we cannot say for certain that a voice can be received, if there was an original in the first place). It is separated from a human body and given over to dissemination, to the telephone network itself, thus wandering like a restless animal haunting the switchboard.[71] "Telephonic animals," Derrida muses in *H. C. for Life,* "circulate between all the orders and all the rules" of thought, and electricity powers the telephonic voice as the mighty roar of a spectral animal revitalised once more:

> However animated and animal it needs to remain [...], this soul that is as spiritual as it is animal, as animal as it is divine, is not, as one would often like to think, alien to technique and to electricity, and its "might partakes of what in English is simply called "power," *electricity as power* [...] does give us to think that this thought of the soul, of the *psyche,* the *pneuma,* of life or of animal breath, is nothing but this enacted thought of might, namely of the absolute speed that makes the letter arrive before the letter.[72]

66 Anat Pick, "Sparks Would Fly: Electricity and the Spectacle of Animality," in *Animalities: Literary and Cultural Studies Beyond the Human,* ed. Michael Lundblad (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 108.
67 Pick, 108.
68 Pick, 107.
69 Lippit, *Electric Animal,* 187.
70 Prenowitz, "Crossing Lines," 145.
71 Prenowitz, 145.
72 Derrida, *H. C. for Life,* 102.

Derrida's suggestion that the telephone should be seen as a crypt alive with the spectral power of animals should not to be confused with a fantasy of pure communication. Instead, as Turner writes, it is an opening to the possibilities of disconnection, of unexpected connection beyond the call to being promoted by Heidegger and further still beyond the confines of our species.[73]

HELLO, IT'S ME

Answering a call for help in times of crisis, does my voice not brush against electric animals that roam the telephone lines with a spectral insistence? When giving instructions on how to perform life support, is my speech not becoming animalised, moving at the speed of life without a singular body to carry it? As I tap the desk before me, mimicking the rate of compressions that come to me from the other side, am I listening to life or nonlife, human or animal? Even though I am trying to inhabit the body of the caller in a different time and place, to sync the actions of their body with my instructional mind, I wonder who or what I am actually resuscitating. Am I reanimating the human or animal life that is on the line, and, if so, until what end? When do I arrive at the decision to withdraw life support in times of crisis?

The simple answer is I don't. Call handlers triaging an emergency call always keep the line open until the emergency services arrive. They continue to provide instructions, guidance and support right up to the moment that someone else takes over. Telephone triage is a line of vulnerability shared by all living beings, and while it may not end in the reanimation or continuation of the living, it responds to the urgency of life and death situations that hang in the balance. The telephone represents a vital bond between creatures, a living telephone cord that is always connected to the heart, and it is this lifeline that is picked up time and again to the ear in order to respond to the suffering of another that until now has remained unheard.[74]

At the medical helpline, call handlers would regularly experience a strange phenomenon, which is commonly referred to as 'phantom call.' These were calls that came through from the other side, but they would lack the vocalisation of a human voice. In other words, there was no response when a phantom call was answered. These calls would present themselves exactly like all other standard calls; they would appear on the telephony system with an assigned inbound contact number and would connect to a call handler's headset much the same as any other call. What was different, however, was that phantom calls were nothing but an eerie silence, save for the minute crackling of static that would ricochet down the line. Occasionally, there would be a high pitch frequency or ominous roar. But despite the fact that phantom calls did not transport a human voice, call handlers were trained to be highly vigilant during these anomalies, as it is not unusual for someone to fall unconscious just before a connection was made. At times, a rhythmic breathing pattern or sound could be

73 Turner, "Telefoam," 161; Jackson, "Derrida on the Line," 155.
74 Derrida, *H. C. for Life*, 81-82.

discerned, and if a call handler suspected the worst, an ambulance got dispatched just in case.

Like all other emergency calls, the line was left open in case whoever, or whatever, was on the other side started to respond. I have triaged many similar cases, sending out help to a phantom call where a threat to life could not be ruled out. Thinking back now, I wonder whom or what I was listening to while waiting on the line. Was the laboured breathing that crackled down the line even human? Or was it in fact already a response, a repetitive pant distorted by electricity trying to say 'yes, I am here, help me.' Who knows. All I could do is wait and listen, in a different space and time, connected only by the sounds coming from a telephone. This alone is arresting. ⊡

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