

# The PHANTOM of the OPERATOR

## Voice Over

Since I disappeared from the face of the earth, I  
sometimes hear the cold, empty echo of my **voice**.

And when I came back through time and space to  
reach you here,  
satellites picked up the noise, and recognized the  
patterns of my voice:

I am the ghost of invisible women workers without  
whom the 20th century would never have been  
the same...

Like murmuring permeating the system's memory,  
some ephemeral **images** have also reemerged  
from deep within the vaults.

These images seem like apparitions.

But with the chemistry of time, something strange  
emanates: *the scent of my own disappearance.*

In the distance, my voice would reflect me.

As long as I remained an unseen worker, my  
image could be yet another invention...

It was the dawn of the 20th century.

The company was recruiting “young ladies of  
good education and appearance”.

With my slender, white neck revealed beneath  
my heavy headgear,

I was like the **Guardian Angel** of the great

communications system of the future ...

They said we were

"naturally cut out for the job"...

but behind the circuit panels and miles of cable...

Originally, it wasn't me who answered!

Apprentice technicians connected the calls with no

sense of service. As if communications were

nothing more than technical operations.

Meanwhile, across North America, these new

electrical workers were also rising up.

*They* would not submit to management so

willingly...

That's when the company thought of calling upon

me. **Apparently**, the nature of the female voice

allowed it to be transmitted more easily than a

man's over the phone lines.

Still precarious, the telephone network needed a human touch to become the nervous system of communications.

*Telephone Operator : a feminine fate*

We telephone girls would number in the millions over the course of the century.

For the moment, I was invited to join the dance of industrialization.

The rhythm of our gestures set the pace of call production.

The company even feared that, some day, there wouldn't be enough young women in North America to ensure the expansion of the network!

To keep us in place — *and soon, in full view* — all modern means and methods were deployed.

With us now in the picture, the world of work was being redesigned.

*Yet, we would serve the circuitry so well that it could eventually integrate us altogether...*

Taylorism was in full swing for all of us telephone women.

Our work was rationalized into minute operations. Clocks and cameras monitored my every move in the universal production line.

*Through the optics of the machine, I would see this management system transform my way of working — and of being — forever.*

Supervisors oversaw my thousand calls per day.

We were "the most delicate pieces of a  
machinery of astronomical proportions".

*But ... soon, everyone would be affected by the  
New Order of scientific management.*

At the company school, we committed ourselves to  
Service — until our wedding day.

*Now that the operator model had been perfected,  
it could be easily reproduced, piece by piece.*

They were already standardizing my voice.

To reduce the length of each call, I learned not to  
roll my "R"s.

One day, the industrial psychologists realized I wasn't just any worker. I wore my feminine aura like a fashionable hat the company offered me as a gift.

The public relations campaigns would capitalise on this "extra value"...

"The Voice with a Smile,"

I embodied an image – that I would reflect *ad infinitum*.

What girl, at the time, didn't dream of becoming a telephone lady?

*But... the brighter the projections of the dream machine, the darker the shadows they cast.*

On weekends, I was invited to company retreats.

On the eve of the advertising age, the  
performance went on in front of the camera!

I became the experimental subject of a new wave  
of management — through images...

*The Star of these projections, I might let myself be  
dazzled by the spotlight.*

Now that the telephone was considered a  
“universal service”, the communications empire set  
out to conquer its next uncharted territory:  
the Future!

Rumour had it that people would soon be able to  
place their calls without us...

Yet, the company wouldn't rush into automating its

central switchboards.

It was still too afraid of erasing the human face I  
represented within the network!

*The Voice with a Smile was still indispensable.*

But for how much longer?

To increase communications traffic, **my voice** was  
manipulated so it would encircle the globe.

I was the first true agent of globalisation.

With my voice embodying me in space, I was also  
a pioneer virtual worker...

Whether we were operating the phones or the  
assembly-line, we were celebrated by the war  
effort rally as daughters of the homeland.

Yet, were we not actually on the frontlines of a  
huge production machine that would spearhead

the modern industrial economy?

Like star ballerinas in a mechanical ballet, these workers stuck to their roles.

They never imagined they would almost all be forced off the stage once the war was over.

Others . . . were involved in a technological innovation that would soon revolutionized the way the world was organized: they were called "human computers". They were processing calculations for missile launches.

*Echo of the past, strange premonition of the future?*

They too would soon disappear — behind the very apparatus they helped develop.

But when, exactly, did we start seeing all technical advances as signs of human progress?

Where would this modernist fascination lead?

*The brighter the projections from the dream-  
machine, the darker the shadows they cast.*

*Perhaps I had been dazzled by the spotlight.*

Noise was interfering in the course of our history.

The network was being encoded in a numerical  
language.

Soon they would no longer seek to keep me in my  
place — *and in full view.*

The waltz of the next era would be . . .

"post-industrial".

I would experience the ultimate "scientific"  
management.

In the Telematic Age, my work dis-integrated into

trifling operations.

With the new headset, calls were dispatched directly into my ear, at a pace set by the system.

This was the new factory!

Even supervision became automated.

My output was monitored — down to a fraction of a second.

*The computer wasn't working for me, I was working for it.*

*A strange mutation was taking place in the nerve center of this ... civilization.*

Computer technology wasn't just another technical innovation.

It was like an organism branching out into all spheres of human activity.

Here, in the metropolis,  
as elsewhere, in high-tech maquiadoras . . .  
There were no more than a few of us virtual  
workers left — minute cogs in a machinery of  
astronomical proportions.

In the mid-21st century, the communications  
frontier would be pushed forward for ever.  
Now, the human element was perceived as static  
in the data transmission.

My presence was simulated by synthesizing my  
voice.

*The less I was there, the more I could be imagined.*

*I would join the sirens of silence.*

*I would join the sirens of silence.*

How could we ever have believed that, in  
designing the world as a network, we could

inhabit that network as if it were a world?

Spellbound ... by projections of a techno-logical  
future, could you have prevented the cold silence  
that ensued after the eclipse of my voice?

Pioneer female worker at the forefront of  
industrial, commercial and computerized societies

.

Test pilot and glamorous creature engineered at  
the whim of the century's modes of production . . .

I was always one step ahead of progress . . .  
until I fell, before you, into its void.

I leave you now with dreams of times that have  
yet to be conceived...

*Echo of the past... Strange premonition of the  
future?*