



Int'l Documentary Film
Festival Amsterdam
Official Selection



Toronto Int'l Film Festival
Official Selection



Vancouver Int'l Film Festival
Official Selection

LE FANTÔME DE L'OPÉRATRICE



a film by Caroline Martel



A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

Women Make Movies • 462 Broadway, 5th Floor • New York, NY 10013
Tel: 212.925.0606 • e-mail: webinfo@wmm.com • www.wmm.com

Synopsis

This wry and delightful found-footage film reveals a little-known chapter in labor history: the story of female telephone operators' central place in the development of global communications. With an eye for the quirky and humorous, Caroline Martel assembles a dazzling series of clips – more than one hundred remarkable, rarely seen industrial, advertising and scientific management films produced in North America between 1903 and 1989 by Bell and Western Electric – and transforms them into a dreamlike montage documentary.

As the first agents of globalization, this invisible army of women offered a way for companies to feminize and glamorize what was a highly stressful, underpaid and difficult job. Not merely "Voices with a Smile", telephone operators were shooting stars in a universe of infinite progress, test pilots for new management systems, and the face of shrewd public relations campaigns. As the work of operators has been eclipsed by the advent of automated systems, this artful piece of labor history also offers an insightful comment on women's work, industrialization and communications technology. Refreshing and hilarious, *The Phantom of the Operator* provides a wry yet ethereal portrait of human society in the technocratic age.



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Credits

2004 · 66 minutes · Color/B&W

Director
Caroline Martel

Sound Editing
Sylvain Bellemare

Editor
Annie Jean

Additional Image Editing
Mathieu Bouchard-Malo

Voice
Pascale Montpetit

Musical Effects
René Lussier

Online Editing
Denis Gathelier

Mix
Clovis Gouaillier

Titles
Louise Overy

Subtitles
Claude Dionne

Foley
Geneviève Lapoint
Lise Wedlock

Foley Recording
Daniel Bisson

Dialogue Editing
Frédéric Cloutier

Original Music (Ondes Martenot)
Suzanne Binet-Audet

Publicity Contact:

Cindy Kridle, Marketing and Communications Manager
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Festivals and Awards

For the most updated list, please visit www.wmm.com.

Toronto International Film Festival – *World Premiere*

Vancouver International Film Festival

International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)

Taiwan International Documentary Festival

New York Museum of Modern Art, Canadian Front

Chicago International Film Festival

Full Frame Documentary Film Festival

Tampa International Film Festival

Brooklyn Underground Film Festival

Quotes

“...the series' highlight comes in Caroline Martel's *The Phantom of the Operator*. A haunting oral history of old-time female telephone operators culled from found industrial films, it's the kind of intelligent and dedicated work that will live on for much longer than the flavors of the moment.”

Mark Peranson, *Village Voice*

" ...bridges time with flair and flare. Caroline Martel's illuminating brilliant work .. is that rare and shimmering example, that instantly classic film which manages to be both a history of the medium and an vibrant consideration of the role of women in telecommunications.”

Peter Wintonick, International Editor, POV Magazine

“A remarkable achievement.”

Vancouver International Film Festival

“Enormously imaginative.”

Scott Foundas

Variety



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Director Biography

Caroline Martel is a documentary artist who was born in Montréal the year the cellular phone was created (1973). She has been synthesizing documentary theory and practice in a variety of projects since 1998, with a special interest in archival materials, cinema history, women and communication technologies.

Hold the Line (Dernier Appel, 52 min, National Film Board of Canada, 2001) was her début in professional filmmaking, following a number of short documentary videos and some student fictional pieces in 8mm and 16mm (First Prize - College Category - International Montréal Short Film Festival for L'Univers du matelas, 1992). Sound artist and radio practitioner, she received the MIX96 Prize for a documentary series : *Radio dans l'air* (1994). Caroline has authored online pieces for the International Festival of new Cinema and new Media of Montréal (FCMM, 1998) and for the Inter-Society for Electronic Arts (1999). She is also programming coordinator at to technological exploration, creation and critique.



With a B.A. in Communications and M.A. in Media Studies from Concordia University, Caroline received the Québec Government's FCAR Master's Degree Scholarship. She has worked as researcher and as research assistant, notably with filmmakers Marilù Mallet and Sophie Bissonnette and with scholars Chantal Nadeau, Kim Sawchuk and Martin Allor. Collaborating with the Cinémathèque québécoise, she was the main researcher and writer of the virtual exhibit *De Nanook à l'Oumigmag* on the history of documentary filmmaking in Canada (Boomerang Prize, 2001). In 2002, she directed the production of the interactive workshop *Documentary Visions* at the Cinérobotèque of the National Film Board of Canada, about documentary movements at the NFB since 1939.

The Phantom of the Operator is Caroline Martel's first feature-length production as an independent producer-director.

Filmography:

The Phantom of the Operator / Le Fantôme de l'Opératrice, 2004
Visions documentaires, 2002
Dernier appel / Hold the Line, 2001
Et va la navette, 1997
Wireless, 1995
Valse en... printemps
L'Univers du matelas, 1991



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Director's Statement



*Let the documentarian's world be full of surprises
Let the form, the film, grow organically,
so that the maker doesn't know
its look until it's finished...
Those images that you have to struggle to find and to
make effective will endure, because history endures.*
Emile de Antonio

Almost ten years have passed since I began my archaeological exploration of the many faces of the "operators" – these women working in the service of the last century's communications machines. Having witnessed first-hand the last moments of their history while shooting *Hold the Line* (52 min, NFB, 2001), I began to sense – upon returning to my research – that these archival images were like phantoms, ranks of smiling simulacra.

The Phantom of the Operator is a documentary that originally sought to discover the history of invisible women who, paradoxically, had had a strong presence in the cinematic vaults of their time. My research soon put me on the trail of a different sort of production – that of ephemeral films, the company productions of which I've since become a true fan. For this experimental R&D project, I identified some 350 films, watched 200 of them, catalogued and digitised 150 titles, and annotated more than 1 500 clips. After seven tours of duty in the editing room – the equivalent of nearly 50 weeks of editing over a four-year period – *The Phantom of the Operator* is finally complete.

A narrative constructed from incredible publicity films that don't always speak the truth, but that testify to past assumptions that were very real, even "documentary", the film ultimately revealed itself to be something of a cinematic legend. Perhaps it will eventually be thought of as a sort of *Atomic Café* (USA, Pierce and Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, 1982) of the telecoms age: a montage film made not from found footage but rather from materials retrieved from national and internet databases and cleared, one by one. It's also a work of reappropriation, produced outside of the current over-production and mass-consumption of images. It exists thanks to the generosity of exceptional cinema artisans and of collaborators who have adventured along with me on this unusual creation, which – I hope – will resonate with the responsive chords of the viewer.



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The Phantom Of The Operator

Le Fantome De L'operatrice
(Docu -- Canada)

An Artifact Prods. presentation. (International sales: Artifact Prods, Montreal.) Produced, directed, written by Caroline Martel.

Narrator: Pascale Montpetit
(French dialogue)

By SCOTT FOUNDAS

"The Phantom of the Operator" is an enormously imaginative docu by French-Canadian filmmaker Caroline Martel -- a found object of sorts that begins as a historical overview of female telephone operators, but gradually evolves into a wryly observed portrait of human society in the technocratic age. Composed entirely of footage skillfully edited from some 100 industrial, corporate and educational films produced by the Bell companies from 1910-89, pic provides an hour of nonstop visual and intellectual stimulation that should be welcomed by fests and cinematheques far and wide.

Having previously documented the 1999 mass layoff of women operators by Bell Canada in her 2001 National Film Board of Canada docu, "Hold the Line," Martel here focuses more on the rise of the profession in the first half of the 20th century.

Narrated by a ghostly, disembodied voice (Pascale Montpetit) meant to represent all women operators of the past, pic traces the increasing importance of telephone communication and how, at a time when phones lacked dials or numeric keypads, it was deemed important that users be greeted on the other end of the line by "a voice with a smile."

The conventional wisdom being, of course, that a pleasant, soothing female voice could smile more effectively than a male one. Not to mention the fact, as pic at one point wryly informs, that "women workers don't mind routine, repetitive work."

Delving into Bell's own extensive archive of self-produced films, Martel uncovers a treasure trove of operator-themed material both compelling and kitsch -- from recruitment movies touting the virtues of the profession in bombastic, newsreel fashion to so-called documentaries that depict the strenuous physical exams to which potential operator candidates must be subjected.

While pic is fascinating enough just as a time capsule, what gives it its unexpected weight is the way Martel sees her phantom protagonists as icons of the ever-diminishing role of human beings in the communication of information.

"How could we ever imagine that in designing the world as a network, we could inhabit that network as a world?" Martel's narrator asks in pic's final moments. Pic then sparks a provocative discussion over whether such things as email, text messaging and voice-recognition software truly bring us closer together or drive us further apart.

Adding to the ethereal feel cultivated by Montpetit's voiceover is original music by Suzanne Binet-Audet and Rene Lussier that makes extensive use of the theremin-like instrument known as the Ondes Martenot.

(Color/B&W); editor, Annie Jean; additional editor, Mathieu Bouchard; music, Suzanne Binet-Audet, Rene Lussier; sound, Clovis Gouaillier. Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Wavelengths), Sept. 12, 2004. (Also in Vancouver Film Festival -- Canadian Images.) Running time: 65 MIN.



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THE VANCOUVER SUN

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2004

Early phone era sci-fi ghostly



The Phantom of the Operator ★★ ★
12:30 p.m. today at the Pacific Cinéma-thèque

Although the images all arise from hundreds of industrial education films of the last century, Caroline Martel's spellbinding film feels more like science fiction than documentary ... but it's science fiction in the past tense, recasting the utopian industrial fantasies of yesteryear into ghostly emanations from another world. Narrated — although that word doesn't do justice to her performance — by Pascale Montpetit, *Phantom of the Operator* chronicles developments in telecommunications from the phone companies' training and recruitment films, when the feminine "voice with a smile" vouched progress with a human face.



A scene from the movie, *Phantom of the Operator*, shows at 12:30 p.m. today.



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The Phantom of the Operator

Here



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www.americanVistas.com

Vancouver International Film Festival 2004

Nominations

The Phantom of the Operator

Le Fantôme de l'opératrice [PHANT] Canada, 2004, 66 min., DigiBeta Directed By: Caroline Martel
PROD/SCR: Caroline Martel ED: Annie Jean with additional editing by Mathieu Bouchard-Malo MUS:
Suzanne Binet-Audet (Ondes Martenot), René Lussier SOUND EDITOR: Sylvain Bellemare Cast: Narration
by Pascale Montpetit

A remarkable achievement at the border of fiction and nonfiction, this entertaining found-footage film is a provocative cultural history of the telephone operator and her central place in the development of global communications. Caroline Martel makes use of more than 100 corporate films from 1910 to 1989, many from Bell and Western Electric. She has an eye and ear for the quirky and humorous, but also the historically telling, cinematic moment and weaves these documents together into an insightful experimental essay on women's labour, industrialization and communications technology. You will learn how being an operator can make you a better person, tips on managing women workers, and the fabulous possibilities of "century 21" as dreamed of by corporate filmmakers.

Guiding us through this labyrinth of science and fiction is the voice of Pascale Montpetit as the phantom narrator who speaks for the millions of women whose labour facilitated the development of a global telephone-communications system. As the operator offered the human touch in the new network, the dial phone caused anxiety over her possible disappearance. Yet it was the touch-tone phone that launched the post-industrial revolution which saw computers take over the monotonous work once seen as naturally suited to women. Exploring Taylorism, or the scientific management of workers, as a constituent of modernity's promise of infinite progress, this will be certain to entertain anyone who has ever spent their day attached to a telephone headset with a smile in their voice.



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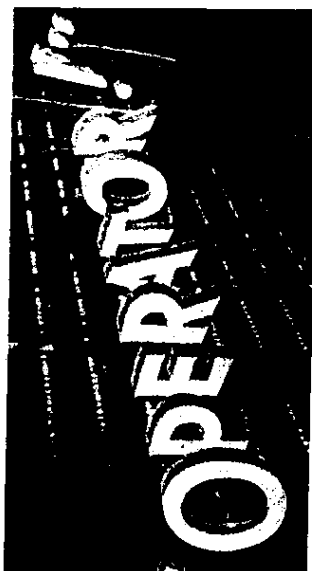
TAIWAN INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL

4th Edition
1999-2003

giving the voice with a smile

the roles, but it can improve them as women. With this type of self-affirming identity as an operator it's no wonder, Marcel says, the women objected strongly to being dismissed as the sex of the 1980s. "We're proud that they were pioneers in an industry that would forewarn many of the century's industrial practices and abuses such as mass production, management surveillance and job-related physical ailments like carpal-tunnel syndrome.

So, while the operators worked seemingly behind the scenes, they were in fact at the forefront of the last century's technological revolutions and all of its attendant social, cultural, economic and even physical phenomena. *Phantom of the Operator* does a commendable job in making this clear and as preserving a record of a mostly unseen culture that is fading rapidly into memory.



to be operators, Marcel said, but, fearing that they would unlearn, began hiring women to perform the job, correctly calculating the women's high turnover rate would be of the formation of unions. The task for the companies, then, was to find a way to feminize and glorify, what was, in fact, a highly stressful, underpaid and difficult job.

The company films that attempt to recall this propaganda are at times hilarious, with blind-rate cameras spending wide-eyed and unconvincing light of the audience that being an operator brings to their lives. The jobs, as they describe them, offer stability, community and an opportunity for them to carry out their nurturing

instances by helping connect people and facilitate interpersonal communication.

In scores of interviews with former operators over a period of nine years, Marcel said the women believed wholeheartedly that they fulfilled a unique, indeed, practically nobility role to customers, despite the glaring hardships of the job. She called the operators' attachment to their jobs a "perverse love affair."

The dark side of the job is brought out in many of the clips from the 1980s and 1940s that show the strict regimentation of the job. Operators are marched military-style to their posts at the switchboards, where behind them, military-like floor managers pace back and forth monitoring speed and accuracy. Clearly, the companies felt no need in that era to mark their goal of achieving maximum employee efficiency. Later, when the fission of feeling needed by the company had worn off, the companies adopted a new tack, focusing on "the voice with a smile" and setting up the job.

According to Marcel, telephone companies were before their time in using industrial psychologists to work out exactly how to lure women into the job. Companies cast the job of an operator as a wonderful thing by suggesting it bestowed a heightened femininity. Not only could being an operator help them get out their feelings,

BY MAX WOODWORTH
STAFF REPORTER

Nowadays, when phone calls are diverted to an automated answering system, the woman's voice on the other end speaks in the detached manner and reversed cadence of computer-generated speech. It's a far cry from the flesh-and-blood, motherly-voiced women who, in an era not too long ago, welcomed our calls in what the telephone companies called the "voice with a smile."

To make a kind of video memorial to this army of women who provided those voices with smiles, Canadian documentary maker Caroline Marcel dug up hours of footage from about 200 telephone-company corporate training videos to make her film *The Phantom of the Operator*, which screens today at the Taiwan International Documentary Festival.

"I wanted to allow women's contribution to the workforce and their role at the base of the century of communication," Marcel said in an interview in Taipei, where she is visiting while her film participates in the festival's competition section.

That role played by the operators, however, has been drastically undercut by the advent of automated systems. Their entire sub-culture is gradually vanishing, Marcel said.

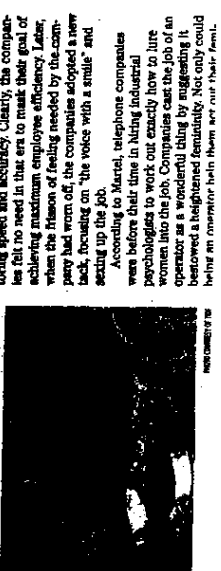
This fact prompted her to construct the film using archive footage and a narration that sounds as though it were broadcast from outer space, whispering a contemporary legend about the lives of these iconic 20th-century women to a soundtrack made using an odd, mid-20th century electronic music instrument called the "ondes Martenot."

The result looks and sounds like a dream, with loosely connected flashes that gradually reveal details about operators and the culture in which they worked.

Telephone companies initially employed men

to be operators, Marcel said, but, fearing that they would unlearn, began hiring women to perform the job, correctly calculating the women's high turnover rate would be of the formation of unions. The task for the companies, then, was to find a way to feminize and glorify, what was, in fact, a highly stressful, underpaid and difficult job.

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捷線生魅影

卡洛琳·馬塞爾
加拿大
多倫多國際影展
獲首屆國際影展獎

本片取材自1910至1989年間，北美洲的電話公司所拍攝的影片，併中音響而成。它讓我們回到當時被犧牲的社會，她們是知識階級領導的電話接線生的生活，她們是工廠、商店與辦公室裡的清潔工，她們是工廠、商店與辦公室裡的清潔工，她們是工廠、商店與辦公室裡的清潔工...

FILM NOTE:
Phantom of the Operator
Directed by Caroline Marcel
Running time: 65 minutes
Screening times and location:
Tonight: 10:30pm, Showtime Cinema, Thursday,
2pm, Showtime Cinema.

Film festival notes:
Where: The 4th Taiwan International Documentary Festival.
When: Until Friday.
Where: Showtime Cinema 國際國際影城
247 Linshen N Rd, Taipei (台北市林森北路247號)
Spot-Taipei Film House 台北電影館
18 Zhongshan N Rd, Sec. 2, Taipei (台北市中山北路二段18號)
Shih-ming Hall of Taiwan Cement Building 台灣水泥大樓
501 Zhongshan N Rd, Sec. 2, Taipei (台北市中山北路二段501號)



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Taiwan International 4th Documentary Festival: Saving the voice with a smile

By Max Woodworth
STAFF REPORTER

Tuesday, Dec 14, 2004, Page 13

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The result looks and sounds like a dream, with loosely connected flashes that gradually reveal details about operators and the culture in which they worked.

Telephone companies initially employed men to be operators, Martel said, but, fearing that they would unionize, began hiring women to perform the job, correctly calculating that women's high turnover rate would stave off the formation of unions. The task for the companies, then, was to find a way to feminize and glamorize, what was, in fact, a highly stressful, underpaid and difficult job.

The company films that attempt to instill this propaganda are at times hilarious, with third-rate actresses speaking wide-eyed and unconvincingly of the satisfaction that being an operator brings to their lives. The jobs, as they describe them, offer stability, community and an opportunity for them to carry out their nurturing instincts by helping connect people and facilitate inter-personal communication.

Taipei Times
Dec. 14, 2004
Page 1 of 2



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The Phantom of the Operator

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The dark side of the job is brought out in many of the clips from the 1930s and 1940s that show the strict regimentation of the job. Operators are marched military-style to their posts at the switchboards, where behind them, matron-like floor managers pace back and forth monitoring speed and accuracy. Clearly, the companies felt no need in that era to mask their goal of achieving maximum employee efficiency. Later, when the frisson of feeling needed by the company had worn off, the companies adopted a new tack, focusing on "the voice with a smile" and sexing up the job.

According to Martel, telephone companies were before their time in hiring industrial psychologists to work out exactly how to lure women into the job. Companies cast the job of an operator as a wonderful thing by suggesting it bestowed a heightened femininity. Not only could being an operator help them act out their feminine roles, but it can improve them as women.

With this type a self-affirming identity as an operator it's no wonder, Martel says, the women objected strongly to being downsized at the end of the 1990s. Never mind that they were guinea pigs in an industry that would foreshadow many of the century's industrial practices and abuses, such as mass production, management surveillance and job-related physical ailments like carpal-tunnel syndrome.

So, while the operators worked seemingly behind the scenes, they were in fact at the forefront of the last century's technological revolution and all of its attendant social, cultural, economic and even physical phenomena. *Phantom of the Operator* does a commendable job in making this clear and at preserving a record of a mostly unseen culture that is fading rapidly into memory.

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Page 2 of 2



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