

The one-way phone and utter bliss

by Margrit Sprecher

For years that plastic object just stood there. With its subdued colours and its shape duly approved by the PTT, Swiss Postal and Telecommunications Authority, it was simply an article of consumption, as emotionally neutral as the mixer in the kitchen. One scarcely took any notice of the thing unless it started to ring shrilly.

Then came the shock. Everything has been different since last autumn. The telephone has acquired sex appeal, in the truest sense of the word. For if you dial 156 plus four other numbers, you hear an unfamiliar female voice which informs you, in a whisper or sighing, giggling or groaning, about all the odd things that happened to the speaker at the swimming-baths, or in the lift in the supermarket, or in the toilet of a plane, or in the theatre cloak-room. There's a number available for every personal taste.

This has caused major changes in Swiss life. Some firms have ordered the 156 numbers to be blocked off, in a number of homes phone bills have reached astronomical figures. For the charge is one to two francs per minute of tape-recorded lewd chitchat. The upshot is that the PTT knows of towns (we won't reveal which ones) where a third of all the subscribers only pay their phone bills after getting a threatening reminder, if at all.

All this groaning on the phone, however, is earning the PTT an extra thirty million or so francs a year. It is also altering the image that hundreds of thousands of Swiss people have of the telephone. They look at it with fresh eyes, or else rub their eyes in astonishment. As if a wedded wife of upright character were suddenly to appear in a miniskirt and her spouse in a sporty Alfa. Whatever will happen next? Is there perhaps even more to

come? Indeed, there is. "Social minimalists" – that's to say, people who can make do with a minimum of social contact – are enthusiastically tapping the new round-the-clock services offered by the PTT. You can phone all day without having to utter a word yourself.

It starts as soon as he gets up. Instead of a jab in the ribs from a surly partner, maybe accompanied by a gruff "time to get up!", our social minimalist is awakened by the phone, ringing in the subdued tone appropriate to a boudoir. On picking up the receiver

It must unfortunately be admitted that, compared with the soft voices to be heard on the new 156 numbers leased out to private firms, those of the PTT ladies are fearfully prudish and incline to the staccato. They don't seem to have the least trace of theatrical ambition. The female voice that reads off the avalanche bulletin on number 187 doesn't tremble. No note of warm-hearted sympathy can be detected as it warns listeners that loose snow may be encountered on the shady side of mountain ranges. The same is true of the voice on

do so. After all, she only wants what's best for him, which is more than one can say of many close friends who turn out to be one's worst enemies. So he absorbs gratefully – for a mere thirty centimes extra on his phone bill – her additional piece of advice, that the lemons to go with the fish ought to be placed in water for a couple of days after the juice has been squeezed out, since if you dip your hands into the resultant brew your skin will become soft and even senile speckles disappear.

After that his experienced fingers move nimbly across the push buttons of his phone to number 165. Another unseen female voice obligingly reads out the TV programme, saving him the bother of having to look it up for himself.

Suppose he is one of those who turn pious rather than jovial as evening draws on? In that case he has only to dial a number that will provide uplift in the form of music and biblical texts. On 156-70-23 a voice – male this time, at least – gives way now and then to a reverberating echo, as if the speaker were standing in a cathedral. With a marvellous heartiness he bids the mute listener farewell with the words "I hope to hear from you again soon" – although he hasn't actually heard a sound. Still better is the parting phrase "I wish you much love ..."

This brings us back to our subject. Since our social minimalist is well served by even a little love, next evening he again tries an erotic number on 156. In the meantime he has discovered on which one unemployed actresses, speaking unaccented standard German, are more likely to scare than excite him, and on which one Swiss housewives, who have been plied with cheap liqueurs to make them



RITA; Solar sound installation with bi-lingual, aleatoric computer poem by Francesco Mariotti.

he hears a female voice informing him, discreetly and without further ado, what time it is.

The modern telephone-conscious happy-go-lucky individual is also spared the trivialities uttered by a partner at the breakfast table. Instead his ear is afflicted only by what's really important at this early hour: the news on number 167, followed by the stock-exchange report on number 166. And when he leaves home number 162 tells him whether he should take his umbrella or not.

number 180, which gives details of election or referendum results, or number 163, which reels off data on road conditions. With their impeccable but impersonal zeal they remind one of the top girl in class at school.

But our social minimalist is a self-sufficient individual and doesn't care about that. In his eyes the fact that the consumer information service on number 129 is devoid of warmth simply enhances its credibility. He is quite willing to buy fish when the nasal female voice advises him to