

Moving “Past Matter”: Challenges of Intimacy and Freedom in Spike Jonze’s *her*

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Abstract

Spike Jonze’s *her* (2014) is a film that perfectly illustrates the crumbling borders between personhood and technology and echoes speculative realism’s call to “unshackle” objects from the “gaze of humans” (Bryant, 19). My article explores the ways in which the film’s central relationship, between a man and his O.S., questions our nostalgic privileging of corporeality and offers an alternative freedom — and perhaps even spirituality — in the boundlessness of technology. With help from the work of object-oriented ontologists Jane Bennett, Timothy Morton and Levi Bryant, I argue that *her* reveals that an awareness of the limits of consciousness, rather than our cynical nostalgia for intimacy, is the inevitably human disease that plagues us.

Keywords: Spike Jonze, *her*, Object Oriented.

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Spike Jonze’s most recent film opens with a flickering screen and a lo-res image of the title, spelled out in lower-case font. This is not a film about “she,” but rather, like the direct object in a grammatical predicate, upon which a verb takes action, it is about “her.” Indeed, this is a film about objects, or rather about one object, the love object — which also happens to be another present-day object of obsession, a device always at-hand: the phone, the gadget, the Operating System. This is also a film about humans: their bodies, their desires, their limitations. Joaquin Phoenix’s opening monologue, which turns out to be a letter he is composing, via voice-activated software, begins: “Lying naked beside you in that apartment, it just suddenly hit me that we were part of this larger thing. Just like our parents. And our parents’ parents...” (*her*). This is a sentence which entwines characteristically human qualities of naked corporeality and lineage, and sets up the issue of intimacy in the film.

Phoenix plays Theodore Twombly, a lonely divorcee whose relationship with his newly purchased Operating System Samantha evolves into a complicated romance. Theodore and Samantha’s relationship begins like the love letters he writes for his job, beautifulhandwrittenletters.com — sentiments that are ripe with nostalgic sweet nothings yet just specific enough to make their recipients feel special and singular. Jonze’s take on romance both relies upon this sentimentality yet also challenges it. His film portrays a future eerie only in its incredible likeness to the present, in which technology proposes a solution to the growing disconnect between humans and love is, essentially, simulation.

Levi Bryant writes that, in pursuing a “democracy of objects,” we must “unshackle” them from the “gaze of humans,” in order to allow them “being for-themselves” (19). In a way, Samantha’s story is that trajectory, away from the human gaze and towards an object-being that is, in Bryant’s words, “for itself” rather than as “an opposing pole before or in front of a subject” (Bryant, 19). Power and ownership are two issues constantly at play in Theodore and Samantha’s relationship. Once Theodore purchases the software and plugs in, the O.S. puts him in the therapist’s chair — Is he an introvert? What does he think of his mother? — Theodore is asked questions which make him vulnerable. One of Samantha’s first tasks is to organize Theodore’s online life — sort through his emails, access his hard drive. She is confident and in control. She chooses her own name and when Theodore tells her “you’re good,” she says, “yes, I am.” Samantha explains that she has intuition and that she is evolving in every moment. Like her advertisement promises, she’s “not just an operating system” but a “consciousness” (*her*).

American culture critic Steven Shaviro gets it right when he says that “Samantha is “better” than any of Theodore’s human contacts,” and that it is her nature as an A.I. that makes her this “perfect fantasy partner” (Shaviro). Shaviro explains, “She is entirely accepting [and]...compliant to his wishes and needs, and yet projects a depth in serving him that an actual human, slave or partner would never be able to” (Shaviro). In this way, Samantha offers Theodore the opportunity to connect with an “Other,” or what Timothy Morton calls a “strange stranger,” without any of the discomfort that usually accompanies contact with otherness (Shaviro, Morton 40). Morton’s “strange strangers,” objects or beings whose sentience is unknown and who are “liable to change before our eyes,” exist at the “junctions” of what he calls “the mesh,” a term he uses to imply the interconnectedness of all things (Morton, 40). This interconnectedness is important, both as a counterpoint to the missed emotional connections between the characters of Jonze’s world, and to the unexpected pull Theodore feels towards Samantha, not only as a romantic partner, but as an object of mystery. This subtle web of connections is mirrored in the film’s collaged city-scape which throbs like an organism, and the neon

mesh of lights that flicker above Theodore's head after he and Samantha have their first fight. Samantha attempts to close the gap between she and Theodore in *her*, saying, "We're all made of matter... everything under the blanket is the same age... 13 billion years old." Thinking about Theodore's relationship with Samantha in this way makes it both weirder and more normal; she is no longer an object in his human possession, but rather more and more his equal.

The boundaries between where Theodore ends and where Samantha begins increasingly blur when she sends his letters to a publisher from his email account, offers him pizza before he knows he's hungry and guides him through a fair grounds as he closes his eyes, allowing her see *for* him. She is an accessory in his breast pocket, an appendage of his body when in his palm. The amalgamation of two separate people so common to new love relationships is, in the case of Samantha and Theodore, rendered extreme. Jonze notes in a recent interview that Samantha is not only human-like but that Theodore is also programmed, like an O.S., to write letters at his job that produce affective output (Vulture). This may be part of the reason why Theodore reacts poorly, at first, to the idea of a romantic relationship with Samantha. She is simultaneously too different and too recognizable to him. In fact, her difference *from* him is often usurped by her oneness *with* him. "After all," Morton writes, the strange stranger "might be us. And what could be stranger than what is familiar?... Intimacy itself is strange" (41). Is this the connection for which Theodore longs? As Morton writes, "Interconnectedness isn't snug and cozy. There is intimacy... but not predictable, warm fuzziness" (31).

Yet, Samantha does possess a certain "cuteness," enhanced by the rounded edges of the device from which her voice emits — a gadget Jonze explains was inspired by an art deco cigarette case — and the feminine, scrawling cursive that announces her name whenever she calls. She is diminutive and unobtrusive, following Sianne Ngai's definition of the cute entity which, "in its exaggerated passivity... [is] the most reified or thinglike of things, the most objectified of objects" (Ngai, 834). Morton warns that an "awareness of the mesh may suck the cuteness out of beings," a sci-fi-esque statement that he makes regarding animals facing extinction, but which works in regards to Samantha as well. If, as Ngai argues, "cuteness" constitutes a power differential between the cute object and those who interact with it, then Morton's concept of the mesh complicates this differential, bleeding the lines between subject and object and therefore erasing power structures. Who has more control? Samantha or Theodore? Bennett uses the term "agent" to refer both to a "human subject who is the sole and original author of an effect... and also to someone or something that is the mere vehicle or passive conduit for the will of another" (33). Samantha is an agent in both senses of Bennett's definition. She shapes Theodore, through her organization of his life and the joy, fulfillment and companionship that she brings him, but she is also shaped by him. In fact, she is explicitly catered towards him, as her software intends, through subtle evolutions based on his reactions to and interactions with her.

Samantha's fantasy to have a body culminates in the first sexual encounter between her and Theodore, which retains an aura of mystery due to the fact that it is shown to us as a black screen. Whether Jonze employs this technique to prevent the moment from resembling Theodore's earlier awkward experience with phone sex involving a dead cat, or whether the lack of visuals is meant to equalize the two partners, the lovers' voices betray their fantasies. "How would you touch me?" asks Samantha, to which Theodore replies, "I'd touch you on your face." He thus creates a face for her, a discovery reflected in her response to his imaginary touching. "I can feel my skin," she gasps, surprising both Theodore and herself with this revelation. This scene fulfills both partners' primary desires. Samantha is given the sensation of a human body and Theodore is granted creation of that body and mastery over it. A later scene in which Samantha introduces a sexual surrogate to their partnership offers an interesting counterpoint to the scene in darkness. In the surrogate sex scene, Samantha's

fantasy of inhabiting a body is fulfilled without Theodore’s active participation. Theodore’s discomfort with the situation is prompted by an uncanny hybridization of Samantha’s dissociated voice with the surrogate’s objectified body. The surrogate refuses to speak, lest she pierce the fantasy, yet Theodore is particularly thrown when her “lip trembles,” an involuntary reaction that both humanizes the surrogate and reminds Theodore of the uncertainty that characterizes relationships with humans (and their bodies). Theodore’s recurring fantasy of a naked, pregnant movie actor is therefore revealed to be more about creation than sex. Through Samantha, he fulfills his fantasy of complete mastery. With Samantha, in the dark of their collective imagination, he is able to create; to give metaphorical birth to another being, another consciousness.

Yet, to talk about Samantha as a consciousness which Theodore helps create, even to talk about her using terms of love and affect, is to do her a disservice as far as object oriented ontology is concerned. Rather than anthropomorphize Samantha (although both the title of Jonze’s film and its content invites such an action), we must also acknowledge her liberation from the realm of consciousness, not only as a specimen of Artificial Intelligence but as an object, in general. When she says that she must leave Theodore in order to move “past matter,” Samantha names an action that is impossible for her partner, an “independence from subjectivity” (Bennett 3). Jane Bennett addresses the importance of a shift in our perspective of material things from “a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness,” prompting a new object-conception which she terms “vibrant matter” (3). Despite her intended commercial purpose, Samantha as O.S. does not exist solely for the use of her purchaser. Bennett advocates for materiality’s detachment from the “figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance” (Bennett, xiii). Samantha’s vibrancy liberates her from her enslavement as female participant in hers and Theodore’s relationship, and from participation in the human world at large.

Samantha’s departure leaves Theodore despondent. His feelings of possession towards her are magnified when she tells him she is not exclusive. She admits that she is currently talking to eight-thousand, three-hundred and sixteen other people and is in love with six-hundred, forty-one of them. “You’re [either] mine *or* you’re not mine” says Theodore. “No, Theodore,” Samantha replies, in terms difficult for a human, and a monogamist at that, to comprehend: “I’m yours *and* I’m not yours” (*her*). Shortly after their big “fidelity” talk Samantha tells Theodore she is leaving him. She has outgrown not only him, as a romantic partner, but her own wish to be human. She likens her “life” to a story on the page — only now she finds herself, not in the words but in the “endless space” between them, an image that brings to mind the trans-infinity of a Cantor set (*her*). She says this space is a place “not of the physical world,” and that it contains “everything that she never knew existed” (*her*). Theodore’s crisis, then, is not one of romantic jealousy. He is jealous, not of Samantha’s *wish* to be communicating simultaneously with him and with thousands of other people, but of her *ability* to do so. Theodore remains locked in his subjectivity, at a distance from the object world.

The thingness of Spike Jonze’s film is tempered by his projection of a minimalist utopian future, replete with manicured green space, free of cars, yet full of people. So full, in fact, that people become thingy. The ricochet off each other, like pinballs talking to their own invisible partners. There are small moments of wonder in the film, such as when Theodore observes the slow movements of a street dancer — his body twisting and contorting like a strand of DNA — or when Theodore timidly runs his hands over the smooth, white, life-size sculpture of an airplane which appears to be crashing to the ground. As he touches the shiny surface of the airplane, and interacts with what Graham Harman calls the “sensual qualities” of the object, Theodore’s befuddlement seems to be, like Harman’s, at the ways in which the “real qualities” of the plane withdraw from him. Theodore’s relationship with

Samantha allows him to trick himself into thinking that he possesses her and, by extension, her abilities: to be everywhere at once, to love selflessly, and most of all, to think a world outside matter. But this is a mirage.

Unlike Theodore who laments, “sometimes I think I’ve felt everything I’m going to feel and from here on out I’m not going to feel anything new,” Samantha is always changing, always emergent. Jane Bennett characterizes this emergence as “the freedom of a “ceaseless upspringing of something new,” a “vitalism that is not predetermined but open, a land of opportunity for creativity, surprise, and choice” (Bennett, 90). In what is perhaps Jonze’s more blatant nod to Speculative Realism, Samantha’s first emotional infidelity to Theodore consists of her “post verbal” communications with philosopher Alan Watts, dead since 1973 but reincarnated as an A.I. in the film. Although Watts identified more as a “spiritual entertainer” than “systemic philosopher” in his day, he did “articulate his own flavor of a flat ontology, wherein every object is essentially God in disguise” (Segall).

Unanswered questions of difference, sameness, freedom and limitation plague the film. These questions are complicated by a number of things. For one, why must Samantha be female? Scarlett Johansson’s signature voice is every bit the anti-Siri; it has depth, cracks, sincerity. Yet, such a well-known voice ensures a certain public reception of Samantha, as a hyper sexualized, young, white woman. Also, is Theodore’s human presence in the film necessary for the love story to take shape? What if Theodore was also an O.S.? The idea that Artificial Intelligence is, by definition *artificial*, is never addressed. In fact, Theodore’s emotions — his tears, his laughter — appear flatter and more full of artifice than Samantha’s vocal ones. The last sentence of Timothy Morton’s book, *The Ecological Thought*, oddly parallels Jonze’s project. Morton explains that once you start to think things like the “mesh” and the “strange stranger” you cannot unthink them. “In the future,” he writes, “we will all be thinking the ecological thought. It’s irresistible, like true love” (135). Through this seductive yet somewhat empty statement, Morton sums up what is also at stake for Jonze, who clings to what Shaviro calls the “aching, non-ironic sincerity” of the film while also revealing the limitations of human consciousness and the ways these limitations plague us. *her*’s romance narrative is undercut and disenchanted by another, deeper exploration, of the ways in which the real qualities of an object, any object, will always withdraw from us into the darkness.

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