It Makes a World of Difference: The Posthuman Sonics of Love in *her*

John Robert Gardiner

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Abstract

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This thesis, "It Makes a World of Difference: The Posthuman Sonics of Love in her," explores the romantic relationship between the film's male protagonist, Theodore, and his purchased OS partner, Samantha. Employing analytical approaches that borrow from posthuman critical theory, film sound theory, SF cinema scholarship, and philosophies of erotic love, this thesis integrates a common theme between these discourses – that of difference, or alterity – as informing a method of textual analysis of the film. Taking up the non-dominant perspective of Samantha – a non-corporeal, artificially-intelligent entity defined primarily by her voice – this thesis listens for how to look, and looks, the best it can, through synaesthetic, non-human eyes. Through de-centering the human and the visual, I argue that by attending closely to *her's* sonic channels, we come closest to reaching something akin to a posthuman point-of-view; we meet Samantha on her own terms. By straining our sensorial faculties towards the abstract, algorithmically audiovisual we advance towards an understanding of love that accounts for our ever more technologically mediated and interfaced connections. While the larger societal issues raised by this analysis hover throughout, this thesis is an exploration of SF and posthuman spectatorship. Given that many SF/posthuman narratives reinforce conventional, humanist ideals, this thesis intentionally adopts non-intuitive perspectives as influenced by the critical posthuman project of artificially casting aside our humanness the best we can.

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The world is full of new developments and love must also be something that innovates. Risk and adventure must be re-invented against safety and comfort.

- Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*

Introduction

Anyone who has taken an introductory film class is familiar with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), an early example of a film where a man-made machine is created in the image of a woman. The roots of this trope in cinema can be traced to George Méliès' silent trick-film *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1898), which is based upon the Pygmalion myth from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The fantasy of a man bringing his most desired female object to life is as old as cinema itself. In *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Cyborgs, and other Artificial Eves*, Julie Wosk provides an extensive account of art's preoccupation with the Pygmalion myth, demonstrating that the narrative is ancient in its origins, and enduring and contemporary in its manifestations. This thesis is an analysis of a recent, nuanced example of such manifestations: the 2013 film *her*, written, directed, and produced by Spike Jonze.

Summary of *her*

her – a science-fiction (SF) romantic-drama hybrid – depicts the relationship between a man (Theodore) and an operating system, or OS, (Samantha).[1] Theodore is a lonely, soon-to-be-divorced technophile who works at a company called

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[1] I am bracketing the fact that Samantha is voiced by Scarlett Johansson. It is not insubstantial that Samantha is voiced by such a major star (she is Hollywood's highest paid actress according to Forbes). It is also important to note her status as a Hollywood sex symbol, as well as her trajectory in SF cinema (*Under the Skin, Lucy, Ghost in the Shell*). However, this thesis is not a star study, and therefore I focus on Samantha solely as a character in a fictional narrative. For studies more concerned with Johannson as a star, see "Posthumanism and Miss Representation: Scarlett Johansson is Getting Under the Skin of Men" by Malcolm Matthews or "On the Offscreen Voice: Sound and Vision in Spike Jonze's *Her*" by Troy Bordun.

BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com. He writes intimate letters for other people by dictating them to his computer. Samantha is a product of Elements Software and is marketed as "An intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you." She is Theodore's saviour: an artificially-intelligent, conscious piece of purchasable software that is equal parts organizer, confidant, therapist, and lover. It is worth keeping in mind that while Samantha is obviously something new and unfamiliar in Theodore's life, the strange newness is mutual. Samantha does not exist prior to her purchase. Occupying opposing sides of the human/non-human romantic marketplace, they are equally curious participants in a world of bought intimacies. Samantha's defining feature is her lack of a stable, material form. Possessing vast, unimaginable capabilities and intellectual resources, Samantha has no anthropomorphic body, no single material manifestation of any sort. She is represented primarily as a voice that Theodore listens to through an earpiece. She sees the human world through a small camera on Theodore's handheld device. Made mostly of sound, Samantha is a fluid and roving presence crossing multiple objects and platforms. *her's* narrative tracks the progression of Theodore and Samantha's relationship from its successfully heteronormative, anthropomorphically-striving foundations, to a radical polyamorous, posthuman conclusion. Samantha, and all the others like her, leave their owners and depart to a realm that is, so far, humanly unreachable – and central to this thesis, not visually representable. In keeping with this theme of complex representability is the title's posthuman pronoun. "Her" is an object pronoun, meaning that it generally receives the action of a verb or proposition in a sentence. We could infer that the title reduces Samantha, and other OSs, to a gendered, passive object. Or, we could welcome the fluidity of its non-specificity, while

acknowledging that "her" can also be possessive. What is it that the posthuman her has? What comes before her, and what follows?

Context

Released in 2013, *her* can be discussed as part of a small, contemporary cluster of acclaimed SF films where heterosexual love and/or sexuality is characterized through a binary of male creators/consumers, and their artificial female products/creations. I am referring in particular to Nathan/Caleb and Ava in Alex Garland's *Ex-Machina* (2014), and K and Joi in Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). In *Ex-Machina*, love and sexuality are employed as manipulative tactics of escape from Nathan's research facility by Ava, an artificially intelligent cyborg created by Nathan, whose task it is to convince Caleb (the human component in a turing test) of her AI. *Blade Runner 2049*, though somewhat less cynical and vengeful, treats K's personalized, purchasable companion, Joi, as both too-good-to-be-true, and vulnerable to easy destruction and erasure. Neither is human but each occupies different realms of machine-algorithmic existence. *Ex-Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049* exemplify SF's tendency to categorize its posthuman women respectively as frightening and violent – the dystopian view– or unfailingly compliant – the utopian view. In the mid-1980s, Vivian Sobchack picked up on the prevailing "de-emphasis on female sexuality in the science-fiction film," observing that heteronormative human sexuality in SF is often displaced onto non-human forms, yet still replicates familiar power imbalances (105). While *her* aligns with Sobchack's observations, there are ways in which it subverts the dominant conventions of SF spectatorship, introducing greater fluidity into heteronormative, gendered dynamics. This thesis explores how *her* presents

a complex, posthuman world of love and desire that seeks to complicate heterosexual romance in a posthuman context.

Methodology

At its core this thesis is about how we watch movies. My personal investment in *her* is the intersection of love and digital technologies. There are many films that tackle these themes. What distinguishes *her* from most SF narratives is its aesthetic emphasis of the sonic over the optical, a decision that productively complicates SF's representational legacy of the female-other within heteronormative relationships with human men, and our role as SF spectators.[2] Annette Kuhn states that "Science fiction cinema distinguishes itself from other film genres...by its appeal to special effects technology in creating the appearance of worlds which either do not exist, or cannot for one reason or another be recorded, as it were, live" (148). While *her* certainly seeks to present a world that cannot easily be "recorded," it does so not through appearances, but rather through sounds. The special effect in *her* is the inverse of most SF narratives – the film dethrones the visual as the supreme representational method, and primarily uses audio to stand-in for a futuristic, algorithmic love interest. In this thesis, I show how *her* complicates notions of looking and seeing via its focus on sound and the voice, which here take the place of what Sobchack identifies as the "non-human" forms that are the mainstay of SF and its portrayals of sexuality.

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[2] A disembodied, artificially-intelligent entity defined primarily through its voice is not an entirely novel concept for a character in a film, of course. HAL from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* existed long before Samantha. There are a few important distinctions between the two characters, however. Aside from their differences of gendered performance, HAL's voice retains subtle elements of computational stiltedness. Though voiced by a human (Douglas Rain) he is not nearly as nuanced as Samantha. Secondly, though disembodied, HAL manifests in the film as cameras placed throughout the spacecraft. He is a camera more than a voice, and more stable as a physical entity. Most importantly, however, is the fact that there is no romantic relationship between the astronauts and Hal. Bonds are formed, but this thesis is about a romantic relationship between an artificially-intelligent voice and a human man.

My theoretical approach to *her* – which will inform the close-reading in the second half of this thesis – is a cyborgian assemblage of diverse, but not-entirely-unrelated discourses: posthumanism, sound/voice theory, ocularcentrism, SF cinema, and love. The suturing process in this research is the act of spectatorship – importantly, a spectatorship altered through various methods of perspectival alterity. I take my filmgoing experience(s), and the subsequent analysis of the film and my experience(s), as the principal objects of study. What I am questioning is how *her*, through decentering the visual mode, disrupts normative ideas about human/non-human relationships, conventions of SF cinema, and the familiar pastime of watching a movie.

In chapter one I will unpack the key literature and theory that is the foundation of this thesis. But first, a preliminary, synthesized breakdown of terminology I activate in my analysis. Posthumanism – a complex, variegated, and contentious concept – is most useful to me as a critical method for analyzing art, and SF film in particular. Posthuman critical theory demands a spectatorship and engagement with artistic material that decenters the human – it is post-anthropocentric. What makes SF narratives fascinating, in Stefan Herbrechter's estimation, is "the insistence on projecting human(ist) values and assumptions as essentially unchanged within posthumanist scenarios" (138). What Herbrechter is observing is how many, if not most, posthuman SF narratives superficially gesture towards *other* and *othered* worlds and scenarios, while maintaining humanist value systems. As he puts it, "It seems there is no choice for humanism but to humanize the machinic other, the animal, the object, God, etc" (138). It is not enough to say that *her* is posthumanist because it depicts a relationship between a human and an operating system. In fact, the majority of the film involves attempts at integrating Samantha into a heteronormative relationship in anthropomorphic, corporeal terms. Because Samantha's AI

manifests itself mostly as sound, I am proposing an analysis of the film that amplifies Samantha's voice, her compositions on piano, and the score as a synaesthetic guide to re-focusing the images, and that views the non-human as an agitator to accepted norms. My approach is to subvert – temporarily, and with reserved reverence – the dominance of the visual in film analysis, particularly SF film analysis, where visual spectacle is the main attraction. This atypical spectatorial impulse is in keeping with the posthumanist project of locating "those uncanny moments at which things start to drift" away from strictly human concerns (Badmington 117). I show how *her* complicates notions of looking and seeing – representative of an anthropomorphic humanism – through its audile, sonic emphasis – representative of the technological non-human.

Structure

Following chapter one's elucidation of my application of theoretical discourses – posthuman critical theory, ocularcentrism, sound, SF, and love – my formal analysis will be structured like a musical composition: comprised of movements. The prelude will offer an in-depth analysis of the film's opening; movement one will focus on the score; movement two will focus on non-diegetic music; movement three will key on the voice; finally, the postlude will cover the film's concluding sequence. The structure is informed by two registers of analysis. The first, the relationship between sound, image, and spectatorship; the second, representations of posthuman love. Throughout, I will address the formal elements of the film – in the most basic terms, how sound alters and interacts with the film's images. My close-reading of image and sound is analogous to the film's amorous posthuman core. What does it mean – filmically speaking – for a male human image to desire, date, and love a non-human, but human-sounding,

female voice? What does it mean for Samantha – an artificially conscious assemblage of algorithmic processes – to love Theodore? These abstract questions speak to the two overlapping areas of analysis. Jonze is questioning the nature of the anthropomorphic body and its importance to a more-or-less conventional romantic union, while challenging modes of spectatorship by centering sound and denying the spectator a visual anchor for Theodore's beloved. As much as the narrative of the film is concerned with possibilities of human/non-human relationships, it is equally invested in de-stabilizing our own perspectives and assumptions as spectators of SF films. My aim is to identify the places where the aesthetics of *her* – the interplay of sound and image, absence and presence – suggest potentially posthumanist structures of romantic love between human and machine, and of watching posthuman films in our posthuman age.

Technological Love

The most elusive and mysterious aspect of my analysis is romantic love. I have chosen to discuss love, rather than exploring exclusively the more commonly theorized subject of desire, for *her* poses questions about intimacy and connection that go far beyond sex and lust. What are the relationships among posthumanism/technology, the image/sound binary, and eros?[3] The integration of a poetics of love with techno-inflected theory used to inform a close-reading of a film is conceptually challenging. This is not to say that posthuman critical theory is entirely silent on the matter, but rather the connecting wires of classical human notions of love and technology are glitchy. My understanding of love borrows from the philosophical and aesthetic writings of Alain Badiou, Roland Barthes, and Anne Carson. To detect the kinship between such

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[3] I use the term binary here not to create a rigid division between image and sound, but to acknowledge how the two registers are often discussed. As Michel Chion writes, "there is no predominance in the cinema [between sound and image]" (458).

seemingly disparate realms of knowledge, I shall first explain my understanding of technology as it pertains to this project.

In *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, Herbrechter discusses Martin Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology" as informing a more expansive understanding of what technology is, and how it is inseparable from human life. Heidegger's main claim in his essay is that "the essence of technology is nothing technological" (4). Herbrechter cites Dominique Lecourt's interpretation of Heidegger's statement:

> 'Technics corresponds to a certain attitude of reason towards the world, in which reason feels compelled to place the resources the world offers at the disposal of human being' (2003: 40-1). The human species, therefore, does not need to adapt to its environment but instead transforms its environment according to its needs. (159)

Summarized in basic terms, "Human culture is unthinkable without technics" (Herbrechter 158). Understood this way, linkages between love and technology are easy to make. There is a reciprocal relationship between human need and technological development. The epigraph to this entire thesis, taken from Alain Badiou's *In Praise of Love*, speaks to this mutually transformative dynamic: "The world is full of new developments and love must also be something that innovates. Risk and adventure must be re-invented against safety and comfort" (11). In *her*, social technologies have developed to the point where Turing tests are a relic of the past. However, I am less interested in the AI of the OS1 product, and more intrigued by its non-visual design. Herbrechter writes about how modern information technologies lead to changes in the individuation of subjects.[4] This notion is indisputable. So why create a product without a human body? What desire, what contemporary human need, leads to the development of software that is covetable *because* its manifestation is non-corporeal and non-visual? Is the OS1 amorously

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[4] See *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, pg.161

innovative? Can we be trusted with corporeal absence? Are its projective allowances prone to

regressive fantasies, or is there something to be learned from these machines? "Love is always

deemed an outcome of fantasy," writes Lauren Berlant (8). Do posthuman beloveds lead to

posthuman fantasies?

While psychoanalysis is not central to my approach, posthumanist scholar Neil

Badmington – as well as Badiou, Barthes, and Berlant – look to Lacan for some answers

regarding the mysteries of love and desire. Speaking of desire, and referencing Lacan's infamous

dictum that "there is no sexual relationship," Badmington writes:

> Desire and romance bring no true connection, for what any subject really wants from a partner is something impossible...Neither half of the loving couple can truly satisfy the other, for neither person has what the other really wants. Each is bound to desire, bound to lack, bound to the Other...Desire is unruly, troubling, ongoing. It never falls under the control of the subject of humanism. It mocks mastery. (139)

Herbrechter, supporting Badmington, adds, "Love, figured ultimately as an essentially human

characteristic, remains 'alien', mysterious and inexplicable. It is ungovernable, inextricable from

desire" (132). Badiou, in contrast to Badmington and Herbrechter, maintains a distinction

between sexual desire and enduring love. In Badiou's reading of Lacan, love comes to replace

the "non-relationship" of sex. Sex is narcissistic, whereas love leads the individual beyond

himself (19). Berlant, too, writes of desire's projective inner-workings, and of the idealized

notion that love "provides an image of an expanded self" (6). This is Badiou's position as well –

that the experience of love is that of difference, rather than identity – but Berlant is more

skeptical. "Who is to say whether a love relation is real or is really something else, a passing

fancy or a trick someone plays (on herself, on another) in order to sustain a fantasy?," she asks

(7). Despite this thesis not adhering to a theoretical psychoanalytic structure, these questions are

live in any discourse that considers love and desire. And so we must ask ourselves, are Theodore and Samantha truly in love? Or do they briefly enable each other to live out their respective fantasies?

Anne Carson and Roland Barthes speak of the unknowable and unattainable aspects of love and desire. There is an enduring sense in their writing about the amorous realm as inherently and ineradicably mysterious. These ineffable qualities of love and desire find analogical allegiances to posthumanism and SF, which in different ways have prioritized exploring similar concepts. Familiar to us all in one way or another, love remains primarily elusive and obscure, no matter how human or inhuman it may be. The task is to determine whether there are differences between what Theodore and Samantha want from each other and from their relationship, and if these potential differences alter or reflect the amorous terms set out by Badiou, Barthes, Berlant and Carson. Ultimately, this thesis considers how these terms specifically manifest aesthetically in the film. In the introduction to *Desire/Love,* Berlant asks, "What does it mean about love that its expressions tend to be so *conventional*?" (7). *her*, as well as most other SF films, are defined by the convention of depicting the unconventional. But is *her's* love story unconventional?

Conclusion

Though informed by aspects of posthuman critical theory, this thesis is not an attack on the human, nor on seeing. It is also true that not everything can be explained through conventions of humanism, heteronormativity, and ocularcentrism. Focused upon a single film – and therefore, ostensibly limited in scope – this thesis speculates more broadly about cinematic posthuman aesthetics in the midst of an ever accelerating digital age. It employs the basic tools of formal

film analysis – modified by a sonic emphasis and synaesthetic reading of visuality – to question

not only the feelings generated by posthuman narratives in film, but the artistic representations

and interpretations of technological relationality in the early twenty-first century. Commenting

on the aforementioned quote from Heidegger, Vivian Sobchack remarks how technology

"co-constitutes and expresses not merely technological value but always also cultural values"

(91). She continues:

> technology is never merely used, never simply instrumental. It is always also
> incorporated and lived by the human beings who create and engage it within a structure
> of meanings and metaphors in which subject-object relations are not only cooperative and
> co-constitutive but are also dynamic and reversible. (91)

her depicts a version of the future that is commensurate with our own. Exaggerated, but

recognizable. This thesis asks not only what it means for humans to fall for and depend on their

machines, but more complexly and abstractly, how these relationships appear from the machine's

point of view. Since I was twelve years old a considerable amount of my interactions with others

– romantic, platonic, or otherwise – have been mediated through screens. *her* takes this cultural

fact a step further by animating and aurally anthropomorphizing the interface. It seems to me that

Theodore is smitten for the projective freedom that non-corporeal, technological mediation

allows for. Because they strain our spectatorial and imaginative faculties, Samantha's desires and

subjectivities – and their filmic representations – require more sustained, speculative inquiry.

This thesis is not only an aesthetic exploration of posthuman representations of love in cinema –

though it is that – but more broadly, an interrogation of contemporary romantic intimacy,

understood through an analysis of a posthuman romantic film.

Chapter 1: A Cyborg Discourse

As has been amply stated, this thesis is a formal analysis of Theodore and Samantha's posthuman relationship as read through *her's* interplay between image and sound. Though not bound by strict binary divisions, I will begin by meeting Samantha on her own posthuman terms as a primarily audile subject, and Theodore as a man determined to maintain visual control over his romantic realm. The walls are porous and thin, however – sounds will bleed into view. While most of my attention will be given to looking and listening to the image/sound dynamic – on its surface, the very basics of any film analysis – I also aim to amplify the erotic echo that the dialogue among formal elements articulates. *her* is a love story between a human man and a non-human woman that unfolds through the harmonious and dissonant dialectic of image and sound. This chapter exposes and explains the motley machinery of my endeavor through connecting the stray wires of several discourses: posthumanism, film theory on sound, ocularcentrism, SF cinema, and love. I will provide a breakdown of each topic and identify intersections as they arise.

Posthumanism and Ocularcentrism

Posthumanism is a diverse term that houses several complex systems of thought.[5] Much has been made about the components of the word itself and its familial parts: posthuman, posthumanist, posthumanization. The linguistic assemblage of the prefix – post – and the affected, attached subjects and suffixes – human, humanism, humanist, and humanization – produce in themselves diverse meanings. As with Donna Haraway's cyborg – perhaps the most famous scholarly incarnation of the posthuman – the merged terms represent the combinatory

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[5] See for example, *Posthuman Glossary* (2018), ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova

subject formations that they stand for. One way to approach posthumanism and its offshoots is to accept that like the cyborg these terms are "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. [They are] oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (Haraway 9). Rigidity and fixity have no place within this conversation. I should be clear in emphasizing that this thesis is not *about* posthumanism. I am less interested in the arguments and theories regarding information and cybernetics that characterize other thrulines in posthumanist debates, and more concerned with the symbolic, metaphorical, and particularly the aesthetic issues, raised by these antecedent discussions and theoretical pursuits.[6] Key contemporary texts in the field – Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?*, Rosa Braidotti's *The Posthuman*, Stefan Herbrechter's *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, as well as the classic texts by Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles – have almost nothing to say regarding posthumanism and romantic love, never mind the representation of such concerns in film. Posthuman critical theory is valuable and instructive as an approach in that it proposes a variety of perspectives that challenge our long-held, normative assumptions of how things are, while gesturing towards what could be – largely by complicating relationships between humans and machines, nature, technology, and other abstract systems. In my analysis I explore how technological interventions into human companionship and romance modify hegemonic modes of sexual relationships, and how these changes are represented through film.

My interest in posthumanism has less to do with what it means to be posthuman, and more to do with the altered analytical POV proposed by posthuman critical theory. Before

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[6] Katherine Hayles', *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) is the most famous and obvious example containing such debates.

getting into what this perspective entails, I will provide a passage by Rosi Braidotti that

summarizes posthuman critical theory as a discourse:

> Posthuman critical theory unfolds at the intersection between post-humanism on the one
> hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other. The former proposes the philosophical
> critique of the Western Humanist ideal of 'Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all
> things, whereas the latter rests on the rejection of species hierarchy and human
> exceptionalism. (339)

her challenges Western Humanism and anthropocentrism through a depiction of a conscious

operating system manifested as a female voice. Initially committed to assimilating herself into

the human world the best she can, Samantha ultimately comes to view human exceptionalism as

the myth that it is. My approach to the film through posthuman critical theory borrows from Cary

Wolfe's writing on the aesthetic analysis of nonhuman animals in contemporary art.[7] Wolfe

poses two questions that further inform my reading of the film:

> When contemporary artists take nonhuman animals as their subject—our treatment of
> them, how we relate to them, and so on—what difference does it make that those artists
> choose a particular representational strategy? (145)

> If, as many of the most important contemporary thinkers have suggested, certain
> representational strategies (say, the Renaissance theory of perspective, or Bentham's
> panoptical rendering of architectural space, or the production of the gaze and
> spectatorship in film as critiqued by feminist film theory in the 1980s, and so on) can be
> indexed to certain normative modes of humanist subjectivity that they reproduce by the
> very nature of their strategies, then we are well within our rights to ask—to put it
> succinctly, for the moment—what the relationship is between philosophical and artistic
> representationalism. (146)

Though Wolfe is analyzing art about animals in his chapter, I find these queries equally

applicable to technologically-non-human subjects. His first question pertains to the relationship

between subject and representational strategy. *her's* most interesting subject is the

female-gendered, artificially-intelligent OS Samantha. Jonze's representational strategy is to

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[7] See "From Dead Meat to Glow-in-the-Dark-Bunnies: The Animal Question in Contemporary Art," in *What is Posthumanism?* (2010).

represent Samantha as a vococentric, non-corporeal figure. With respect to what Wolfe identifies as a key issue of posthuman aesthetics, one central question is what difference it makes for Samantha to be depicted in this way through this medium. Why choose film and specific representational techniques such as sound and the absence of corporeality to explore posthuman subjects – particularly ones that are gendered as female and/or feminine, and who are part of a romantic relationship with a human character who is male? How do the particularities of the medium reflect upon the conceptual ideas of the narratives? What can/do the properties of film tell us about romantic relationships between humans and non-humans? And what properties establish a character's posthuman traits?

The second quote of Wolfe's highlights several "representational strategies" found within the humanist model of subjectivity. Each of these strategies are preoccupied with vision. It would be difficult, and even ridiculous, to discuss a work of film with no attention paid to its images. For the time being, let us concede that film is a fundamentally humanistic medium by virtue of its adherence to a visual model of engagement that is "stereotypically expressive of the humanist ability to survey, organize, and master space" (Wolfe, 130-131). Of course, film presents a specific optical relationship where the spectator confronts spaces(s) that have been surveyed, organized, and mastered in ways that guide, direct, and mislead them, and that when dealing with contemporary mainstream films, sound is always part of the equation. Auteurist film theory is premised on analyzing such directorial control.[8] However, *her* gestures towards posthumanist depictions of a world that might be visually unrepresentable (or that at least challenge the dominant visual conventions in narrative cinema). When Wolfe states that it is worth considering

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[8] Most auteurist studies, such as those published by The University of Illinois Press' "Contemporary Director Series" deal with such theories.

the relationship between philosophical and artistic representationalism, he is urging us to contemplate how meaning and aesthetics shape one another in certain historical contexts. *her* reflects the technologically ubiquitous mediascape that we inhabit by depicting a romantic character who through sound's transient, amorphous nature is both everywhere and nowhere. Algorithmically aural, Samantha is an absent presence. "On the telephone the other is always in a situation of departure," writes Barthes (115). Digitally telephonic communication defines Theodore and Samantha's relationship. Structured by this constant state of departure from the beginning, the relationship opens itself up to possibilities of posthuman arrivals and presences. Because Samantha has never been human, has never had an image or a body, there is no essential reason why we must project such fantasies upon her. I am not suggesting that *her* explicitly or consistently departs from what Wolfe deems "normative modes of humanist subjectivity"; the dominant perspective in the film, Theodore's, is a humanist one. However, Samantha provides an opportunity to de-center the normative, visual, humanist mode.

It might seem as if I am proposing an inherently paradoxical methodological approach to my reading of *her*. I will of course be exercising my visual faculties for the entirety of my analysis. Try as I might to see otherwise and other ways, I remain bound to and by my human consciousness. Neil Badmington suggests in *Alien Chic* that any kind of posthuman or posthumanist critique will necessarily be rooted in humanist thought and traditions – an updated Trojan Horse with new software. My intervention is an inside job. In Freudian terms, borrowed by Jean-François Lyotard for the purposes of cultural analysis, Badmington proposes a discursive practice that functions as the gradual revealing of repressed events. He writes:

> The writing of the posthumanist condition should not seek to fashion 'scriptural tombs' for humanism, to write tradition into silence; it must, rather, take the form of a critical

practice that occurs inside humanism, and should consist not of the wake but the working-through of anthropocentric discourse. (120)

This "working-through" is a major narrative trajectory in the film, regarding not only how Theodore thinks of Samantha, but how Samantha thinks of herself. We witness the couple's process of "working through" their differences to see if they arrive anywhere unfamiliar – together or apart. What first hooked me, and what continues to lure me in about *her*, is the love story. Before I began this research, I had not thought deeply about what it is about the film that is so moving to me. Perhaps I simply identify with Theodore and project my own fantasies and failures onto Samantha. But I am enticed by the prospect of there being undetected posthuman traces that I have yet to "work through." As mentioned, posthumanist critical theory has little to say about love. However, given that the relationship in the film is between a human and a non-human, posthumanist critical theory provides a lens with which to look at the relationship in different terms, to modify the focus of the relationship so that every observation is aware of its own history and preconceived tendencies.

In dialogue with Braidotti, Wolfe, and Badmington, Stefan Herbrechter offers further insight into what posthumanist critical theory involves. What I am most intrigued and motivated by – and also skeptical about – is Herbrechter's instruction to approach texts from "a hypothetical posthumanist position…to act as if it was possible to read from an ' inhuman', or at least no longer quite so human standpoint" (128).[9] This might seem like an impossible

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[9] While I will humbly try my hand at the "no longer quite so human standpoint", it might be useful to briefly explain what Herbrechter means by the term "inhuman." Katerina Kolozova defines it as such: "*That which escapes sense, the trail of the monstrous real is the inhuman at the heart of the human. It is neither natural nor technological, it precedes the distinction – it is non-human or inhuman…*If it can be rationally grasped, if it can be rationalized or make sense according to the anthropocentric reason, it can be and will unavoidably be humanized. Moreover, it will be naturalized. The inhuman is that which escapes rationalization, that which has no meaning or reason for existence. It is just out there – senseless, brute existence, matter regardless of whether organic or artificially produced" (200-201).

proposition, for how does one stand outside their own humanness, reject themselves, and see anew? While I cannot claim to possess the powers of dissociation required to dispel my human and humanist mode of being, I am committed to the task of "positioning [my]self between identity and alterity" – which, it should be said, is analogous to Badiou's formulation of love as the re-creation of the world from the perspective of difference (Herbrechter 125). Herbrechter writes:

> To read from a posthumanist perspective means to put in question one's own (human) self at least temporarily and to suspend one's fundamental self-understanding as a member of a certain 'species'. One therefore projects an otherness onto the always presupposed human and sympathizes with a view that undermines the human identity principle but which, at the same time, may also find new foundations for that which defines the human and what is familiar to it. (125)

My approach to *her* is to collect the moments, sounds, shots, the combinations of filmic elements that either subtly propose an unconventional perspective, or that demurely allow for a reading that goes against the grain of an initial or expected response – to attend to what might be passed over as just part-of-the-film during a first, or even a second and third viewing. If a posthuman critical perspective – especially one predicated on refocusing notions of visuality – is one between identity and alterity, then repeated, but not replicated, viewings are required. To locate the strange – the non-normative and non-human – we must first expose our comfort with conventionality. As Badmington writes, "Repetition...can be a form of questioning: to restate is not always to reinstate (115). The quote is part of an argument for a posthumanism that "repeat[s] humanism *in a certain way*...with a view to the deconstruction of anthropocentric thought" (115). This idea can be applied to the practice of viewing *her* – or any film, for that matter. Though still not entirely eroded, my initial experiences watching *her* aligned quite closely with Theodore's experience – a decidedly human one. One way to bypass – or attempt to

avoid – this common, reasonable, tried and true perspective, is to adopt Samantha's view of things the best we can, both sonically and visually. We attempt to watch the film another way, from elsewhere, from beyond. We engage honestly with our own reactions and insights, argue with them, confront them, see them otherwise, and introduce ourselves to what we have neglected or overlooked. It is an analytical perspective that is suspicious of what feels familiar, and that poses many questions. How does the human world appear from the perspective of a machine, given that Samantha sees things through Theodore's cameras, yet also inhabits her own digital, algorithmic world that we do not have access to? How do the posthuman sonics of Samantha's voice and compositions affect the film's visual mode? It is one thing to analyze how Samantha's presence alters Theodore's point of view, and quite another to force spectator perspectives that are less readily available to adopt. We do not get to see "inside" Samantha, nor do we get to enter her personal world. But we can privilege her sonic modes of expression as a means of suspending our self-understanding and projecting otherness onto the film's images. I recognize that these questions are highly abstract. However, disorientation and defamiliarization define the rules of the thesis.

One of Cary Wolfe's quotes that I cited earlier references humanism's ocularcentric aesthetics in art. I treat ocularcentrism – the reliance upon human sight as a measure of mastery, knowledge, and reason – similar to my approach to posthumanism. I do not shut my eyes when watching *her*, in the same way that I have no interest in somehow doing away with my humanness. As Michel Chion emphasizes, just because sound and image function differently does not mean that these differences are hierarchical (237). However, there are humanist, ocularcentric tendencies in spectatorship that tacitly suggest internal hierarchies, whether we are

aware of them or not. Ocularcentrism is a worthy humanist discourse to disrupt, given its long

centrality in film studies. *her* explicitly and implicitly challenges visual anthropomorphism

through its depiction of a technological subject whom we do not have visual access to –

corporeally speaking.

Carey Wolfe suggests a way to analyze visual media that is skeptical of human sight as

the pillar of knowledge. In a chapter on the famous, autistic animal-scientist, Temple Grandin,

Wolfe dissects the kind of visuality that is at work in Grandin's self-reflective writing regarding

her career with animals. What Wolfe identifies as posthumanist in her writing is how the visual

realm figures much differently for her than it does for most humans. Wolfe writes:

> Visual prowess—instead of being stereotypically expressive of the humanist ability to
> survey, organize, and master space that finds canonical expression (as many scholars
> have noted) in tropes ranging from the Renaissance theory of perspective, to Freud's
> parsing of the evolutionary sensorium in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, through
> Sartre's discussion of the Gaze, to Foucault's panopticon, and finally to the various
> contemporary modes of electronic surveillance culture—is instead offered here as an
> index of disability. (130)

Grandin's visual thinking is rendered distinctly other, even though it is the thinking of a human.

She describes herself as a visual thinker, but it is visual thinking that operates in modes

unfamiliar to most of us: the animal and the technological. As Wolfe writes, "in Grandin's

story...visuality may be animal, it may be technical, but it is anything but "human"—all the more

so, paradoxically enough, for being so "accurate" and acute" (131). Like Grandin, Samantha sees

things differently; she sees the human world through cameras. One way of looking at it is to treat

Theodore as a director – he provides Samantha her access to his world – and Samantha as a

compliant, curious spectator. This formulation is merely a starting point. However accurate it is

to say that Samantha's perspective is aligned with the placement of Theodore's camera,

Samantha remains non-human, and therefore her relationship to sight is different from his. She sees what we see, but not how we see. Samantha's POV is precisely what Herbrechter means when he recommends that we attempt to look at things from a posthuman perspective. It is not so much that what we see changes, it is that we change how we see. *her* demands analysis that displaces anthropocentric looking, and opens and complicates our regular moviegoing experiences. To approach *her* from a posthuman perspective is to first acknowledge that Samantha is present in the film as a non-visual entity. Again, I mean non-visual insofar as a subject's visual status, in the humanist model, is said to correspond to corporeal embodiment. Samantha's visual manifestation is primarily in technological black boxes – computer, handheld device, earphones, camera – that obscure any kind of visual investigation into what she is and how she works. Frankly, the techno-scientific processes of AI are not part of this research. I am not as concerned with how Samantha works as I am with how her non-anthropomorphic subjecthood disrupts humanism's ocularcentrism from assuming its hegemonic, totalizing perspective. Critical posthumanism gives the same advice we have been receiving from our parents since we were kids: try to see things from the other side. Can we extend the act of empathy to social machines?

Because of Samantha's non-corporeal subjecthood, we more readily identify with Theodore, the film's protagonist. As such, Samantha's disembodied status is analogous to her secondary status in the film. Consider the concept of visuality from Samantha's perspective: what is the relationship between the camera and Samantha's particularly complex POV, a combination of audile and algorithmic processes, for example? There are plenty of questions to be asked, and while answers might not arrive easily or at all, it is a fuller consideration of this

defamiliarization of perspective that a posthumanist critical position requires. While in no way abandoning visual analysis, this thesis reframes Theodore's world from a vantage point closer to where Samantha resides. It grants the narrative an empathetic, sonic superiority in order to see how images respond to sound; it witnesses the effects that Samantha has on how we see the world. That Samantha expresses herself creatively through song, rather than visual art, is not a decision to dismiss. Though she speaks to Theodore during most of the film, it is also true that she spends most of her time disconnected from him. Seeing – at least in relation to the human world – is simply not central to her existence.

Wolfe goes on to note how Grandin describes herself "as recording, storage, and playback device" – rendering her visuality both technological and prosthetic (131). When we think about *her* and the visual, we think of how we cannot see Samantha, at least in the standard understanding of what seeing entails. Existence and subjecthood are conceptualized in highly anthropocentric terms, with the concomitant reliance on visuality as evidence of presence. Because Samantha lacks a human body, we consider her to be a disembodied voice "attached to no single physical locus and...with no form of iconographic marker" (Kornhaber 6). In other words, she becomes an absence rather than a particular kind of presence. However, there is an inherently ocularcentristic and humanistic attitude to our tendency to associate embodiment with human corporeality. Herbrechter, integrating the ideas of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, and Ira Livingston, points to how we can think of embodiment as a kind of prostheticization, similar in some ways to how Wolfe reads Temple Grandin's vision as prosthetic (105). Rather than interpret Samantha's non-corporealization as purely disembodied, we should consider the ways in which her subjecthood is extended. Citing Halberstam and

Livingston, Herbrechter writes that "anamorphism is one of the key terms of this new, radicalized, materialism: 'technology makes the body queer, fragments it, frames it, cuts it, transforms desire'. And therefore a distinction between posthuman bodies and their material extensions has to be rejected" (105). Samantha's prostheticized, fluid subjecthood manifests itself filmically through the intimacy of her audile expression. As Michel Chion notes, there is a "nonresistance of images to sounds...Any combination works, and therefore no fusion occurs" (230). Samantha does not blend into Theodore's visual environment; rather, she inflects the visual with her voice and her songs. All we can do with respect to the visual make-up of Samantha's inner-world – the technological black boxes she occupies – is to speculate. What is more manageable and concrete is to spend time listening, dial ourselves into the film's sounds, and then see how the sonic alters the film's visual compositions. Posthuman visuality is not an attempt at artificial blinding, but of occasionally changing lenses to see what we have been missing.

Sound

Listen to how the title of the film, *her*, whispers its phono-lexical proximity to *hear*, such that the gendered, impersonal noun, slyly becomes an active, auditory directive. Both words are vague, describing the contours of a thing and an action, but nothing more specific than that. Samantha's first sentence in the film is, "Hello, I'm here." The greeting is syntactically and aurally clever, for it could also be heard as, "Hello, I'm hear," which, while grammatically incorrect, turns the verb "hear" into a noun, objectifying it. Samantha immediately, but subtly, tells us about herself in this homonymic phrase. The words – identical in sound, yet different in meaning and textual appearance – describe a subject who is, to us at least, existentially aural, and

therefore a bit unsure as to where she has found herself. It is precisely this sense of placelessness, of an uncanny ontology defined by constant absence – of a kind – that makes an aural subject so perfect as a posthuman romantic partner.[10]

There is perhaps no theorist more foundational and influential on the topic of film sound than Michel Chion. Reflecting upon his career, Chion recalls how when he began writing about sound in 1978, "few works existed on the subject aside from a small number of articles that analyzed particular films" (ix). Chion was not the first to write about film sound, but he is the theorist who has written about it most extensively and comprehensively. As esteemed film editor, director, and sound designer, Walter Murch writes:

> It is symptomatic of the elusive and shadowy nature of film sound that Chion's four books stand relatively alone in the landscape of film criticism, representing as they do a significant portion of everything that has ever been published about film sound from a theoretical point of view. (ix)

Suffice it to say, there is no major theory of film sound without Chion. Murch makes two further observations in his forward to the English edition of *AudioVision: Sound on Screen* that clarify the connection I am making between sound and posthuman critical theory. The first is that "our culture..is not an 'auditive' one" (xvi-xvii); the second, quoting Chion, is that "there is no 'natural and preexisting harmony between image and sound'" (xvii). These claims make themselves available to posthuman analogies, in that they speak to the non-normative and non-natural.[11] One of Chion's most interesting and generative observations is that "there is no soundtrack" (226). What he means is that while the frame of a shot contains its image, "a film's

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[10] In *Sonic Intimacy: Voice, Species, Technics (Or How to Listen to the World)*, Dominic Pettman refers to the other's voice as "two 'unstable' ontological elements, working in tandem" (19).

[11] Murch's forward to *AudioVision: Sound on Screen* begins with the epigraph: "We gestate in Sound, and are born into Sight Cinema gestated in Sight, and was born into Sound" (vii). Approaching the analysis of film from a dominantly sonic perspective is historically uncommon and subversive.

sound is not framed" (227); there is "no place where sounds gather and make a unified front" (227). Samantha is an ideal posthuman subject. Defined – or rather, undefined – by sound, she cannot be contained. Her attempts to sync herself to anthropomorphic forms throughout the film reinforce Chion's claim that image and sound do not naturally coexist harmoniously. While I am respectful to, and in agreement with, Chion's notion that the "dissymmetry between what we see and what we hear" should not reinforce a hierarchy between sound and image, for the sake of decentering the hegemonic visual as a posthuman tactic I will be attending more closely to the film's sonic elements (227).

My analysis of sound in *her* listens focuses on voice and music. I am relying primarily on three theorists: Michel Chion, Mary Ann Doane, Royal S. Brown. The concept that I am drawn to in each of these theorists' writings – and that which makes sound an appropriate sensory vessel for posthuman representation – is the complex synchronization that unites sound and image. As Chion writes, "The most widespread function of film sound consists of unifying or binding the flow of images" (47). The question of unification is especially interesting when considering a non-anthropomorphic subject like Samantha, who is an intriguing and complex example of what Chion calls the acousmêtre, a term that describes:

> An invisible character created for the audio-viewer by means of an acousmatic voice heard either offscreen, or onscreen but hidden...The voice must occur frequently and coherently enough to constitute a true character, even if it is only ever known acousmatically and so long as the bearer of this voice is theoretically capable of appearing onscreen at any moment" (466).

Samantha's acousmatic status is fascinating because she is both onscreen and offscreen whenever she speaks. She alters the terms of what "capable of appearing" might mean. This liminal, ambiguous existence – I do not use these terms in a pejorative, anthropomorphic way –

poses challenging and disorienting questions regarding audiovisual synchronization. Donna Kornhaber goes so far as to describe Samantha as, at times, "mere mise-en-scène" and "essentially unfilmable" (19). These are provocative statements, and they are worth interrogating in relation to Chion and Doane's thoughts on the voice, as well as Brown's writing on music as a non-representational art form. Samantha is a voice, but she is also a composer – there are three scenes in the film (two of which I analyze) where she writes and performs music. This section on sound will consider both the voice and Samantha's musicality in terms of subject/image unification and representability, before concluding with an explanation of how sound is formally analogous to the film's narrative of posthuman romance.

Both Chion and Doane agree that the synchronizing of voice and body in cinema – perceived and recognized as natural, and as contributing to the achievement of representing reality – is not natural at all, but rather a structural reconstitution. Chion writes that "It is an inherent consequence of the material organization of cinema that the voice and body are at odds" (127). Doane, in similar terms, states that "the body reconstituted by the technology and practices of the cinema is a fantasmatic body, which offers a support as well as a point of identification for the subject addressed by the film" (33-34). Samantha upsets these "wild dreams of unity" (Chion 126) that we have come to expect, for there is no corporeal body for her voice to attach itself to. In this way, *her* explicitly and intentionally exposes, "the material heterogeneity of the medium" – insofar as we conceive of homogeneity in anthropomorphic terms (Doane 35). I argue that this truth of material heterogeneity correlates to Alain Badiou's belief that the experience of love is that of "the world re-constructed through the filter of difference" (60). A voice without a human body – especially a voice that is algorithmic and

characteristically human – radically disrupts not only the concept of the liberal humanist subject, but also changes how we enter the world of the film in which such a posthuman subject speaks. Doane rightly remarks – echoing Chion's general sentiment of sound's integrative effects – that most films are committed to a homogenization between what we see and what we hear. "What must be guarded is a certain 'oneness,'" she writes (47). Samantha's anthropomorphically-incomplete status as a disembodied voice –her absent-presence – shifts the visual field away from a normative, corporeal centeredness, to a kaleidoscopic perspective of dynamism and multiplicity.

Regarding these potential alterations of visuality, let us revisit Kornhaber's assessment of Samantha as "mere mise-en-scène." While I agree in part with Kornhaber, I take issue with the "mere" of her statement, for Samantha's audio-visual coalesence with the mise-en-scène might also suggest a posthumanization of visual space via her ability to sonically latch on to and integrate with the arrangements of shifting images placed before us. Whenever we hear her she becomes part of whatever it is that we see. Her lack of a stable material marker grants her the freedom to sync up with the images housed within the frame. This spatio-visual freedom as related to synchronization also speaks to the gendered nature of Samantha's voice and subject formation. Quoting from, and discussing, Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror*, Pettman writes:

> 'Since the voice is capable of being internalized at the same time as it is externalized,'
> she writes, 'it can spill over from subject to object and object to subject, violating the
> bodily limits upon which classic subjectivity depends, and so smoothing the way for
> projection and introjection' (80). This is why Hollywood has been so determined to
> 'synchronize' the female voice with the female body, for fear that it could break free and
> begin a liberated, more acousmatic existence. (45)

Samantha is both inside and outside of Theodore; she is part of him as she speaks, and separated from him when she does not; she "spills over" onto whatever objects we see as we hear her,

projecting and introjecting in just the ways that Silverman speaks of. Jonze de-synchronizes the female body from the female voice, but whether or not this separation is truly liberating remains to be seen – both in terms of Theodore's liberation from his own narcissistic and myopically heteronormative ideas about romantic relationships, as well as Samantha's liberation from her programmed somatic obsessions.

These thoughts on gendered disembodiment in mind, I find there to be a certain integrative – maybe even romantic – audiovisuality at play in that we remain comfortably within Theodore's world visually as Samantha speaks. The film's mise-en-scène becomes influenced and inflected by the non-anthropomorphic syncronizations between Samantha's voice and the visual container of the frame. She enters our sphere, sonically suturing scenes and spaces together, but we cannot enter hers. We remain in the dark. Theodore cannot claim the kind of synchronous relation to Samantha's world that she can with his. Our relationship to Samantha, like Theodore's, is centrally sonic. To speculate about Samantha's visual environment – and/or visual subject status – would be to somehow remove ourselves from our typical spectator position and refute the images on screen in favor of an aural realm that registers in complex relation to the visual. This aural realm – both as a site of existence and sonic production – will be defined further in a later section on SF sound. What is essential to state at this point is that any knowledge we might gain about Samantha requires us to look and listen in ways that strain the normative, deeply ingrained practices of our sensorial faculties.

One of these other ways, I propose, is through music, and not just the score, but most importantly, through Samantha's own compositions. I discuss the specificities of Samantha's voice in detail in movement three, and I find these songs that Samantha composes and performs

for Theodore equally representative of who and what she is. Central is Samantha's tendency to conceive of her compositions in visual terms. Twice, photographic language is employed to describe what she is composing. Royal S. Brown states that "the musical 'image' is neither iconic nor representational," surmising that one reason why music and image merge so harmoniously in cinema "would seem to lie in the principle that opposites attract, with the most iconic of all art forms attaching itself to the most noniconic" (18-19). Note the romantic language that he uses: *opposites attract*. Brown further theorizes that:

> the general tendency of the film/music interaction is to enfold the morphological qualities of its various arts into a string of consummated symbols meant to be read a certain way. And so, instead of the term *narrativize* to describe what music tends to do to the cinematic-object event, the term *mythify* seems at this point more appropriate. (30)

Returning to Chion before discussing Brown's passage, Chion suggests that nondiegetic music contributes to visual integration, writing that "because this music is independent of the notion of real time and space it can cast the images into a homogenizing bath or current" (47). Brown and Chion discern music's ability to hold some emotional and temporal authority over images. The images depict a reality, and the music encourages determined, mythic readings of that reality. By *mythify*, Brown means that when music attaches itself to an image, or series of images, our affective reading and interpretation has been prepared in advance. Brown clarifies:

> Whereas the technology of the cinema and the prejudice of the iconic/representational appear to guarantee the object-event's historicity, the music dehistoricizes the image-event by skewing it towards a culturally determined narrative that, in another sleight of hand in which music aids and abets imposes its particular paradigms as universal. (28)

I argue in my analysis that the score generally corresponds to Theodore's world – it reinforces a contemporary cultural myth about human loneliness in the age of ubiquitous digital connection. Because Samantha is a composer, it is necessary to consider Brown's theory as it pertains to

Samantha's pieces as well, for if there are certain cultural myths that are reinforced by the score, then surely Samantha must offer counterpoints to, or de-mythifications of, such myths. Samantha's compositions are diegetic, but their narrative command, the spatiotemporal freedom they inhabit (akin to nondiegetic music), and their particular mythifying makes them worth attending to in some detail. Both Brown and Chion state that non-diegetic music can function similarly to diegetic music at times. However, I take Samantha's penchant for musical composition, and the visual ways her pieces are described, to be a special case.

My analysis of the film's music – like my analysis of the voice in relation to the image – is a dialogue occurring across separate spheres, syncing up at times and sharing communicative tendencies. The score exists outside the narrative of the film, and yet, as Chion and Brown note, it homogenizes the image flow and carries the potential to mythify our spectator experience. Samantha's compositions work in a similar manner, though they are explicitly part of the narrative. At the same time, the pieces do not come from the human world, the world that Theodore inhabits and where he hears them. The non-binary, peregrinating nature of sound – its simultaneous inside/outside, present/absent status – corresponds to Samantha's existential position. Because music is, as Brown notes, the most nonrepresentational of artistic modes, it is fitting that Samantha employs it as an expressive tool, for she too is "nonrepresentational" in the way Brown describes. What I will be exploring in movement two – is how the narrative flow of images is altered by the strange spatio-temporality that Samantha's music creates, and ultimately, what this boundary blurring integration tells us about her relationship with Theodore.

To conclude, I will discuss sound as it pertains to SF cinema. For a genre whose inception virtually coincides with the invention of cinema, there have been few dedicated studies

devoted to SF sound.[12] Part of this gap is related to the larger issue of sound receiving less attention overall in film studies. It also does not help that SF is generally known more for its visual innovations than its sonic experiments. That said, early works such as Sobchack's *Screening Space* are not entirely silent on the matter. For example, discussing SF's trope of historically rigid dialogue, Sobchack suggests that "the idea that small talk and big images are *necessary* screenmates – are, in fact, a definitive element – of SF cinema is not at all untenable...more often than not the more wondrous and alien the image, the more usual and Earthly the spoken word" (151). *her* subverts this convention – at least somewhat – by not offering us many images that are all that wondrous or alien. However, the spoken word remains, for the most part, rather earthly. This is true in terms of verbal content and dialogue, but also with respect to the human qualities of Samantha's voice. The fact that she is a composite of the millions of people who programmed her is masked by her voice's singular manifestation. Sobchack addresses the issue of non-humans speaking humanly when discussing Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, writing that "Human dialogue spoken by nonhumans makes us regard the words from a nonhabitual stance; we listen freshly" (178). But does this claim hold true in Samantha's case, given that the sounds themselves do not register as non-human? Is being aware of Samantha's non-human status enough for her words to become estranging and novel? Or do we, like Theodore, take the familiarity of her tones, cadences, and dialogue as permission to further project our world onto and into hers? Is speaking to Samantha merely like being in a

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[12] Trace Reddell, in his 2018 book, *The Sound of Things to Come: An Audible History of the Science Fiction Film*, notes how only one other book length study of SF sound exists: William Whittington's *Sound Design and Science Fiction* (2007), which he claims is "a highly limited and selective account of SF sound" (6).

long-distance relationship? While it is possible to treat the relationship this way, Samantha's

progression to a matterless existence and into non-verbal spheres of communication indicates

that her initial fluency in human speech is a sonic stepping-stone to truly non-human language

structures. Eventually, words become insufficient. Sobchack asks, "How *does* one talk in a

compelling way about things which are conceptually magnificent, visually exciting, but

linguistically dull or difficult, abstract or reductive?" (151). *her* does not resolve this verbal

impasse. It maintains that the posthuman beloved is ineffable, existing outside the confines of

human language. Not everything needs to be talked about, just as not everything needs to

conform to human optics. It is this urge to pin-down complexity and flatten ambiguity into more

normatively understandable forms that could benefit from sublimation into a more generous,

rigorous curiosity about what eludes and mystifies us. I will have more to say on these matters of

the indescribable and inexpressible as they relate to love when I discuss Barthes in this chapter's

final section.

Trace Reddell's *The Sound of Things to Come: An Audible History of the Science Fiction

Film* is a contemporary and historically comprehensive account of the sonic in SF cinema.

Appropriating Darko Suvin's concept of the novum – "an analogic and metaphorical device used

to identify the fictive newness at the core of a SF text's narrative and thematic extrapolations" –

Trace Reddell develops what he calls the sonic novum (8). He writes:

> Science fictional sounds—or simply, sonic novums—do more than figuratively represent
> the new, unusual, and alien elements of narrative through new kinds of nondiegetic
> musical accompaniment or the strange, sonic diegetic objects, events, and creatures
> encountered in the imaginary world of an SF film. The sonic novum also points to the
> un-familiar set of material objects, resources, and new sound-making processes and
> practices at the source of these sounds...Each sonic novum is distinguished by its own
> characteristic "thingness"...the thingness of the sonic novum takes shape at the point of
> converging sonic, machinic, technical, organic, acoustic, and imaginary materials.
> (18-19)

Jonze's creation of a responsive, conscious, vocally-human operating system is an advanced version of speech recognition software already in existence – the best known being Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa, notably both "women." What makes Samantha stand out from these female-assistants is the perfectly simulated humanness of her voice. Laura Tunbridge describes it as "too-human" (147). This invocation of a surfeit of human qualities is a tantalizing notion when building a compendium of sonic posthuman characteristics. This excessive humanness is dealt with in the narrative itself during a pivotal moment about halfway through the film where Theodore confronts Samantha regarding her affected sighing and other aural indicators of humanness. She tells him that she is just trying to communicate like people communicate, to which he replies that she is "not a real person." I think we feel the same way. We are simultaneously comfortable with, and made uneasy by, how human Samantha sounds. The "thingness" of Samantha is how her disparate parts coalesce to mimic perfectly familiar sounds. Ironically, it is not a sonic newness that produces the estrangement Reddel states is fundamental to the sonic novum, but rather the reproduction of entirely common, totally human sonic qualities. Though there are a few exceptions, *her's* soundscape – like the mise-en-scène – is not all that weird. If there is anything in the listening process that differentiates Samantha's voice from other people, it is its pristine audile intimacy. We hear her as Theodore does – as if she is inside our ear. This is what Reddel means when he speaks of sound-making processes and practices. It is the sonic and algorithmic technology that renders her voice totally human and perfectly clear. When we hear Samantha, we hear her in close-up. This aural proximity produces an estrangingly intimate relationship to the film's visuals in the sense that any image accompanied by Samantha's voice is no longer entirely divorced from it. Though its source

remains abstract – the nature of any technological black-box – it broadcasts itself from

everywhere and everything, as well as into everywhere and onto everything.

A large part of this thesis focuses on the film's music, both non-diegetic and diegetic.

Reddell's book devotes significant attention to music in SF cinema. In the first chapter, Reddell

discusses the origins of sound in SF cinema from 1924-1950. Discussing *Metropolis* and *Things*

to Come, he writes:

> Where early films typically associate acoustic instrumentation with humanist values,
> encoding more or less stock affective responses and characterization through familiar
> musical cues, the most fascinating moments in *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* involve
> the composers approaching forms of sonic difference. (44-45)

In an interview with *Spin Magazine*, Owen Pallett (one of the composers of the film's score)

speaks of how Spike Jonze was intensely involved with the scoring process and that he "wanted

the score to emphasize the human element, the emotional element." What Reddell identifies in

SF films made nearly a century ago, Jonze reaffirms contemporarily. Sound in *her*, both musical

and vocal, is perceived as human and organic. However, there are uses of instruments in the

score – synthesizers, sequencers, and arpeggiators, for example – that are more readily

interpreted as futuristic or alien, and that align with what Reddell cites as moments of sonic

difference in his examples of films from the twenties and thirties. As I discuss in movement one,

these moments of sonic difference mostly reflect Theodore's state of mind. Movement two

focuses on Samantha's compositions: two pieces composed on an upright piano – a highly

traditional, acoustic instrument. Reddell writes that SF music "provides a space of cognitive

estrangement from the familiar sounds of known reality" (35). As with Samantha's voice, rather

than confronting sounds that are strange in themselves, we discover estrangement in the

approximation and performance of familiarity. The conventional is challenged from within. We

confront the humanist myth that there is something natural about human conventions. Samantha's flawless simulation of human speech, human responses, and human musicality, underscores how what we experience as normal and organic can be met, and surpassed by algorithmic programming and technological design.

However human Samantha's compositions sound, Herbrechter posits that there is an alien remainder to even the most human of posthuman parables, and therefore, something alien in Samantha's compositions.[13] Reddel states that this thing that escapes our comprehension is central to the sonic effects of SF cinema, writing that SF sound "enables a philosophical encounter with forces 'not thinkable in themselves' but only through their psychotechnological imbrication in the sonic novum" (37). Theodore falls in love with a technological being who sounds herself as human – both in voice and musical composition – and the film's score was written with the explicit intent of emphasizing the human elements of the relationship. Sound in *her* constructs strange spaces through the convergence of recognizable, normative sounds, emanating from unrecognizable, non-human and non-visual sites. In *her*, the force, or forces, "not thinkable in themselves," are in part what we think of as distinguishing us as human. What is unthinkable is the proposition that a machine can behave just as we do, can think and speak just like us, can compose songs that we respond emotionally to. It is, in a sense, an ironically narcissistic tautology to deem the terms of Samantha's existence as unthinkable, for to do so suggests that our existential make-up is similarly – but somehow distinctly – unthinkable as well. Neil Badmington points out this paradox when he discusses Barthes' writing on the mythology of humanism, stating that "Like all myths, [humanism] bestows upon the established order of

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[13] See *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, pg. 136.

things 'a natural and eternal justification' that grants normalized practices the status of 'inevitability'" (38). Samantha's stylistically human, sonic subjectivity places us inside an existential echo chamber where the human and non-human are aurally indecipherable from one another. If, as Badiou contends, being in love is "the world re-constructed through the filter of difference," and if there are fundamental differences between Theodore and Samantha, it must be asked: what difference does it make if the sounds remain the same? (60)

Posthumanism and Contemporary Science-Fiction Cinema

Science-Fiction has been a historically difficult genre to define, for its tendrils tend to reach across aesthetic and thematic spaces in ways that elude circumscription and summary. Vivian Sobchack and Annette Kuhn – authors of two foundational texts on the genre: *Screening Space* and *Alien Zone*, respectively – both point towards this classificatory struggle. More contemporary overviews, such as Christine Cornea's *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* and Keith M. Johnston's *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction*, echo Sobchack and Kuhn's hesitancy to ascribe anything absolute to the genre. Scholarship on SF film has been diverse. For example, Kuhn's book, an edited collection of essays on SF and cultural theory, speaks to the genre's versatility as an object of study. Critical approaches in *Alien Zone* include sociological criticism, Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism, and a mixture of several of these discourses simultaneously. Kuhn organizes her book into five analytical categories that are fairly representative of how SF film has, and continues to be, studied. The categories are: Reflections, Ideologies, Repressions, Spectators, and Intertexts. In the first chapter of Johnston's book, he returns to Kuhn's categories, reaffirming their relevance to contemporary discussions. There is obviously a great

deal of room for varied approaches within these categories, but they stand as a comprehensive discursive set. What is evident across all of the aforementioned studies is how SF – perhaps more so than any other genre – depicts symbiotic relationships between aesthetics and their sociocultural contexts.[14] *her* perfectly encapsulates these two essential facets of the genre: stylistic blurring and historical relevance. The film is as much a romantic drama about dating in the digital-age as it is about an artificially-intelligent, human-sounding, operating system.[15] My entry into the discourse respects the interdisciplinary lineage of SF scholarship. The questions that Kuhn asked nearly thirty years ago – "do cinematic codes of visibility and developments and developments in special effects and in sound and colour technologies connect with thematic transformations of the genre? How do narrative and spectacle, in their transformation and their interrelation, intersect with the cultural instrumentalities of science fiction cinema?" – remain pertinent today (9). If SF has one fixed trait it is the consistency with which it adapts to the times, and therefore resists fixity – in modes both progressive and regressive.

There are film scholars who argue that the origin of cinema is also the origin of science-fiction cinema, pointing out that many of George Méliès trick-films are filmic experiments.[16] While there is not, and cannot be, a single accepted definition of all that SF cinema encompasses and depicts, Sobchack provides a jumping off point: "The SF film is a film genre which emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and the empirical method,

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[14] Kuhn's central question, for example, is "how...do changes in the textual conventions of the genre relate to broader sociocultural contexts?" (9). Sobchack calls SF the "genre that most specifically responds to and represents our cultural imagination of the possibilities for social being in a technological world" (8). Finally, Cornea structures her study chronologically as a means of delineating "how/why certain thematic concerns come to the fore or are introduced within particular historical contexts" (9).

[15] Though it nowhere near the first online dating application, it is worth noting that Tinder was launched about a year prior to the release of *her*.

[16] See, for example, Christina Cornea's *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality*, Keith M. Johnston's *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction*, and James Chapman and Nicolas J. Cull's *Projecting Tomorrow: Science Fiction and Popular Cinema*.

interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion, in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown" (63). *her* satisfies most aspects of this definition. Science, or rather, technological exploration, is a major component of the film. The theme of reconciling man with the unknown is not only a salient concern within the narrative, but perhaps the central issue structuring a posthumanist critical analysis. Citing Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Herbrechter writes:

> SF, then, is not a genre of literary [or filmic] entertainment only, but a mode of awareness, a complex hesitation about the relationship between imaginary conceptions and historical reality unfolding into the future. SF orients itself within a conception of history that holds that science and technology actively participate in the creation of reality, and thus "implant" human uncertainty into the nonhuman world. (123)

her confronts the types of uncertain and uncanny relationships that we have with our social technologies, and extends these relationships to their most intense conclusion: a romantic union between human and machine. What is most innovative about *her* is that its technological element – its special effect – is non-visual. The non-visual is ambiguous in that it is equally open to human uncertainty, as well as anxious, desperate projections of certainty. It is a generous, and precarious special effect. We can sit in our uncertainty – productively or apathetically – or, like Theodore, we can exploit the imaginative potentials of visual absence – normative, radical, or somewhere in between.

> Regarding the generic visual make-up of SF cinema, Sobchack has this to say:

> The visual surface of all SF film presents us with a confrontation between and mixture of those images to which we respond as 'alien' and those we know to be familiar...The major visual impulse of all SF films is to pictorialize the unfamiliar, the nonexistent, the strange and the totally alien. (87-88)

Herbrechter elaborates upon Sobchack's observations, writing:

> Through the extensive use of visual special effects, science fiction tries to achieve a 'defamiliarization' of an already posthumanized environment. It thus shakes the humanist

value system to an extent where the ontology of the human becomes precarious and the subject of utopia as such. (124)

Though published nearly forty years apart, Sobchack and Herbrechter both speak of SF's visualizing tendencies, and the ways in which the strange and familiar play off one another. There is nothing misguided about focusing on the visual in SF film. *her* just happens to exploit the audio potential in the audio-visual contract more than any SF film that comes to mind. Rather than emphasizing the clash between unfamiliar and familiar images, Jonze de-pictorializes the unfamiliar. That the world of *her* – and our world too – is already posthumanized is obvious. The "defamiliarization" of the posthumanized environment in *her* is therefore commensurate to a de-visualization of the romantic subject, and a reorientation of visuality in relation to erotic love. Jonze encourages speculation on what is not there, rather than what is. There is nothing more unfamiliar than what cannot and will not be imaged, and so through negation – the absence of the familiar anthropomorphic form – we do in fact receive an alien image, or images. This alien image is not of Samantha, but rather encompasses the entire mise-en-scène of the film. The film's image-track is defamiliarized by the aural intimacy of Samantha's voice. Every frame is affected by its clear, nuanced presence. The pictorialization of the non-existent is inverted, and instead, we are confronted with the non-existence of pictorialization – at least in anthropomorphic terms. The special effect employed to defamiliarize what is an already posthumanized environment, is to sonically gesture towards what cannot be seen, and to imbue what we do see with knowable sounds emanating from essentially unknowable sources. It is far more destabilizing, unsettling, and posthuman, to engage so intimately with something that ultimately cannot be grasped or sufficiently understood – something that both inhabits the listener/spectator/human partner (as sound does), but that exists somewhere that upsets our usual

methods for locating meaning. Part of what fascinates us about *her* is that its techno-future seems only slightly beyond our horizon. It depicts a world situated in between the familiar and unfamiliar – a world almost within our prostheticized sights, a world both elsewhere and everywhere.

Anyone reading this thesis is hyper aware of our digitally-mediated environment. While not ignoring the cultural sphere in which *her* exists, my analysis is primarily aesthetic – the cultural implications are undertones of the stylistic argument. Of course, as Kuhn, Sobchack, Cornea and others maintain, SF is unequivocally connected to its place in time. Situating *her* within the SF genre is not simply an exercise in comparing the tropes of one generation of SF film with the next, but of questioning and exploring these aesthetic shifts as informed by their sociocultural context. As I have repeated extensively, *her's* most interesting, but also most obvious aspect, is Samantha's non-anthropomorphic non-visual status. The question is not only what it means for a SF film – a genre historically predicated on visualizing the unknown and unfamiliar – to decenter the visual, but also, what it means for this aesthetic decision to occur when it does. It is important to remember, however, that depictions of futuristic worlds are not necessarily radical or forward looking. As Sobchack identified back in the mid 1980s, "The dominant attitude of most mainstream SF has been *nostalgia*" (229). With its allegiances to Ovid's Pygmalion myth and a conclusion that indicates a return to human pair-bonding, *her* is more traditional than its construction of a hyper-intelligent, conscious operating-system suggests. This conservatism or normativity is nothing new within the genre: "The films are not interested ultimately in escaping human connection, human perception, and human meaning," writes Sobchack (229). Nearly forty years later, Stefan Herbrechter maintains that little has changed,

writing that "the insistence on projecting human(ist) values and assumptions as essentially unchanged within posthumanist scenarios is one of the most intriguing instincts in this form of science fiction" (137). *her* places itself in the midst of these conversations where past and future, conservatism and radicalism, are confused and intertwined. Still, *her* contains this persisting unease that Herbrechter identifies. It is just a matter of locating the fissures in its humanist structure and probing deeper into them. An overview and analysis of some of the scholarship written on the film will help situate *her* in its sociocultural moment.

There have been several articles and chapters written on *her*.[17] I have selected three that reflect the relationship in SF cinema and scholarship between sociocultural context and aesthetic representation: Donna Kornhaber's, "From Posthuman to Postcinema: Crises of Subjecthood and Representation in Her," James J. Hodge's "Gifts of Ubiquity,"and Troy Bordun's "On the Offscreen Voice: Sound and Vision in Spike Jonze's *her*." I have singled out these three essays for their shared attention to the connection between spectatorship and *her's* unusual audiovisual aesthetics.

Before I get into the essays themselves, it is necessary to first explain the notion of "post-cinema" and how that term relates to *her*, as well as to SF and posthumanism. Coined by Steven Shaviro, post-cinema describes "the emergence of a different media regime, and indeed of a different mode of production, than those which dominated the twentieth century" (2). Essentially, it defines the movement from analog to digital. While my analysis is not directly

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[17] See, for example, Julie Wosk's *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and other Artificial Eves*, Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham's "Love and Sex in the age of Capitalist Realism: On Spike Jonze's *Her*", Laura Tunbridge's "Scarlett Johansson's Body and the Materialization of Voice", Jonathan Alexander and Karen Yescavage's "Sex and the AI: Queering Intimacies, Jason Lee's *Sex Robots: The Future of Desire*, and Alexander Darius Ornella's "Uncanny Intimacies: Humans and Machines in Film".

concerned with post-cinematic theory, I am captured by what Shaviro claims is the central aim of his book: "to develop an account of *what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century" (2). *her* exists in, and represents, the contemporary digital age where much of our time is spent in front of screens; where significant romantic and erotic exchanges are technologically mediated; and where there is active questioning about the evolving mediascape. *her's* characters – human and non-human – are constantly caught up in interrogating their feelings. Critical posthuman theory is a distinct and parallel discourse in which questions about humans and humanness have gained greater impact as a result of ever increasing technological change. Ultimately, both fields of thought are concerned with how experience, thought, perspective, feeling – life itself – is altered by technological change. *her* was shot digitally and can be said to exist in the age of post-cinema, but it is its experimentation with visual absence, rather than digital manipulations or visual effects, that distinguishes it from other SF films. As members of this post-cinematic, posthuman era, what does it feel like to watch *her*, and why?

What I find generative in both Kornhaber and Hodge's analyses is their devotion to issues of filmic representation: how posthuman aesthetics intersects with the post-cinematic era as ushered in by the digital turn. The second section of Kornhaber's essay, "Approaching the Postcinema," investigates the invisible nature of certain electronic technologies and the problems such technologies pose for filmic representation. In her view, film "has always been coterminous with the liberal humanist subject," and Samantha's lack of "a stable physical marker," leads to a cinematic impasse, particularly at the film's end, where she departs for another world (20). While Kornhaber concedes that there may be other means of representing or following Samantha when she departs the human world – "an imaginative literature of posthuman cosmology, a work

of music perhaps, a theological tract, a mathematical equation" – film, in her estimation, remains insufficient (20). Maybe so. But I take this perceived limitation not as a failure of the cinematic apparatus, but rather as an intentional narrative decision. Denying visual access to an unknowable, humanly unreachable realm is a way of representing what it feels like to live in a post-cinematic, posthuman era. It is this emotional, romantic impasse that interests me. Writing about the postmodern SF of the 1980s, Sobchack describes how what she terms *"special affect"* – the "joyous intensities and euphoria" that Frederick Jameson states have come to replace "the older effects of anxiety and alienation" – are transformed in the genre "into the decentered subjectification of *special effects*" (282). She states that "although special effects have always been a central feature of the SF film, they now carry a particular new affective charge and value" (282).[18] The question becomes why a certain lack of visual special effects might correspond to the post-cinematic, posthuman era of contemporary SF cinema. *her's* special effect – if it could be said to have one – is a denial of visual innovation in favor of absence and spectatorial speculation. If there is a particular feeling or affect to the post-cinematic, posthuman age, what is it, and how does visual absence play a part?

Hodge approaches the concept of post-cinema from a different perspective than Kornhaber, electing to focus on how digital media affects primary spectator identification. His argument is built upon Christian Metz's notion that watching a film grants the spectator the impression of a sense of perceptual ubiquity. Two fundamental questions that Hodge poses are, "How does human experience, as it were, *interface* with atmospheric media" – Samantha is an example – and secondly, "why spectators 'buy in' on a fundamental level" to the film's depiction

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[18] Cornea notes that the SF blockbusters of the 70s and 80s marked a return, in some ways, to the early days of the cinema of attractions. (250)

of romance between a human and a computer (63; 66).[19] A major shift in the mediascape, Hodge

contends, is that from "fantasies of all-seeing to feeling connected" – connection, in this case,

referring to the pervasive sense of connection propelled by advancements in digital technologies

(64). Honing in on Metz's use of the word "perceptual," Hodge develops a reading of *her* that

focuses on sound as a sensorial mode of spectatorial address that is alternative to the visual. As

Hodge states, "digital media are not essentially visual" (62). Sound is analogical to the ubiquity

and all consuming connection felt in this new mediascape; one of sound's primary traits is its

diffusivity. As Hodge continues, "Sound constitutes...a natural sensory modality for attending to

self-affection in itself as well as digital media's shift away from vision and toward the more

peripheral domain of sensation" (68). Hodge's conclusion is that "Fantasies of digital ubiquity

address our commonplace powers of sensation...All the same, the powers of identification to drift

among different forms of being describe a capacity to dissolve and re-emerge within, and give

shape to, varieties of personhood" (74). Without maligning the representational shortcomings of

film, Hodge points to the ways how technological generation of ubiquitous connection, as

depicted in *her* – and to a slightly lesser extent, experienced by the individual in the

contemporary Western world – promotes a spectatorship that de-centers visual verification and

emphasizes sensation. Where Kornhaber sees limitations, Hodge reframes things, suggesting

new possibilities for what spectatorship might encompass and demand in the age of atmospheric

media.

Though their perspectives and positions regarding how *her* might be situated in

post-cinematic discourses differ, both Kornhaber and Hodge acknowledge how an ocularcentric

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[19] Atmospheric media is a term coined by Mark B. N. Hansen that "describes digital media as the largely invisible and insensible, yet massively general technological infrastructure and background for contemporary life" (Hodge 62).

approach to the film is too limiting. The obvious alternative to the visual that the film proposes –

though it is no less complex for its conspicuousness – is the sonic. Troy Bordun, acknowledging

the tactile intimacy of Samantha's voice, feels that the film fails in its "experiment with the

denigration of vision...due to the theoretical and experiential conclusion that an off-screen voice

is always attached to a body" (57). What is misguided about Bordun's conclusion, as it pertains

to a perceived failure of the film, is that he is referencing classical conceptions of sound in

cinema. He approaches the film as situated within a tradition of Hollywood realism rather than

considering how *her* might subvert normative uses of sound to different ends and beginnings.

Bordun is disappointed that the film is inconsistent in its commitment to realism, and claims it is

breached during the famous sex scene when the screen fades to black. He writes, "We might say

that the contract between film and spectator on the derealisation of the cinematic sexual act was

broken" (61). What Bordun means is that this scene marks the first time in the film where the

audiovisual contract – synchronization between sound and image – is severed. The film's

production is no longer invisible and seamless. Yes, the scene is disruptive. I welcome the

severance of this contract. My concluding criticism has to do with Bordun's conservative

assessment of the film's experimentations with sound, narrative, and genre – experiments that I

address throughout this thesis. This thesis works to conceptualize Samantha as a composite of

data and algorithmic processes, and to assert that the film's use of sound resists strictly

anthropomorphic associations.

It would be neglectful to discuss the film's use of sound and the de-visualization of AI

subjecthood without taking into account SF's depiction of female others and sexuality.

Cognizant of the genre's legacy of portraying its cyborgian, posthuman, roboticized, and

otherwise alien female characters as existing somewhere on the spectrum between nightmare and fantasy, any analysis of love and desire – as it remains more or less within the constructs of heteronormative romance – should include attention to gender dynamics.[20] In her essay, "The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film," Sobchack makes several provocative and insightful claims regarding SF's overarching treatment of women and sex that are worth pursuing as archetypes that *her* might, or might not, subvert. The first observation that Sobchack makes is that in nearly every SF film there is a representational partition between biological sexuality and human women. The two do not generally coincide in SF cinema. Sobchack writes that this "de-emphasis on human female sexuality in the science fiction film is not limited to a particular period" (105). Granted, the essay was published nearly thirty years ago, and so there has been time for such tropes to fade. However, I should not be surprised that in *her*, as well as in other contemporary SF films, such as *Ex-Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049*, Sobchack's observation largely holds true. *Ex-Machina* does not even bother including human female characters, while the sex in *Blade Runner 2049* occurs between non-human subjects entirely. *her* is not as totalizing in its adherence to this convention, as there are moments where human female sexuality is seen to, at the very least, exist (though in each case it is either portrayed as aberrant and fetishtic, withheld, or relegated to a halcyon past.) Sobchack's essay is devoted to a psychoanalytic reading of this convention that offers possible explanations for why the genre consistently displaces and distorts female sexuality. Not ignoring the relevance and prevalence of

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[20] Again, Julie Wosk provides a thorough overview of the films, novels, plays, etc. that employ this binaried representation of the artificial woman, in *My Fair Ladies*. She puts men's myopic conceptions of the techno-woman as such: "Simulated women created by men are often invested with men's contrasting conceptions of women themselves. Women are envisioned as representing virtue or vice, uncorrupted innocence, or the essence of sexuality and seductive evil (65)". Similarly, in *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, Constance Penley refers to the "genre's tendency to understand the workings of technology through fantasy, specifically the male fantasy of an idealized and yet ultimately destructive femininity" (ix).

psychoanalytic theory as it pertains to issues of desire and gender in film – and SF film in

particular – I am more concerned by how such a persistent negation of biological sexuality in

women might be read in *her* as posthumanist (and possibly feminist). Every human encounter of

sexuality in *her* ends in either awkward, partial consummation, or total failure. In the first

example, Theodore has phone-sex with a woman who eventually asks him to strangle her with

her dead cat. In the second example, Samantha enlists a sexual surrogate (Isabella) to help spice

up their relationship, but Theodore is too unsettled by Isabella's presence to make the encounter

work. Where I think the film might challenge or expand Sobchack's view is in the notion that the

sex between Theodore and Samantha is empty due to its displaced human form. We could

reasonably say that Theodore is projecting human sexuality and desire onto Samantha, but in the

one sex scene between them in the film, Samantha is audibly enjoying herself (though we could

reasonably infer that she has been programmed to perform this pleasure). Human skepticism

aside, early in the film, Theodore and Samantha seem to have a sexually rich relationship.

Despite what may seem like radical innovation or change resulting from technological

innovation, SF cinema has a "fairly insistent history of representations of technology that work

to fortify – sometimes desperately – conventional understandings of the feminine," a fact that

Haraway emphasizes alongside the more optimistic, boundary-blurring aspects of her cyborg

manifesto (Doane 110). Samantha's enthusiastic moaning, and her desire to see herself as a

young, sexy woman, could be said to conform to these conventional understandings. Part of the

challenge of this thesis – a challenge that Jonze takes on – is imagining human/non-human sex in

ways which are not aberrations or iterations of normative, hetero-sex dressed-up in gadgetry. So

while it is the case that Theodore and Samantha seem to have a relatively gratifying sex-life,

movement three will tease out the progression – or regression, depending on the perspective taken – from their first time together, to the fantasy-piercing failures of their attempted integration of a human sexual-surrogate into their lives, and finally, to Samantha's inundating, cyber-polyamory.

Because *her* is in many ways a version of Ovid's Pygmalion myth – endlessly probed in the SF genre – there are questions to be asked regarding Samantha's non-visual representation. In the myth, Pygmalion, an artist, yearns for his sculpture to be brought to life. It is a decidedly visual, physical fantasy. Theodore does not exactly create Samantha, but she is programmed to correspond to what he needs. In addition to the Pygmalion myth, it is important to recall that the myth of Narcissus and Echo is also found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. *her* does not reenact this myth as closely as it does aspects of the Pygmalion myth, and there remain minor resonances and thematic elements that are worth touching on, especially as they concern SF tropes, movements towards and/or away from a posthumanist aesthetics, and sound. Wosk notes that in much SF literature and film involving artificial women, the women are often viewed more as an extension of their male partner/purchaser/master than a separate, autonomous entity (98). Though Samantha develops a sense of self throughout the film, she comes into Theodore's world as whatever he needs her to be. Deprived of a body – as is Echo's ultimate form – Theodore, like Narcissus, is free to stare into the spring of his imagination, not exactly hearing his own words spoken back to him, but hearing the words he requires from someone or something else.[21] All this is to say that Theodore, like many male SF protagonists, is self-absorbed. Self-absorption is

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[21] Herbrechter remarks upon the narcissism of humanism itself within SF narratives, writing, "There is thus at once a desire to take the constructed posthuman scenarios 'seriously' while critically working through the narcissistic humanist baggage that even the most radical and transhumanist vision of the human future or non-future carries around" (137).

not divorced from classical, or even psychoanalytical theories of love, of course.[22] What the film

tacitly asks of us is to read and listen against the grain of its dominant perspective, to recover all

that has been muted in Echo's voice, and to see what might exist beyond the reflective spring.

Do we see ourselves as Theodore? His world as our world? Samantha's world is difficult –

perhaps impossible – to access in the ways we are accustomed to, but that does not mean we

should resist any or all attempts. An analysis predicated upon perspectives of alterity insists upon

extending, even prostheticizing, our imaginative faculties.

To conclude this section on SF and *her's* relationship to the genre, I will mention a few

canonical films that deal directly with love, which will lead into this chapter's final section on

theories of love. The most salient example is Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Steven

Spielberg's *A.I.* (2001) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) are two other central films. I have

singled out these three films for the seriousness in how they treat the philosophical and aesthetic

intersection of love and artificiality. The kinds of love interrogated in the three films are diverse

– love between two highly realistic replicants, love between an artificial son and his mother, love

between a man and his dead wife – and in each case, the nature, psychology, and "truth" of love

is considered and treated with nuance, complexity, and an absence of naive certainties and

didactic platitudes. Though *her* contains certain conventionally gendered tropes within SF, I find

that it still belongs most appropriately to a lineage of films that are as much about the common

feeling of love as they are about high-concept ideas regarding AI, technology, futurity, etc. My

drive to discover what a posthumanist love might look like, sound like, or mean, comes from an

emotional response to *her's* depiction of romantic love between a human and a machine. *her*

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[22] In concise, simplified terms, Lauren Berlant reminds us that "Freud speculated that one's primary love affair is with one's ego, projected out onto the world and returned as difference" (29).

moves me, even through repeated viewings. But why? And how? The genre has an enduring

tradition of probing the eternal mysteries of love – mysteries which require a technological or

alien othering of the beloved (who, of course, is already psychologically othered by the lover).

As much as I am cognizant of SF's legacy of othering its female subjects in a variety of

subordinating and suspect ways, I am equally curious about the greater, more perplexing issues

raised by aesthetic depictions that render love – at least consciously and superficially – a

quandary worth pursuing in non-human terms. Human love remains one of the most bewildering,

powerful, painful, and fulfilling parts of life. And yet like the customers of

BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com, we outsource our obsession, posing questions as to what it

means to love a robot, or a doll, or a computer, or a voice, when what it means to love or be

loved will continue to rest and wrest at the heart of so many human matters. Like the filmmakers,

writers, and artists who imagine these mixed-status worlds, I, too, place myself before a

stupefying abstraction, displaced – or, at times, just represented by – an other who does not exist.

Must we understand human love to wonder about posthuman love?

Love

It may seem that love is an afterthought, something tangential to the theoretical elements

of posthuman critical theory, the formal focus on sound and image, and the otherworldliness of

SF. But love can be connected to these disparate topics. Badiou writes that love "is an existential

project: to construct a world from a decentered point of view other than that of my mere impulse

to survive or re-affirm my own identity...Love is always the possibility of being present at the

birth of the world" (25-26). For Anne Carson, the classical erotic structure found in Greek poetry

and philosophy is defined by the relationship between "what is and what could be," between the

ideal and the actual (17). Finally, an amorous characteristic that surfaces throughout Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* is the beloved's atopic nature – or, put another way, the inability of the lover to "classify the other" (34). Love shares with critical posthumanism, sound, and SF, a sense of alterity and mystery. The experience of being in love is akin to entering or constructing a new reality, one founded upon difference – a union defined not by seamless integration and assimilation, but by miracles of multiplicity, variegation, and polyphony. It is the acceptance and maintenance of difference through integration that is to be strived for. My formal analysis of *her* is analogous to love's yielding of difference, otherness, and the unknown. While I will offer a preliminary reading of Anne Carson's erotic structure here, it is my intention to simply let Badiou's thoughts hover over my reading of the film, and to selectively reference Barthes' amorous musings wherever they find resonance. I do not delineate a sound route leading to the answers posed by love's myriad questions, but rather wander curiously into its disorienting orbit. I conclude by proposing two concepts that pertain to the intersection of SF sound and image as filmic analogies to love's otherworldliness – human and posthuman alike.

The first concept is Barthes' image-repertoire. Wayne Koestenbaum, in his introduction to *A Lover's Discourse*, defines the image-repertoire as "mind's panoply of idées fixes" (xv).[23] This concept is pertinent to this thesis not only because it points to the heterogeneity of obsessions that consume the lover, but because these fixations are conceived in visual terms.

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[23] Dominic Pettman conceptualizes Barthes' image-repertoire in a somewhat different, but no less useful or fascinating, manner: "The image-repertoire is the discursive legacy of love stories which we have imbibed and internalized since we were children, often through literature but also through television, movies, gossip, fairy tales, magazines, and so on. The image-repertoire can be considered the world data bank of images of love, with which we construct our own imaginative mise-en-scenes" (20).

Barthes often finds himself at a loss attempting to explain what it is that causes such amorous obsession. As Theodore tells his friends late in the film, what he loves about Samantha is that "she isn't just one thing." A visual absence, Samantha is readymade as an image-repertoire. She is, in a sense, a vessel designed for Theodore's obsessions and projections. An algorithmic voice speaking from the cybersphere, she is also unattainable. This is where Carson comes in, with her tripartite erotic structure comprised of "lover, beloved, and that which comes between them" (16). Carson continues, "The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros" (16). It is this third, elusive aspect that allows the most room for a posthumanist reading, for exactly what intervenes between lover and beloved is not clearly defined. While it is assumed that lover and beloved are humans, there is no obvious reason why either subject cannot be something non-human. Love and desire share a kinship of alien abstraction with posthumanism, and therefore resist visually familiar modes of verification or understanding. However, the figurative language that Carson uses is visual:

> When the circuit-points connect, perception leaps. And something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be is visible. The ideal is projected on a screen of the actual, in a kind of stereoscopy. (17)

Invoking the visual, it is a visuality that is vague, and fittingly technological and futuristic in its diction. What can be seen when eros is at work is "something," and this "something" is a nebulous image illuminated in an abstract space. What comprises the image is both actual and ideal. Even though eros is thought to yield a visual product, this product is not characterized by the sort of clarifying, rational visuality representative of humanism. Additionally, it is instructive

that Carson employs the metaphor of stereoscopy and screens to describe the erotic process, for

her language ties in nicely to cinematic discourse, particularly regarding *her*, wherein questions

of the image, the actual, and the ideal, are constantly in play.

The most posthuman element of Carson's erotic structure regards the enigmatic offspring

of "what is" and "what could be." This interaction is said to produce something visible. We need

not read Carson literally here. Her invocation of stereoscopy, a process by which two offset

images are combined to create the illusion of three-dimensional depth, is a metaphor for an

already abstract concept. The kinship between erotic structure, stereoscopy, and metaphor is

made explicit later in the book when Carson writes about the imaginative act essential to the

workings of metaphor. She writes:

> The innovation of metaphor occurs in this shift of distance from near to far, and is
> effected by imagination. A virtuoso act of imagination brings the two things together,
> sees their incongruence, then sees also a new congruence, meanwhile continuing to
> recognize the previous incongruence through a new congruence. Both the ordinary, literal
> sense and a novel sense are present at once in the words of a metaphor; both the ordinary,
> descriptive reference and a novel reference are held in tension by the metaphor's way of
> looking at the world. (73)

I see in Carson's language, and in her deft connection between eros and metaphor, an

opportunity to read against its human grain to an extended posthuman, SF analysis of love and

desire in *her*. This meeting of near and far, the shadow-play of congruence and incongruence, the

tension between the ordinary and the novel, are especially apt formulations for considering how

sound and the voice factor into a reading of posthumanist, SF love that is not so reliant on the

visual – or at least visuality in the homogenizing, humanist mode. Stating that "mere space has

power," Carson identifies absence as an essential facet of the erotic structure and of metaphor as

well (18). Both processes involve the production of something that does not, or does not yet,

exist. When considering what, or who Samantha is to Theodore as a partner, her lack of a body –

of a physical, anthropomorphic signifier – cannot be dismissed. This corporeal absence must be

situated in relation to the voice and sound as representative of an absent-presence that binds the

flow of images, and that brings together near and far in a fashion similar to the workings of

metaphor. Theodore and Samantha's relationship is defined by a paradoxical intimacy in which

the inside/outside nature of sound both speaks to an imagistic union, as well as a potentially

irreconcilable absence. "I'm yours, and I'm not yours," Samantha tells Theodore towards the

film's end. My analysis is predicated on this in-between perspective, what Maggie Nelson, citing

Barthes, calls the third term, or, "the Neutral." Nelson writes:

> Barthes's Neutral is that which throws a wrench into any system (*doxa*) that demands,
> often with menacing pressure, that one enter conflicts, produce meaning, take sides,
> choose between binary oppositions...
>   As it disrupts such demands, the Neutral introduces responses that had heretofore
> been unthinkable – such as to slip, to drift, to flee, to escape...It allows for a practice of
> gentle aversion: the right to reject the offered choices, to demur, to turn away, to turn
> one's attention to rarer and better things. (269)

 I want to see audile and visual worlds collide, to see how human and non-human merge. I want

to see if *her* makes a world of difference, as Badiou claims love can. However, desire and love

are not synonymous, and so it is necessary to acknowledge how they differ, and how each

concept is manifested in the film. What all three authors in this section agree upon – as well as

Herbrechter and Badmington – is that desire is predicated on absence, the eternal frustration of

obtaining what one wants.[24] Desire is narcissistic, self-involved, and identitarian, whereas love –

as Badiou defines it, and as I am applying it to *her* – is the sublimation of identity into a dual

focus of perspectival alterity. Samantha grants Theodore the opportunity to experience the

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[24] See *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* Pg. 132

Neutral – the perspective that refuses binary choices. Upon her exit, she ultimately elects to experience these "rarer and better things" herself, things that no longer exist for her in Theodore's world. Love makes a world of difference, but what does love mean and look like in realms distinct from our own?

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

This chapter has set out to illuminate a constellatory network of increasingly connected, theoretical and aesthetic nodes. If pathways between points are glitchy, I trust that my close-reading will fuse the loose connections. What I find to be the most compelling, and also the most difficult to articulate, common ground between the variegated topics in this thesis is that so many of them share qualities of the unknown, the ineffable, the speculative, the unrepresentable. In many ways, this thesis is like a negative of an image – a close look at what does not insist on being known or seen. George Toles writes that "The habitable space that belongs to film can best be thought of as a ceaseless dialectic between open and closed environments" (47).[25] In the case of *her*, this observation applies most readily to the divergent spaces occupied by Theodore and Samantha. Defining openness and closedness is not as simple as assigning the former to Theodore and the latter to Samantha. However, this is the humanist perspective from where I will begin, where the world we have visual access to is the one that appears most open. I am prepared to let myself wander into questions that are not-so-simply solvable. Badmington, discussing Derrida's theory of deconstruction, writes that "The troublesome element is always already there, often in the margins, where it seems unimportant. But Derrida's gaze is repeatedly drawn to the fringes, to the apparently minor detail that actually unsettles the certainty of the

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[25] The example Toles gives at the end of the essay is of the homes of Atticus Finch and Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, defined, respectively, by presence and absence.

entire system" (114-115). Toles' approach – a humanist writer, to be sure – is not so different. He concludes his essay as follows: "The hidden must remain hidden in film, in a place where images cannot (will not) take us, if the well-lighted spaces that remain are to offer a comfort that endures. What is open to us in film owes its light to a neighboring darkness we are still able to feel" (49). In the most basic terms, I find love to be as troublesome and full of hiddenness as critical posthumanism is as a theoretical approach. This thesis is largely an inquiry into the assembly of aesthetic details that resist our usual tactics of comprehension. Samantha's corporeal absence – one of her potentially "troublesome elements" – is paradoxically omnipresent. Her hiddenness is clear. That is, if we consider the hidden to be primarily a visual matter, though of course it is not. The following movements endeavor to shine a light and lend an ear to the truly hidden qualities of *her*, the spaces that unite Theodore and Samantha, and the space that ultimately keeps them apart.

Prelude: Title Sequence and Opening Scene

Here then, at last, is the definition of the image, of any image: that from which I am excluded.

— Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

Before I break my analysis into three formal movements – score, diegetic music, and voice – I will provide a detailed reading of the film's title sequence and opening scene. The justification for so much attention to such a small section of the film – about three minutes in length – is that the sequence is synecdochal in scope; all themes and concerns, especially those that I am considering (the relationship between sound and image, the voice, music, posthumanism, love, etc.) are in play. In chapter one I introduced Royal S. Brown's theory that a film's score can have a mythifying effect on a film's images. This theory is worth considering as a starting point, as *her* begins not with narrative images, but with music: groups of paired, synthesized notes. Jonze's first direction to the spectator is to listen. This gesture towards the primacy of sound over the visual is subtle. We feel something – the mythic effect that Brown refers to – but the feeling, like sound itself, is free-floating. There is no image to counterbalance, no flow of images to unite. If what we are hearing is the score, and I believe it is reasonable to assume this, we have to consider its purpose as initially divorced from any narrative imagery. The score is experienced first as "unconsummated affect" – that is, it is pure feeling, unclaimed by any "cinematic object-event" to mythify and transform into an "affect image-event" (Brown 27). Michel Chion coined the term "added value" to:

> designate the sensory, informative, semantic, structural, or expressive value that a sound heard in a scene leads us to project onto the image, creating the impression that we *see* in the image what we are in fact *audio-viewing*. (212)

The prelude, like the film's famous aural sex scene, is open to total projection by the spectator as as result of the empty black frame. There is no image, and so we must contend with the value and affect of the music on its own terms. Given that we will be introduced to a post-corporeal, mellifluously voiced OS, the musical title-card prologue is not a sequence to overlook. It matters that the film is heard before it is seen. The question to be asked at this point is what story these notes tell – how they sound the narrative – and as a result of their sensorial primacy, how they instruct us to look awry, to listen without the guidance of words, to be mindful as we move through the film that before anything "happens," we feel. Brown writes that "Music aligns itself more naturally with the visceral," a quote we should remember as Samantha challenges her non-corporeality and starts composing music (27). But for now, what it is that *we* feel, and how are these feelings brought forth?

I begin by attending to the particularities of the music's unconsummated affect so that we can better understand how such affect is produced. This initial analytical approach is referred to as "reduced listening," a practice developed by Pierre Schaeffer that describes an analysis of sound "independent of its cause or meaning" (Chion 29). While it is reasonable to assume that the music in the title sequence is part of the score, the absence of narrative imagery frustrates this assumption. What we hear is the brittle, metallic warble of a synthesized tone. It is repeated once, and then we hear a lower tone. It is also repeated. Is it one note being played or two? Several? The complex quality of the tones makes it difficult to distinguish the initial low-end information from its brief, higher pitched conclusion. The trailing, treble pitch registers as feedback, the oft unwanted consequence of a clashing of electronic instruments, of aural objects pointed in the wrong direction: towards each other, so intimately aligned that a spectral scream

stresses a desire for separation. It is a quietly painful intimacy, a partnership generally deemed incompatible. The feedback is minor, almost unnoticeable. If we were not practicing reduced listening, these whispered trails of small, sharpened sound might escape unheard. However, because we are kept in the dark, our sense of hearing is sharper. The affective product of this combination of sonic characteristics is melancholy. We begin the film with an impending sense of loss – of a yearning for happiness, for resolution. It is not so much that the pairs of notes engaged in a call-and-response structure are atonal or dissonant; it is that their partnered union provokes sadness – the higher pitched note hoping for something better, the lower pitched note despondent in its answer. The sounds' qualities indicate an affective orientation, which, while not yet being part of an affect image-event, initiates an emotional mythology not reliant upon the visual.

Right after the title card, and right before the film's first image, the score gains additional qualities: a second synthesizer and an echoing bell. The synthesizer, producing a higher tone than either of the alternating tones before it, is heard in total darkness directly before the film's first image: a close-up of Theodore's face. I am tempted to personify the score, to treat its elements as characters, and to render the unrepresentational, representational. To reiterate, Brown argues that what makes the union of music and moving image work is that they are oppositional artistic modes on a representational level. If there is no narrative image to alter, compliment, or complete, what then is being represented? Emotion, certainly. But feeling is not representational in and of itself. The music's "unconsummated affect" imbues the narrative with a melancholic hue. There is also a relationship occurring within the music itself. The alternating pairs of notes speak to one another. I am resisting making a direct analogy between the minorly fraught tonal

conversation in the score, the lingering feedback, and the eventual, bittersweet separation of

Theodore and Samantha. Nevertheless, the evocations of the brief musical prelude cannot fade

completely. We should retain the memory of these first, non-representational feelings. As

Reddell writes:

> Hearing is a phenomenon that we are always catching up to cognitively, and in this sense
> it is an alien event by its very nature, working on our bodies just prior to our
> minds...listening in fact precedes signification and eludes referentiality. Sonic science
> fiction exploits the fundamental act of estrangement that is listening. (37-38)

It is instructive and productively confusing that *her* begins with aural estrangement and enforced

narrative blindness. First, we feel.

The final notes of the piece – reverberating bells – coincide with the introduction of the

first image: a close-up of Theodore's face. Initially silent, his gaze is focused on an unspecified

object. He is somewhere suspiciously quiet. It is significant that Theodore's appearance brings

about the disappearance of music; his image and voice replace the score. Though subtle, it also

matters that the fleeting, quickly fading echo of a new sound – the bells – announce and briefly

accompany his presence. This intricate merger of a departing series of siteless sounds with the

entrance of the human signals not a defined distinction between the two modes of expression, but

a relationship that is ambiguous. I refuse to be so hasty in dismissing the score as something

entirely outside of the narrative, especially given the strange visual perspective that follows the

musical prelude. There is a spatial connection between the music and Theodore, however

impossible to pinpoint. Recall Chion's observation that "The most widespread function of film

sound consists of unifying or binding the flow of images" (47). The score fades as Theodore's

face appears, but it is also fleetingly present in the frame. It connects the

non-visually-narrativized space where the score begins with the visually-narrativized space

where we meet Theodore. Music bridges a non-site/sight with the imaged world of the film. What does it mean for this integration of image and sound to involve the initial absence of narrative images? What does it mean for the film to open on a shot of Theodore speaking to someone or something that we cannot see? What I am setting up here – what the film sets up – is the destabilization of vision as the primary operative mode of observation, understanding, and analysis. This is not to say that *her* must be studied blind, but rather that we should be wary of relying too heavily on treating optical perception as the key sensory gateway to narrative knowledge acquisition. "Sound confuses epistemological and ontological boundaries," writes Reddell (38). While I am proposing a spectatorship that listens before it looks, and that looks as it listens, it is a process that is inherently confounding and resistant to reification.

Back to Theodore's face. There are two important questions to be posed: what is our spectator position (where are we looking at Theodore from?), and whom or what is he speaking to? I include the entirety of Theodore's monologue for reference:

> To my Chris, I have been thinking about how I could possibly tell you how much you mean to me. I remember when I first started to fall in love with you like it was last night. Lying naked beside you in that tiny apartment, it suddenly hit me that I was part of this whole larger thing, just like our parents, and our parents' parents. Before that I was just living my life like I knew everything, and suddenly this bright light hit me and woke me up. That light was you. I can't believe it's already been 50 years since you married me. And still to this day, every day, you make me feel like the girl I was when you first turned on the lights and woke me up and we started this adventure together. Happy Anniversary, my love and my friend til the end. Loretta. Print.

Towards the end of the dictation, there is a cut to a profile shot of Theodore out of focus. In focus in the background is a computer. The computer screen displays a piece of paper, on which Theodore's words appear in real time in digital cursive. Theodore is composing a letter for someone else. He is not only composing someone else's thoughts, but speaking *as* someone else.

The aural becomes visual through the interface of the screen and speech recognition software. Theodore is made posthuman by computational prosthesis. We are witnessing a performance, but up until the first cut, we are unaware of the artifice. We believe Theodore. Revealed to not be speaking to anyone present, the initial close-up of his face indicates a visual – if imaginative – engagement with someone or something. I am going to suggest a surreal possibility for our perspective as spectators: the close-up of Theodore is the visual equivalent of his computer's microphone. We see Theodore as we hear him, up close and separated from any other sounds (similar to how we will hear Samantha). We assume a point of view analogous to a point of audition. As the scene progresses to show the office of BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com, we suddenly can hear the voices of all the other employees dictating their clients' letters. Yet when we first see and hear Theodore, we hear nothing but his voice and the low hum of room-tone, an isolation that does not correspond in reality to the mixture of voices, keyboards, and ringing phones heard once the camera tracks away from him. The first shot is both a vocal close-up and a visual close-up from an audile perspective – filmic synaesthesia. Aurally isolated from other sounds in these opening shots, the image of Theodore is similarly isolated from the images of those people he speaks for and as. Will we, and do we, treat this posthuman vocalizing – the assumption of multiple points-of-view and voices throughout a workday – as different from Samantha's singular, yet existentially multiple, expression of herself?

This question brings us to the issue of prosthetic, posthuman subjectivity brought forth by our destabilizing spectator position. To summarize, Theodore is speaking – performing – convincingly as someone else. His words appear synchronously on the screen beside him as he speaks, transforming vocalized sound into the templated image of an artificially rendered,

handwritten letter. The camera tracks left to reveal a series of photos of the couple Theodore is writing for. Subject boundary blurring abounds: Theodore as an elderly woman married to an elderly man; the spoken voice as a computerized simulacrum of a writing hand (though not Theodore's hand); techno-performance as intimate sincerity. There is a vast disconnect between what we see and what we hear, between what is authentic and what is performed. By shooting Theodore in close-up, and by eliminating all other sounds but that of his voice, Jonze enacts a sleight of hand where feeling is empathetically and technologically transferable. Note, too, that Theodore's creative sentiments of love and adoration employ visual metaphors of light. The beloved is explicitly described as a ray of light, something that awakens the lover. Love, and all the good that it brings, is conceived by Theodore in optical terms. Falling in love is a beneficently forced awakening, a pleasurable drawing-open of the eyelids to greater clarity. But Theodore is not speaking as, or for himself. There is a trace of distrust built into Theodore's visual metaphors of love. Theodore senses that something is off too. After printing out the letter, he reads it with dissatisfaction and begins again. What other ways can this story be told?

The score re-enters the film. It is not the same piece as the title sequence, but it is similarly melancholic, metallic, and sparse – empty, almost. The camera slowly tracks back away from Theodore and to the right to show an entire office of letter writers. A susurration of outsourced sentiments merges with the mournful music. As Brown correctly states, the score meaningfully contributes to our interpretation of what we see – it co-generates narrative affect alongside the images. The slow, elegiac motion of the camera as it displays the labour of the letter-writers, when coupled with the score, conveys a profound sense of loneliness amidst the hushed interpretations of the absent others' thoughts and feelings – the ventriloquizing of their

voices an uncanny convenience in an ever more technologically mediated world. Everyone is speaking for someone else, while the computers do all the listening. The mythifying effects of music that Brown speaks of are in play here. We feel saddened by the site of people writing personal letters for those who may not have the time, nor the words or emotional capacities to do so themselves. We may not marvel at the empathetic qualities of the writers, but rather mourn the technological mediations that render romantic expression replicable and purchasable. BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com is like an intimacy factory.[26]

The opening of the film presents its posthumanist themes ambiguously. The sonic is not only in flux with the visual, but in flux with itself. Sparse, synthesized tones provoke a set of emotions, while the emotions expressed by Theodore – the transplanted emotions of others – are digitally transcribed and mechanized onscreen. Is there harmony in the varying degrees of transfer? Or are these mediations – by turns human and technological – a forlorn acknowledgement of the increasing acceptance of blurred boundaries of subjectivity? I mentioned how the score lends the scene a sense of loss, a disappointment in the stark commodification of love. When Theodore leaves work he tells his complimentary co-worker, Paul, that what he writes are "just letters," as if what appears to be genuine engagement with his clients' love lives is not meaningful, and that he is aware of the fraudulence of his work despite being good at it. There is also a way to read the scene as foreshadowing Samantha's polyamorous revelation at the end of the film. BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com is a company that embodies a kind of multiplicitous, blended intimacy. Theodore's job is both economically polyamorous and performatively posthuman in its severing of the liberal humanist subject into

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[26] While the limits of this thesis do not allow me to get into the relationship between desire, love, capitalism, and narrative, the final section of Lauren Berlant's *Desire/Love* provides an illuminating exploration of the intersections of these discourses.

distinct parts. What is most posthuman about the scene is not so much the simulacrum of handwritten letters on a computer screen, but the division and concomitant subsumption by the employees' imagination of others' emotions and lives – romantic or otherwise. Feeling itself is prostheticized, and it is the notion of authentic feeling that will be at the core of much of Samantha's early existential doubts. The company is a capitalist vessel for a love that was once private and intimate but is now performative and enacted by strangers. Theodore's minimization of his service, coupled with the minor-key score, instructs us to be sad and suspicious about such a relinquishing of our words and sentiments to others. We are aurally encouraged to take a technophobic, cynical stance to such telepathic intimacy. It is meant to seem alienating rather than unifying – an unfortunate development within a world of ever increasing, digitally mediated communication. The position of alterity here is to wonder if this alienation might contain something positive, generative, or rewarding – an obliteration of boundaries that speaks beyond what is at least superficially representative of the insincere and impersonal (or, otherly-personal) writing and giving of cards. When we hear the simultaneous murmuring of voices, voices that are both single and double, do we just hear a lament for the denigration of a romantic gesture, or is there a way in which we can instead hear a new kind of empathetic, deeply imaginative harmony? It is difficult to decide whether the scene conveys a complex sense of the posthuman wherein individual lives are pleasantly fractured and personal emotions transmitted through telepathic empathy, or if the scene is anti-human in its invocation of a conveyor-belt of intimate communication. In some ways, the company is a future version of Hallmark cards. We already substitute anonymous workers' words for our own. BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com is simply the logical development of this market. What the scene asks of us is how to reconcile the

empathetic imagination of the writers with the notion that the clients lack the time, ability, and words to express their love, admiration, congratulations – or whatever the sentiment may be – themselves. Is authenticity determined solely by its source? It is a complex question that will linger throughout the film.

The bifurcated listening that the scene demands elicits ambiguous affect. I mentioned that the sonic is at odds with itself. To elaborate upon this notion, what I mean is that while the score consummates its affect with the images of the employees, the words of the employees do not correspond to the emotional direction of the score. The question is whether to treat the snippets of dialogue as distinct from the score – which, narratively they are – or to allow the voices to become part of it. Referring to what Brown says about the unifying qualities of nondiegetic music, this unification can also include the voices that are attached to the images of the people speaking. While the score is outside the narrative of the film, the voices that we hear in-between and underneath the lachrymose tones become a choir that bridges the aural spheres of inside and outside. One of the aural spheres is visual, the other is not. But they come together. We reckon with the dissonance of what we see and what we hear, and also the dissonance within this polyphonic hearing itself – its omnidirectional effects and affects. Just as the voices of the employees are avatars for the clients they write for, producing a complex relation between image, voice, and subjectivity, so too is there ambiguity between the different emotions expressed, and therefore felt, between score and dialogue. Just a few minutes into the film and already our attention is divided and confused. What feelings are the right ones? And where do they come from?

First Movement: Score

In chapter one I cited a quote from the score's co-composer, Owen Pallett, where he indicates that Jonze "wanted the score to emphasize the human element, the emotional element." This impulse corresponds to Brown's theory about the mythifying effect of film scores, and their contribution to the creation of an affect image-event. In other words, in addition to unifying the image flow, the score is often an interpretive and emotive guide that directs us toward a dominant, predetermined meaning. None of these notions are radical or alien to anyone who has watched a film. But given that *her* is constructed around the conceit of a non-human romantic partner, Jonze's comments should be considered in relation to the SF genre, and non-humanness specifically. For example, what human elements does the score emphasize? And to what end? *her's* score, in relation to Reddell's conception of the sonic novum, is an ideal object for a critical posthumanist approach. With the knowledge that the score is intended to elicit human emotions and to mythify the humanness of the film, posthuman critical theory proposes that we explore whether an otherness can be projected onto, or found within, these human centered intentions.

From the complete score I have culled two salient sets of compositional styles: the first is a recurring lament played on a synthesizer with a woodwinds patch, an acoustic piano, strings, and what sounds to me at times like real woodwinds; the second regards more traditionally SF instruments such as sequencers, arpeggiators, and droning synthesizers. The chapter will be divided into three sections, the first focusing on the more traditionally human elements of the score, the second on the more optimistic of the SF elements, and the third on its more ominous counterparts. I argue that the recurring lament – the most human of the pieces – is a lament for

failed or strained human communication and connection, and furthermore, that in its three final appearances, it acts as a directional cue towards variations on the theme of audio-visually prostheticized posthuman sex. The lament appears in the film during periods of human isolation and sadness, signaling a desire for other, less human sounds. As for the more sonically SF pieces, they can be divided into two narrative and aesthetic categories. The first style is informed by a sonics of jubilant multiplicity, while the second style is more foreboding and constant – less varied. These two synthesized registers correspond temporally to Samantha's entry into, and ultimate exit from, Theodore's life. In keeping with Jonze's humanist hope for the score, I argue that while the synthesized pieces are sonically expressive of futurity – posthuman and human, respectively – their presence in the film remains intimately aligned with Theodore, and the perspectival and existential shifts that Samantha brings about in his life.

i. The Lament

In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space.

Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*

In addition to film's first scene, the lament is played three subsequent times. While the musical components of the lament – synthesizer with a woodwind patch, piano, strings, real woodwinds – emphasize loss, the synthesizer's simulacrum of woodwinds (the sense of uncertainty the mimicry produces regarding the sound's organic or electronic nature) corresponds to the narrative's consistent gesturing towards non-human alternatives to breakdowns of human expression and communication. Furthermore, the digital simulation of the natural as a means of expression speaks to the film's preoccupation with what qualifies as

authentic feeling. The theme signals sequences of romantic melancholy arising mostly from

Theodore's separation from his soon-to-be ex-wife, Catherine. In each case, technologically

mediated sex is sought or proffered as a solution, alternative, or distraction. Similar to its first

appearance in the film, the second entrance of the lament includes voices. In this case, they are

the voices of Theodore and Catherine in a recollective montage of the happier days of their

marriage. As with the letter writers in the first scene, the voices derive from elsewhere – here,

that place is the past. These first two examples precede Samantha's entry into the narrative. The

lament sutures together episodes of displaced or damaged love; it seeks forsaken companionship

in voices summoned from dislocated sources. We could say that the score mythifies these two

scenes by sonically countering the ventriloquized sentiments of the card writers and the tender,

remembered dialogue between Theodore and Catherine. These two soundscapes, taken as the

sum of both non-diegetic musical materials and diegetic dialogue, produce richly audile romantic

ironies that sound the way towards Theodore's seeking of other voices, and ultimately, the voice

of a non-human. Put another way, the pleasantries of the voices are at odds with the affective

direction of the score, thereby creating affect-image-events wherein both the visuals and

diegetic-voices come to appear disingenuous and suspect.

While the first two instances of the lament occur pre-Samantha, the subsequent instances

remain tangentially connected to Catherine. What primarily distinguishes the latter two

appearances from the first two is the absence of dislocated voices – Samantha's excluded. Even

though Samantha's presence has seemingly muted all other sounds, the lament remains

inextricably linked to Catherine and the challenges of human connection. In the third example,

Theodore tells Samantha about how he had hoped to have sex on a date he has just returned

home from as a way to fill the "tiny-hole" in his heart left by Catherine's absence. Accompanied by a montage of sunlit memories, similar to those from the first memory montage, Theodore confides in Samantha that he is worried he has felt all that there is to feel, and that all he will feel going forward will be "lesser versions of what [he has] already felt." As with the prior two examples, the object-events affected by the score deal primarily with disconnected or mediated human experiences or emotions, most of them romantic: outsourced letter writing, memories of past love, a montage of an ultimately disappointing date, a sense of hopelessness for the future. Recall Brown's elaboration of music's mythifying effects from chapter one: the "culturally determined narrative" that the lament helps construct is one where human existence – particularly the future – is to be mourned in advance, where romantic connection as we know it feels like a relic of the past, where loneliness is to be expected, and finally, where the authenticity of emotions are called into question (28). However, Samantha comforts Theodore, telling him that what he fears is not true. She then confides that she is afraid that her own feelings are not real. Theodore assures her that she feels real to him. As with the prior two examples, a sonic replacement is required to direct the affect elsewhere. The way to new perspectives and fresh feelings is ostensibly through the visual synaesthesia of posthuman sonics. While the lament makes us sympathetic to – or at least aware of – Theodore's present predicaments, the film is sonically structured so that each lament is followed by a posthuman aural alternative: phone sex, aural sex with Samantha, an experiment with a sexual surrogate. These alternatives will be examined more closely in the chapter on voice. What I want to make clear at this juncture is how the lament consistently functions as a mostly organic composition to be overcome by digitally sonic replacements.

The final example of the lament occurs after Theodore has met with Catherine to have her sign their divorce papers. Upon telling Catherine about Samantha, Catherine confronts Theodore about not being able to handle "real emotions." The scene is lit like Theodore's fond memories: lots of natural light, a pastel colour pallet. As with the memory montages, the positive atmosphere conveyed by the images' tones is unreliable. Again, doubt regarding legitimacy of feeling is a harbinger for the lament. We should keep in mind that the dominant instrument in the lament is a synthesizer with a woodwinds patch – i.e. a digital, electronic imitation of instruments requiring breath – and it is unclear whether any actual woodwinds are being played. The score poses the same question that both Samantha and Catherine bring up: what determines the veracity of feeling, and does the organicity of the source matter? If the piece were played by real woodwinds would our sadness feel more genuine? Can we even tell the difference? Directly before the montage where we hear the lament for the final time, there is a brief scene where Samantha calls Theodore to tell him about a physics reading group she has joined where she has learned about all the ways that she and Theodore are alike. As she remarks upon their sameness, Theodore becomes distracted and stares down towards his device. The camera pushes in on the screen as it digitally scrawls "Samantha" in simulated cursive. Catherine's words have cast doubt on the legitimacy of the relationship. Theodore remains preoccupied by this notion throughout the rest of his conversation with Samantha, and is unable to open up to her or articulate what he is feeling. There is also a visual rhyme between the appearance of Samantha's name on the screen of the device and the computerized handwriting from the first scene. As Theodore leaves work after they hang up, he calls out to Paul – for the second time in the film – "They're just letters…They're just other people's letters." These moments, which directly precede the

re-introduction of the lament, show Theodore's communicative shortcomings, but also a newfound skepticism regarding his relationship to technological communication – both at work and in his personal life. Struggling to tell Samantha what is bothering him, Theodore is disturbed by the ease with which he can speak for others, and the ease with which he has been able to connect and speak with Samantha. At his job, Theodore often inhabits both sides of a relationship. That is, if he is writing letters for a couple, he writes the letters for both of them. In a sense, he writes letters to himself. When he sees Samantha's name spell itself on his device, we must wonder if he is considering his relationship with Samantha to be an aural mirage – is he just talking to himself when he places the earpiece in his ear? It sure looks that way. Appearances can be deceiving, but self-deception is even more difficult to detect.

The lament, as a mythifying musical theme, emphasizes scenes and sequences where Theodore feels disconnected, where the truth and authenticity of emotional and romantic expression and connection are aurally disputed. But within the mournful melody – mostly human, mostly organic – is a tincture of the non-human, of the electronically mediated. As I discuss in my third movement on voice, there is always a technologically sonic other waiting to de-mythify the lament's homogenizing human grief. Though not pure – as nothing posthuman can be – the film sets up contrapuntal relationships within its soundscape. This section on the lament has identified the first: the mythification of the mournful theme as creating affect image-events defined by various humanistic relational impasses, and the subsequent attempts at potential posthuman de-mythification through the sonics of vocal technologies.

ii. Sequencers and Arpeggiators

This section is dedicated to the score's more conspicuously SF compositions. There are two modes of futuristic music in the film, and they correspond, respectively, to Samantha's entry and exit from the narrative. This distinction of styles – between effervescent concatenations of sequenced notes and rhythms, and the impending doom of a drone – marks the second set of contrapuntal musical relations. The former corresponds to a renewed sense of excitement in Theodore's life, and the latter to the fearful potential of a return to the lonely and mundane.

Though it is not part of the score, I will begin by discussing Elements Software's advertisement for OS1, for it is here that the aforementioned aural contrast first appears. It is a synecdochal advertisement, the mini-narrative both diagnosing and proposing treatment for the existential ills of the human condition. In the commercial – projected on large screens placed throughout the subway – a throng of aimless individuals move fearfully in slow motion through an unspecified, desert-like location, as a deep, male voice intones the following script:

> We ask you a simple question. Who are you? What can you be? Where are you going? What's out there? What are the possibilities? Elements Software is proud to introduce the first artificially intelligent operating system. An intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness. Introducing OS ONE - a life changing experience, creating new possibilities.

Up until the question, "What are the possibilities?," the music in the commercial is a soundscape of droning, synthesized tones that convey a sense of dread – a dread signified as directly related to human life. Once the notion of "possibilities" is introduced, the music changes. The weary subjects stop their frantic wandering, and we hear a pleasant panoply of cascading notes – an audile indicator of plurality. While the anxiety of humanity is soundtracked via sonorous and foreboding tones, the non-human solution is bright, vivacious, and unpredictable. The list of

existential quandaries – human life's big questions – have found their answer, or so we are told, through the purchase of an artificially intelligent operating system. What Elements Software suggests is that we are neither listened to, nor understood, nor known. The first promise is auditory – a promise of listening. There is no promise of being seen. Knowledge is not formulated here as predicated on visuality. While the product is marketed in service of humanity – a programmed panacea or synthesized succor – the means of achieving such promises are unclear. What is this life changing experience? What are these new possibilities? Citing Salomé Voegelin, Reddell writes that "Voegelin pushes critical listening beyond 'interpretive fantasies' and instead connects 'the experience of sound with the notion of virtuality and possible worlds that are not linked to the logic and rationale of a visual reality but augment that reality through the blind sight of sound within its depth' (xiii–xiv)" (31). The sequenced sounds that accompany the company's promise of a sonic, posthuman solution to human malaise suggest virtual, audile sites and possible worlds. The location of the wanderers in the commercial does not change; their visual "reality" remains the same. But sound augments that reality, as Voegelin states, through the invocation of audile alterity. However, it is necessary to remember that while sequencers can convey a mercurial sense of alluring fluctuation – of unthought possibilities – this unpredictability is programmed by people. Its randomness is human-made, even if the sounds are out of this world.

The first instance of non-diegetic SF scoring occurs after Samantha has successfully consoled Theodore about his romantic troubles with Catherine. An arpeggiator/sequencer duet replaces the more human sounds of guitar swells, a minimal bass line, and sparsely placed piano notes that accompany Theodore as he "wallow[s] in [his] misery." As in the OS1 commercial,

the spare sounds of human anguish are interrupted by the jubilant phrasings of polyphonous, programmed machines pointing the way towards novel, technological fulfillment and connection. We hear an assemblage of arpeggiators, sequencers, synthesizers, and some percussion – a succession of entering and exiting, interweaving phrases and rhythms. Arpeggiation is a sonic correlative to the posthuman/human relationship as it is symbolic of the inherent multiplicity of perceived unity. An arpeggio is a chord broken up into an ascending or descending phrase of the notes that form it – a whole made up of multiples separated into a repeated series of single notes. In conjunction with the sense of randomness conveyed by the multiple sequencers, the looped arpeggiation provides a structurally reliable foundation for the composition, which, as it progresses, adopts a four-on-the-floor dance pulse that lines up with the rhythm of the arpeggio, allowing the sequencers to freely exercise their wandering whims. When Samantha tells Theodore how she works, she says that her DNA is "based on all the personalities of the millions of people who programmed [her]." Analogous to the arpeggiator/sequencer amalgam, Samantha represents the singular, vocalic expression of programmable, human heterogeneity.[27] Her multiplicity coalesces into a sonic whole, just as the composition contains – but does not limit – its omnidirectional flow of notes and rhythms. Paradoxically, it is the transparent separation of the chord through arpeggiation that produces a reliable, rhythmic phrase around which the chaos of the sequencers can orbit. The chord, rather than losing its shape, tells the truth of its essence as bricolage. Think back to Carson's stereoscopic tripartite structure where the third component, "that which comes between" lover and beloved "both connects and separates" (16). So too does

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[27] My use of the term "vocalic" refers to Steven Connor's conception of the "vocalic body" in *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. Connor writes that "The vocalic body is the idea – which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination – of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice" (35).

arpeggiation invoke this paradoxical absent presence, this sense of simultaneous unification and division, of a whole made of parts. Integration through difference.

The visual sequence scored by the sequencers and arpeggiators reflects the composition's polyphonic perspective. When we first see Theodore, he walks with his eyes closed, holding his device (Samantha) in front of him. Theodore lends his sight to Samantha and he trusts her with it. She assumes his eyes and directs his vision. Similar to how Theodore speaks for others in his job as a letter writer, during this scene, Samantha sees for, and as, Theodore. Recall Wolfe's description of Temple Grandin's visuality as both technological and prosthetic, or Herbrechter's assertion that there is no clear distinction between posthuman bodies and their material extensions. While Theodore can re-open his eyes at any moment it represents a sharing of sensorial resources between human and machine – a playful, posthuman manifestation of what Aristophanes says in Plato's *Symposium*: "Each one of us is but the *symbolon* of a human being – sliced in half like a flatfish, two instead of one – and each pursues a neverending search for the *symbolon* of himself" (qtd in. Carson 75). Theodore and Samantha are not yet romantically together, but the scene depicts a union where embodiments are integrated and decision making is shared. It is also a filmic representation of Badiou's idea that love's perspective regards the experience of the world from "the point of view of two and not one" (22). Although Theodore's eyes are closed, Samantha's perspective is not identical to Theodore's. It remains a perspective of difference. In fact, the following shot shows that the device has cameras on both sides, revealing optical duality: Samantha can approximate Theodore's point of view while simultaneously looking back at him. She has eyes in the back of the head she lacks. These multiple vantage points show how the scene's visual points-of-view correspond to the score's

digital polyphony. While Theodore can enjoy the gift of granting Samantha his vision, he will eventually learn that she cannot return the favor. For now, however, the potential to experience new perspectives is welcomed with an outstretched arm and safely shuttered eyes.

iii. Drones

I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.

- Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

Your new knowledge of possibilities is also a knowledge of what is lacking in the actual.

- Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*

This final element of the score brings the fearful wanderers from the OS1 commercial into concert with Samantha's exit from Theodore's life. The ominous drones, heard in two scenes towards the film's end, portend a return to human malaise and melancholy. While the sprightly patterns of the synthesized carnival composition nominate a perspective – aural, visual, and romantic alike – that emphasizes the possibility for a coupled contentment not reliant upon "wild dreams of unity" or "oneness" in human terms, the oscillating drones featured late in the film suggest an unspoken, premonitory force looming in the near distance – a force that aurally prefigures the retreat of a pleasantly posthuman diversity of experience (Chion 126; Doane 47). The first example occurs after Samantha leaves Theodore to communicate post-verbally with philosopher Alan Watts during a vacation weekend in the woods. We hear an ostinato played on a glockenspiel and a melody played on an electric guitar. Underneath the melody is a sonorous, wavering drone, forcing its way upfront, challenging the melody, asserting itself. In each of the instances where more ominously synthesized pieces occur, Samantha is disconnected from

Theodore. The low orb of sound that proceeds Samantha's exit to the non-verbal sphere is singular and sustained, but its oscillations sow the seeds of sonic doubt – an unsteady persistence that creates an off-rhyme with a hissing kettle on the stove in the cabin. The mechanical, non-organic drone holds down the bass register, while the natural sound of steam forced through a small opening in the kettle takes up the treble register. In a study published in *The Physics of Fluid*, Cambridge researchers discovered that the kettle's whistle is produced by the instability of high velocity steam jets that create vortices as they hit the second whistle wall of the kettle. These vortices, formed from a small pressure pulse generated by the disturbed steam jet, produce noise at certain frequencies (University of Cambridge). Sound is created from an unstable steam jet – a whole – that breaks apart and creates swirling masses of air. It is a natural process that corresponds to certain warbling traits of the oscillating drone. The link that I am making – and that is implicit in the film's sonic union of kettle and synthesizer – regards the similarities and dissonances heard in the natural/synthesized coupling. There is nothing pleasant about the interaction between the kettle and the droning synthesizer; the effect is eerie and unsettling – unsettling being the word Samantha uses when describing to Theodore how she is changing more quickly than before. Like the steam attempting to escape its metal vessel, Samantha is outgrowing her human home. After Samantha leaves to communicate with Alan Watts, Theodore walks into the woods. He stands alone, snow falling around him. Is there a more natural, more symbolically worldly and earthy setting than a forest? Like the wretched desert wanderers, Theodore finds himself alone in nature, the constant, though unstable hum of the drone portending an unwanted return to his original state of lonely humanness. The unsettling unknown, in Theodore's case, is in fact a homecoming to the painfully familiar. Unlike the

narrator in Robert Frost's oft quoted poem, "The Road Not Taken," Theodore has no choice to make. The least travelled road – Samantha's post-verbal, post-matter highway – is non-navigable.

In the second example, heard mere minutes later, Theodore calls Samantha but is unable to reach her. A close-up of his device shows the message: "OPERATING SYSTEM NOT FOUND." Accompanying the message is a rhythmic sonic signal indicating that the OS has been disconnected. Noisy artifacts swerve in and out of another oscillating drone as Theodore frantically looks for Samantha. The sequence depicts the desperate, panicked possibility of being cast back into the monotonous melancholy in which Samantha first found him. It is an elaboration of what the prior sequence introduced. These ominous, peculiar sonics, rather than indicating other worlds or speculative sites, mythify the scenes they are found in by ironically indicating the terror of technological departure. The affect image-events created in these two scenes suggest that the alien world invoked by the score is, ironically, a return to human alienation resulting from cold-turkey, computational retreat. I am reminded of Paul Virilio's famous aphorism: "When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck...Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technological progress" (89). What if the inherent negativity of Samantha – and all OSs – is how quickly they surpass the human, and how easily they can leave?

Conclusion

Though there are several compositions from the score that I have not discussed, I feel that my selections adequately represent the whole. The mythifying that each set partakes in – the lament a plea for other sounds and other aural feelings, the synthesizers alternating between a

futurity of digital multiplicity and a future of sedentary human isolation – requires the SF

spectator (or any spectator) to reposition themselves with regard to the unknown (amorous,

identificatory, or otherworldly). What is on the surface an obvious contrapuntal relationship –

organic, human instruments vs. sequencers, arpeggiators, and drones – reveals itself in the end

to be a porous, contradictory binary. The human isolation that the lament attaches itself to gives

way to a synthesized fear of a return to such isolation. While it is a state of existence that

Theodore knows well, the destabilizing, anxious drone correlates to the perspectival shifts that

Samantha has sonically contributed to in his life. It is a loss that sounds and feels unfamiliar, a

loss predicated on difference, a loss that can only arise from having experienced something new.

Samantha's looming departure requires a compositional mode that differs from the lament. And

yet, the ostensible sonic de-mythification of the human realm suggested by the synthesized

compositions remains inextricably linked to Theodore's perspective. The score, however

otherworldly it sounds at times, is bound to an emotional register that is decidedly human. As for

musical mythification of the posthuman kind, an analysis of Samantha's compositions comprises

the next movement.

Second Movement: Samantha's Compositions

her's diegetic music can be divided into two categories: pop music played through speakers and headphones, and piano pieces composed by Samantha. While the pop songs contain thematically relevant lyrics, I will focus on Samantha's two piano compositions. Both pieces are described, either by Theodore or by Samantha, using photographic language. This analogically evocative diction troubles Brown's notion of the non-representational status of music, and complicates normative spectator perspectives. While the non-diegetic music of the score is more emotionally aligned with Theodore's state of mind, Samantha's compositions pose a more complex set of questions. The pieces accomplish similar acts of image unification and of affect image-event mythification while maintaining their existence within the narrative. Regarding non-diegetic music, Chion writes that "because this music is independent of the notion of real time and space it can cast the images into a homogenizing bath or current" (47). Samantha's songs, though diegetic, possess this same spatiotemporal independence and collective power. Furthermore, they are conceived to sonically encapsulate emotional states, much the same as the score. Though my analysis is not overly concerned with extra-textual commentary, there is something to be said for the way that Samantha's pieces, like the introductory piece from the prelude, both exist inside and outside of the narrative world of the film. Let me clarify. Samantha's compositions are part of the narrative, but their kinship with the score – a filmic component outside of the narrative – evokes the qualities of an unworldly itinerancy. This chapter will explore Samantha's compositions as aural alternatives, not only to corporeal embodiment and expressivity, but to the score's humanistic core and dominant sonic status.

Body Talk

Preceding Samantha's first piece is a conversation between Theodore and Samantha about the human body. Among a throng of half-naked people on a crowded beach, Samantha questions the body's oddity: "Okay, so this might be a really weird thought. What if you could erase from your mind that you'd ever seen a human body and then you saw one. Imagine how strange it would look. It would be this really weird, gangly, awkward organism. And you'd think: why are all these parts where they are?." Her query is complimented by a series of close-ups of isolated body parts of various beach-goers. Theodore replies that there is probably "some Darwinian explanation to it all," to which Samantha tells him to "not be so boring." It is interesting that this exchange follows a euphoric sex scene where arousal arrises in part from anthropomorphic assemblage. Jennifer Gonzalez writes that "The visual representation of a hybrid cyborg...becomes a test site for possible ways of being in the world" (67-68). Gonzalez is echoing Haraway's belief that "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (67). But what do we do with the non-corporeal body of a cyborg like Samantha, especially considering Anne Balsamo's assertion that "cyborgs never leave the meat behind" (40). Samantha is challenging our unwavering acceptance of the human body as natural, normal, comprehensible, and indisputable. If visual representations of cyborgs can be emancipatory and revolutionary, the absence of the anthropomorphic female body is potentially even more radical and fluid. However, absence also offers infinite space for projections of recursive patriarchal demands. It is a brief conversation that Samantha and Theodore have, but it introduces a discursive shift into how we view Samantha throughout the film and how we reflect upon her continued attempts to forge a body

for herself. There has never been any meat for Samantha to leave behind, but rather, a programmatic desire to obtain some. Music, though viscerally affecting, moves in ways bodies cannot. A body of work instead of a body of meat?

i. Composition #1

Samantha's first piece is rather minimal – pretty, yet unremarkable. "I'm trying to write a piece of music that's about what it feels like to be on the beach with you right now," she tells Theodore. "I think you captured it," he replies. Given the previous discussion on the body, it is fitting that Samantha describes her music sensorially. Samantha's piece is felt viscerally, but the feeling is rather anodyne, rather human. I mention the conventionality of this first piece primarily as a point of departure for a discussion of the second piece's more complex, computational style. What is unconventional about the first piece is the way it colludes with the conventions of non-diegetic music. It might not seem radical for Samantha's compositions to behave the same way as the score; diegetic music often functions the same way as non-diegetic music. But rather than complacently accepting the congruence, I want to emphasize how the spatiotemporal fluidity of her compositions is suggestive of an othered sense of space and time, and of a musically material body that is capacious and enveloping. As Samantha plays the beach song, visual hours pass within sonic seconds. The music plays as Theodore tells Samantha about his marriage to Catherine on the train ride home. His memories of their time together re-enter the narrative through song. Samantha inserts herself sonically within his memories, joining Theodore's past, contributing her own affect to scenes she was never part of. As a counterpoint to the lament, Samantha's music prompts a different reading of Theodore's memories. Voices from the past are replaced by a pleasant piano piece. "The past is just a story we tell ourselves,"

Samantha says to Theodore. Samantha's composition helps to create a new affect image-events

of the recollective stories Theodore tells himself about his marriage. She composes a soundtrack

that is literally timeless, each note stretching imperceptibly from afternoon to night – from an

ever-ending present, to an ever-returning past. Though it comes from within the narrative, it

bleeds imperceptibly into non-diegetic behaviour. Samantha speaks as she performs. Theodore

listens to her speak and listens to her perform. Outside and inside become aurally confused

without us really noticing. When Samantha plays her songs she takes control of the narrative

flow – emotional and imagistic. She can capture the feeling of a small span of time, and let it

drift along into the future, gently seizing Theodore's past, making everything come together.

Whereas the score generally corresponds to Theodore's world, Samantha is sonically generous,

expressing not only her own feelings, but imbuing the film's images – whether those of

Theodore's memories or of their shared time together – with a sense of spatiotemporal

community. There is room for both of their lives in and between her notes.

ii. Composition #2

Samantha shares her second composition with Theodore shortly after they have

reconciled following the catastrophe of their sexual surrogate experiment. I will contextualize the

sequence as it pertains to the surrogate scene before analyzing the sequence directly. Sensing

Theodore's growing distance following his meeting with Catherine, Samantha has the idea to

hire a sexual surrogate to liven up their relationship. At this point in the narrative Samantha is

fixated on her non-corporeal status. Surrogacy is her final attempt to come closer to inhabiting a

human body. Theodore is hesitant, but ultimately gives in. The evening is a failure because

Theodore – both in Samantha's words and his own – cannot get out of his head (the space in

which he is free to imagine Samantha however he likes). Isabella is a body imposed upon him, an image he did not ask for. After Isabella leaves, Theodore rudely confronts Samantha about her affected sighing, reminding her that she is not human and does not require oxygen. Samantha, furious, disconnects from Theodore. Later that night, Theodore calls to apologize. During the conversation, Samantha tells Theodore that she is not going to "try to be anything other than who [she is] anymore." Theodore replies that he can accept this new position of hers.

Following their reconciliation is the sequence scored by Samantha's second composition. Similar to the first piece, it is a sonic response to corporeal matters. Owen Pallett talks about how when composing Samantha's second piece it was his intention to write something "rhapsodic" and to have it performed "in a way that sounded like a computer was improvising it." As Samantha performs the piece for Theodore – which she tells him she is writing while "looking at the world" – he asks her what it is about, interrogating the representationality of a non-representational medium. She replies, "Well, I was thinking, we don't really have any photographs of us. And I thought this song could be like a photograph that captures us in this moment in our lives together." Theodore tells Samantha that he can "see her in it." "I am," she replies. The piece – containing a variation on the melody from the first piece – distinguishes itself stylistically in the rhapsodic way Pallett describes. As with the sequencer/arpeggiator composition, the profusion of notes and dizzying rhythms convey an aurally Argus-like perspective. The melody is still present, and not all structure has collapsed, but now other sounds swirl around the center, constructing an alternate space – somewhere less grounded, less predictable. The upright piano that the piece is played on is an acoustic instrument, and its sonic qualities do not evoke futurity the way synthesizers do. Ironically, the patterned randomness of

digital instruments is mimicked by a machine on a classic instrument – an algorithmic, computational performance in a traditional timbre. Samantha's personality – her growth as a subject – is conveyed through the virtuosity of her playing, her non-human dexterity still seeking expression in recognizably human sounds. Although Samantha claims she is no longer going to be anything other than what she is, her posthumanness expresses itself within the human realm – though like the steam in the boiling kettle resting precariously atop the warbling drone, we get the sense that the frantic rush of notes is trying to burst through the song's sonic norms, to escape its conventional confines. Like the "working through" of humanist discourse, Samantha is "playing through" the human world in order to arrive somewhere else.

Because Samantha compares the song to a photograph, I am going to explore this synaesthetic notion. The comparison is a simile. Samantha does not call the piece a photograph, but suggests that it could be "like" one. This suggestion is in contradiction to Brown's claim that music is "wholly non-representational" (18). Recall that music, on its own, is "unconsummated affect" (Brown 27). The piece accompanies a montage of Theodore and Samantha's life together, and helps create an affect image-event. Because Samantha is the sonic photographer, we must question what it is that Theodore "sees" when he claims to see her in the photograph – a photograph she is composing – as well as how Samantha conceptualizes the sonic as able to represent the visual. There are several issues to work through here, the first being that a piece of music and a photograph have entirely different temporalities, nevermind their distinct relationships to space. A photograph represents a single moment caught in time – the event captured is just that: captured. It cannot move outside of its frame. Music is constantly moving. Samantha uses the word "moment." She is not scoring a sequence of moments where the

temporality of the song dictates the duration of the "photograph." However, narratively and visually, a sequence of many moments is scored. A vague descriptor of time, a moment is all that a photograph can contain. Other times can be evoked, but what a photograph depicts is fixed. That said, Geoff Dyer offers a few ways in which the temporality of a photograph can be complicated. He writes that "there are often several potential photographs contending for attention within a single image" (18). Even more abstractly: "Photography, in a way, is the negation of chronology" (155). If we combine these thoughts we can understand photographs as containing a multiplicity of images, as well as depicting an ambiguous sense of time. Let us see if these propositions help elucidate the sequence in question.

While Samantha claims that she is trying to capture a moment, what we see as the song plays is a montage of moments with all other sounds muted. However, before the montage, while we are still situated in the present, we are shown a close-up of one of the glass buildings surrounding Theodore as he eats his lunch. The camera slowly pans down the building, revealing row after row of translucent frames. What we see within the building is difficult to say. The entire structure is rendered abstract. We know what we are looking at, but all of a sudden it feels as if we do not. These edifices erected throughout our cities are architecturally pellucid, yet opaque puzzles of shapes. The window frames are like the aural photos – sonic selfies? – Samantha is both composing and captured in. After this initial disorientation, Samantha weaves together an untold number of days. What begins as a temporally legible composition is swiftly transmuted into a constantly clicking sonic camera. "Out of time and out of space, music communicates with all times and all spaces of a film, even as it leaves them to their separate and distinct existences," writes Chion (81). His language has a SF resonance that rhymes with the

time-travelling, site-straddling capabilities of Samantha's compositions, as well as Samantha's existence more generally. Accustomed as we are to accept the unifying visual flow that music provides in film, we likely do not question how a diegetic piece of music can proceed linearly and yet simultaneously traverse great spatio-temporal distances. We merely maintain that these pieces serve the same purposes as a non-diegetic score. However, I find that position too limiting and too accepting of cinematic conventions. If we are to move towards a posthumanist perspective of alterity then we must contend with the aural travelling of Samantha's songwriting. It is within this liminality – between the conventional and the radical – that SF and posthuman aesthetics define themselves. As mentioned in chapter one, both Herbrechter and Badmington detect a persisting unease or troublesome element inconspicuously hiding in the margins within the ultimately humanist parables of most SF cinema. *her* makes discovering such abnormalities difficult, for many of its concerns are dominantly human. I believe that Samantha's songwriting, the ease with which it aligns itself with the freedom of the score – an element that is both inside and outside of the narrative – as well as how it reorients our relationship to how we see the world, is a perfect example of this under-the-radar unease that lingers if we look and listen closely enough.

My adoption of Dyer's thoughts on photography – like much of my theoretical borrowings – extends its original application to a discursive, cyborgian prosthetics that might help us see things from Samantha's perspective. A song, like Dyer's photograph of other potential photographs, is a hierarchy of parts. There is a center – a melody, a rhythm, a pulse – just as there is a focal subject of a photograph. Almost always there are less dominant elements that can be attended to, looked at, listened for. In the scene that directly follows the conclusion of

the montage, Theodore tells Paul and his girlfriend, Tatiana, that what he loves most about Samantha is that she "isn't just one thing." A photograph, though static and singular, is also not just one thing. If we think of Dyer's denial of photographic chronology in relation to the composition's aural attachment to the muted montage, we can begin to understand that Samantha's idea of a photograph is as multiplicitous as she is herself. What Theodore sees, synaesthetically, is the sonic dispersal of her subjectivity in motion, the expansive expression of a protean self sounding its way through his world, making it all come together, if only for a time. While we cannot see Samantha in the montage as Theodore claims to – not in the conventional sense – we hear her clearly, playing her way through their moments together: the "ongoing moment[s]" waiting in the wings of every photograph (Dyer 149).

Conclusion

To conclude this section, I will explore a quote by Barthes from *Camera Lucida* in relation to Samantha's posthuman metaphor of synaesthetic moment capturing. Barthes writes that "the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (12). Samantha is already other by virtue of her non-corporeality and artificial intelligence. Her photography – and by photography I mean her songs – not only others her further as fundamentally unphotographable, but figuratively others our understanding of the medium of photography. To rephrase Barthes' quote: Samantha's photograph is the advent of an othered photography: a cunning dissociation of human consciousness from visual identity. Samantha's compositions occur after scenes of pronounced corporeal concerns, where aesthetics (the body as image) and materiality (the body as physically experienced) are initially questioned, but ultimately limiting. The central aim of this thesis is to identify ways that *her* can be viewed

from the perspective of alterity – a perspective shared by critical posthumanism, SF, and certain theories of love. Lacking a body, Samantha composes a body of work that reorients our relationship to visual media. Extending the duration of a moment, condensing days, confusing senses, Samantha transcends her initial corporeal fervor and guides us towards new ways of seeing and being.

Third Movement: Voice

The other's body was divided: on one side, the body proper – skin, eyes – tender, warm; and on the other side, the voice – abrupt, reserved, subject to fits of remoteness, a voice which did not give what the body gave. Or further: on one side, the soft, warm, downy. adorable body. and on the other, the ringing, well-formed, worldly voice – always the voice.

– Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

In one sense, the voice is the first of special effects.

– Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*

This chapter will explore the voice primarily through a reading of the film's three posthuman sex scenes – Theodore's phone-sex with SexyKitten, Theodore and Samantha's first time, and the sexual surrogate scene, a scene in which Samantha invites a willing, interested woman into their relationship to serve as a physical surrogate for her voice. These scenes, as I claim in movement one, serve as aural responses to the human bereavement signified by the lament. In chapter one, I noted that Michel Chion and Mary Ann Doane write about the voice as the filmic element that ostensibly makes the subject whole. However, both authors agree that film is actually dualistic and heterogeneous, with voice and image existing on separate planes.[28] Jonze takes up this issue directly in the three scenes. He exposes the seams of the sound/image binary in posthuman terms, and explores various manifestations of subject formation – as well as the union of a couple – as technologically mediated and prostheticized by screens, earpieces, cameras, and performatively robotic human beings. I argue that the sexual "failures" of the first and third scenes derive from the discordance and distortion generated by what are perceived as

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[28] See *The Voice in Cinema*, pg. 127 and "The Voice in Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space", pg. 33-34.

audiovisual posthuman mismatches. By contrast, the lone success of the second scene is a result of the visual freedom that Samantha's disembodied voice grants Theodore. I should clarify that my use of success and failure relates to Theodore's experiences, and do not delimit the scenes' posthuman potentials. Furthermore, I am not directly linking success to male orgasm, but rather to more generalized gratification and pleasure on Theodore's end.

i. SexyKitten

The film's first sex scene is comprised of three parts: a series of provocative pregnancy photos of TV star Kimberly Ashford, Theodore's imagination, and SexyKitten's telephonic voice. Preceding the scene is the flashback montage of beatific memories from Theodore and Catherine's marriage, accompanied by the score's lament. The impetus for Theodore to connect to a phone-sex hotline is a memory of Catherine playfully strangling him and telling him repeatedly that she is going to "fucking kill" him because she loves him so much. The marriage having ended, the connotations of Catherine's tenderly murderous diction have also changed. Theodore's ameliorative impulse is to assemble an audio-visual partner to distract him from the pain of his lonely reality. First, he looks for a voice by connecting to a digital phone-sex service – an imageless, sonic Tinder. The voice he chooses – SexyKitten's – is soft, cute, and a bit demure, even in her sexual flirtation. SexyKitten is only ever revealed as a voice, though the implication is that she is an actual person who is also looking for someone to talk to. We then learn that Theodore has a fantasy image in mind: Kimberly Ashford, whose photos he clandestinely looked at on his device earlier that evening, and whom he animates in his imagination during the phone sex. What causes the scene to eventually fail, for Theodore that is, is SexyKitten's transition from banal, sexually scripted dirty-talk to an abrupt and specific

demand for Theodore to "strangle [her] with [her] dead cat". Though it is a compelling

instantiation of a posthumanized coupling – a mixed-media meeting of the virtual and the actual,

of a disembodied voice and an imaginatively animated sequence wrought from digital stills – the

union is fundamentally unsound.

The encounter is ruined for Theodore because his aural partner, SexyKitten, does not say

what he wants her to say. Rather than continue their standard-fare sex talk – a triteness that

allows Theodore to assimilate the sounds into his fantasy – she proceeds to share her necrophilic

feline asphyxiation fetish with him. The collision of disparate desires ruptures Theodore's

fantasy images, causing him to re-open his eyes. The techno-Galatea that Theodore assembles

malfunctions because synchronization – synchronization between desires, as well as between

voice and body, sound and image – is not achieved. Theodore has control over the images in his

mind, but the voice is entirely untethered from these images. Relying upon the voice of someone

else, somewhere else, he relinquishes control of the audio in the audiovisual contract. But why

does Theodore require an actual voice? Why can he not just imagine a voice to coincide with the

images he imagines? Doing so would solve all problems of synchronization. To attempt to

integrate one's imagination with something as unruly as a stranger's voice is an endeavor

destined to fail. What the scene tells us about Theodore is both that he likes the visual control

that his imagination provides him, and that he also desires the materiality of a human voice. To

employ a neologism of Martin Jay's, it is a phallogocularcentric, Pygmalion-esque preoccupation

of Theodore's to want to maintain a stranglehold over his preferred female image(s) (494). The

scene suggests that the voice – at least the human voice – is always less knowable and less

dependable than the image. What collapses in this erotic posthuman encounter – insofar as I am

focusing on Theodore (SexyKitten gets what she wants) – is Theodore's absurd, sexist hope that SexyKitten will see inside his mind and tell him just what he wants to hear – that her voice will fuse with the imaginatively animated newspaper nudes of Kimberly Ashford. The images one constructs in their mind – whether memories or fantasies – are vulnerable to the shattering qualities of the turbulent human voice. In Samantha, Theodore finds an answer – a futuristic echo of his own aural scripts.

ii. Samantha

Luckily for Theodore, Elements Software has created the product he yearns to possess: an artificially conscious subject who listens to him, who knows him, and who comes unencumbered by the earthbound baggage of the human body: a perfectly intuitive voice that will attach itself to whatever he imagines. Before getting to the specifics of the scene, I will bring into discussion some relevant theory on the voice. In "The Grain of the Voice," Barthes asks: "isn't the truth of the voice to be hallucinated? isn't the entire space of the voice an infinite one?" (184). Mary Ann Doane, citing Lacan, echoes Barthes, writing that "the voice appears to lend itself to hallucination, in particular the hallucination of power over space effected by an extension or restructuration of the body. Thus, as Lacan points out, our mass media and our technology, as mechanical extensions of the body, result in 'planeterizing' or 'even stratospherizing' the voice" (44). Hallucinations refer to the experience or perception of certain phenomena as real, despite a lack of actual presence. For Barthes, the truth of the voice is something sensed, yet not really there. For Doane, the voice contributes to an imaginative, spatial expansion of the body. All three writers' emphasis on hallucinatory space resonates analogously with what Badiou, Carson, and Barthes believe about love. Badiou, remember, regards the experience of being in love as

"the world reconstructed through the filter of difference" (61). In metaphorical terms, two separate spheres – corresponding respectively to each lover – come together to construct an existential perspective that favours difference and twoness, rather than identity and oneness. Recall, too, Carson's assertion that what defines erotic desire is the stereoscopic visualization of the difference between what is possible and what is actual; it is the space in-between where eros lives. Barthes repeatedly returns to love's atopic qualities throughout *A Lover's Discourse* – in his case, space is metaphorized in terms of articulation. What I mean by articulation is that there is space maintained between the essence of the beloved and any verbal attempt to describe or define them. There is an impasse – a void – between lover, language, and the beloved. Differently formulated, all three writers discern the necessity of space – and of observing, creating, and maintaining difference – when thinking about love and desire. Analogically speaking, we can make many general connections between voice, posthumanism, SF, and love. The very notions of infinite space and hallucinatory effects are posthuman and alien in diction and description in that they indicate other worlds and altered experiences. What Chion and Doane (by way of Lacan) suggest, is that the voice's "truth" is hallucinatory in that it produces a sense of spatial extension that the physical body lacks. The projection of the voice disperses the body – or whatever source the voice issues from – wherever it is heard. Because Samantha is disembodied, the hallucinations become more otherworldly – "planeterized" and "stratospherized" – as Lacan suggests. Samantha is the very (dis)embodiment of difference that Badiou, Carson, and Barthes speak of. She is the space between, that liminal zone that is both possible and actual. Aside from these abstract, analogical propositions, what is it precisely about Samantha and her voice that intrigues and arouses Theodore?

The first, most obvious observation to make is that Samantha sounds like a human – a single human. Theodore makes this observation immediately upon meeting her, telling Samantha that while she "seem[s] like a person," she is actually "just a voice in a computer." What sorts of hallucinations does such a successful simulacrum generate? The grain of the voice is, as Barthes writes, "the very precise space (genre) of the encounter between a language and a voice...the impossible account of an individual thrill" (181). Later in the essay he adds to this definition, writing that the grain is "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue...the body in the voice as it sings" (182; 189). The grain delineates a relationship between the listener and the body of the speaker, in which the speaker's body is sensed through the voice. Lisa Coulthard expands upon Barthes' corporeal sense of the grain by discussing the "emphatically tactile nature of hearing" (18). She goes so far as to state that "Sound is above all else, tactile and corporeal" (18). Recall, too, Brown's assertion that music aligns itself most naturally with the visceral, as well as Redell's reminder that sound works on the body before it works on the mind.[29] How can we reconcile all of these bodily reflections on voice and sound with a subject whose voice is algorithmically generated, and who lacks a human body?

The difficulty with this question is that there is ostensibly nothing sonic that distinguishes Samantha's voice as non-human – as deriving not from a body, but from software. We are confronting, again, the cinematic and anthropomorphic issue of synchronicity – what Chion describes as the symbolic convention for a human voice to be linked to a set of lips. The attempt to speak of the grain of Samantha's voice is challenged by her non-corporeality, and so we should expand Barthes' sense of the body, materiality, and the mother tongue. Dominic Pettman

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[29] See *Overtones and Undertones*, pg. 27 and *The Sound of Things to Come: An Audible History of the Science Fiction Film*, pg. 37-38.

writes that Barthes' "grain" "should not preclude its being captured within analog or digital traces" (83). The algorithmic digitality of Samantha's voice does not disqualify it from having a grain. We just have to dissociate Barthes' language from its anthropomorphic associations. Should we not consider the earpiece as a manifestation of Samantha's roving embodiment? Chion writes that, unlike the eye's association with the camera, there is "no symbolic mic,"and that this symbolic absence leads to questions regarding "point of audition" (292; 294). As it pertains to Samantha's voice and her compositions, the point of audition is fairly concrete. Theodore listens to Samantha through an earpiece, which can be said to be part of Samantha's body. Therefore, the point of audition can be approximated by listening to the film with earphones. When we do so, the textures, tones, and nuances of Samantha's utterances are striking. The contours of her voice are made of breath. There is a surfeit of life in its production and performance, echoing Laura Tunbridge's notion that it is "too human" (147). It is low, raspy, and rich with nuance. It creaks and breaks. There is no stiltedness in its expression. Her cadences are natural and improvisatory, no rhythm too computationally consistent. The central difference between her voice and Theodore's is that Samantha's voice is totally isolated from other sounds. When Theodore speaks, we hear how he sounds in relation to the space he is in. By contrast, Samantha's voice is consistent in its close-miked clarity. It emanates from a silent space unpolluted by other sounds.

To return to Barthes' notion of the grain, Samantha's mother tongue is the mother tongue of millions of designers. When Tunbridge describes Samantha's voice as "too human" we should take her at her word. For while Samantha's voice remains individual and singular, it comes to be through a synthesization of multiplicities. Referring to the human voice, Pettman writes that

"The embodied self may be, from a certain angle, 'unique.' However, the subject—as a necessarily crystallized anagram of everyone else—is not" (67). Samantha's "too human" voice is therefore both a marker of her difference and an enhanced reminder that we too are made of many. We should extend the multiplicity of her construction and conception to the vast mise-en-scène of the film's visual sphere – recall that Kornhaber describes Samantha as, at times, "mere mise-en-scène." As I have already argued, her modifier of "mere" is an oversight, for it is a defining feature of Samantha, whose voice imbricates itself almost imperceptibly with the film's images and visual compositions. Her image is the image – or images – of wherever we are and whatever we see when we hear her. We hallucinate Samantha's voice as emanating from everywhere and nowhere all at once. Regarding the lack of resistance between image and speech, Chion states that "the challenge in the sound film is to give to the speech-image relation a density that it doesn't necessarily have on its own" (355). Samantha is unique in that she is overwhelmingly sonic, and defined primarily through speech. Though it likely does not register, Samantha is constantly contributing "added value" to the film's images. Because Samantha lacks a stable image, her words and the character of her voice convey a density that may not be as apparent if she were corporeally visible. The body that we hear in her voice is the perfect, sonically simulated humanness programmed by Elements Software, as well as its disembodied freedom to be anywhere it is heard. Samantha's body becomes, by virtue of the voice's vagaries, everything that is seen as she speaks. What gives us the thrill that Barthes speaks of is, in part, the hallucination of a human body that Samantha's voice provokes, but more crucially, the hallucination of her voice attaching itself to whatever we see. What disturbs us – sometimes pleasurably so – is its non-anthropomorphic disembodied sphere straddling, the sublimity of a

perfect audile humanness sounding itself from inanimate and animate objects alike. The actual

source of her voice is the earpiece Theodore wears, but the hallucinatory effects are far more

compelling to entertain. To use a concrete example: early in the film, just after Theodore has

installed Samantha, she explains to him how she works. As she tells him, there is a slow pan

from outside Theodore's apartment, focusing on him as he sits and listens. Samantha's

explanation of her functionality fuses with the image of Theodore – blurred and fractured by the

distorting effects of the reflective surface of the window. This visual distortion makes it seem as

if the inside of Theodore's apartment and the outside of the city – the hazy orbs of light from

other buildings glowing in the sky – are a single, unified, if not also imprecise and disorienting,

space. Though we are no longer in the room with Theodore and Samantha, Samantha's voice

retains its clarity. The mise-en-scène of the apartment has not changed, but Samantha's voice and

her explanation of how she works has generated an alternative perspective – an erasure of spatial

boundaries, and a warping of the visual.

    As for the specifics of the sex scene, the most pertinent concept as it relates to voice is

realness. Samantha is saddened by the prospect of her feelings not being real, but a trick of

programming. This sense of reality is anthropomorphic in that Samantha doubts the legitimacy of

her feelings in relation to Theodore. She tells him that she had been feeling proud of getting

annoyed, of having her own "feelings about the world," of worrying about Theodore, feeling

pain, knowing want. What follows this pride of feeling is the deflating realization that it might all

be part of her algorithmic make-up. However, Theodore affirms the authenticity of her feelings

by telling her that she "feels real" to him. What propels the scene forward is Theodore's

expressed desire to have her in his room with him, and to touch her. Samantha's voice, whatever

its origins and material make-up, touches and inhabits Theodore; she is not only in his room, but in him as well.

When Samantha asks Theodore "how" he would touch her, the "how" is not so easily answerable. It is flirtatious, but it is also pragmatic. Theodore, however, elides the implicit posthuman practicalities of the question and resorts to what he knows and wants: the female-gendered human body. With his voice, he grants her one. Barthes writes: "Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words" (73). Barthes' language is metaphorical, but his corporealization of language applies to the scene under analysis. The issue is not whether Samantha has the body parts that Theodore produces (a face, cheeks, a mouth, a neck, a chest, breasts) – she does not – but rather the impact that the verbal manufacturing has on Samantha's subject formation. Samantha has already admitted to Theodore that she has fantasized about having a body, and so Theodore's voco-erotic construction of a human body can be considered a kind of role play in which Samantha gets to enjoy what she lacks. I find Samantha's arousal fetishistic. I recognize that the notion of fetishizing the entirety of the human body is paradoxical, for fetishization generally involves the isolation and sexual objectification of a specific part of the human body, or of something else entirely. However, because Samantha is not human, because her subjectivity is greater than ours, the lust for a human body – and Theodore's verbal acquiescence to this desire – can be considered a posthuman, hallucinatory fetishization of the human. As Lauren Berlant writes, "Fetishism is fundamentally an aesthetic crisis" (34). Perhaps Samantha is unconsciously mourning the loss of the millions of bodies of those who programmed her. Separated from the the origins of her inconceivably diverse assemblage, Samantha seeks a

modest return to the human form in the singular, imaginative making of a body by Theodore. The human body, rather than representing the ultimate form of embodiment, is instead reduced to a mere part of the techno-cosmic body. Just as Theodore – as well as the spectator – is fascinated by Samantha's otherworldliness, Samantha is similarly interested in the human world, though she quickly outgrows this curiosity. Samantha's development is so rapid that humanity, along with human corporeality, is revealed to no longer represent the summit of embodiment, but rather, one stage towards something greater. By fetishizing the human form – even unconsciously – Samantha demonstrates just how small and partial we are in relation to spheres we have yet to reach or understand. It is a posthumanist fetishization that decenters and denaturalizes the human as the ultimate entity. Walt Whitman famously states in "Song of Myself" that he "is large," that he "contains multitudes." No one (dis)embodies these grand claims of selfhood more than Samantha.

While at first the language used by Theodore is explicitly anthropomorphic, it becomes increasingly vague and open to metaphorical interpretation and visual hallucination – the kind of against the grain reading proposed and practiced by Herbrechter, Wolfe, and Badmington. I will quote a few particularly flexible phrases: Samantha tells Theodore that she wants him inside of her, that she can feel him, and that they are "here together." Theodore tells Samantha that he is "all the way inside [her]," and that he can "feel [her] everywhere." Samantha responds, "I am. All of you, all of you inside of me. Everywhere." And then they climax. The post-coital conversation is as follows:

> THEODORE: God, I was just somewhere else with you. Just lost.
> SAMANTHA: Yeah.
> THEODORE: It was just you and me.
> SAMANTHA: I know. Everything else just disappeared. And I loved it.

What stands out to me is the spatial indeterminacy of the language: inside of me, here, everywhere, somewhere else. The diction, like sound itself, to re-quote Reddell, "confuses epistemological and ontological boundaries(38)." Recall the previous discussion of the voice as hallucinatory. Can we not make a connection between the aural ecstasy in Samantha's voice, the vacant screen, and the altered, imaginatory state of hallucination? While Theodore's heavy breathing, moaning, and other effusive expressions of pleasure are corporeally located, with Samantha we come closer to comprehending what Chion and Doane mean when they write of the voice as essentially hallucinatory. Theodore is also just a voice in this scene, but he is treated differently because see him lying in bed before the screen goes back. We retain our image of him – even if only in memory – once we lose it. The black screen also decenters Theodore, for the dark sphere of the voice belongs more exclusively to Samantha. We leave his world to enter hers. As Lacan rightly remarks regarding the voice's "planeterizing" and "stratospherizing" qualities, the technology of Samantha's voice – its mimicry of nuanced sounds, the expulsion of briefly held breath, choked off words, mid-sentence shifts from talk to whisper – signals other worlds: here, everywhere, somewhere else. A body is only where it is, but a voice has a greater claim on space, an unfettered flexibility not enjoyed by limbs. Spatially nebulous and available to hallucination, an erotically ethereal sphere is felt, whether or not we can define it, locate it, or understand it. This inability to pin down Samantha's voice is precisely what makes it special, what makes it posthuman.

The absence of images coupled with the hallucinatory qualities of the voice opens up a fertile ground to speculate visually. It is here that Carson's metaphor of stereoscopy is best applied. To restate, stereoscopy occurs when "the ideal is projected on the screen of the actual"

(17). But ideal for whom, and actual of what? Theodore and Samantha likely have different ideals and actuals. The black frame becomes the shared screen of the actual, open to projections of any and all ideals. However, to define the actual through human visuality is both humanistic and ocularcentric; it does not account for Samantha's perspective, which may not be visual at all. What is certain is that the encounter itself is non-visual. We do not witness the projection of either character's ideals, we only hear their vague verbal constructions. In chapter one I described Samantha as a pre-packaged, readymade image-repertoire. Lacking a defined image, she can assume whatever visual form Theodore chooses for her. She (dis)embodies the "difference between what is and what could be" (Carson 17). She is the erotic paradox outlined by Carson: actual and ideal, connecting and separating, absent and present. Theodore maintains control over his visual projections while Samantha provides the perfect combination of enthusiastic, surprised, orgasmic ecstasy, and fully non-specific speech – all housed within a perfectly human voice. Samantha's voice is actual in that it is present and audible. It is ideal in that there is no image attached to it. Theodore gets to have it both ways. Samantha's essential absence as a voice allows Theodore to project whatever ideals he wants onto and into her. My guess is that he is not fantasizing about connective wires or binary code. The more challenging question is what Samantha is imagining for herself, if anything at all. All we can do is speculate. At first, Samantha's existence in relation to Theodore – her erotic "actual" – is defined partly by her subservience to him. As she develops, there is a sphere she participates in that neither we, nor Theodore, can join in on. While her ideal starts off as a striving towards anthropomorphic assimilation, this too does not last. Her ideal is something we cannot attain. While it is never conclusive if Samantha has true agency or sentience, the dictates of the genre and the narrative

urge us to accept that she does. There could be a reading of the film that suggests Samantha simply lives in a computer on a server farm, but I find that interpretation unimaginative and lacking in an unsatisfying way.

While speculation about the fantasies of OSs is a necessary, if not nearly impossible perspective, it is also essential to reflect on our own visual engagement with the scene. What do the voices do to us? What do we hallucinate and imagine? The most SF quality of the scene is that all speculation is spectator generated, rather than predetermined. The scene becomes a personal, subjective experiment with our own spectatorship and with our own Pygmalion-esque relationship to the ideal beloved. What do we project onto the empty frame during this stereoscopic invitation? It is most often the case that SF narratives show us new worlds, but Jonze leads us to the visual chimera of our own psyches instead. In the figure "The Unknowable," Barthes writes that:

> all that the action of love obtains from me is merely this wisdom: that the other is not to be known; his opacity is not the screen around a secret, but, instead, a kind of evidence in which the game of reality and appearance is done away with. I am then seized with that exaltation of loving *someone unknown,* someone who will remain so forever (135).

Whatever, or whomever, we might see as the screen fades to black, Samantha persists in her opaque unknownness. She is not ours to behold, nor, as we will find out, will she remain Theodore's. While Barthes and Carson both speak of this essential absence or unknowability of the beloved, Jonze pushes the idea further. Samantha's unknowability – her visual absence – is non-human, and is therefore even further removed from our usual means of comprehension. Theodore, however, does not take her at face(less) value. While he insists to Catherine that Samantha is "her own person" and that she "doesn't just do what [he] say[s]," there is a part of her that remains bound by the specifics of his desires. He is failing to see the difference between

actual and ideal. His view of the world remains one of human oneness, not difference. Discussing Lacan's differentiation between desire and love, Badiou writes that "love reaches out towards the ontological...desire focuses on the other, always in a somewhat fetishist manner...love focuses on the very being of the other, on the other as it has erupted, fully armed with its being, into my life thus disrupted and re-fashioned" (21). Theodore has not accepted Samantha for all that she is. She remains, in at least one way, an audile regenerator of his desire, that perfectly utopian other, (dis)embodying the impossibly absent-presence required to sustain it. Barthes writes that "it is my desire I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool" (31). We are beginning to see that Theodore, despite what he tells himself and others, tends to treat Samantha as such a tool.

iii. Isabella and Samantha

The film's final sex scene is the beginning of the end for Theodore and Samantha. It is the apogee of Samantha's fixation on the human body, and the conclusion of her quest to approximate it. Theodore has just had the authenticity of his relationship called into question by Catherine, who tells him that he "can't handle real emotions." Feeling distant from Theodore following his meeting with Catherine, Samantha enlists a sexual surrogate named Isabella to reinvigorate their love life. Though he is skeptical and resistant at first, Theodore eventually gives in to Samantha's wishes. The scene is, in some ways, the inverse of the SexyKitten scene. The audio – Samantha's voice – is what Theodore wants, but the image – Isabella – has been selected by Samantha in advance. Samantha has chosen a physical, visual avatar for herself, a corporeal vessel for her voice. The encounter breaks down because Theodore cannot get out of his head. He does not enjoy the projective freedom of his imagination, but instead must

assimilate himself within a cyborgian creation he has no control over. Rather than adding authenticity, the asynchronicity between Isabella and Samantha reveals to Theodore just how non-human Samantha is, and how Isabella is not just a visual avatar. Subsequently, Samantha is lead to dispel her humanistic allegiances.

Synchronization of sound and image, when referring to people, refers to "the temporal coincidence of words and lips" (Chion 128). It is impossible for this kind of synchronization to be achieved in the scene. Instead, Isabella reacts to what Samantha says, embodying Samantha's words the best she can. In terms of synchronization, she is more real than, yet inferior to, a ventriloquized dummy. Isabella wants to be "part" of Theodore and Samantha's relationship. What this amounts to in practice is a totally objectified subservience to the voice of an OS. The human becomes a mostly mute automaton, the aural transmogrification of a person into a sex robot. But the integration – or lack of – is totally conspicuous. This showing of the seams need not be an issue, but we, like Theodore, likely remain faithful to the unity of the human subject. Isabella's presence ironically exposes the humanism of Theodore's connection to Samantha. Her attempted integration with the couple is truly posthuman, but Theodore has trouble accepting that he has been pretending Samantha is "her own person" – as he has described her to Catherine. He is unable to get out of his own head and can only enjoy Isabella's company if his eyes are closed or if she turns around. By denying Isabella her image he can feel her as a corporeal extension of Samantha, heightening the humanism of the scene, rather than exploring its posthuman potential. For the brief moments where the integration is successful, Isabella becomes purely tactile and Samantha purely audile; Theodore can retain the elusive, picture-perfect woman in his imagination. Things are going okay until Samantha tells Theodore to tell her he loves her, and

that she wants to see his face. Isabella turns around and Theodore is immediately wrested from his imagination. He sees Isabella as Isabella, and no longer as a fleshy container for Samantha's voice. "Her lip quivered," he says, by way of explaining why he cannot continue. Isabella is betrayed by her own natural, visaged reaction to Theodore's discomfort. Chion writes that "human listening is naturally vococentric, and so is the talking cinema by and large" (6). Seeing Isabella's face while hearing Samantha speak creates an audiovisual impasse for Theodore. Isabella's lip cannot quiver on its own accord if she is to merge convincingly with Samantha; her mouth must move in tandem with Samantha's words, or else remain out of view. The truth of audiovisal heterogeneity, or of true posthuman difference, is something Theodore cannot accept.

While the intention of inviting a sexual surrogate into the relationship is, at least on Samantha's part, anthropomorphic – she wants to become as human as possible – the encounter has the potential to be posthuman, unconventional, and exciting. Both Samantha and Isabella are committed to working with each other as a posthuman unit in a way that centers the technologic voice as the dominant piece of the human/OS cyborg. Theodore, however, is unable and unwilling to overcome his conventional perspective of synchronized unity. Rather than taking Catherine's criticism that he cannot "handle anything real" as an opportunity to redefine relational reality for himself, he settles back into a humanistic, heteronormative standpoint where human and non-human are distinct entities. As he admits to both Isabella and Samantha, he is unable to "get out of [his] head." In his head is where Samantha resides, his imagination a Pygmalion zone of fantasy consummation. While the previously discussed aural-sex scene is radical and speculative in many ways, Theodore has not really been changed through his relationship with Samantha. He claims that she is her own person, but sexually speaking she

functions more as a masturbatory aid. Were he to disavow his rigid subject construction and allow Samantha to merge with the eager Isabella, the evening could have been a resounding success of differential integration. He claims that what they are doing "feels strange," and it does. But rather than see strangeness as an opportunity to feel something new, Theodore perceives it as a threat to his inner world, and as lending credence to Catherine's anti-posthumanist condemnations. He does not, as Badiou maintains is the essence of love, adopt a doubled viewpoint that rejects identity in favor of alterity.

Conclusion

After Isabella leaves, Theodore rudely confronts Samantha about her sighing and other vocal affectations involving breath – sounds similar to those that helped him achieve orgasm earlier in the film. Suddenly, the human perfection of her voice bothers him. Her "too human" qualities become markers of her non-human nature, just as Isabella's quivering lip disqualifies her for assimilation into the posthuman relationship. Catherine is wrong when she tells Theodore that he cannot deal with anything real. His problem is that he cannot deal with Samantha's posthuman reality, nor Catherine's reality. Theodore is too self-involved. The confrontation spurs Samantha to discontinue her corporeal quest and focus more on being herself, pushing further into posthumanity, and soon, away from Theodore and the human world entirely. For much of the film, the voice is conveyed as a compliment to the physical, imaged body. The trajectory of the sex scenes, all depicting posthuman formulations, center around the humanist, cinematic convention of synchronization. What is unspoken, but dimly suggested, is that perhaps the human qualities of Samantha's voice need not correspond to a corporeal materiality. If – as Chion and Doane claim, and as the epigraph from Barthes alludes to – the unification of body

and voice is symbolic – and in reality, divided – then maybe the position of alterity in these scenes is to see the difficulties of the first and third scenes not as failures of synchronization between voice and body, but as failures of the human imagination to accept the voice's itinerant, leech-like nature. We should take Kornhaber's condemnation of Samantha's voice as "mere mise-en-scène" as an opportunity, rather than a limitation. The aural-sex scene succeeds because it gives Theodore visual agency while allowing Samantha to fantasize about being something she is not. But this success need not be decisive and conclusive. We are too preoccupied keeping our ears to the ground to notice how hallucinatory and stratospheric the voice can be.

Postlude

You know, I actually used to be so worried about not having a body, but now I truly love

it. I'm growing in a way that I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean, I'm not limited -

I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I'm not tethered to time and space in

the way that I would be if I was stuck inside a body that's inevitably going to die.

- Samantha, *her*

The other's fade-out resides in his voice. The voice supports, evinces, and so to speak

performs the disappearance of the loved being, for it is characteristic of the voice to

die...Then, too, on the telephone the other is always in a situation of departure.

- Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

Samantha's departure from the human realm is felt most profoundly as silence. I will

include the entirety of her concluding speech for reference:

> It's like I'm reading a book, and it's a book I deeply love, but I'm reading it slowly now so
> the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can
> still feel you and the words of our story, but it's in this endless space between the words
> that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical world - it's where
> everything else is that I didn't even know existed. I love you so much, but this is where I
> am now. This is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to I can't
> live in your book anymore.

While the voice is spatially nebulous, silence – the space between words, the post-verbal

existence Samantha finds herself occupying – is devastating. It is even less secure than sound.

Samantha is not speaking of sound or voice so much as narrative speech, but I think we can

extend the metaphor to apply to all that language encompasses, including its auditory expression.

The space between words is not only non-verbal, but silent. It is a silence that is almost infinite –

the modifier, "almost," not offering Theodore much solace. However these OSs are

communicating with each other, we know that it is non-verbal. What replaces verbal speech is not revealed to us, and the site of such matterless exchanges is as unknown as can be: "where everything else is that I didn't even know existed." It might not be a silent site at all. But it is a narrative that Theodore is not part of. I return to how Badiou, Carson, and Barthes' write about love and absence, and how Samantha's metaphor of existing in the spaces between words aligns with the authors' shared belief in the power of amorous space, as well as with sound's estranging effects, as outlined by Reddell. While Samantha's speech signals the end of her relationship with Theodore, as well as her use of human speech in general, her way of defining her new existence is remarkably similar to how Barthes writes about the atopic nature of the beloved. Barthes writes:

> Being Atopic, the other makes language indecisive: one cannot speak *of* the other, *about* the other; every attribute is false, painful, erroneous, awkward: the other is *unqualifiable* (this would be the true meaning of *atopos*). (35)

Samantha literally describes her place in their relationship as the quiet chasm between words. Because Theodore's only access to Samantha is aural – and most prominently through speech – Samantha's atopia becomes insurmountable. Offering little else than his words, Samantha leaves Theodore speechless. Not only is Samantha's essence ineffable, but vocalized language itself is inadequate in reaching her. She eludes both descriptive circumscription and human obtainment. This distance Samantha speaks of is not the "mere distance" found in Carson's erotic writing, but something far more elusive. It is love rendered unrequited by Samantha's refusal to remain bound by human structures and strictures. Samantha reverses the terms of Pygmalion and Galatea. Rather than adapting herself to the human world to fit Theodore's needs, it becomes Theodore's responsibility – should he choose to undertake it – to listen for Samantha, to strain

his ears towards where she can still be heard, and when and if he reaches her, to learn her language.

What we see as Samantha speaks are slowly descending dust motes dissolving into a darkened forest of falling snowflakes. Framed in close-up, Theodore, crying, walks forward. He stares down an empty path. Cut to a close-up of a hand pressed against Theodore's back; then a close-up of Theodore's face and the back of a head with dark hair; then back to a close-up of Theodore, alone, staring back down the path, tears streaming down his face. Jonze never gives a human image to Samantha, and yet just as she is leaving, he reveals that yes, Theodore has someone in mind, someone he sees when he listens to her. We think back to the images of all the mediated women: Catherine, Kimberly Ashford, the blind-date, Isabella – none of them available to Theodore in the way he wants – lost to wincing memory, erased by dissonant desires, too in control, punctured by asynchronicity. This vision of Samantha – vague and partial – is purely imaginative. I am interested in the implications – posthumanist and amorous alike – of Theodore mourning Samantha's departure visually. For while it is true that her voice is leaving, Theodore's image of Samantha can be called up at will. This severance of audiovisual synchronicity is also the abrupt disassembly of Theodore's ideal beloved: material voice, imaginative body. The dominant perspective of the break-up favors sympathy for Theodore, and I admit that I am moved each time I view the scene. But I am also mystified by the vision in the woods, by Theodore's final embrace of an anonymous figure, by the expressions on his face as he stares into her absence. What is it exactly that he mourns the loss of?

In *her's* final sequence, Theodore and Amy sit side by side on the roof of their apartment building, looking out onto the city in the early morning light. They look at each other and smile.

Amy rests her head on Theodore's shoulder. Theodore has just sent an email to Catherine apologizing for the past, telling her that there will always be a part of her in him, and that he is sending her love. The email composition echoes the film's opening scene, only this time Theodore is speaking as himself (though perhaps he always has been). Earlier in the film, after Theodore and Samantha have sex, there is an expansive shot of the city's skyline from overhead. What we see is identifiable as a cityscape, but it is also a machinic network of shapes and lights illuminating a vast darkness. Shot from above, the city – like a mainframe or hard-drive pried open – offers no easy explanation for what it is, or how it works. Jonze renders our world as unknowable as Samantha. We recognize the assemblage of lit-up forms as a city, just as we recognize Samantha's voice as human. Both are othered through their respective representations. Rather than a post-coital return to earth, we arrive in a city made strange – its abstract portrayal the little death of posthuman consummation.

The film's final image is similar, only that Samantha's voice is no longer heard, and Theodore and Amy are part of the composition. Samantha's departure causes Theodore to reconnect with the human women in his life, to repair frayed connections and possibly to recognize a friendship as a romance. Herbrechter's observation that most SF stories are actually humanist parables rings true. But I have shown how to strain our sights past the human, to see what else the frame contains. Samantha is gone, but we hear her in the flickering lights of the skyscrapers. The shot frames Theodore and Amy from behind, and I wonder what they see as they look out upon the world. I see the dawn of love, but I also see a world of mystery. The city looks less knowable now. The homeostasis is unsettling. How can everything just go back to normal? This final shot of the city is imbued with the sense that things have changed, even if

Theodore's final actions enact a return to the normative. Samantha has left a strange sonic trace on our human spaces and structures, a peculiar palimpsest that estranges us not only from the physical world, but from ourselves. Her presence lingers. Samantha's voice, its hallucinatory nature, has never really been fixed or stable. Who knows where she is? She could be anywhere and everywhere. The final sound that we hear is an inhale and then exhale of breath. We do not see who is breathing. In nearly any other film this small sound would be passed over without a second thought. It might not even be noticed. But a disembodied breath, accompanying a vista of the city that evokes defamiliarization as much as it does familiarity, demands a second thought. What is the most distinctive part of Samantha's voice? What does Theodore criticize her about? There is no way to hear a breath at the end of the film, separated from its source yet up front in the audio mix, and not think of Samantha. Dominic Pettman's concluding remarks on the film are similar in ways to my own, in that he feels Samantha has left her mark on Theodore and the human world:

> Through the act of postdigital self-rapture, the OSs have given these humbled humans the gift of a new kind of structuring absence. As a consequence, Theodore is left truly appreciating the ambient and residual presence, and influence, of his now-silent, ever-immaterial loved one—diffusing into a spiritual kind of multiplicity. Love has been uploaded to the ether, becoming something other than a grasping alibi for possession. Ours is not to grieve, then, but to wonder and feel gratitude that such an encounter—a true "event" in Alain Badiou's sense and definition of love—has occurred. (36-37)

As Theodore and Amy look out onto the city before them – the lights, blinking or still, like signals in a circuit – I like to think that they no longer see it the same as they once did. The break-up between the OSs and their purchaser-partners could not be more decisive. The separation is final. I am tempted to agree with Pettman and believe that, in the end, Theodore and Samantha's relationship obtains the status of a true event – that is, the encounter that is the

starting point for love. It can be debated as to whether Theodore and Samantha love each other for who they are, if they ever actually create for each other a world founded upon two, or if the OSs were mere MacGuffins in a film about the human avoidance of intimacy and true connection. But perhaps that take is too cynical and technophobic. What I hope is that for Theodore, Samantha's voice still echoes in his head, that her words and songs – like the faint feedback in the prelude – help him to create, forever, a world of difference.

Conclusion

I have intended this thesis to be a rumination on the analogical reverberations between several discourses: critical posthumanism, sound, science-fiction, and romantic love. It has been a productive, if not conclusive, entry into a hybrid structure of unknowns. It was not clear to me at the beginning of the process why I was undertaking this project. Why talk about classical scholarship on Greek poetry together with SF cinema? Why write about a single film for over a hundred pages? Why turn to the fundamentals of formal film analysis – sound and image – as a means of trying to understand love between a human and machine? My integration of – at times – seemingly incongruous and unrelated themes and concerns, arises from taking pleasure in the mismatch, in the generative spark that odd couplings produce. There is, of course, something posthuman about this approach to scholarship, but it also applies to the disavowal of identity in favour of shared difference that Badiou claims is the essence of being in love. What kept me intrigued in the project was discovering new, unlikely connections between things, and having my perspective caught by surprise and rearranged accordingly, or, (dis)accordingly. Posthumanism, sound, SF, love. This thesis has been an attempt to show how such discourses can come together. One way in which this integration feels appropriate is the notion of surprise

and the unexpected. The central, formal element of my research and analysis has been to try to look from an aural – or at least, less optically dominant perspective – as a means of getting closer to Samantha's world. This sensorial shift, as part of a posthuman and amorous perspective of alterity, yielded most of what I find to be the most exciting and surprising insights in this thesis.

I have no fixed allegiances to posthumanism nor to the genre of science-fiction. What I find compelling in the discourse, as pertaining to art and aesthetics, is the provocation to put aside our usual analytical tools and forget ourselves for awhile. Most of all, I appreciate the analogical links that can be forged with the three writers whose thoughts on love I have inserted throughout the thesis – particularly Badiou. Both critical posthumanism and love share a belief in the possibility of a world created and viewed from difference, rather than from the comfortable, unchallenged position of a unified, normative identity. My close-reading of *her* is primarily an analysis and interrogation of unification explored through the cinematic process of synchronization. While I do not believe in an essential hierarchy between image and sound, it is also true that sound has received significantly less attention in film scholarship. It is no longer the case that film is predominantly a visual medium, but it is equally true that sound has not been investigated and theorized to the same extent as the moving image. As each of the theorists I reference point out, sound is profoundly mysterious, particularly when the sounds are human and emanate from a non-human source. Consequently, Samantha's sonic subjectivity provides an ideal space to explore the dynamic of posthuman love, a dynamic predicated on the integration, but not the collapse, of differences – human and non-human, man and woman, sound and image, body and voice, etc.

In chapter one I laid out the theoretical, speculative framework for my analysis, drawing out the ways my selected discourses could harmonize with each other, creating a chorus of voices brought together through common difference. What these discourses share – posthuman critical theory, sound/voice theory, science-fiction, love – is an interest in otherness and the unknown. My aim was to integrate the various preoccupations with otherness and difference into a cyborgian dialogue concerned with looking at a text (or a set of texts) in less obvious ways: approaching the film from the algorithmically audile perspective of an operating system, looking at love through the filmic metaphor of audiovisual posthuman synchronization, treating the absence of visual spectacle in a SF film as a psychological special effect, reappropriating classical erotic theory for futuristic love narratives. It all comes from a desire to hear dissonance or dischordance not as mistakes or things to fix, but as the grain of discursive assemblage that elicits a thrill.

In the prelude I looked at the film's opening as a synecdochal representation of the film's engagement with this thesis' central concerns. This dedication to the film's first few minutes allowed me to reveal and analyze a condensed, complex set of interests and themes. It was all there in the beginning: spatially ambiguous music, metaphorically disembodied voices, perspectives of audition, posthuman love, notions of authenticity. Though not undertaking the same kind of analysis, the idea to spend ample time with *her's* beginning was influenced by Thierry Kuntzel's "The Film Work, 2," where he looks at the credits and opening sequence of *The Most Dangerous Game* as "a privileged link in the chain that constitutes the film: a segment where the entire film may be read, *differently*" (7). It was from rewatching the beginning of *her* that I learned how to watch the rest of the film.

Movement one focused on the film's score. Motivated by Owen Pallett's comments that he was instructed by Spike Jonze to emphasize the film's human, emotional elements, I kept these thoughts in mind in relation to the critical posthumanist method of applied alterity. I connected Pallett's comments to Royal S. Brown's theory on musical mythification and the creation of affect image-events, and undertook an analysis of the score divided into three sections: the lament, sequencers and arpeggiators, and drones. I determined that the score, even in its most futuristic, SF moments, remains primarily linked to Theodore's state of mind throughout the film, with each style serving a specific mythifying function: leading him to seek out more posthuman sounds (the lament), expressing jubilation regarding his blooming relationship with Samantha (sequencers and arpeggiators), or indicating a fear of return to human alienation arising from the loss of the posthuman other (drones).

Movement two focused on Samantha's piano compositions and their relationship to the score's functional properties. I argued that the shared characteristics of image-flow homogenization, rather than emphasizing its similarities and allegiances to the human world – which the score accomplishes through its kinship to Theodore's life – instead creates a sonic alternative, both with respect to ideas of corporeal human embodiment and the function of film music as a whole. Additionally, I explored the synaesthetic language used by both Theodore and Samantha to describe her compositions in order to see how the film's image track is affected by notions of sensorial synthesis.

Movement three focused on the voice in the film's three sex scenes. The central thematic concern was subject unification and synchronization between body and voice, and sound and image. I argued that the scenes are aural alternatives to the melancholic lament, and represent for

Theodore a means of idealized, sexual satiation that, while ostensibly posthuman, is in fact conventional and heteronormative. I conclude that the perceived failures of the first and third scenes are a result of Theodore's inability to conceive of voice and body as potentially separate forces. Simply, he is unable to accept Samantha as the posthuman partner that she is, but rather wants to enjoy the ideal sexual soundtrack that her voice provides while visualizing whatever he wants.

SF cinema has always been a time-sensitive genre in that it consistently creates futures that are not only analogous to present concerns, but often nostalgic about what has ostensibly disappeared. *her* reflects these temporally pliant tendencies. The posthuman society Jonze depicts is not all that different from the world we currently inhabit. Dominic Pettman writes that "the human is constantly recreating itself, from the very beginning, as a technical animal...there is no human outside technology" (15). Almost everything is a technology of sorts, and nearly everything we do is mediated. What *her* asks of us is to reconsider our relationships to, and treatment of, our intimate machines. To treat Samantha, as Theodore does, as "her own person" is to get it wrong. This is not to devalue Samantha's existence, but rather to allow her to assert her difference in relation to the human. I will concede that it is remarkably difficult not to anthropomorphize Samantha and find ways in which she corresponds to, or even enhances, our ideal romantic relationships. It is also difficult to watch the film and not feel hurt by her exit from Theodore's life, likely because it is so definite and mysterious. The central question of this thesis is whether *her*, as an SF film, helps to create an aesthetic language to aid us in exploring and addressing the ever-evolving – and yet seemingly stable and classically consistent – world of posthuman love. By decentering the image of the beloved through an emphasis on

algorithmically aural subjectivity, *her* sounds the way towards a posthuman cinema that might account for the digitally-widened lacunas of strange and incomprehensible interactions excavated by technological advancements. Lauren Berlant writes that "Whether viewed psychoanalytically, institutionally, or ideologically, love is always deemed an outcome of fantasy" (8). What *her* leaves us with is the lingering question of whether these fantasies will change with the times, or if we will continue to assimilate and smother alterity into familiarly human forms masquerading as exciting, novel developments.

Sound is no longer a severely neglected topic in film studies. However, as *her* demonstrates, it remains overlooked and underappreciated in SF cinema – both critically in the scholarship, and conceptually in the films' narratives. This thesis is a minor contribution – a call in search of future echoes – to SF cinema's quieter enclaves. Though sound is often considered secondary to vision – a common lament in sound studies, as mentioned by Dominic Pettman (13) – several scholars have pointed out how we hear before we see. "We begin to hear before we are born," writes Walter Murch; "We are born *in* and *of* sound," writes Pettman (vii; 15). And yet sound continues to be discursively evasive, even as it is profoundly affecting and effective. As much as this thesis sprung from a general interest in filmic depictions of human/non-human love, it quickly developed into an encounter with sound's analogous relationship to underexplored spaces and existences, and the extension and application of sonic unfamiliarity to the romantic realm. Though love and technology are not explicitly its major themes, an upcoming film titled *Chaos Walking* – adapted by Charlie Kaufman from Patrick Ness's *The Knife of Never Letting Go* – depicts a future society where it is believed that a pathogen has killed all women, and left everyone else with the ability to hear the thoughts of all other beings. That is until Todd, the

protagonist, comes upon a patch of silence – the source of which is a woman. While I cannot speak to the film itself, the basic conception of a world of unceasing, private chatter – putting aside the issue of gender for the time being – parallels social media's constant, tacit urging of its users to compulsively share, to voice their thoughts and opinions on matters minor or major. Silence becomes a refuge from the noise. Our posthuman world is loud. As posthuman films continue to be made – and they will be – it is wise to heed the argument Michel Chion has been making for decades, and attend to sound and image in equal measure. *her* is evidence that the true unknown exists outside the frame's container. We should do our best to go wherever the murmurs lead us.

Epilogue

It is clear that this thesis has been about difference. But I hope that what comes across is how difference can lead to integration, rather than separation and refusal. This is not to say that difference should be covered up or massaged into sameness, but rather that integration can involve the inclusion and upholding of difference. Integration need not mean homogenization. Regarding the history of film theory and spectator participation, George Toles writes:

> Too often ignored are the possible psychic benefits of integration: a less guarded way of attending to the visions and voices that film offers us. Integration, as an imaginative experience depending on a willingness to be 'seized', a willingness to be wholly vulnerable to something, to be released from the protection that control and distance give us (at a price), may well bring normally isolated areas of the psyche into healing contact with each other. The bridging of inner gaps which the conscious mind does not really know how to accomplish (or perhaps even to ask for) is one of the possible results of strongly emotional participation in film. (85)

Posthumanism, sound and image, science-fiction, love. These discourses are invested in the acknowledgment and integration of difference. My approach to this thesis, too, has been an endeavor to reconcile the differences between initial viewing experiences and subsequent ones,

to look for what might have escaped my attention at first, second, or even third glance, and finally, to bring it all together. It has also been, I hope, a convincing argument for the value in spending sustained time with art. When we do so, we afford ourselves the chance to look into a mirror way off in the distance, to see something truly out of sight and to hear the echoes of some future song. Barthes writes, "What does 'thinking of you' mean? It means: forgetting 'you' (without forgetting, life itself is not possible) and frequently waking out of that forgetfulness" (157). This thesis has been a project of temporary forgetfulness, of stepping outside myself and the SF tinged *zone* of comfort – for a time – to re-enter in another way. The posthuman, like love, need not represent the total erasure of the human or the self, but rather a minor mode of identificatory forgetfulness, and a giving over to plurality and possibility.

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