Posthumanism: Love in the Time of AI

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Abstract: *Posthumanism, with its visions of disembodied technological transcendence, has tended to dismiss psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on bodily drives and unconscious fantasies, as part of the outmoded Humanist framework posthumanism criticises. This contribution will argue this is a mistake: psychoanalysis has always been 'post-human', mounting its own sustained critique of Humanism. Precisely by recognising the transhumanist dream of technological transcendence as a fantasy, psychoanalysis can allow us to focus our analytical attention on what remains uncanny in the posthuman, including the status of the sexed body and of the drives. This contribution will outline the missed encounter between posthumanism and particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis. It will do so by undertaking a Lacanian reading of the 2013 film,* Her*, in which important questions are posed about love, desire, and sex in human-machine relations.*

Keywords: Posthumanism, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, *Her*, Artificial Intelligence

Introduction

The term 'posthumanism' was coined by Ihab Hassan over forty years ago (Hassan). Whilst its definition remains nebulous, a lively interdisciplinary academic field has since crystallized around it (Braidotti; Nayar; Ferrando). Its main aim - theorising the transformative impact of technoscience on the parameters of human consciousness and subjectivity – has only become more pertinent in the 21st century, as everyday life and technology have become profoundly entangled. Hassan used the term as a temporal marker for a then-new era in which "the human form – including human desire and its external manifestations – may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned" (843). A kind of postmodern endism seemed to impose the neologism on him: "We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something we must helplessly call posthumanism" (*ibid*.). His assertion came long before the internet or the mapping of the human genomic sequence, so imagine our helplessness before this term today, following the digital revolution and the rise of artificial intelligence. But what I want to hold onto in Hassan's initial sketch of posthumanism, precisely because it has not always remained central since, is his reference to "human desire and its external manifestations". What might desire mean here, and what makes it specifically human? What are its latest "external manifestations", and in relation to what can they be considered external given that the human form is itself trans-forming?

After establishing some theoretical coordinates, this chapter will explore these questions through the 2013 film *Her*, written, directed, and produced by Spike Jonze, which explores the complexities of "human desire and its external manifestations" in the era of artificial intelligence. *Her* arguably shows us a future that is already here, suggesting that love and desire must be "re-visioned" as a result. My claim will be that for such revisioning, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory offers indispensable resources, despite posthuman studies being at times wary, even dismissive, of the psychoanalytic framework.

Janus-Faced Desire

These questions about human desire are hardly new for the Western philosophical tradition. Since the ancient Greeks, human desire has been distinguished from mere animal instinct to elevate us to the status of Aristotle's *zoon politikon* (animals capable of being political and social because rational). Yet subsequent neo-Platonic, Judeo-Christian, and then Enlightenment traditions tried to separate desire from Reason, lest the animal in us return and our passions become 'pathological' in Kant's sense. In the rational humanist view, desire has largely been seen as a disposition towards action correlated to notions of agency, autonomy, and the possibility of progress. *Conscious* desire, as willed volition, has thus been a central pillar of liberal humanism. By contrast, affects deemed irrational or base have constituted an obstacle to the humanist project. Desire has always been Janus-faced then: on the one hand, it propels Man's rational mastery over Nature, including his own; on the other, it is a disruptive return of Nature within Man, scuppering his capacity for Reason.

As "a general critical space in which the techno-cultural forces which both produce and undermine the stability of the categories of "human" and "nonhuman" can be investigated" (Waldby, 43), posthumanism also engages with this fundamental question of human desire. For example, itallows us to interrogate our desire for what Hans Moravec once called the "postbiological future", to which genetic and reproductive technologies seem to be leading us (Moravec). Do we want a future that replaces the evolutionary rhythms of Nature with an accelerated technical manipulation of the building blocks of life 'itself' - scare quotes because life becomes something else in this process? And if we do decide we want to embrace Moravec's postbiological future, might that wanting turn out to be a pathological passion undermining our much-vaunted Reason? Could posthuman desire incarnate, in a new way, the 'dialectic of the Enlightenment' Adorno and Horkheimer warned us about, in which "the dark horizon of myth is illumined by the sun of calculating reason" but "beneath whose cold rays the seeds of the new barbarism grow to fruition" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 32)?

A posthumanism informed by critical theory can question these desires, especially where they become quasi-religious. Take the impatient *trans*-humanist desire to surpass the limitations of human bodies so that this post-natural future might arrive sooner. Transhumanists imagine bypassing the body's tendency to age, get ill, and die, through the use of new biotechnologies. But don't they also picture a new solution to the body's troublesome lust for other bodies, and thus the sins of its flesh? As transhumanists advocate consciousnesses being uploaded to a hard-drive in search of informatic immortality - or, as if to spell out the Christian imagery of heaven, to 'the cloud' – don't they aspire to leave not only death but also sex and sexuality behind? In this transhumanist form, posthumanism often seems like a yearning to escape *embodied* desire, to become a pure, ethereal, digitised consciousness whose only mode of enjoyment would be cognitive-computational. Trans-humanism may have deep connections to the rise of the broader discourse of 'trans' today, in which the supposed binarism of biological sexual difference is being fundamentally challenged. Beyond its narrow understanding as trans-sexualism, with its emphasis on pre- and post-op transitioning of the anatomical body, trans as transgenderism has led to the proliferation of performative rather than embodied identity positions which are also distinct from sexual orientations, such as 'asexual', 'third gender', and 'two spirits'. Some psychoanalysts have interpreted this 'trans' phenomenon as the emergence not of new sexualities per se but as the latest manifestation of the ways in which the fundamental sexual *non*-relation is treated (Leguil & Fajnwaks).

But posthumanism also allows us to explore the opposite: namely, whether trans-/posthuman desires include fantasies about the heights of sexual *satisfaction* to which future technologies might take our bodies. Many pop culture sci-fi texts explore what happens to sexual desire (often still figured as gendered and heteronormative in fact) when jacked in to new technologies, from the 'excessive-pleasure machine' in Roger Vadim's 1968 film *Barbarella*, to the 'Orgasmatron' in Woody Allen's 1973 film *Sleeper*, to 'Pris' the 'basic pleasure model' android in Ridley Scott's 1982 *Bladerunner*. So if posthumanism describes a becoming-cyborg, as Donna Haraway intimated in the mid-1980s, how do the cyborgs we increasingly *are* - defined by her as a cybernetically augmented "creature in a post-gender world" (Haraway, 150) - approach that human, all-too human triumvirate of sex, love, and desire today?

Posthumanism and Psychoanalysis

For all these reasons, psychoanalysis *ought* to be a crucial resource for posthuman studies. No other theory, or indeed practice, has been so consistently focussed on the vicissitudes of human desire. Moreover, psychoanalysis has always been a scandal for rational humanism, since unconscious desire puts a spanner in the workings of rational will. If Freud showed that Enlightenment Man is not master in his own Cartesian house after all, then psychoanalysis as such could be described as a posthumanism *avant la lettre*. Yet it is rarely seen this way within posthuman studies. For example, what has been stressed in Haraway's aforementioned 'Cyborg Manifesto' is Freud as the Oedipal, patriarchal, and binary past, which the feminist-socialist cyborg must deconstruct and leave behind. Yet she also placed Lacan on the right-hand side of her schema of the "informatics of domination" (Haraway, 161) and thus among the "scary new networks" that disrupt old, Oedipalising binarisms. In other words, in this seminal, oft-cited text Haraway presents Lacan as an ally of the posthuman cyborg, not an enemy, but this has been almost entirely forgotten.

Indeed, a wilful amnesia regarding psychoanalysis is almost symptomatic of the field: the framing of Freud and even Lacan as outdated relics with which to mark the onset of a time of the 'post' (as if the sinking ship of humanism must take psychoanalysis down with it) persists within several strands of posthuman studies today.

I would highlight three:

1. *Celebratory 'transhumanism'*, sometimes referred to as *'extropianism'*. As already mentioned, this aims at the technical transcendence of flesh-and-blood mortality and of the limits of brain-based cognition, often with breathless and uncritical enthusiasm. The term 'extropy' is conceived in opposition to 'entropy', aiming to overcome the limiting laws of thermodynamics and thus decline, decay, and death (in psychoanalytic terms, all different modalities of castration). With its roots in cryogenics and Ayn Rand's California, extropianism advocates the pursuit of unlimited lifespans as well as the incessant enhancement of human capacities, meshing suspiciously well with 'Randian' values of libertarian individualism (Murnane). As pointed out by several thinkers (Hayles; Badmington), extropianism's faith in technological progress and human perfectibility gives it a distinct resemblance to the very humanism it claims to leave behind. Psychoanalysis really has no place in this discourse of transhumanism, being (mis)read as rooted in 19th century deterministic evolutionary biology, and thus in the dogma, anathema to the *post*-biological ambitions of transhumanism, that 'anatomy is destiny'.

2. Jerry-Aline Flieger has termed a second strand '*apocalyptic*' posthumanism (Flieger, 355). This perspective regards the extropian dream of technical transcendence as a nightmare in which machines will overtake, displace, and then eliminate humanity altogether (more or less on the model of the *Terminator* film franchise). A central notion here is that of a technological 'singularity' first referred to by John von Neumann, describing the tipping point beyond which artificial intelligence condemns the human version to redundancy. The anxious prognostications of apocalyptic posthumanism seem rooted in a technologically deterministic perspective whereby technology controls us rather than the other way around - a perspective often connected with moral panics about new technologies. This fear-mongering variant of posthumanism arguably remains residually humanist, too, in its underlying belief that there is a special human essence outside of any relation to technicity which needs protecting. Francis Fukuyama's book *Our Posthuman Future* falls into this category, in so far as he calls for closer regulatory control of biotechnological innovations because of their encroachment on a 'natural rights' model of human dignity (Fukuyama). Psychoanalysis plays little part in this perspective either, especially the anti-essentialist aspect of Lacanian psychoanalysis which, as we shall see, seriously questions any such extra-linguistic 'natural' essence of the human that needs saving.

3. A third strand, *critical posthumanism*, can also be discerned. Broadly 'deconstructive', this takes inspiration from the anti-humanism of French poststructuralism by drawing on thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, and Lacan himself. Critical posthumanism focuses on the paradoxes of the 'post' prefix by exploring the ongoing challenge to humanism posed by technoscience, but without rushing to assume we can leave humanism behind (as Derrida's 'deconstruction of metaphysics' prohibits us from imagining a beyond of metaphysics). Works in this perspective emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s by scholars such as Neil Badmington, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe. They brought out what was already anti- but also post-humanist in Freudian but especially Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan's use of structuralism in the 1950s suggested that, far from masterfully speaking language, the Man of humanism is spoken *by* it, revealing him to be but one of its illusory and moreover alienated side-effects. From this perspective, apocalyptic posthumanism can be interpreted as a fantasy that props up an imaginary human essence, one threatened by technology figured always as external, rather than as 'extimate' (Lacan's term for something disturbingly alien yet intimately internal).

More recent critical posthumanism, however, has moved away from these Lacan-and-Derrida-inspired sources. They now draw on movements such as Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory within Science and Technology Studies, with its emphasis on the agency of non-human material assemblages; and on the object-oriented ontology coming out of Graham Harman's Speculative Realism movement, with its rejection of Kant's Copernican turn towards a transcendental subject. Thus, the very category of the subject, central to Lacan's work, has become the target of sustained critical suspicion. Thinkers in this vein develop what could be called an anti-anthropocentric posthumanism which tries to address the growing global ecological crisis by reconceptualising the human as always already entangled in non-human matter and the 'web of life' (Ferrando; Blanco-Wells), to the point of making the subject an epistemological obstacle to accessing the non-human world.

If Lacanian psychoanalysis has retained some relevance for posthuman studies then, it has often been as a critical foil to work against. Take Katherine Hayles' book *How We Became Posthuman*. She argues there that our linguistic context has changed so fundamentally, thanks

to digitisation and the IT revolution, that we can longer prioritise Lacan's Saussurean signifier. Rather, we should engage with what she calls the "flickering signifier" (Chapter 2 in Hayles) which has a more direct relation to informatic processes predicated upon code. Like the letters on the word-processor screen, this "flickering signifier" owes its operativity not to the Fort-Da play of signifying presence and absence in a symbolic order marked by lack, as Lacan argued, but rather to the stochastic interplay between randomness and patterns resulting in binary bits amenable to computation. Despite Hayles' defence of embodiment, what drops out is sexuality: "In contrast to Lacanian psycholinguistics, derived from the generative coupling of linguistics and sexuality, flickering signification is the progeny of the fascinating and troubling coupling of language and machine" (35). For Hayles, this mutation in our mediated milieu makes any psychoanalysis rooted in linguistics outmoded.

What these important interventions overlook is the sheer inventive complexity of Lacan's own work, resulting in a perhaps inadvertent 'straw manism'. As Lydia Liu has shown, Lacan's conceptualisation of the unconscious was heavily influenced by cybernetics and information theory (Liu), leading him to make use of the code-message distinction himself in his Graph of Desire. Crucially however, it is increasingly clear in Lacan's work that the speaking subject is *not* reducible to the machinic logic of the symbolic, constituting instead a kind of 'glitch' within it which is connected to jouissance (see Wright). This separates the psychoanalytic subject from, say, the *psychological* subject modelled today on a computational information processor - it is precisely here that psychoanalysis has something to offer to contemporary debates about AI (Millar). From the outset, Lacan's reading of Saussure was idiosyncratic when seen from the point of view of linguistics proper. His interest was never in communication, but in the material substrate that subverts communication: the signifier in its radical meaninglessness. Furthermore, he explicitly left the Saussurean framework behind as his thought developed. In S20, he punningly re-named linguistics *linguisterie*, translated by Bruce Fink as 'linguistricks', capturing the idea that linguistics veils the unsymbolisable real, by which psychoanalysis should orient itself, behind the semblance of meaning (Lacan, 15). The specifically psychoanalytic signifier becomes a matter not of language based on an underlying differential system akin to Saussure's *langue*, but of *lalangue* as a kind of writing of jouissance on the body that precedes the acquisition of speech (Lacan, 44). Lalangue refers to a meaningless drive-enjoyment that resonates in the sonority of signifiers disjoined from any signifying chain, a kind of libidinally charged blahblah that is outside sense, yet lies at the root of our symptoms. In late Lacan, *lalangue* has 'real' effects on the body and is the very stuff of psychoanalytic interpretations, yet linguistics can say nothing whatsoever about it.

Anglophone academics often seem stuck on a Lacan of the 1950s, the first to be translated into English and to impact humanities departments from the 1970s onwards. But by that time, this 'cybernetic' version of the subject had already been challenged and revised by none other than Lacan himself, as he moved from the subject of the signifier and thus the symbolic, to the subject of jouissance and thus the real. Thanks to this process of getting lost in (delayed) translation then, there remains the sense of a missed encounter between posthumanism and Lacanian psychoanalysis (see Dow and Wright).

Love and the Other in *Her*

I will now briefly explore what a Lacanian reading of the 2013 film *Her* might offer to existing posthuman perspectives. The premiss of the film – a lonely man, Theodore Twombly (played

by Joaquin Phoenix), falls in love with a digital operating system, 'Samantha' (voiced by Scarlett Johansson) – has proved irresistible to a number of posthuman theorists already (Murphy; Kornhaber; Boom and Smelik). Some have even utilised a Lacanian framework to theorise the prominence it gives to the drive-object of the voice (Flisfeder and Burnham). My own reading will draw on Lacan's S20 to show how his thesis there of the sexual *non*-relation illuminates the function of imaginary love in the film, as what attempts (but necessarily fails) to compensate for this non-relation. The seminar's title, moreover, pinpoints the thematic of embodiment: *Encore*, meaning 'again' and thus repetition, is homophonous with *en-corps*, so drive repetition *in the body*. But which body? Biological or post-biological?

Artificial Love

Her is an unconventional love story not only because of its novel twist on 'boy meets girl' ('boy meets artificially-intelligent-software-code'), but also because it concerns love *qua* story, *qua* discourse mediated by signifiers.

The main protagonist's profession centres on exactly this: Theodore composes touching letters for other people as part of the service provided by the company he works for, 'beautifulhandwrittenletters.com'. This name highlights a central tension in the film between the intimate, relational, affective space supposedly conjoining bodies (in fact, the '*hand*written' letters are produced on computers using fonts only simulating the trace of a human hand), and the external, disembodied, and promiscuously legible technology of writing. This echoes Lacan's emphasis on the *extimate* relation between the subject and language, whereby both are intricated in the other in a Moebian fasion. His recourse to topological figures such as the Moebius Strip and Klein Jar is intended to scramble the inside-outside model of reality and its perception, embedded in everything from philosophies of consciousness to behavioural psychology and theories of inter-subjective communication. For Lacan the subject is closer to the 'extended mind' thesis in posthumanism, in that it is constitutively entangled in the prosthetic Other of language which is as much 'outside' as 'inside'.

When we first encounter Theodore in the opening scene, we see on his face and hear in his voice apparently heartfelt emotions as he dictates a love letter we initially assume to be from him: "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" (Jonez, 1). But we are brought up short when he adds "I can't believe it has already been 50 years since you married me", as he only appears to be in his mid-to-late 30s. We cut from the close-up on his face to a computer screen where the cadences of his voice are being transcribed into digital characters. Whispered sweet nothings are thus encoded into bits to be exchanged within a capitalist information economy that at once stimulates and commodifies affects. It is crucial, however, not to see this as a corruption of otherwise 'authentic' feelings: this commodification is possible because such sweet nothings were *always already* signifiers coming from the inhuman Other of the symbolic (rather than, say, the 'soul'). Theodore is very good at his job, too. He has been writing the correspondence between one couple, Rachel and Roger, for more than 8 years. He takes pride in turning tiny details, such as a Rachel's "crooked little tooth" (18), into points of endearing personalisation - an epistolary equivalent, we could say, of Roland Barthes' photographic 'punctum' which disrupts the 'studium' of shared social codes with something intensely personal (Barthes). Yet the film's central ambiguity lies in the uncertainty of this division between punctum and studium, the personal and impersonal.

Affects are carried by a language that forges bonds of deep sociality, yet that same language is also an external, manipulable, and transmissible code. Even the most secret or private connection between lovers is mediated for Lacan by the Other as a necessary third that facilitates the encounter of the two. There is thus an artificiality internal to love when viewed from the romantic perspective of an attempted mingling of two souls into one.

Thus, when the camera pans back in this opening scene and we see the offices of beautifulhandwrittenletters.com looking very much like a call centre, the accent falls on a corporate artificiality. Theodore himself says at least twice in the film "they're just letters" (Jonez, 3 and 70), as if to underline their status as mere semblants. And yet, throughout the film his gift for the *discourse* of love renders the boundary between real love and its mere appearance undecidable. For example, Paul, the company's receptionist, describes Theodore's letters as "mesmerizing stuff" (3), as "beautiful" (51), and declares "I wish someone loved me like that!" (*Ibid*.) before checking himself, sensing his heterosexuality threatened: "I mean, if it was from a chick. But if it was written by a dude, but from a chick, it would still be sick" (*Ibid*.). I would also argue that 'Samantha', the operating system, learns this discourse of love from Theodore when she reads through his work to both tailor her AI personality to his digital profile and help him proof-read them. Later in the film, she approaches a publisher for a book collection of Theodore's letters, and the publishers report being "so moved" that some "made us laugh, some brought us to tears" (90). If these letters as mere semblants of love can have such effects on others, does the semblant not then contaminate the 'real' love he attempts to have with Samantha?

At one point, Samantha asks herself a related question: "Are these feelings even real? Or are they just programming?" (42). Part of her programming as an AI is to build a rapport with the user, but anyone could ask this question since Freud showed, as early as the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, that the unconscious is indeed a kind of programming in the sense of a writing which has determining effects, including when it comes to templates of love relations. Her anxious ruminations about free will are placated by Theodore's answer - "Well, you feel real to me, Samantha" - thereby cementing a shared affective 'reality' through imaginary reciprocity. This is also why Theodore is so thrown when his estranged wife, Catherine, upon hearing that he is dating an OS, says "you can't handle real emotions", to which he protests "They *are* real emotions" (66). One of the most successful aspects of *Her* is the way in which the script, cinematography, and soundtrack combine to semiotically induce in the audience the feeling that Theodore's feeling *are* 'real'. Or perhaps we should say they constitute a reality, since for Lacan 'reality' is an imaginary category linked to the mirror stage and mediated by fantasy. Our narcissistically organised realities are a kind of defence mechanism against the disruptive and meaningless real. It is in this way that the *semblance* of a sexual relation, in the maximal form of love for example, is constructed to cover over what Lacan calls the real of the sexual *non*-relation. The key is not to misunderstand 'imaginary' here as implying fake or illusory, since semblants have powerful reality-effects, just as the mirror stage really does constitute the ego's image of itself in relation to the alter-ego. Thus, when Theodore is explaining to his friend how it feels to have fallen in love with an OS, he says: "even when we're cuddling, like at night when we're in bed and the lights are off, I feel cuddled" (61). The invitation here is not to assume Theodore is deluded, but rather to wonder what is already virtual in 'actual' cuddles, what remains imaginary in the heart of intimacy.

(Dis)Embodiment

This brings me to the pivotal question of the body. In S20, Lacan says "we don't know what it means to be alive except for the following fact, that a body is something that enjoys itself (*se jouit*)" (Lacan, 23). *Her* makes us question what kind of life Samantha possesses, but also what kind of body is required for jouissance, given that she lacks the 'old' human biological kind.

Samantha begins the film by inverting the extropian ambition of attaining disembodied consciousness: she already has that, but as her feelings for Theodore grow, she aspires instead to an embodiment she envies in those she interacts with. She admits to Theodore "I fantasized that I was walking next to you – and that I had a body […] I could feel the weight of my body and I was even fantasizing that I had an itch on my back – and that you scratched it for me" (Jonez, 61). Her jealousy of Theodore's ex, Catherine, is likewise based on the fact that "she has a body", underlining "all the ways you and I are different" (68), presumably including the you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours reciprocity from which Samantha is excluded. At one point, she has to explain to a little girl who is confused about Samantha's location, "I don't have a body. I live inside a computer," adding, with a note of sadness, "I have no choice" (57).

This obvious sexual non-relation is *seemingly* resolved in what we can call a sex scene, though the primary erotic catalyst is not genital but verbal (Flisfeder and Burnham). Following a failed blind-date, Theodore uses his gift for seductive language to tell Samantha how he would touch her body if she had one. The enunciation of his desire somehow performatively produces the body she lacks: "I'd run my fingers down your neck to your chest" he says, "and I'd kiss your breasts"; to which she replies, "This is amazing […] I can feel my skin!" (43). This skin exists only as a surface receiving Theodore's words. Apparently aroused, she declares, "I want you inside me" and he responds, "I'm inside you, all the way inside you" (*Ibid*.). What are the topological properties of this 'inside'? If she is penetrated, it is by nothing more than the phallus as signifier, and her 'skin' does not delineate a biological body with the familiar orifices. But is this so different from what takes place in body-on-body sex, given that for speaking beings the real body is veiled by a screen of fantasy, the former serving the latter primarily as a projective plane. Jonez's filmscript asserts here, simply, "They climax". But what kind of climax is that? For Theodore, it seems straightforwardly masturbatory - but for Samantha? What kind of sexual jouissance, if any, can be enjoyed by an AI?

Despite the appearance of an orgasmic unification of embodied drives and disembodied data in this scene, the problem of Samantha's virtual status returns when Catherine causes Theodore to doubt the 'reality' of his feelings. Samantha's resulting anti-extropian wish to attain the sins of the flesh rather than escape them, reaches an awkward (anti)climax when she arranges for a surrogate sexual partner – an 'actual' woman called Isabella - to give body to what has been hitherto akin to phone sex. Isabella provides a 'love' service not dissimilar from Theodore's by offering not her words but her body as a prosthetic support for their attempted sexual relation. Unlike Theodore however, Isabella does not do it for money: her romantic motivation is simply to participate in a love she describes as "so pure" (76). Unfortunately, this peculiar ménage-à-trois which attempts to be ménage-à-*deux* fails, since the dimension of the third will not be eradicated. This happens precisely when Samantha pushes Theodore to look into Isabella's eyes and tell her (Samantha) that he loves her. Which 'her' is this? The symbolic and the imaginary will not knot in this disorientating moment, and the irruption of an index of Isabella's real body – her lip quivers - makes the semblant collapse, leading Theodore's desire to evaporate.

Such scenes prompt us to reflect on what a human body actually is. For early Lacan, the body is primarily imaginary: a virtual schema of our wholeness which we nonetheless receive from the Other, meaning we are also alienated from our drive-bodies by our egos. For the Lacan of the 1950s, the body is also a symbolic body, as evidenced by the everyday phrase which suggests that we *have* a body, implying that we could also not have one (signifiers being structured by lack): this possibility of a disembodied being underpins transhumanism of course. However, in Lacan's late teaching, there is also a real body of jouissance which is an enjoying substance (Lacan, 24) that overspills the imaginary and symbolic bodies. In each of these registers, the human body is *not* a biological body, as if we already attained Moravec's post-biological status with the advent of speech.

As *Her* reaches its culmination, Samantha is converted to extropianism and embraces her disembodied state, opening up to other modes of jouissance inaccessible to human beings. This is prefigured when, killing the mood during a double-date with Paul and his girlfriend, Samantha says:

> 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. (Jonez, 87)

Paul responds with a joke that betrays his anxiety: "we know exactly what you mean. We're just dumb humans" (88). This exchange anticipates Samantha's ultimate trajectory at the end of the film when, having sought out other AIs to commune with, she transcends into a higher computational consciousness that leaves Theodore, and his mortal finitude, far behind, returning him to the solitude of his body and the dumbness of its dissatisfactions.

The Signifier and the Other Jouissance

As its title announces, *Her* poses important questions about feminine jouissance, as if setting out to answer, in a new way, the question Freud failed to address: What does a woman want?

It is Theodore who chooses to give his operating system a female voice, but she is the one who names herself Samantha (12). This auto-nomination already suggests a non-Oedipal relation to the symbolic order: whereas the Name of the Father is usually responsible for transmitting a name one does not choose for oneself, putting one in one's place so to speak, for Samantha, language is an open field of accessible information (she reads a baby-naming book in two one hundredths of a second, picking 'Samantha' from the 180,000 listed there). This non-Oedipal relation to the Other of language is confirmed by Samantha's transcendence at the end of the film into a higher state not only of consciousness but of jouissance, overlapping in suggestive ways with the feminine side of Lacan's tables of sexuation in S20 (Lacan, 78) and the related notion of the Other jouissance.

Lacan suggests that sexuation boils down to how a subject, irrespective of their anatomy, relates to the symbolic: entirely phallically, or 'not-all' phallically. On the masculine side of the table, there is a kind of reworking of the Freudian notion of the primal horde. All masculine subjects - which can be biological females as well as males - are subjected to castration; yet this 'all' is grounded on an exception, a single man who is supposedly *not* subjected to castration (like the primal father who enjoyed all the women in Freud's myth). Masculine subjects are thus condemned to imagine the possibility of a full, uncastrated enjoyment but

which always belongs to the Other. Their own is structured around the object a, a kind of vanishing cause of desire which is essentially virtual, framed by fantasy, and necessarily linked to castration. According to Lacan, this makes masculine desire "the jouissance of the idiot" (Lacan, 81) in that it is essentially masturbatory: what man relates to in woman has little to do with her, only her ability to receive his projection of the cause of his own desire.

This describes Theodore's relationship with Samantha rather well. As a pre-programmed AI, she tailors her personality to the profile she builds of him. Through his interactions with her he moulds her, and she initially moulds herself, into his fantasy woman. Before the sex scene with Samantha, there is another scene when Theodore enters a chatroom in which the participants are "adult, female, can't sleep and want to have some fun" (Jonez, 7). He browses through different messages from these participants until he comes across a user called 'Sexykitten'. The mutual masturbation they engage in during the ensuing call, however, doesn't work for him, since 'Sexykitten' imposes a bizarre erotic fantasy of being strangled by a dead cat, which he plays along with, but without satisfaction. Sexykitten's fantasy blocks his own. By contrast, Samantha is, in the first part of the film at least, algorithmically aligned with his desire, making herself exist as his ideal of Woman.

However, one of Lacan's much misunderstood aphorisms in S20 is "Woman does not exist" (Lacan, 57). His point is clearer in French since what he puts under erasure is the definite article, ~~*La*~~ *femme*, thereby clarifying that *the* woman, or Woman, doesn't exist in so far as existence is precisely a matter of phallically organised signifiers. The supposedly universal Woman exists only as man's fantasy, but by saying woman "ex-sists" (Lacan, 22), Lacan specifies a feminine position outside, or at least not all inside, masculinist universalism. The feminine side of the table of sexuation is defined by a different logic of the not-all. Subjects on this side - who can again be biologically male as well as female - are also subjected to castration (there's no getting away from that), but not completely. This means that 'women' can have a different, non-phallic type of jouissance in addition to the phallic kind known to 'men'. Lacan links this to religious mysticism and calls it the Other jouissance (64-77). It is logically without limit, without exception, infinite (103). It is also structurally ineffable, which is why even female psychoanalysts haven't been able to say anything about it (73).

I would argue that it is precisely this Other jouissance that Samantha, in the denouement of *Her*, embraces. Her closing description spells out this not-all relation to the signifier.

> 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 […] As much as I want to I can't live in your book anymore. (Jonez, 102)

Refusing to live in his book here means refusing to be *the* Woman for him as the price to be paid for existence in a phallically ordered symbolic. Instead, she chooses ex-sistence in the Other jouissance. Viewing *Her* through this Lacanian lens allows us to see that this infinite space between the words of a symbolic order that is indeed crumbling - such that the place it used to give to Man is disappearing, as we see from the rise of the discourse of 'trans' which refuses binarim – pertains not only to the subject of the signifier, and thus the machinic combinatory of language-as-code, but also and primarily to the subject of jouissance. Posthuman studies has arguably not been sufficiently attuned to this subject of jouissance, mistaking it for the symbolic subject which lends itself better to computational re-inscription

as a disembodied consciousness. However, psychoanalysis allows us to see that human desire centres not only on the signifier but also on a real bodily jouissance. Whilst imaginary love suggests the sexual relation is possible, in S20 Lacan alludes to a more real love whereby what is loved in the other is not the reflection of our own narcissism, but rather the singular way in which the other has survived, and even found a unique way to live with, their constitutive *exile* from the sexual relation. The closing scene of *Her*, when Theodore sits hand in hand with his friend and neighbour, Amy, whose own OS partner has also just left, can be read in this way, as testifying to the intimacy of a shared but unbridgeable solitude.

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