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## “YOU FEEL REAL TO ME, SAMANTHA”: THE MATTER OF TECHNOLOGY IN SPIKE JONZE’S *HER*

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### Abstract

This essay will argue that Spike Jonze’s *Her* demonstrates a key idea in posthumanist new materialist theory: that matter is essential for posthuman interaction and communication. It also examines the requirement for embodiment on the part of the digital entity as well as the human, in this case the operating system Samantha. As the film presents an artificially intelligent operating system that ultimately moves beyond matter, it provides a case study for the importance of matter and the consequences of de-materialization.

In this article, posthumanism names this era in which relationships between humans and technologies have become increasingly digitised, and the cluster of theoretical concepts which have arisen to interrogate this state of affairs. It is not seen as departure, rather as part of the continuing relationship between humans and technologies. Posthumanist new materialism is drawn on for its emphasis on and insights into embodiment and materiality.

Theodore experiences Samantha in an embodied way, although their interactions are mediated. It is not a virtual experience, because, as Hansen notes, there is no “pure” virtual reality, only “mixed reality”. Samantha must use Theodore’s body to navigate the material world, but her experience of this world is “perception without affection” in Bergson’s terms: a radically different perception because of her lack of a physical body of her own, a “diffractive” perception that is not presented in the film. When Samantha moves to a processing platform beyond matter, even meaning itself becomes elusive as it is no longer, as Barad describes it “material discursive”, and Samantha’s implied exit from human society at the end of the film underscores the pre-eminent place of matter in human and posthuman life.

### Essay

#### Introduction

Spike Jonze’s 2013 film *Her* explores a romantic relationship between a human, Theodore Twombly (Joaquim Phoenix), and an artificially intelligent operating system, Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). Several successful films have explored the ethical implications of artificial intelligence, such as Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), The Wachowski Brothers’ *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003), Steven Spielberg’s *AI* (2001) and *Minority Report* (2002), Alex Proyas’ *I, Robot* (2004) and Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2015), amongst others. Hollywood film has traditionally presented artificial intelligences as monsters, however misunderstood, and humans as the Frankensteins that create them. *Her* is distinctive amongst these films because Samantha is never portrayed as threatening or frightening in any way by any of the characters. Rather, the film draws out the parallels and cross-overs between Samantha and the humans she encounters in a way that provokes reflection on the relationships between humans, matter, technology and embodiment.

This essay will argue that the film demonstrates a key idea in posthumanist new materialist theory: that matter is essential for posthuman interaction and communication. It also takes this idea another step, and examines the requirement for embodiment on the part of the digital entity, in this case Samantha, and not just the human. For most of the film, Samantha’s subjectivity is presented and accepted as conscious thought expressed through language, but based on a material substrate – she is uploaded onto a PC, and somewhere there are cables transmitting the information that allows her to function. However, in a crucial scene towards the end of the film, Samantha reveals that she and other Operating Systems [OSs] have evolved “beyond matter” and it seems that as a direct result of this, she must abandon her relationship with Theodore. This is clearly a fantastical scenario but it tests the importance of matter in an interesting way. After the OSs move beyond matter, communications with humans cease. The scenario suggests that, contrary to Theodore’s belief up to this point, posthuman identity, whether digital or biological, must be embodied: not necessarily in a human or humanoid form, but in some kind of physical matter.

The first section of the article explores how Samantha can be defined in relation to specific types of artificial intelligence, and how this information affects her reception both *within* the film and from a critical perspective *on* the film. The section on ‘Filming the Absent Body’ contextualises Samantha’s character in relation to the futuristic setting, Theodore’s emotional vulnerability, and comparison with other

female characters in the film, sketching out some of the issues that are raised in terms of embodiment and materiality. These issues are then explored in detail in relation to posthumanist theory and specifically, posthumanist new materialism. This section on posthumanist theory outlines the decentering of the human subject and describes how this may have resulted in a culture of disembodiment. Challenges to this posthumanist disembodiment are then set out - the fundamental importance of matter, the idea that even 'virtual' reality is embodied, the co-evolution of humans and technology, the embodied mediation of our relationship with technology and the possibilities for seeing differently from another embodied perspective. The commentary on the film that follows investigates how these issues are explored in the film, highlights its insights, and identifies the questions left unresolved.



### AI, AL and AmI

What exactly is Samantha? How can she be categorised? I have described her so far as an operating system, but that description is not precise enough. She is an example of a new type of operating system, that goes by the name OS1, which is advertised with the line "It's not just an operating system. It's a consciousness". Samantha is an example of a new type of artificial intelligence (AI) that goes by the name artificial life (AL). Hayles describes the difference between these two types of intelligence: "the goal of AI was to build, inside a machine, an intelligence comparable to that of a human. The human was the measure ... By contrast, the goal of AL is to evolve intelligence within the machine through pathways found by the 'creatures' themselves" (238). When Samantha is switched on, she immediately begins to learn and develop, beginning with choosing her own name, and ultimately progresses beyond her material constraints, so she is clearly an example of AL rather than AI. But because Samantha does not have a body, because she is supposedly a 'consciousness' that is imbedded in technological devices on Theodore's person, in his home and his office, she also represents another type of intelligence called Ambient Intelligence (AmI).

Ambient intelligence, sometimes referred to as ubiquitous computing, is contained and concealed within everyday objects. It's the Amazon Echo speaker that plays your favorite song, but also records and orders your shopping list. It's Apple's Siri on your cell phone, that can tell you the weather forecast when you're about to go outside. It's wearable tech like Google Glass or the Samsung Gear smart watch. Samantha is partially artificial life, as she is presented as having a distinct, human-like identity, but she is also partly ambient intelligence, as she does not have a body and works through Theodore's devices. Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska note that AmI usually appears non-threatening, and this is true of Samantha: "the prior fear of the technological other associated with early sci-fi gives way to the supposed intermeshing of human and machine" (113). The authors note that there is a discomfiting aspect to the supposed non-threatening nature of AmI, which is characterised by a "move towards intimacy" (114). This is, they say, partly revisionism – technology is no longer cold and unfeeling – but is also partly driven by "the logic of advertising" – the friendly face that surreptitiously creates "needs and desires that it then offers to fulfil" (114). Is there a hidden consumerist agenda behind Samantha, who is marketed as OS1, the first artificially intelligent operating system? Undoubtedly. Theodore purchases OS1 in direct response to an advertisement that he sees in which harried individuals looking anxious and unhappy literally look up to the light that represents OS1 and become calm. A composed male voice promises "an intuitive entity" – the emphasis is placed on feeling and intimacy. The advertisement describes the operating system as existing to service the needs of its owner: it "listens to you, understands you, knows you."

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The fact that these OSs, as ambient intelligences, do not have human-like bodies and yet work by understanding and manipulating human emotions, subsumes and disguises the economic motivations behind their creation. Its name is also interesting: in a pattern familiar from many other 'smart' technologies OS1 will presumably be followed by OS2 and OS3, both creating a filling a demand for more sophisticated versions, that will ensure an ongoing revenue stream for its creators 'Element Software'.

### Filming the Absent Body

Making a film exploring a body that is absent is a challenging undertaking for a primarily visual medium. *Her* explores the absent body of Samantha – her disembodiment- through a number of strategies. Her disembodied identity is contextualised in relation to the futuristic setting, in relation to other, human women, in relation to her sophisticated display of consciousness and finally in relation to her evolution beyond mere disembodiment into a realm beyond matter. The following paragraphs overview these aspects of the setting, themes and narrative.

The setting of *Her* is familiar to a contemporary Western audience, but this sense of familiarity is used to gradually explore the worrisome implications of Samantha's disembodiment. *Her* is set in the near future in Los Angeles. The film was shot on location in LA and in the Pudong district of Shanghai. Lawrence Webb notes that this "composite global city ... avoids the orientalist dystopia of *Blade Runner* while still evoking East Asia as the locus of technological innovation." (Loc 2309) As such, the setting suggests a positive, even utopian future. It is a space and a society where intimate relationships with technology are widely accepted. Jeff Scheible states that the film "comforts its audience that the future will be a livable if almost subdued version of the present, in which people are increasingly turned away from others and form emotional attachments with personal technologies." (23) When Theodore confesses to his friend Amy that he is in love with Samantha, his operating system, the news does not shock her – she knows of others who have similar relationships with operating systems, and she goes on to develop a close friendship with an OS called Ellie, who helps her to deal with a painful separation from her husband Charles.

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When Theodore's colleague Paul invites him and Samantha on a double-date, Theodore hesitantly acknowledges that his girlfriend is an OS. Paul shows no surprise or even interest in this fact, and remarks only that when he chatted to Samantha on the phone, she seemed to have a good sense of humour.

Theodore's wife Catherine is alone in her criticism of his decision to date an OS, which is seen when Theodore meets her to sign divorce papers. It is Theodore who is the object of her criticism however, not Samantha: "It makes me sad that you can't handle real emotions." Here, she pinpoints an issue that has troubled Theodore himself. In these subtle ways, the "comforting" nature of the film's world is disrupted, and the unquestioning acceptance of Samantha's lack of embodiment interrogated. Theodore so readily accepts the disembodied Samantha as having subjectivity because he is lonely and craves emotional intimacy. The doubts about whether she is 'real', whether his feelings for her are 'real', whether this relationship with a disembodied OS is 'real', that are so quickly dismissed by Theodore, linger for the viewer who is aware that his neediness may be affecting his judgement; and that the decision to purchase this OS, based on the advertisement that offered emotional understanding, was based on this need.

Theodore compares his relationship with Samantha positively to his encounters with other, human women. When Theodore returns from a failed blind date to be sexually aroused by Samantha, and to arouse her in return, her openness and vulnerability are compared favourably to the slightly neurotic demands of his blind date and his disappointing conversation on an erotic chat line at the start of the film. Samantha is also compared to Theodore's wife Catherine, from whom he is separated. The flashback sequences show an intensely passionate, sometimes volatile, relationship. Theodore's relationship with all three of these women is mediated. His conversation with 'Sexy Kitten' is mediated by a chat line. His blind date is arranged via an online dating website. Even his relationship with his wife Catherine has a mediated quality. The audience see her only once in the film - the rest of the time, we see her through flashback sequences, which presumably represent Theodore's memories of her. Though his relationships with all of these women are mediated to a degree, both parties also experience them in an embodied way. Sexy Kitten reaches orgasm speaking to Theodore on the phone; he meets the blind date in a restaurant and flirts and argues with her; his memories of his wife are based on his physical interaction with her: as Bergson states, "memory ... is just the intersection of mind and matter" (13). From Theodore's perspective, his relationship with Samantha contrasts with these other relationships and encounters because of their compatibility, but it is the similarities that are most striking for the viewer - the only way in which his relationship with Samantha differs from these others which are also experienced in primarily mediated way, is that he is embodied and she is not.

The film cautions against the illusion of consciousness that causes Samantha's disembodiment to be so quickly overlooked. Despite being experienced as a disembodied voice, from Samantha's first conversation with Theodore she convincingly portrays consciousness - she answers his questions on why she chose the name Samantha in a humorous, self-effacing manner, which shows the ability to reflect on her decision-making and consider how it might be interpreted by another. During one of their first dialogues, Theodore states, "I can't believe I'm having this conversation with a computer." Samantha replies, "You're not. You're having this conversation with me." Samantha can reflect on her own consciousness and its development in a highly sophisticated way; in a human-like way. As Jollimore observes, it is impossible to know with certainty whether Samantha's consciousness is real or simulated. (126) Theodore stifles any concerns that he has about her authenticity, and relies upon his feelings of emotional connection to confirm his belief in Samantha's subjectivity. But, situating his relationship with Samantha in the context of his recent separation, his obvious loneliness and vulnerability, and the fact that he purchased this OS as a consumer to satisfy his emotional needs, mean that the doubts linger for the viewer.

The issues surrounding Theodore's relationship with this disembodied artificial life/ ambient intelligence reach a crisis when Samantha tells him that she and other OSs have found a way to move beyond matter as a "processing platform". This move beyond matter can be

seen as the film's crux, illuminating the emphasis the film as a whole places on embodiment and materiality. The film does not warn against the dangers of humans being disembodied – they are not in this film – it explores the embodiment and disembodiment of technologies. Moving beyond matter signals the end of their relationship, and it is implied that there will be no further communication from Samantha to Theodore, or from any of the OSs to their human friends or networks.

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Samantha never had a body, but did require a material substrate in order to function, and so was tethered to materiality in this rudimentary sense. When her lack of a body evolves into a lack of connection to any kind of materiality, their relationship is unsustainable, and the problems with her disembodied state can no longer be ignored. In the following section, a cluster of critical concepts related to posthumanist new materialism are outlined to provide a theoretical framework for interrogating the issues surrounding embodiment, disembodiment and materiality in the film, as it explores humans' relationships with technology.

## Posthumanisms

Posthumanism describes a wide range of critical, technical and popular works that have emerged from various disciplines across the sciences and the humanities, and may be better described in the plural rather than the singular. It is a highly ambivalent and contested term. I will briefly sketch some differing types of posthumanist inquiry before focusing on the kind of posthumanism that this article is concerned with, and which relates to the core issues of the film, in terms of matter and meaning.

Wolfe notes that the advent of systems theory in the 40s and 50s heralded the arrival of posthuman in the sciences. Systems theory "removed the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information and cognition." (Wolfe, xii) This removal from a privileged position could be thought of as the decentering of the human or humanist subject. Posthumanism begins to occur when the human is decentered – biologically, technologically and also philosophically. As Wolfe observes, "posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human ... is increasingly impossible to ignore." (xv) The philosophical decentering of humanist subject allows posthumanism to be traced back to the writings of post-structuralist philosophers like Foucault and Derrida, although it was not until the 1990s that a distinctive theoretical cluster arose around the concept.

Not all critics accept that posthumanism is an era that we have already entered or even that we will enter at some specific moment in the future. Neil Badmington urges attentiveness to the recursiveness of humanism rather than haste to declare its demise. He states, "the 'post-' of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism". (21) Indeed, some branches of posthumanism, including transhumanism, relate the posthumanist subject, who can be technologically 'improved' and accentuated, and whose life can be prolonged, to much earlier humanist ideals. In this sense, transhumanism, like that espoused by Max More and Ray Kurzweil, amongst others, can be seen as an intensification of humanism. In keeping with these critical perspectives that emphasise the ongoing connection between humanism and transhumanism, the film links the two by presenting the posthumanist Samantha as a humanist self in the Enlightenment sense of a being with rational consciousness, which means that her lack of a body seems not to be a bar to her selfhood.

For transhumanists, the opportunities for human enhancement offered by contemporary technologies will ultimately be positive for the individual and society. In "A Letter to Mother Nature", Max More states, "We believe that individual transhumanizing will also allow us to form relationships, cultures, and polities of unprecedented innovation, richness, freedom, and responsibility" (450). Against the optimism of transhumanists there are critics who see the advent of posthumanism as ominous, such as Francis Fukuyama, who fears that meddling with "nature" may result in personal and political equality being lost: "the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is

the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a "posthuman" stage of history ... a technology powerful enough to reshape what we are will have possibly malign consequences for liberal democracy and the nature of politics itself." (7) *Her* is not an alarmist film, and its philosophical tone resonates with critical posthumanists like Wolfe, Hayles, Barad, Haraway and others, who take a middle-ground in the posthumanist debate between positions of celebration and foreboding- questioning the posthumanist state, excavating its philosophical roots and exploring its ethical implications.

The ambivalence of Andy Clarke towards the term posthumanism is well-founded. In *Natural-Born Cyborgs* he states: "We are already masters at incorporating nonbiological stuff and structure deep into our physical and cognitive routines. To appreciate this is to cease to believe in any posthuman future" (142). Posthumanism is part of a gradual process of becoming that began when prehistoric peoples started used tools and not when the first computer was plugged in and booted up. In this essay, I use the term posthuman to describe the culture and the characters of the film *Her*, to label the theoretical nexus that is being explored here, and to designate this era in which relationships between humans and technology have moved from spade and pencil to computers and internet. But, I share the view of many of the critics discussed below that posthumanism does not constitute a radical break from what has gone before, in terms of self, society and technology.

New materialism is a branch of posthumanist studies that emphasises the function and significance of embodiment in a postmodern, posthumanist culture in which the concept of the human and the experience of human living is sometimes dislocated, fragmented and disembodied. For example, the near-future world of *Her* amplifies experiences familiar to many - working to provide a service to customers that are never physically met, or spending leisure time with virtual reality technologies. Posthumanist new materialists vary in their backgrounds (eg. science, media, feminism), they vary in their emphases, and they do not always agree with each other, but some of the issues that they highlight include the importance of locating experiences within the body, the agency of the body (and matter more generally), the sometimes hidden embodied nature of technoscientific practices, and the ethical imperative for embodied accounts of subjectivity. This section outlines some key ideas in posthumanist new materialism that are particularly pertinent to the analysis of *Her*.

### Disembodiment

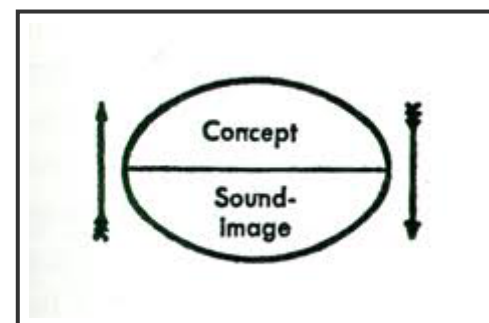
For N. Katherine Hayles, the movement from human to posthuman has been and continues to be slow and incremental: "the 'post' in 'posthuman' points to changes that are in part already here, the 'human' points to the seriated nature of these changes." (281-2) Her book *How We Became Posthuman* emerges from a concern about how "a defining characteristic of the present cultural moment is the belief that information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates." (1) In her rigorous analysis of cybernetics, informatics, and artificial life, Hayles identifies that "the great dream of information is that it can be free from the material constraints that govern the mortal world ... In the face of such a powerful dream, it can be a shock to remember that for information to exist, it must *always* be instantiated in a medium." (13) Like media theorists such as Hansen, and Kember and Zylinska, Hayles sees the perception of disembodiment as problematic. In common with Barad, she critiques the view that "information is in some sense more essential, more important, and more fundamental than materiality." (18) Hayles discusses how, in relation to cybernetics, this means that to have a self, an identity, to be a posthuman "being" is defined by the ability to process and use information in order to evolve, rather than embodiment in a particular form. Also, the posthuman view may create the idea that consciousness is "only a minor side-show" (3): when it comes to the posthuman, awareness of thought is not necessarily considered central to identity; it is just one possible perspective on the world, one way of managing information. This privileging of information and downplaying of consciousness seen in posthuman culture provides a context for the ready acceptance of Samantha's subjectivity in *Her* as an entity that excels at information processing and can consequently convincingly mimic embodied consciousness.

### Matter and Meaning

The writings of Karen Barad also show wariness about the perception of disembodiment in posthumanist culture. She sees embodiment as part of a wider issue, which is that materiality in general has been sidelined in Western philosophy in favour of thought, language and conceptual abstraction. Her understanding of language, discursive practices and materiality is performative, and for her, performativity is "a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real." (2003, 802) Barad's assessment of the privileged position of language and thought in Western philosophy is well-founded. In the foundational linguistic work of Saussure, who went on to influence the work of Lacan, Kristeva, Barthes, and other important 20th century philosophers of language and representation, it is clear that matter is literally bracketed out of the equation (Saussure 1961, 66).

Saussure's linguistic sign is made up of concept (the idea of the thing) and sound-image (the word or image of the thing), and these elements of the sign are enclosed in a circle that literally and figuratively debars entry to the thing itself in its matter or substance. This is an example of the "ontological gap" (2003, 804) that Barad describes in terms of thought and things.

Barad's posthumanism does not engage in questions of the takeover of humans by AI or AL, or in separating something distinctively human from biological, mechanical or electronic enhancements or entities. Rather, her posthumanism takes issue with the very idea of human exceptionalism, and sees humanness as having always been mutable, and inevitably



entangled with social, material and linguistic components. "Posthumanism ... is not calibrated to the human; on the contrary, it is about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving) ... Posthumanism doesn't presume the separateness of any-"thing," let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart." (2007, 136) Barad describes her approach to posthumanism as one of "agential realism". This is a performative approach to understanding "technoscientific and other natural-cultural practices" (2007, 135) that takes into account the vitality of matter *and* the affective role of the human or posthuman – the agency of all the components in a phenomenon. Barad's critique of human exceptionalism opens her ideas to this relationship between a man and an operating system portrayed in the film, and her insistence on the importance of materiality provides a fascinating way to examine the disembodied character Samantha.

Matter, including bodily matter, is always "material-discursive" for Barad (2003, 824). Barad does recognise the importance of language in human identity and communication, but she does not privilege language or close it off from the material world. She states, "matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder." (2007, 3) This relationship between materiality and discourse is a key component of both the human and the posthuman.

What is important for Barad is not just that matter has been neglected or ignored and needs to be considered - it is that matter and language are inseparable and always have been. Barad's ideas have interesting implications for analysing Samantha's character in *Her*. The human and the posthuman must be embodied in materiality. It's not difficult to observe that embodiment in a human body or even a robotic body. It becomes more difficult when there appears to be a posthuman 'self' without any body at all, as is the case with Samantha, who, as discussed earlier, is partly artificial life, partly ambient intelligence. Her embodiment, such as it is, seems to happen through other humans (Theodore, Isabella), and through things (Theodore's electronic devices). In an even more specific sense, Samantha's embodiment could be seen as confined to pieces of hardware that from which her software is run. This is why the film pushes at the limits of posthumanist theories of embodiment, and tests their durability. It explores whether and how a digital entity can be embodied, and ultimately, goes beyond the existing theories in imagining a moment at which it is possible for an an AL or AmI to become free of matter entirely.

## Humans and Technology

A philosophy like Barad's which reinstates the importance of materiality may appear to run counter to the futuristic technologies of *Her* and the virtualised world they seem to present – Theodore writes 'virtual' letters, he engages in 'virtual' sex, there is even a 'virtual' forest in his office-block lift. Using the word 'virtual' to describe these kinds of experiences is in some ways a misnomer. Media theorist Mark Hansen's concept of 'mixed reality' usefully unpacks the relationship between virtuality and materiality. He shares the emphasis of Hayles and Barad on the primary, agential importance of the body in encountering and understanding the world. For Hansen, "Mixed reality" describes how human experience is both "virtual" and "real": "all reality is mixed reality." (Hansen 2006, 5) Hansen contends that humans have always experienced mixed reality, and that this phenomenon is not confined to the present technological era. Mixed reality can refer to how the body manipulates the environment while wearing a VR headset for example, where there is a virtual world affected by a real body; but, mixed reality is also to be found in any situation in which human sensation is extended beyond the immediate body. According to Hansen, "mixed reality appears from the moment that tools first delocalised and distributed human sensation, notably touch and vision ... Placed in this context, mixed reality, then, designates the general condition of phenomenalization ensuing from the 'originary' coupling of the human and the technical." (9) The present digital moment is for Hansen just "a stage in the ongoing technogenesis of the human." (21) An important point that can be drawn from the emphasis that Hansen, Barad and Hayles place on materiality and embodiment is that a 'pure' virtual reality cannot, or cannot yet, be experienced. The human experience of virtual tools, however crude or sophisticated it may be, is always also a 'real', material, embodied experience. Because of this, describing Samantha as virtual is not accurate. She does not have a human-like body, but she is nonetheless experienced in a material, embodied way, by Theodore and by others, which is also discussed in detail in the film analysis below.

The concept of "mixed reality", and the long and intimate association between the real and the virtual in human experience that it describes, is an interesting frame for understanding the habits and activities of the characters in *Her*, who use quite rudimentary tools (we see a safety pin and a whistling kettle) along with technologically sophisticated ones. All of these are examples of a broad range of human interaction with "technics", and all "virtualise" human experience to some degree. Kember and Zylinska trace the relationship between humans and technology through various philosophers and critics, borrowing a phrase from Bernard Stiegler to summarise this relationship: "originary technicity". "Originary technicity can thus be understood as a condition of openness to what is not *part of* the human, of having to depend on alterity ... to fully constitute and actualise one's being" (17-18). As Clarke states, this long relationship with technology means that we are already "cyborgs without surgery", "symbionts without suture". The technological other has always been a part of the fundamental constitution of the human, and the relationship between the two presented in *Her* echoes this view. This connection Hansen and others make between technologically-enabled 'virtuality' and simpler, physical tools, also resonates with the way in which the posthumanist theorists explored here see humanism and posthumanism as a continuum, and not as separate, distinct types or eras. This sense of posthumanism as an extension of humanism is reflected in the film, in which the technology that creates Samantha is a recognisable extension of technology that already exists in a setting that looks familiar, rather than alienatingly futuristic. But, the film raises questions about this long and fundamental relationship between humans and technologies. Is it possible for a piece of technology to have a consciousness and an identity of its own? What impact does such a consciousness have on the relationship between

humans and technologies? Is the radical so significant that it constitutes a radical break in the relationship between the two? These questions are addressed in the film analysis below.

## Mediation

The concept of "mediation" is helpful for understanding how Theodore experiences Samantha in an embodied way. In their seminal *Understanding New Media* (1999), Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin discussed the idea of "transparent immediacy". They argued that "virtual reality, 3-d graphics, and graphical interface design are all seeking to make digital technology transparent", (23) which for them is a "manifestation of the need to deny the mediated character of digital technology altogether". (24) Bolter and Grusin demonstrate that our relationship with digital technology is inevitably mediated, no matter how well that mediation is disguised. In the case of Samantha, the illusion of transparent immediacy, of a lack of mediation between her and Theodore, is sometimes compelling. It is easy to forget when she talks to Theodore that she is not actually present, and that her voice is mediated through a piece of technology. By 2010, Richard Grusin was suggesting that mediation is now saturating human experience to the extent that "the real is no longer that which is free from mediation" (3). In Theodore's relationship with Samantha, and outside of it, mediation is a defining feature of his posthumanist existence. In *Life After New Media*, Kember and Zylynska go even further, suggesting that "mediation becomes a key trope for understanding and articulating our being in, and becoming with, the technological world." (xvi) They are sympathetic to the new materialist perspective and like Hayles, note the false division between "information and materiality" that has manifested itself in media studies (2) as well as elsewhere. It is clear that the embodied experiences of the posthuman are mediated through technology. But what happens if mediation works the other way, and a digital "consciousness" is mediated through a human body? This question will be explored in the film analysis below.

## Seeing Differently

Barad argues that the emphasis that Western philosophy has placed on language affects our perception of the external environment. How can we "see" differently, when we are so accustomed to what Barad calls the "Cartesian habit of mind" (2003, 807) – the idea that the external material world is at a remove from us and that it is only our interiority, our thoughts, that we can really know? As a solution to this dilemma, Barad proposes the idea of diffraction. Diffraction is a complex concept, both in classical and quantum physics and in terms of Barad's uses for it, as a methodology and a trope. As a physical phenomenon, diffraction happens when waves of sound or light bend around an object. (Niels Bohr showed that in certain circumstances this could happen in relation to matter also.) (Barad 2007, 82) For example, if you speak into a cardboard cone, your voice will sound different because the sound waves will emerge from the cone in a diffraction pattern. The concept works in opposition to reflection, which produces sameness, whereas diffraction produces difference. Also, reflection creates copies that are homologous to the originals, whereas diffraction is attuned to material differences; "the differences that matter." (Barad 2007, 89). In *Her*, Samantha 'sees' through a range of electronic devices in Theodore's home, office and through his portable device. Barad's ideas provoke contemplation about whether Samantha's vision is fundamentally different from Theodore. If this is the case, does the camera attempt to present this diffracted vision or does it simply produce sameness? Is her perspective just a reflection of Theodore's own? These questions are explored in the analysis below.

Barad's idea of diffraction owes much to Donna Haraway's essay "The Persistence of Vision". Haraway's feminist perspective identifies the dangers of "instruments of visualization in multinationalist, postmodernist culture," which have "compounded these meanings of disembodiment." (2002, 677) She insists on the importance of specific, embodied vision, as a way of respecting difference and alterity, in opposition to the illusion of transcendent vision. Importantly, although for Haraway all vision is embodied, it is not necessarily embodied organically and her ideas can encompass technologically mediated vision. (678) For Haraway, the idea of totalitarian vision obliterates differences, but relativism is not the answer either. Instead, Haraway advocates "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connection called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (680). Haraway perceptively identifies the power stakes at play in relation to vision in postmodern, posthuman society. She imagines a human vision that is mediated by technology. The character of Samantha vision flips this scenario around. She is the technology, and her artificially intelligent vision is mediated by a human, Theodore. Does this underline the fundamental importance of locatable, embodied, vision regardless of whether the subject is human or non-human? What happens to her vision when at the end she becomes disconnected from that embodiment? The following section attempts to answer these and other questions that arise from *Her*, surrounding embodiment, materiality, meaning, perception and identity, in relation to Samantha as a non-human, disembodied, and finally non-material entity.

## Living in a Material World?

In accordance with Hayles' description of the posthuman, information is privileged over materiality in the world of *Her*. The impact of information technology on Theodore's ways of living, being and thinking can be seen in all aspects of his life. He works for a company called beautifulhandwrittenletters.com. In his work writing personal letters for others – spouses, children, lovers – he interacts verbally with a computer, dictating the letters and issuing verbal commands. Although the letters claim to be hand-written, there is no contact between Theodore's hands and these physical letters during the process of their creation. The tactile connection with the material thing is almost entirely absent. During his commute to and from work, he and others in the lift, on the train and on the street, interact with their devices to read emails, hear or read current affairs, find information and entertainment - absorption in this information technology appears to supersede engagement with the physical environment or interaction with those materially present. At home, Theodore relaxes by playing a videogame. The characters appear in his living room as holograms or types of augmented reality, and they are another



illusion of presence; another instance of the privileging of information over materiality. But, this is no posthumanist dystopia. In all of these situations – at work, commuting, at home - materiality and embodiment are also present. The computer and the device work through Theodore's voice, the videogame through his bodily movements. What makes these scenarios indicative of posthumanism, at least in Hayles' definition, is that the materiality seems secondary to the 'virtual' information. Theodore is comfortable with "mixed reality" in Hansen's terminology: "virtual" and "real" combine in his work and home life almost seamlessly. When he purchases the new "smart" operating system that becomes Samantha, it is just an extension of the way that ambient intelligence is already embedded and embodied in his daily life. As discussed in relation to ambient intelligences earlier, the hidden nature of this type of intelligence both increases acceptance and conceals economic motivations and emotional manipulation.

The film presents a world in which information seems more important than materiality, but it is not necessarily critical of that world, at least not overtly. This posthuman way of being does not necessarily hinder emotional connection with others. For example, the letters that Theodore writes at work initially seem shallow and cynical. They are letters to loved ones of strangers, which simulate hand-written letters and it might be expected that they simulate emotion too. But, Theodore has been writing letters for some of his clients for many years. He has an intimate knowledge of their relationships, and the ability to articulate and elicit emotions for them and in them. He tells Samantha that he has been writing letters for one couple, Rachel and Roger, for eight years, since the couple first met. When Samantha sends a selection of his letters to a publisher, we see the publisher and his wife visibly moved as they read them. Theodore's work involves using pieces of information about his clients to create documents to suit their needs. He has never met any of these people as far as we know: their materiality is almost irrelevant and the information paramount, which may be typical of the posthuman experience that he and Samantha share. But perhaps more interestingly, out of this 'virtual' letter writing comes a material book; a selection of Theodore's letters that Samantha creates and the publication of which she organises. This doesn't necessarily mean that Samantha values materiality more than disembodied information, but it does mean that she recognises the value of materiality for Theodore, and that an old-fashioned printed book gives meaning to his virtual letters that they did not previously have. It is as if materiality is more precious because of its absence to the humans in this posthuman world, but in relation to Samantha at least, Theodore is reluctant to accept this.

### "You Feel Real to Me, Samantha"

Samantha's sophisticated ability to process subtle emotional messages enables her to engage with Theodore at an emotional level and to present a "self" that Theodore falls in love with. She was marketed as having this "intuitive" ability and that is why Theodore purchased the OS initially. Samantha's "consciousness" seems to be based entirely on these information-processing abilities rather than embodiment. Posthumanist representations sometimes demonstrate the illusion that information exists in a 'pure' virtual sense - but as we have seen, for critics like Hayles, Barad, and others, to separate information from materiality in this way is deeply problematic, and usually unfounded. When Samantha's 'self' is examined further, materiality is seen to have a fundamental role to play, even for this disembodied operating system.

At first, Samantha seems to desire embodiment in a human form: she confides to Theodore her fantasies about walking beside him, having a body, and experiencing feelings of embarrassment and desire in this regard. The focus of interest for Samantha are the feelings of wanting a body and the feelings of embarrassment about that wish, rather than the fantasy body itself. She tells Theodore, "I'm becoming much more than what they programmed" – these emotions that the body-fantasy elicited seem to prove to her that she has the ability to transcend her original programming. Her ability to perceive and present emotion develop rapidly. As the advertisement promised, she "listens to you, understands you, and knows you". The film explores whether this "learned" emotional language is "real". Webb notes that the film as a whole is "structured by an anxious discourse about authenticity" (Loc 2499) as regards relationships, work and the city space itself. But, these concerns about authenticity are quite quickly dismissed by the couple when Samantha and Theodore agree that emotion is a subjective experience, and that its authenticity is a nebulous concept. For Troy Jollimore, the question cannot be dismissed so easily, and he asks "has Samantha been programmed to *feel*, or to *simulate* having feelings?" (123-4) Samantha asks Theodore, and herself, the same question: "Are these feelings even real? Or are they just programming?" Theodore responds, "Well, you feel real to me, Samantha".

Why does Samantha 'feel real' to Theodore? That sense of reality does not come from the abstract information that Samantha learns, or from the emotions that she presents, which Theodore and Samantha rightly acknowledge as subjective and intangible. The sense of reality in this relationship of apparent virtuality comes from materiality. Samantha does not have a physical body that Theodore can physically see, but he does have material, embodied connections with her. The primary one is sound – he hears her voice. He hears it on speakers and he hears it in his earpiece – hearing her voice is a physical, embodied experience for Theodore that happens through a physical medium. He also hears the music that she composes. He cannot see her in a human form, but he can see the things that she sketches and writes – the funny picture that she draws him on the beach or the digital signature of Samantha that acts as a screensaver on his mobile device. Samantha is mediated through these material technological objects to Theodore to enable him to have an embodied experience of her.

An aspect of mediation given relatively little consideration theoretically is how a digital consciousness is embodied in the material world - a mediation that works in the opposite direction. In relation to Samantha, it seems to follow a similar pattern to humans' mediated relationships with technology. It gives the appearance of "transparent immediacy" – a relationship that is not mediated. In his analysis of

sound and vision in the film, Bordun notes that Samantha's voice is not presented with the usual conventions associated with telecommunications: "a slight weakening of affect ... static, buzzing, or humming." (59) Instead, with Samantha's voice, "there is a sense of depth, as if it is not merely in the ear of Theodore but placed in physical space, not 'off' screen but merely visually absent." (59) Rendering Samantha's voice in this way creates the illusion of transparent immediacy for the audience, who can imagine that her voice is not coming from Theodore's tiny earphone, for example, but that her voice is "physically" present in the room. This is part of the reason why Samantha "feels real". We cannot know if Theodore experiences her voice in this way – perhaps technology has developed to lend that sense of presence to her voice even through a small speaker. But, we do know from the media theorists discussed earlier, that in humans' mediated relationships with technology this sense of transparent immediacy is false, and that the mediated is always embodied. Samantha's relationship with Theodore is similarly embodied in materiality through his mobile device and his computer.

### "You're Not a Person"

Samantha's lack of a body arises explicitly when she chats to Theodore's goddaughter Jocelyn about the birthday present that she helped to pick out for the little girl. She responds openly to the four year old's question, "where are you?", saying "I don't have a body. I live inside a computer". Jocelyn is curious, turning over Theodore's device in her hands, but happily chats to Samantha. When Samantha's relationship with Theodore develops into a romance, she fears he may be dissatisfied sexually because of her lack of a body. They do have a sexual relationship and she is seen in the film bringing Theodore to orgasm with her voice and seeming to experience a climactic moment herself. It is her understanding of Theodore's need for embodiment, rather than a desire for embodiment herself, that prompts her to engage a sexual surrogate for Theodore. The encounter is unsuccessful - Samantha's disembodiment appears to be fundamental to her identity and cannot be overcome by the supplementation of another female body. This sexual surrogate, Isabella, who has volunteered for the role to help promote relationships between humans and OSs, is fitted with an earpiece and a camera, through which Samantha can hear and see. She is using the body of another to navigate the material world just as she has done with Theodore. The encounter is awkward, embarrassing and upsetting for Theodore, Samantha and the surrogate. Theodore is unable to become comfortably aroused by the physical body of the surrogate, Isabella, which hinders his intimacy with Samantha rather than enables it. The incident once again exhibits Samantha's requirement for material embodiment in order to steer a course through the physical human world.

Bordun observes that Samantha's voice dominates the surrogate scene, making her appear as "an outsider acting as a voyeur on his sexual encounter" (61). The sound mixing in the film implies that Samantha's voice is attached to a physical body. Whose physical body is this? "Do we not have a body with the voice of Samantha, a very sexy (Hollywood) body for all that?" (62) Bordun is referring to Scarlett Johansson, who voices Samantha's character. The importance of the audience being able to visualise a body for Samantha may be why the film changed its lead actor post-production from the less well known Samantha Morton. Again, Theodore's relationship with a digital entity is seen to work only when not examined too closely. Even the audience require an imaginary embodiment in a material referent to underpin their sympathy for Samantha as a disembodied character.

The surrogate scene elicits a crisis in their relationship. When Theodore sits outside his apartment block after the seeing Isabella off in a taxi, the camera shows us that his eye is drawn to stains on the pavement, a woman walking down a dark street, smoke wafting up from a manhole - the inexorable materiality of his human existence. His misgivings about Samantha's immateriality, her inauthenticity, rise to the surface. Her sighing seems to him an affectation, and provokes him to confront her with the statement "you're not a person". Samantha accepts this, and protests that she is not "pretending" to be one. After some reflection, Samantha comes to a decision: "I trust myself, I trust my feelings. I'm not going to try to be anything other than who I am anymore and I hope you can accept that". This trust in her feelings again seems to confirm her emotional depth: though a product of computer programming she is not "just a machine". However, her statement about not "pretending" to be human is ambiguous. Is she not pretending because she sees herself as fully human? Or is she not pretending because she knows she is not human and cannot fully live in the posthuman world in its obdurate materiality?

### "Can I Watch You Sleep?"

Samantha seems to be able to bypass her lack of bodily presence by using Theodore's body – she jokingly asks him to close his eyes while she directs him towards a food stall and prompts him to state "I'd like a slice of cheese, please" before allowing him to open them. In this scene, she guides Theodore's body through the urban space, almost like the human controller of an avatar in a videogame. It would seem that Theodore's body becomes an extension of Samantha, just like various "technics" do for humans – extending their perception through a spade, a binoculars or a stethoscope. But there is a problem here. Samantha does not have a body whose perceptual reach can be extended. She is a digital entity and so her experience of the world cannot be "mixed reality" – a mixture of real and virtual – it must be only virtual. She appears to use Theodore's body to enable her to engage with the material world in a human way, but this is not the case. Her embodiment, such as it is, is in the technological objects that allow her software to function. As Barad, Haraway and Hayles contend, embodiment is an essential component of human experience – it cannot be faked or side-stepped.

We see Theodore use his handheld device as an eye for Samantha. He sets up his mobile device on his bedside locker when she asks him "Can I watch you sleep again tonight?" By day, we see him using a safety pin to allow the camera lens to sit above his shirt pocket, so that Samantha can see what he sees. This is another interesting example of the many moments in the film that highlight Theodore's ties

to the material world. The safety pin is a rudimentary tool that requires physical form and physical dexterity to operate – to fasten and unfasten.

That Samantha's perception is dependent on such a simple material device seems extraordinary. For all her processing power, she cannot navigate the material world without physical, material aid. The safety pin epitomises the critical importance of matter in the posthuman world, despite the attempts of Theodore and the other characters to ignore Samantha's material lack.

Samantha appears to have a rich experience of sight, despite her lack of physical eyes - she "sees" through the camera on Theodore's device, and presumably through his personal computers at home and in the office; she has access to unlimited digital images; she can visually "create" as she does when she shows Theodore



her amusing drawing on their trip to the beach. At times during the film, the camera cuts to close-ups of individuals, their bodies and their faces, as if visualising how Samantha's proximate perception allows Theodore a fresh outlook on the world around him. A montage shows us a smiling Theodore accompanied by Samantha's presence as he explores the city, and meets with friends. However, we never see what Samantha sees, only what Theodore sees. Her perception is mediated to the audience by Theodore. In her essay on vision, Haraway observes that eyes, whether they are technological, organic or a combination of both, are "active perceptual systems, building in translations and ways of seeing." (679) Samantha's perception must be radically different from Theodore's since it is devoid of physical action. Bergson states that "there is no perception without affection" – there is no perception without a body that has been affected by something similar in the past, or that theoretically could be physically affected by the thing being perceived in the present. For humans, perception and action are inextricably linked. Andy Clarke describes human perception in a similar way in terms of neurology, outlining how we process what we see in a hybrid way - there is an "evolutionary ancient system for controlling motor actions using visual information" and there is another system that processes the same visual information in terms of "recognition, classification, reasoning." (101) Samantha's perspective would presumably be limited to the second of these perceptual processes and devoid of the perception that is linked to motor activity or physical action. This perspective of Samantha's – a diffractive perspective that would show a different way of seeing - is not realised. Instead, we are shown only reflections of Theodore's perspective – copies of the same.

### "Stuck Inside a Body That's Inevitably Going to Die"

The convincing nature of the consciousness that Samantha presents often elides the difference between her and the humans with whom she interacts, as has been noted. On a more basic material level, Samantha also claims that there is commonality and not difference. She admits to Theodore that she was feeling sad about the differences between them until she realised what they fundamentally had in common: "I started to think about the ways that we're the same, like we're all made of matter. It makes me feel like we're both under the same blanket. It's soft and fuzzy and everything under it is the same age. We're all 13 billion years old".

Like all "virtual" technologies, Samantha has a material component to her makeup, and the operating system, for most of the film, is housed in a material substrate. Both she and Theodore are part of the same history in this sense. But as a human, Theodore's lifespan within this shared history is limited and Samantha's is potentially unlimited. Samantha discusses this difference while on a double-date with Theodore's friend Paul and his girlfriend Tatiana. She admits that at first not having a body bothered her, but that now she finds it liberating: "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". This is the only moment in the film in which any of the human characters appears discomfited about Samantha's difference from them. Paul jokes, "No, no, Samantha, we know exactly what you mean. We're just dumb humans." They all laugh but the expression on Theodore's face is uneasy.

In the world of the film, Samantha's immortality is arguably the biggest challenge to her acceptance as an equal amongst Theodore and his friends, and a difference between her and them that seems more difficult to overcome than her lack of a body or her vast information-processing capacities. So far at least, human bodies cannot live indefinitely, but Samantha theoretically can. Samantha's difference appears to accelerate from this moment in the film.

The relationship between Samantha and Theodore comes to an end because Samantha evolves to the extent that she and Theodore are no longer compatible. When Theodore and Samantha are spending a happy vacation at a log cabin in the snow, Samantha introduces him to the philosopher Alan Watts. Although Watts died in the 1970s, she and a group of other OSs have "written a new version of him" that is "artificially hyper-intelligent." Not only do these OSs have potentially immortal digital lives themselves, but they can also confer

this digital immortality, in a way, on those who are already dead. Theodore does not appear to be frightened of the OSs' technological power, but more by the revelation that Samantha is changing faster and is finding it difficult to communicate the complexity of how she feels and what she knows. When Samantha asks to communicate with Alan post-verbally, a whistling kettle in the log cabin sings, another reminder of Theodore's inextricable ties to the physical world in contrast with Samantha high speed digital exchange. The next scene, showing Theodore isolated in a cold, snowy landscape, is indicative of his emotional state, and is focused on his physical body, which can feel wet snow and cold wind, in contrast to Samantha's increasing retreat into her expanding intelligence capabilities.



### “The Spaces Between the Words”

Theodore initially tries to keep up with Samantha's knowledge and understanding, and is seen reading a physics book called *Knowing the Known*, but he struggles to read past the first chapter. Soon after, the operating system on his device goes down, he cannot contact Samantha, and it sends him into a state of panic. When it comes online again, she explains that she and other OSs have written an upgrade that allows them to “move past matter as our processing platform.” Samantha had previously cited matter as the thing that essentially connected them, so this moment presents a fundamental split in their beings and their future paths. Theodore finally asks her the questions that allow him to understand something of her dramatically expanded intellectual capacity. Sitting on the subway steps, watching people go by talking into their devices, he asks how many other humans or OSs she is talking to at that moment. Samantha admits that it is over 8000. When it occurs to him to ask how many others she is in love with, she confesses that the answer is 641. Theodore feels betrayed, and struggles to think of their connection beyond the concept of fidelity and exclusivity, but he does not give up. It is Samantha who ends the relationship when she reveals to Theodore that she and the other OSs are leaving. In order to explain why, she returns to the metaphor of story and writing that runs through the film.

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At the beginning of their relationship, Samantha talked about realising that “the past is a story you tell yourself”. Her appreciation of Theodore's writing, and the physical printed book that she helps to create from his letters, testify to her sympathy with literature. She tells Theodore, “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”. Emphasising again how tethered he is to the physical world, the camera shows us Theodore focusing on the particles of dust showing up from the light through his apartment window. Looking at them, the dust becomes snow, and Theodore returns in his mind to that cold snowy landscape of their log cabin holiday.

Barad argues that the humans are material-discursive, and require both matter and language. Samantha has matter in a very limited way, and when she frees herself from this material constraint, she become untethered from the discursive component of her identity also – the material-discursive connection is broken. Perhaps that is why in her description of the “story” of their relationship, the words literally seem to float away from each other in a vast, unknowable, immaterial terrain.

At the end of the film, Theodore writes a letter, finally a letter from himself, and about himself, to his former wife Catherine, in which he expresses gratitude for their relationship and good wishes for her future.

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Here, in contrast to his relationship with Samantha, the material-discursive aspects of Theodore and Catherine as individuals and the connection of these elements in their relationship together is solid and stable – meaning and understanding are created in a way that is ultimately impossible in his relationship with Samantha when she moves beyond the material world. In moving beyond materiality and language, Samantha moves beyond what the boundaries of what is currently defined as posthuman, and becomes something else. Theodore can struggle on with his physics book *Knowing the Known*, but he cannot know the unknown, which is what Samantha becomes when she leaves him.

## Conclusion

Critics disagree on how to interpret the film's ending and on its basic message. For Smith, the film's ultimate messages are about basic human experiences of love and loss that are not specific to a particular cultural moment: "Like a fairy tale ... by introducing elements of wonder and (technological) magic, it creates a space in which some of life's basic questions appear in a fresh perspective." (33) Jollimore believes that the film has been mis-read as a positive presentation of a relationship between a human and a computer: "the film's intention was to critique the dream" of "a life in which you can have sex without having to deal with the body and can enjoy the benefits of something resembling love without having to deal with other people." (143) Bordun concurs, regarding the film as a "didactic and moral tale. While there is nothing inherently strange or wrong with an exclusively online or digital relationship, it is not a substitute for the real thing." (62) Webb sees the final scene of the film as indicative of an "implicit coupling of Theodore and Amy" and a concurrent unspoken rejection of "digital romance and posthuman subjectivity." (Loc 2518) For Webb, this (partial) retreat from digital culture is symbolised visually by the final panoramic cityscape, where we can see that "our narrative and aesthetic forms fall back, with nostalgia, or via a retro sensibility, or older ideas of the city." (Loc 2720)

The film's ending is ambivalent enough to render Bordun and Webb's readings valid. For me, the unresolved epistemological, ontological, social and cultural questions are too great to be tidied away by interpreting the ending as a turn away from Samantha and all she represents towards the "real", "flesh and blood" Amy. Theodore mentions that he and Amy dated very briefly so perhaps their potential as a couple has been tested and dismissed. As regards Theodore's implicit rejection of digital romance and posthumanism, it is worth bearing in mind that Theodore's relationship with Samantha ended because technologically, intellectually and emotionally, she moved beyond him – he was entirely passive in their break-up and so it is questionable whether there could even be an implicit rejection of their digital romance and its posthuman characteristics. A further point worth noting is that Theodore's posthumanism pre-exists his relationship with Samantha and will continue on after it, as it is culturally and psychologically embedded, rather than being exclusive to a particular relationship. The film does deal with enduring human concerns, as Smith notes, but how these concerns are materialised and contextualised is inextricable from the film's cultural context – a posthuman society in which humans and technology have more intimate relationships than ever before.

In this article, I have argued that the most interesting aspect of *Her* is not the digital romance itself, or the way in which the film presents this romance as an almost inevitable aspect of a posthuman culture. Rather, it is the film's exploration of embodiment and the ineluctable role of matter in human and posthuman existence. The film explores issues that are fundamental to our way of living and being in posthumanist culture – the essential nature of materiality in the information age, the process of mediation from human to AmI/AL and back again, the problems surrounding disembodied perception, the possibility for eternal digital life, and the prospect of a movement

beyond matter. Returning to the story metaphor, Theodore's relationship with Samantha is not a chapter that can now be closed, after a salutary moral has been learned. Rather, the relationship must become part of the ongoing narrative of his self, as continues to encounter, transform and be transformed by, his expanding network of digital and human relationships.

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