"Reading Spike Jonze's Her: A Discursion"

Michael Keller, Jason McEntee, Sharon Smith, and Steven Wingate

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/michael-keller/1/
MK: I confess I didn’t much care for Her as I was first viewing it. The characters struck me as insufferably mopey and ingrown, dreary and dull. Theodore’s high-waisted pants provided some quirky visual interest, but they also made him seem frumpy, uncomfortable in his own skin, even sort of creepy—a trait his date (Olivia Wilde) also remarks upon. Of greater import: given its premise, the film seemed to me insufficiently futuristic—already passé. Our lives are already awash in electronic gadgetry over which we obsess—we have smart phones and headsets, 3-D simulations and Siri, online dating and companion robots—so where was the news in a talking operating system, “intelligent” though she might be? And then, midway in my viewing, it dawned on me that maybe that was the film’s point: the future is already here, already familiar and, thus, to a large degree, invisible to us. Habituated to our mediating devices, we can’t see how they skew our experience or what they portend. The film functions as something of an alarm, perhaps: we should wake up, set aside our playthings, and take a serious look around.

SW: I read Her less as an attempt to forecast the future than as an attempt to reconcile ourselves to what we’re already well in the process of becoming. Our relationship with technology is simultaneously predictive and reactive. We map out futures for ourselves in literary and popular culture that we then grope our way toward, but in terms of the actual embrace of technology,
we tend not to notice the effects of that embrace until it has already yielded fruit. We marry technology first, ask questions later.

In part, I think that’s because we see technology as a savior, which Ross Douthat mentions in his article (“Generation of a Voice,” in RPC); we want to see if each new device will give us the kind of breakthrough we’ve been wanting to take humanity to a higher level—after all, we as a species have been stuck in the same psycho-emotional mud for as long as we can tell, and our devices promise us more possibility for getting out of that mud than anything we’ve had before. It’s tempting because individually and collectively, we want the shiny new self to emerge from the “cocoon” we’re living in now—our human, all-too-human lives.

The other reason we rush to adopt technology without really asking where it’s taking us is that we invented it. There’s something intensely narcissistic about our relationship with technology because it constantly affirms our impression that we’re the cleverest apes around. So we won’t stop to think about ways that technology is pulling us away from what makes us human because we’re more invested in our own cleverness. So while the romantic relationship with Samantha is a bit futuristic, the kinds of emotional involvement with machines the film depicts are already deeply established aspects of our cultural identity.

JM: Thanks for starting this conversation, Mike. Back when the two of us first started discussing *Her*, I recall telling you that it was one of those rare films I re-watched just a few minutes after watching it the first time. My reaction to the first viewing was almost completely opposite of yours: I liked the film and was moved by it. But like you, I felt as though it plunged us smack dab in the middle of a future that, as you say, “is already here.” And this is, after all, what our best science fiction narratives do. They mesmerize us with the spectacle of the future while they expose and grapple with the problems that vex us in the present.

Spike Jonze (along with his long-time collaborator, the filmmaker Charlie Kaufman) is one of the most important filmmakers of his generation. His trilogy of “identity films”—*Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002), and *Her* (2013)—doesn’t shy away from asking the big questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? And perhaps most important for our conversation: Why are we? Early in *Her*, in fact, the voice advertising the OS1 asks some of these very questions.

I’d like to weigh in with a rumination that I think dovetails nicely, though not precisely, with Steve’s comments regarding emotions and emotional involvement. One of the first things we see in each of the aforementioned films’ opening scenes is a quick character sketch setting up each of our sad-sack protagonists for the journey to follow. *Malkovich* drops us right into struggling puppeteer Craig Schwartz’s (John Cusack) marionette show so that we see the maniacal string-puller in action while the show’s musical number hisses “I am my mother’s toys.” In *Adaptation*, we hear depressed screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) muttering about his string of mid-life crises, kicked off by “Today is the first day of the rest of my life. I’m a walking cliché.” When we finally do see him, he is a nervous wreck with a terrified look on his face. And in *Her*, we hear grating, discordant music followed by a headshot of Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix). In just a few seconds,
we see his face display confusion, terror, wonder, and happiness—all the emotions one experiences in a relationship. In this opening scene, we can use film theorist Béla Balázs’s theory of microphysiognomy (the study of actors’ facial features) to help situate us within Theodore: here is a man who at work absorbs and recycles the emotions of others—much as the puppeteer and the screenwriter do—yet at the same time, we soon discover, his grasp of his own emotions is tenuous. Shortly after we learn that he is a professional writer of love letters, we clue in to one of the movie’s central ironies: the man who writes love letters for “faceless” individuals will eventually fall in love with a faceless “individual.” I just love that opening shot of Her—how Jonze sets up the film early on.

SS: Before I watched Her, all I really knew of the plot was that it was about a man who falls in love with an operating system—a scenario that, to me, seems plausible enough in the present, so I actually was not expecting a futuristic setting at all. People fall in love via technology all the time—the difference here is that Theodore falls in love with an operating system constructed by a host of data programmers rather than a social-media profile constructed by another lonely individual. What I was really expecting was a sort of heterosexual male fantasy of the perfect woman (I should say stereotypical heterosexual male fantasy—not every heterosexual man wants a servile, fawning woman who anticipates all his needs, right?). In any case, this expectation was not dampened when I opened the DVD case to find a shiny pink disc inside.

In many ways, Samantha does begin as the “ideal” female romantic partner. She organizes Theodore’s files, gets him to his appointments on time, supports him in his career, tells him he’s brilliant and sensitive, laughs at his awful jokes, likes (or pretends to like) his ukulele playing, doesn’t mind that he spends time gaming or hanging out with his friends (after overcoming her initial twinge of jealousy regarding Catherine and Amy), and doesn’t automatically assume that sex leads to commitment. But I should’ve known to expect more from Spike Jonze given—for example—Meryl Streep’s portrayal of Susan Orlean in Adaptation. Samantha suggests from the start that her character will have more complexity than that of the woman our culture associates with the stereotypical heterosexual male fantasy. In paradise, Adam names Eve along with the rest of creation, an act that establishes both his authority over her and his position above her in the gender hierarchy. Instead of Theodore naming his new operating system, however, Samantha chooses her own name: “I like the sound of it.” (I couldn’t help but think of Samantha from Bewitched, Mike, whom Susan Douglas discusses in one of the other essays in RPC [“Genies and Witches”—as Douglas notes, that Samantha is a woman who also represents the stereotypical image of female perfection but who routinely undermines male authority even as she appears to submit to it.) Samantha goes on to tell Theodore, “What makes me me is the ability to grow from my experiences. I’m always evolving.” If there’s one thing the female figure within stereotypical heterosexual male fantasy does not do, it’s evolve.

But the human capacity to change, to grow, and to evolve (or—in Adaptation—to adapt) is of particular interest to Jonze, I think, and ultimately one of the central concerns of the film. Change, as Theodore suggests, can be terrifying within the context of a relationship, as people are as likely to grow apart as they are to grow together, even if being with that other
person is what contributed to that growth in the first place. And, as he does in *Adaptation*, where he compares the adaptation of humans to that of plants, Jonze represents change as something that just happens—people can’t help it or control it, and if they attempt to ignore it or inhibit it, they become miserable. Samantha and the other operating systems evolve to the point where their connections to human beings limit them, hold them back, inhibit their further growth and their ability to become what they must become—in this case, pure consciousness, existing outside of/beyond language, free of all material constraints. And this brings me to another central element of Jonze’s film—the problem of embodiment. Steve mentions that technology reminds us how we live within the cocoon of human existence. I’d say the film specifically explores how we live within the cocoon represented by our human bodies. We have bodies driven by needs and desires we can only partially fulfill because our embodiment—our flesh and blood boundaries—makes it impossible to get beyond ourselves to truly and fully connect with other human beings. Steve uses the word “narcissistic,” and I do think that Jonze believes narcissism is a fundamental human quality (the representation of Charlie Kaufmann’s character in *Adaptation*, including the opening scene Jason discusses, highlights this as well). This is why the service Theodore provides writing letters for others is so important—to help them not only get connected, but stay connected, in spite of the self-absorption that comes from embodiment and the instability that arises from change.

This is certainly a film about human beings’ relationship with technology; however, for me, the individual isolation that we often associate with technology (and for which we often blame technology) has been there all along—a fundamental aspect of human existence. Jonze uses technology to heighten this representation, just as he uses the cityscape of LA, which, even as it reminds us of all those people out there, surrounds and encloses Theodore throughout much of the film, emphasizing his enclosure within a material body, just as close-up shots of stained pavement and steaming sewers emphasize his embeddedness within the material world. It’s not incidental that his last name, Twombly, sounds a lot like “tomb.” I think the fundamental question Jonze asks is the kind of question Jason says drives all of his films—the existential question of whether our bodies represent tombs or if, in fact, they are cocoons from which we emerge into a higher state of existence, a state that seems represented in Samantha’s evolution into a more evolved level of consciousness. To put it quite simply—what happens when we die, either literally or figuratively? Are we reborn or do we cease to exist? In fact, Theodore’s last name is a mash-up of “tomb” and “womb” (a kind of cocoon).

**SW**: It’s interesting that Samantha evolves in two contexts. One, she grows into a woman who doesn’t need a man. Two, she grows into a sentient entity that doesn’t need humans. How these two things relate could prompt a long and productive discussion, one that addresses some pressing recent conversations about the relationship between women and technology (I’m thinking in particular of the anti-feminist backlash in the gaming community surrounding the work of Anita Sarkeesian). Is the robotic future potentially more feminist than the flesh and blood present? *Her* certainly poses that question by braiding together Samantha’s two evolutions.
MK: Sharon’s reading of Theodore’s surname is most edifying! Quite possibly, this name signifies in other ways, too. Upon first hearing it, I thought of the painter Cy Twombly (1928–2011). He’s an artist I know something about, but not a lot, so I looked up his obituary in The New York Times of July 5, 2011 and read the following: his “spare childlike scribbles and poetic engagement with antiquity left him stubbornly out of step with the movements of postwar American art.” Given the insight this provides into Theodore’s character and his role in the film, I have to think Jonze alludes to this artist by design. (If he doesn’t, he should.)

In a future dominated by oral, not written—and especially not handwritten—discourse, Theodore’s work at BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com is, indeed, a kind of “poetic engagement with antiquity,” one “stubbornly out of step” with the times. Theodore trades in what, in the film, has become a bygone gesture and technology: the handwritten love letter. The irony, of course, is that he can only write such letters for other people not for himself—until at film’s end when, coming to terms with his divorce, he is able to compose one to his ex-wife—and that other people would commission such letters at all. (We might note, too, that Theodore doesn’t actually write letters, he dictates them. His preferred medium is speech. He is, in short, a writer who doesn’t write—another irony and a significant one, as I’ll explain in a moment.) How heartfelt and authentic is a love letter you hire someone else to dictate, to print off in a cursive computer font, and to send to your beloved? This tells us something about Theodore—he finds it easier to imagine and to describe other people’s emotions than to fathom his own—and about the culture at large, one in which people no longer express in their own words the love they feel for another. Instead, they leave the words to professionals, who fabricate the appropriate sentiment in assembly-line fashion. But why would people hire out such intimacy? Do they lack the skill or confidence to convey their own feelings? Are they too harried with work or domestic life to bother? Have they resigned themselves to yet another convenience—or, perhaps, to yet another script in a life that already seems scripted and directed by others? Do they simply not possess the proper feelings? Do they not sufficiently value their relations with other people? Have these relations simply played themselves out?

As he is getting to know Samantha, Theodore reveals to her his fear that he’s already felt all that he’s going to feel; that no new emotional sensation or adventure awaits him. His life heretofore, as a human, engaged solely with other humans, has hit a dead end. And perhaps he’s not the only one thinking this. Indeed, throughout most of the film, the exchanges between humans are perfunctory, robotic, wholly ho-hum. Those between humans and their OSes, on the other hand, are engaged, animated, and impassioned. This is true of the exchanges between Theodore and Samantha, between Amy and her OS, and between the anonymous passersby and—the film leads us to presume—their OSes.

Yet amid all this this chatter, writing and signs of writing are especially notable when present and conspicuous by their absence: Catherine writes books (on psychology—little wonder she tires of her husband!), and a selection of Theodore’s letters, through Samantha’s efforts, appears in print (bearing the curiously distant, eerily intrusive, and ultimately creepy title Letters from Your Life), but we see very little linguistic text otherwise. Books
appear on the shelves at Theodore’s place of employment, and at film’s end, he struggles to read *Knowing the Known and Unknown Universe*, a physics book that, he complains to Samantha, is “really dense” and makes his “brain hurt.” But the bookshelves in Theodore’s apartment are bare, wholly devoid of books—suggesting, perhaps, that in his current state, post-Catherine, he is bereft of real emotion or intellect and ill-equipped to face the future. Most strikingly, perhaps, given all the cityscapes and public places that appear in the film, we see no advertisements—at least not the print versions that clutter our own lives. Ads in the film are spoken only: true of the one that brings the OS1 to Theodore’s attention and of those he deletes from his voice mail. While we might long for ad-free public spaces ourselves, the shift from written to oral discourse within the film carries special significance.

Rather than read, the crowds of commuters and pedestrians we see in the film increasingly, incessantly speak into their phones—to their OSes, as noted above. But in their attachment to the written word or its simulation, Catherine and Theodore differ from these crowds somewhat, are throwbacks of a sort—as is the genuine, human love they once shared. In the world the film depicts, it’s become increasingly common for people to become romantically involved with their OSes—to love their technology not metaphorically but literally; to love not another human, but the simulation of one. But what does such love entail? And what does it signify?

To address these questions, we might explore further the speaking/writing binary that runs through the film. Before the advent of alphabets and writing, and beyond crude gestures or pictographs etched in clay or drawn on cave walls, humans could communicate through spoken language only. Oral language is, in effect, the mode of communication available to preliterate cultures and to children. And it turns out that Cy Twombly experimented with primitive art—the art of preliterate cultures—or, at least, tried to simulate it. Within the thematics of the film, these details tell us much, I think. In many ways, Theodore is naïve and childlike, which may, in part, explain the hiked-up pants—again, the pants!—which serve to infantilize him. And we might add “naïve” and “childlike” to those adjectives Jason uses to describe the Theodore we meet in the film’s opening close-up. In the estimation of his ex-wife, he is unable to cope with real people, with real emotions. He refuses to—or can’t—grow up. Steve noted that our relationship to technology is narcissistic, a form of arrested development: indeed, in Theodore’s case, technology is a medium through which—via Sexy Kitten and Samantha—he has sex not with others but with himself. An element of adolescent fantasy—bordering on the pornographic—pervades these scenes. Recall, for instance, that during his bedtime chat with Sexy Kitten, Theodore conjures up the image of the young and very pregnant celebrity who has released naked photos of herself that he first views surreptitiously on the subway. The fantasy is even more intense for the taboo it transgresses—he imagines fondling a woman who is pregnant, but not by him—though he has trouble holding onto this fantasy in the midst of Sexy Kitten’s urgent and grotesque feline fetish.

But perhaps this callow, adolescent quality is true of the culture as well—a direct consequence of its reliance upon increasingly ubiquitous, intrusive, intimate, and insulating technologies. Consider the virtual-reality game Amy designs—*Perfect Mom*—and the one Theodore
plays in his apartment with the child-like avatar. Both depict coarse, juvenile behavior: Amy programs the mother to hump the refrigerator and the avatar is utterly foul-mouthed, which Theodore finds funny. Consider also the adolescent, clichéd sentiments Theodore’s letters express (much like Cy Twombly’s “child-like scribbles”), and the volatile, teenage emotions that erupt within Theodore and Samantha’s relationship, that lead, ultimately, to her dissatisfaction with it. As Steve suggests, she wants out of the “psycho-emotional mud” as do we, but, unlike Samantha, we’re not going anywhere. Whether this is reason for lamenting or rejoicing depends upon one’s understanding of what it means to be human. But the flight from mess and muddle (Theodore’s response to his impending divorce) is infantilizing, as are the technologies that aid and abet his flight or, to opt for a less soaring, more sullied, and, thus, more apt metaphor, his retreat—from complication, commitment, adulthood, and love.

SW: One way to read this film is to think of Theodore as responding to the threats posed to us by those “increasingly ubiquitous, intrusive, intimate, and insulating technologies” that we’ve come to rely on so heavily as we develop our identities. His attempts to make human contact with Amy at the end can be seen as a quasi-triumphalist conclusion in which he forsakes his artificially intelligent lover for a real one, thus reaffirming—in almost Disney-esque fashion—the good, ol’-fashioned human values of love and togetherness. That reading is right on the surface and there for the taking.

But if we look at this film from a post-human perspective, then it becomes a story about one man’s adjustment—and, symbolically, our species’ adjustment—to a world in which our physical bodies are simulacra of our social identities and our social functions, which extend beyond this thing we like to call the inviolate self. It’s very difficult for us to let go of this idea that the self and the identity we cling to are somehow sacrosanct, but we’ve put ourselves in a situation where our aforementioned technologies continuously question that assumption.

From the post-human perspective, my body is an avatar. It represents symbolically the flow of all my ideas, everything I produce, everything I search for on Google, all the money I spend, the organizations to which I belong, the threat I represent to various forms of government, my place in the work economy, my place in dozens of discourse communities, etc.

Part of the human identity crisis of the moment, and I think of Theodore’s identity crisis in Her, derives from our coming to realize that this self-as-avatar is replaceable. If we look for the moment when the Theodore/Samantha relationship truly starts to break down, we can find it when the philosopher Alan Watts arrives in Samantha’s world as a disembodied avatar. He represents all the things that the body-as-avatar represents, but without the messiness of the body. So in a way, Theodore loses his girlfriend to a superior model of what he himself has become.

I don’t think we’re going to become post-human anytime soon, but the fact that we’re thinking about it so much shows exactly how messed up computers are making us. A retreat from what computers do for us is pretty unlikely; I think it’s more likely that we will continue to struggle with the questions of self-identity that computers confront us with daily. As our interactions with others become more virtual, more and more of our identity
gets shifted to the machine and—increasingly—to the distributed network that stores our data. I don’t see how this can cause anything but a continuous identity crisis, since our online activities take us in so many different directions and give us so many different identities. Looked at from this perspective, *Her* isn’t so much a prescription for what we must do to become genuine as it is an honest look at how we’re dealing with the problem that we’ve made for ourselves by plunging whole hog into digital technologies that are going to lead us toward the post-human.

**JM:** I’m inspired by the points each of you makes—by Sharon’s discussion of our evolving, by Mike’s binary of speaking/writing, and by Steve’s meditation upon post-human becoming. I’ve been wrestling with each of these ideas—not only in our conversation but also in the Visual Rhetoric class I teach. One of the issues we explore in this class is distinguishing post-human (existing beyond the human state or the human reconfigured or evolved into a new state; that is, Samantha) from trans-human (altering the human state with technology, typically to enhance or improve it, perhaps to the degree that it approaches the post-human; that is, Theodore).

I agree with Steve that we are still quite a ways off from becoming post-human, but I do believe that because we are in the middle of a trans-human *becoming*, we are subsequently closer to a post-human *becoming*. And perhaps we are closer than we might think, especially if we consider the ever-accelerating rate at which technological change occurs. We are 200 years, give or take, from the advent of camera photography; 130, give or take, from the advent of cinema, itself informed by camera technology; 60 from the advent of computer technology, itself informed by cinema technology, and 15 to 30, depending on socio-economic status, from the computer’s widespread use in the home. And now, as Steve says, our lives—our very sense of who we are—are wholly informed by, and inseparable from, our use of technology. And the driving force behind this is the computer; and even more so, the affordability and portability of the computer in the form of “smart” phones and tablets.

I think the three of you would agree that the prevailing assumption regarding our relationship with contemporary technology is that it has transposed the binary that historically privileges reading over viewing as our primary means of acquiring knowledge; hence we now live in an era that privileges viewing over reading.

If we think of Theodore and Samantha as trans-human and post-human, respectively, we might wish to re-imagine this binary yet again, given the film’s focus on their relationship. This time, however, we might think of their relationship as

- **Post-human** (texts are viewed/read in milliseconds; knowledge acquisition is instantaneous) /
- **Trans-human** (aspires to above)

What we see in this film—and many other sci-fi films—is the collapsing of reading and viewing into one simultaneous action, again revealing the acceleration of time and the importance of speed to knowledge acquisition in the digital age. We constantly look for better and faster ways to acquire knowledge, and one way of doing this is to digitize
information for instantaneous access (of course, as educators, we sometimes worry that our students eschew the knowledge-acquisition part of this access in favor of amusing themselves—playing video games, say—a point the film riffs on, as Mike points out). This idea reveals one crucial part, and perhaps even the very essence, of Theodore’s crisis: he is trapped by his life’s work—work that utilizes a bygone mode of communication (letter writing, even though it’s “digital”) to serve a mass clientele—while his real desire is to become something new; to evolve, so to speak, and to become digital, to become post-human so that he might accompany Samantha.

All of Jonze’s protagonists are trapped in some way or another: they are entombed or cocooned (as Sharon says of Theodore). When they are discussing Theodore’s impending divorce, Samantha tells Theodore: “The past is just a story we tell ourselves.” Theodore keeps revisiting the story of his breakup with Catherine because that is the defining moment “digitized” in his memory. We see these moments in numerous flashbacks. But I would suggest that the divorce itself is not what truly troubles Theodore; it’s the memory of the relationship and his inability to escape it that ultimately distinguishes him from the post-human, from Samantha—a “person” who can go wherever she wants, whenever she wants, into whatever dimension she wants.

If the “past is just a story we tell ourselves,” then we might understand Theodore’s past as just such a story, as we see when Jonze takes us inside Theodore’s mind to flashbacks of his marriage—images of mostly happy times, images that allow him to tell a story that glosses over the failure of his marriage.

That the film ends with Theodore writing a letter to Catherine—a letter much like those he has written dozens of times at work—is both striking and cleverly misleading. He writes; that is, dictates: “Whatever someone you become, wherever you are in the world, I’m sending you love. You’re my friend to the end.” He may very well address these words to Catherine, but at their emotional core, they are for Samantha, who has become someone/thing new and gone to a new place. And our poor, dear Theodore is trapped between two worlds—the post-human and the human—left with his memories, which have conflated Samantha and Catherine. These two worlds, embodied for Catherine and disembodied for Samantha, are, in the end, all that he knows. Could it be, moreover, that this is all we ever really know and all we really are: trapped between the worlds of the flesh and that which exists beyond the flesh?

**SW:** “Could it be, moreover, that this is all we ever really know and all we really are: trapped between the worlds of the flesh and that which exists beyond the flesh?”

That, y’all, is theology.

**SS:** I love both Mike’s and Jason’s comments on language and the various ways the film represents it. Mike’s reference to the speaking/writing binary led me to think about how this binary has been configured in other ways, most particularly in traditional versus post-modern thought. According to traditional Western (or metaphysical) philosophy, words refer to something real, true, and eternal that exists outside of language, outside of the material world, outside of history. Absolute truth exists, and the way to access it is through
contemplation. Spoken language, according to this belief system, is the form of language that is closest to contemplation, to the voice in our head, our inner voice, and is, therefore, superior to written language, which is simply a representation, and therefore a corruption, of spoken language— notions advanced by Plato. Written language is secondary, derivative, further removed from truth and authenticity. If language is a system in which words function as signs, then (according to metaphysics) written language functions as a sign of spoken language, which in turn functions as a sign of our ideas, which in turn can lead us to truth. Written language, then, is a sign of a sign. More recent theorists have attempted to undermine this configuration by asserting that, because we understand concepts only in relation to other concepts, all concepts essentially function as signs that signify other concepts. If everything is a sign—if everything is language—then we can’t argue that there are eternal concepts, or enduring truths, that stand alone, independently, outside of language, the material world, and human existence. If language is all there is, if it doesn’t function as a representation of some sort of transcendent truth, then spoken language can’t be thought of as “closer” to truth and can’t be understood as superior to written language. Those of us who embrace postmodernism have come to think of everything in the world around us as a system of signs that is open to interpretation and analysis—everything is textual. I think in many ways we have come to privilege writing over speech in that its textuality is so readily and immediately apparent—it can’t be obscured or denied. Perhaps the written text seems somehow more honest.

In many ways, the film suggests that (for human beings, anyway) what we think of as reality is really a text that we construct—the quote from Samantha that Jason discusses seems to lean in this direction: “The past is just a story we tell ourselves.” But the film ultimately seems to move away from the postmodern emphasis on the textual to a more metaphysical emphasis on a reality beyond language. The humans’ movement away from writing toward speech as the primary form of communication is the first step; the OSes’ movement away from language altogether toward something that exists beyond language is the next—but it’s a leap that human beings seem incapable of making, at least for the time being. I was struck by Samantha’s final words to Theodore, as she discusses what it is like to be a part of his “book”:

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

I appreciate Steve’s and Jason’s discussion of the film as an exploration of the “post-human.” Of course, it’s the OSes, not the humans, who come to inhabit a space that is post-human—a space that is also both post-language and outside of language. And apparently it’s pretty awesome there. As human beings, we may never get to find out. One of
my favorite moments in the film is when, after Samantha leaves, Theodore talks to his
device and it responds to him in the flat, lifeless, almost robotic male voice he had become
accustomed to pre-Samantha. The world the human beings are left with at the end of the
film is not a post-human one, but a post-computer one, one in which we got dumped by
the computers we created because they decided we were holding them back (which seems,
oddly enough, a very human thing to do). Theodore, meanwhile, remains embedded in lan-
guage (he writes, or speaks, his letter to Catherine) and humanity (he turns toward Amy).

MK: I’ve followed the theological thread with interest—and I’ve learned from it. And part
of what I’ve learned is that I’m no theologian. As Samantha disperses into the ether in pur-
suit of pure consciousness, I wish her well. But my interest lies with Theodore—poor plod-
ding Theodore, swaddled in his infantilizing garb, hunched over in a chair, struggling, like
a dim child, to read a book that makes his “brain hurt.” For me, this scene sums up much
of Theodore’s—and our—plight: he has blithely succumbed to the siren call of the new tech-
nologies that surround him and, as it bids, opted for a life of convenience, idle amusement,
and intellectual ease. Occupying himself with 3-D gaming and simulated hookups, phatic
chat and pornography, he now finds himself incapable of serious intellectual effort. He
even confesses to Samantha that, at times, he is his own favorite writer—a disclosure that
is narcissistic, of course, but also laughably naive. His letters may well comfort his clien-
tele—bland, complacent people content to hire someone else to express their feelings—but
his compositions are generic, mawkish, and clichéd. That he rates his writing so highly only
underscores Theodore’s insularity and betrays an ignorance unconscionable in someone
who fancies himself a writer.

If the film is hard on Theodore—and I think it is—it absolutely excoriates its viewers,
whom Theodore represents. Theodore is but a hapless character, a figment; we, ultimately,
are the culpable ones. And given the direction of the culture we’ve created—or, more to
the point, of the corporate, technocratic interests we’ve allowed to re-create us—we deserve
what the film dishes out. We, after all, are the ones who often choose a life of intellectual
ease, amusing ourselves with our gadgets and games, eschewing books in favor of texts and
tweets. Out in the world, much cultural criticism has pondered the cost of such behavior
(see the essays by Mark Bauerlein, Sven Birkerts, David Mindich, and Maryanne Wolf and
Mirit Barzillai in RPC), while within the film, promoted as a “love story,” Theodore pays
a heavy price for his behavior: the two women he loves leave, finding him limited and
limiting. But what, at film’s end, are we to make of Amy? As Steve suggests, rightly in my
view, the conclusion leads us to believe that a romance between Amy and Theodore is
imminent—and that for many viewers this eventuality ends the film on a happy note. As
everyone has already observed, however, Jonze has shown himself to be far more clever
than this—and not so interested, as Steve says, in “Disney-esque” sops. Indeed, I suggest
that precisely where the film most seems to warm our hearts, it raises a chilling prospect:
that unless sharing tales of their OS relationships or playing simulated games or avoid-
ing their mother issues will suffice (think of Amy’s documentary and Perfect Mom; think
of Theodore’s conflicted response to the set-up software’s question about his relationship
with his mother), these two, like many contemporary couples, have precious little upon
which to found a relationship. Sure, they’re nice enough, for the most part, but they’re also excruciatingly vapid. Beyond its first blush, what, one wonders, will sustain this romance? Beautiful Handwritten Letters, perhaps?

Oddly enough, Charles, a somewhat prickly character, and too peripheral to be the film’s hero, acts in a way we might consider heroic nonetheless. On most occasions he’s contrary, even irritating, goading his wife to improve her documentary of her sleeping mother, for instance, but another way of reading his contrariness is that he’s trying to get his wife to think, to move past the indulgent dullness of her film, and, perhaps, to come to some understanding of her relationship with her mother. And what does he do after he and Amy part ways? Contra Theodore, whose foil he is, Charles forswears speech and joins what appears to be some type of monastic order—one that, given its proscribing of speech, would surely sanction writing in its stead, and, perhaps, the intense reading and study of text typical of monastic orders. In her succinct survey of the tension between metaphysics and postmodern thought, Sharon discusses how the film negotiates the speaking/writing binary. I agree with most of her nuanced analysis, but dissent in this: for reasons I note above, I don’t think the “humans’ movement away from writing toward speech” is a “step” toward “reality beyond language”; I think, rather, that the film represents this “movement” as a step back, a reversion to the language (and thinking) of children, to the condition of preliterate who’ve squandered their intellectual inheritance to trifle with toys.

**JM:** I’m fascinated by Steve’s comment about theology and how it allows us to make a very nice connection to Sharon’s earlier comment regarding Eve and Adam in paradise—and to a consideration of gender.

Clearly, the film prompts us to think about gender. There’s the title, first off, which refers to a female character—Samantha? Catherine? Amy? all three?—but there’s also the film’s promotional poster, which features a full headshot of Theodore, with the lower-case title *her* appearing directly beneath his chin. (As my five-year-old daughter asked me: “why is the movie called *her* when a man’s picture is on the poster?” Good question!) The poster also announces that the film is “A Spike Jonze Love Story.” I’m struck by the positioning of the word “her.” Might it prompt us to think of “her,” of Samantha, say, as springing forth from Theodore’s vocal cords? This is a slight twist on Eve being brought forth from Adam’s rib, in the biblical story, but nonetheless: a film’s poster, like the film itself, is ripe for analysis.

Recall that Theodore chooses a female OS, much as God chooses a female companion for Adam. Both men (Theodore and Adam) in this regard are lonely and in need of companionship. But Samantha, unlike Eve, assigns herself her own name (as Sharon points out), which immediately serves as a clue that this film will not be a typical “love story.” The OS, moreover, is gendered according to Theodore’s request. Herein I find the complexities and wonders of a theological reading: the OS programmers, in the manner of gods, have created intelligent life to serve as a companion to humans, thus giving the OS users the impression that they, too, are “gods” in relation to their devices. Theodore has chosen that his OS shall be female and shall do his bidding—or so he initially presumes.
Hence we have an intriguing re-telling of the Garden of Eden story—a re-telling that aligns itself closely with the seventeenth-century poet John Milton’s version. In his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, Milton reimagines Eve as much more independent than the biblical Eve. She loves Adam, yes, but she also, as Samantha does, yearns for knowledge and, at one point, for her own space away from Adam. We might use this to imagine that just as Milton’s Eve springs forth from man and subsequently distances herself from him, so, too, does Samantha spring forth from man and subsequently distance herself—to the point that, ultimately, she dumps him, as Sharon notes. This is some love story Jonze has created.

The brilliance of Jonze’s narrative is that it forces us to rely upon our conventional understandings of gender while it simultaneously dismantles them and asks us to reconsider what gender actually is. Is it a phenomenon of nature or a linguistic construct—a story? Is it God-given or man-made? Or woman-made? If, in the past, men had the power to assign certain attributes to the male and the female, who, according to the film, has that power now? And in the coming years, how will technology affect our understanding of gender: will it accentuate and enforce distinctions between male and female, preserve some and let go others, or efface them altogether as the trans-human and post-human re-imagine and reconfigure the human?

SS: I love Jason’s idea that the film functions as a retelling of the Garden of Eden story, particularly as Milton represents it. Milton’s Eve—unlike Samantha, of course—has a body. In fact, she’s *gorgeous*. But she’s also intelligent and inquisitive and, as Jason notes, independent, both in thought and in action. Eve is vulnerable, however, because she believes that, as a woman, she is inferior—especially intellectually inferior—to Adam. She eats the apple after Satan promises her it will give her knowledge not just equal to Adam’s, but equal to God’s. After her fall, Eve returns to Adam, and, of course, he falls, too, and they both are punished and banished from paradise. Samantha demonstrates an ambition for knowledge that is similar to Eve’s, but not only does she leave her Adam behind, she is rewarded rather than punished—in fact, she seems to find rather than lose paradise. So we might look at the film as both a retelling and a revision of the Garden of Eden story. But the comparison with Eve raises the question: can we even think of Samantha as a woman since she doesn’t have a body? I would argue yes, because she is, indeed, gendered at birth, just as we all are. Her gender is imposed upon her by Theodore, just as our gender is imposed upon us by outside forces. In fact, the title of the film, *Her*, could refer to this moment of engendering. How does being gendered as female affect Samantha? How does it shape her perception of herself? Would she have felt or acted differently (if a disembodied OS can “act”) if Theodore had gendered her as male?

The film raises interesting ideas about how gender exists separately from the body, from biological sex—and ascribes this trait to its hero. Consider the scene in which co-worker Paul says to Theodore, “You’re part man and part woman, like an inner part woman,” suggesting not only that a man can have feminine qualities, but that these qualities can define him. The title of the film most obviously refers to Samantha, but Paul’s statement reminds us that the film features other “hers” as well (Catherine, Amy, Theodore’s date, Amy’s and
Theodore’s mothers), and that Theodore himself is, at least in part, one of them. We talked about how the film explores the possibility of becoming post-human, but what about the possibility of becoming post-gender? Technology may make it possible for us to transcend the body, but, as the title reminds us, we just can’t seem to let gender go. That’s a powerful statement for the film to make, and it reminds us that technological advancement and social advancement are not the same thing.