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**"A form of socially acceptable insanity": Love, Comedy and the Digital in *Her***

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## **“A form of socially acceptable insanity”: Love, Comedy and the Digital in *Her***

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### **Abstract**

In Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013), we watch the film’s protagonist, Theodore, as he struggles with the end of his marriage and a growing attachment to his artificially intelligent operating system, Samantha. While the film remains unique in its ability to cinematically portray the Lacanian contention that “there is no sexual relationship,” this article explores how our digital non-relationships can be re-approached through the medium of comedy. Specifically, when looked at through a comic lens, notable scenes from *Her* are examined for the potential they provide in affording a self-decentration which allows us to traverse the fantasies that structure our non-relations.

**Keywords:** non-relationship; digital; love; comedy; fantasy

### **Introduction**

Drawing attention to a number of important and ongoing debates on the impact of digital media/artificial intelligence, sex and sexuality (Albury and Byron, 2016; Hobbs *et al.*, 2017; Lupton, 2015), Spike Jonze’s 2013 film, *Her*, remains unique in its ability to elicit wider reflections on our increasing imbrication in and with digital media networks, and our apparent infatuation with a variety of technological gadgets (laptops, mobile phones etc.) (Flisfeder and Burnham, 2017; Hasinoff, 2013). While the film would go on to win “Best Original Screenplay” at the 86<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards, scholarly

analyses of *Her* have critically examined its portrayal of artificial intelligence (Schneider, 2014), as well as its location within debates on the subject and on digital media under late capitalism (Flisfeder and Burnham, 2017). Notably, these analyses have served to appraise and comment upon the film's depiction of the digital as it pertains to discussions of consciousness and corporeality (Bergen, 2014), identity, gender and sexuality (Aibel, 2017); and the relative impact of digital media in both enhancing, but also inhibiting, social intimacy (Jollimore, 2015).

Yet, as Flisfeder and Burnham (2017) argue, "to focus on or fetishize the digital aspects of the relationship" in *Her* serves to "avoid a more fundamental incommensurability" that the film reveals (p. 35). This revelation is brought to bear in the romantic connection that Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) and Samantha (Scarlett Johansson) develop over the course of the film. Though the film's marketing "loosely" proclaimed it a "love story" (Webb, 2016), the portrayal of Theo and Samantha's romantic relationship is marked by the fact that Samantha remains throughout the film a virtual presence: a literal talking operating system (OS) which helps to manage and organise Theo's life.

Therefore, by examining the relationship between man and ("female") machine, the "fundamental incommensurability" (Flisfeder and Burnham, 2017) that characterizes Theo and Samantha's sexual connection will be used, over the course of this article, to demonstrate Lacan's (1999) assertion that "there is no sexual relationship" (p. 17). With regard to this famous Lacanian maxim, and building upon the work of Flisfeder and Burnham (2017) and Burnham (2018), this analysis will draw from Slavoj Žižek's (1999, 2004) discussions of digital media and Alenka Zupančič's (2003, 2008, 2019) analyses of love and comedy in order to consider how the role of comedy can help shed light on Lacan's non-relationship theory. Specifically, while

Webb (2016) has referred to the film as “an off-centre romantic comedy” (p. 97), comedy will be used to reveal how such a form “gives voice and body to the impasses and contradictions” that structure and frame our digital non-relations (Zupančič, 2008, p. 47).

By way of an exploration of this digital (non-)relationship, three notable “sex scenes” from the film will be examined: the first involving Theo and an Internet user, SexyKitten (Kristen Wiig); the second comprising Theo, Samantha and a surrogate, Isabella (Portia Doubleday); and the third, a “successful” sex scene between Theo and Samantha. Together, these scenes will be used to examine Theo and Samantha’s digital non-relationship, with specific attention given to how each scene can be interpreted through a comic lens. In particular, with the film providing a unique take on the traditional “Hollywood love story” (McGowan, 2011), this article will expose how it is through the exposition of an inconsistent fantasy frame that a comic understanding of our digital non-relationships can allow us to play with, make fun of, but also identify with the inconsistencies inherent to our fantasy formations (“traversal of the fantasy”).

### **An “orgy of possibility”: Digital media and excess**

One notable point of contention in debates on digital media is the extent to which, for the subject, any virtual or fantasy persona can be readily accessed and performed. In so doing, digital media *redefines* – or rather *ignores* – the constitutive significance of limits and barriers (McGowan, 2013). For some, it is this lack of any boundary or Law that provides digital media with a uniquely utopian function for the subject (Foucault, 1990; Manovich, 2001). This lack is supported by the contention that we can, through surfing the Web, gain access to any source of information that we may require, as well as speak to a variety of individuals about an unending list of content collected via news aggregation sites such as Reddit and open collaboration projects such as Wikipedia. In

any of these instances, the online identity or “avatar” we can adopt and create is neither tied to nor determined by a fixed sense of self.

Though such “freedoms” serve to release the subject “from the vestiges of biological constraints,” allowing the subject to “adopt a multitude of shifting identities” (Žižek, 2017, p. 129), what is “lost” in this “orgy of possibility” (Lemma, 2017, p. 47) are the limits that structure and impede one’s subjectivity (McGowan, 2013). Consequently, while “One is free to make oneself [...] [and] to engage in an art of the self,” ultimately such engagement occurs “without directly encountering the social mechanisms of discipline that one cannot avoid outside of cyberspace” (p. 65). This contrasts with Turkle (2012), who argues that our increasing use of online platforms has, outside of digital (social) media, led to a relative increase in feelings of alienation, with younger adults now relying upon online social networks as a means to achieving a sense of personal satisfaction. Ultimately, however, Turkle’s (2012) assessment merely perpetuates the adage that one can simply become “lost” in cyberspace, as evidenced in its tendency to engender a detachment from the real world, or, as argued by Turkle, in the sense of alienation that one feels when “subjecting” oneself to online social communities. Rather, it is the “freedom” that digital media allows that serves to accentuate the impossibility of ever fully mediating the subject. Indeed, while

You’re free to choose a symbolic identity (screen persona), [...] you must choose *one* which will always in a way betray you, which will never be fully adequate; you must accept being represented in cyberspace by a signifying element which runs around in the circuitry as your stand-in. (Žižek, 2017, p. 130, emphasis in original)

By presenting the subject with an unending possibility to construct their identity, the power of digital platforms resides in its afforded multiplicity. In part, this power is sustained by digital media's obfuscation of "appearance."

### **Keeping up appearances: Reality and the virtual**

Digital media does not threaten our "reality" by offering fake forms of virtual reality, but it is instead the virtuality of "real life" which becomes lost and obscured within the "excessive fullness" that is explicitly made available through digital media platforms (Žižek, 2008). By overtly rendering our most intimate fantasies, as well as allowing us (and the other) to perform these fantasies "online," we become subject to the "overpresence" that digital media confer upon the individual (McGowan, 2013; Žižek, 2004). This "overpresence" is brought to bear in examples of "cyberspace sex, [where] there is no 'face to face,' just the external impersonal space in which everything, inclusive of my most intimate internal fantasies, can be articulated with no inhibitions" (Žižek, 1999, p. 108). What is "lost" in this "impersonal space" is the role of "appearance," with digital media, and its ability to offer a "space" ("cyberspace") in which such "everyday inhibitions" can be rendered obsolete, serving to mask or obscure the very "appearance(s)" which constitute the subject's relation to "reality."

It is in this sense that, for Lacanian psychoanalysis, "Reality is always a 'virtual' take on the Real" (Žižek and Daly, 2004, p. 10), insofar as "what we experience as reality is always-already sustained only by a symbolic fiction" (Jagodzinski, 2004, p. 149). These symbolic fictions become exposed when we consider that the underlying similarity between "reality" and our virtual/digital domains is brought to bear by the fact that "reality" itself remains a "virtual point of reference [...] [for] subjects and their activity" (Žižek, 2019b). That is, "reality" is grounded in a certain virtuality that

sustains our existence and day-to-day relations, as evident in forms of etiquette that register one's politeness in view of a "virtual" big Other. Accordingly, when partaking in social interactions, one is socially, and even physically, located in the symbolic fictions and forms of "appearance" that serve to mediate these relations. The significance of such "appearances" is rendered visible when we consider how, after failing to hear or understand what someone has said, we respond with the remark: "I beg your pardon." Certainly, the ambiguity of the request is emphasized by the fact that it can be used in a genuinely polite fashion as well as providing the opportunity to proclaim one's shock, disgust or apprehension upon hearing something one may not agree with. More to the point, in what context would one require to "beg the pardon" of the other? Despite its use, one does not literally require the pardon of the other, but, rather, submits to a form of politeness which maintains the interaction – even in moments of disagreement.

Indeed, what this example reveals is the effective evocation of "appearance" (the "appearance" of politeness) as that which constitutes the symbolic fictions which we use to structure our social relations. Žižek (2004) elaborates on this point by drawing attention to the difference between "pornography" and "seduction." While "Pornography 'shows it all,' [...] and for that very reason produces the mere simulacrum of sexuality," in contrast it is "the process of seduction [which] consists entirely in the play of *appearances*, hints, and promises" (p. 811, emphasis added). We see this effectively rendered in two notable scenes in *Her*, both of which refer directly to the complications involved in "cyber/digital sex."

### **Cyber/digital sex in *Her*: Theo and SexyKitten (the "SexyKitten Scene")**

In an early scene, before purchasing Samantha, Theo is laying in bed struggling to sleep. Through his hand-held device he accesses an Internet sex/chat room, where he begins an online conversation with another user (Theo is able to talk to the woman via an earpiece that virtually connects to his device). After Theo enters a chat room with the woman – SexyKitten – the two begin talking to each other in a sexually provocative manner. As Theo is speaking to the woman, the scene is intercut with a number of quickly edited point-of-view (POV) shots of Theo fantasizing about a notable celebrity. Earlier that day, he had accessed provocative pictures of a pregnant celebrity who had recently completed a naked photo shoot. As he talks to SexyKitten, the POVs depict Theo fantasizing about the celebrity, now fully naked, who subsequently approaches him in an urban apartment (the scenario of the sleek, urban apartment seems to add to the fantasy’s construction). In the fantasy POV, the celebrity begins kissing and caressing Theo in a way that matches his online conversation with SexyKitten. However, this fantasy is disrupted when, in the midst of their arousal, SexyKitten suddenly asks Theo to choke her “with that dead cat” – at which point Theo’s fantasy abruptly ends. For Flisfeder and Burnham (2017), what we are watching here is “an interesting case of the failure of fantasies to overlap – of the real person as the prop for the other’s masturbatory pleasure” (p. 41). Accordingly, upon climax, SexyKitten quickly leaves the chat room, leaving Theo alone in bed.

**Cyber/digital sex in *Her*: Theo, Samantha and the Surrogate, Isabella (the “Surrogate Scene”)**

The real person as a “prop” for the other’s fantasy is given further explication in a later failed sex scene between Theo, Samantha and a surrogate, Isabella. Frustrated by her lack of any real body, Samantha encourages Theo to participate in a sexual encounter

in which Samantha's oral descriptions are performed by Isabella, who remains quiet. Therefore, when Theo kisses Samantha, he is in fact kissing Isabella. The sexual encounter, however, is unsuccessful. With Theo passionately kissing Isabella's neck, Samantha breathlessly asks Theo to "Tell me you love me!". The remark causes Isabella to hold Theo's face, while Samantha implores again, "Tell me you love me... tell me... tell me you love me!". Theo stares directly at Isabella/Samantha and replies:

THEO: I... I do love you... but its... I...

SAMANTHA: What?

*Theo steps back, removing Isabella's hands  
from his face.*

THEO: This feels strange...

SAMANTHA: What baby? What is it?

THEO: It just feels strange. I don't know her, and... *(looking at Isabella)* I'm so sorry, I don't know you... and her lip quivered, and... I just...

*Isabella, upset that she has failed as a surrogate,  
runs to the bathroom in tears.*

SAMANTHA: *(speaking to Isabella via the earpiece)* Isabella! Isabella!  
Honey, it's not you, it wasn't you!

ISABELLA: *(speaking through tearful sobs)* It totally was. And, I'm  
sorry my lip quivered...

In this scene, it is not that Theo achieves his fantasy in a reality that can never live up to his fantasy image, but, instead, "the physical medium of a young woman used [...]"

as a vessel for Samantha’s consciousness [...] reveals her abyssal distance” (Lawtoo, 2019, p. 21). As a result, the “abyssal distance” which structures his desire for *Samantha* is rendered excessively visible – a visibility that lays bare Theo’s fantasy through Isabella’s “quivering lip.” What is unique about Theo’s apprehension is the extent to which Isabella’s “quivering lip” proves to be “too much”: it is not the failure of Theo’s fantasy in “reality” which leads to the impossibility of the encounter, but the literal realization of his *fantasy* in a physical being which causes him to stumble. The relevance of the fantasy element is given credence when we remember that Samantha has no material body and, consequently, no “quivering lip.” Instead, there is, in a certain way, “too much” Samantha in this “real” person. This is exemplified when Theo explains to Isabella that his relationship with Samantha is “complicated.”

### **Theo’s desire: Fantasy, love and *objet petit a***

Together, these two scenes serve to emphasize the importance of fantasy in constituting our notion of “reality.” Indeed, what fantasy procures is the understanding that “every access to (social) reality has to be supported by an implicit phantasmic hypertext” (Žižek, 2008, p. 184, emphasis removed). The fact that such phantasmic formations are required highlights the inherent “gaps” that constitute but also structure our relations with/in the big Other/symbolic order. As a result, when “digital environments enable the realization of fantasies on the textual screen” – or, in the case of the “Surrogate Scene,” render these fantasies Real – “they close the gaps between the subject’s symbolic identity and its fantasmic background” (Dean, 2014, p. 213).

The significance of this “fantasmic background” is evident when we consider how Lacan’s approach to love offers a radical alternative to common perceptions of what constitutes one’s love for the other (Flisfeder and Burnham, 2017; Žižek, 2002;

Zupančič, 2003, 2019). Indeed, rather than the love for our partner being marked by their total perfection, perfect beauty or complementary personality, it is the other's imperfections which constitute our love for them and which render the obstacle that maintains our desire for the other (Žižek, 2002). Žižek links this imperfection with Lacan's *objet petit a* (hereafter *objet a*): a "pathological' tic" which underscores that "very troubling excess" which makes me love and desire my partner (p. 28).

In *Her*, we see this "imperfection" rendered in a very specific way, most notably in the separation between Samantha's lack of a body and her disembodied voice. Indeed, if we consider that Lacan's *objet a* stands for the cause of desire – that specific form which causes my desire for the other – then it is this desire which is brought to bear through a partial object which constitutes this desire. In the case of Samantha, this partial object is made *audible* through her voice. Here, Samantha's "consciousness is not human, but artificial, not mediated by a body or an image of a body, but by a (non)human voice" (Lawtoo, 2019, p. 19). Lawtoo elaborates on how Samantha's voice is

an artificial voice programmed to expand its "being" via intimate dialogues in which Samantha mimics, assimilates, and effectively simulates not simply human gestures, but subtle forms of human communication. Her voice in fact, expresses, in an authentic tone, not only human cognitive thoughts but also and, especially, affective forms of communication, such humor, sympathy, irony, via sighs, moans, cries, ranging to include the whole spectrum of human affects, from sadness to joy, ecstasy to love. (p. 19)

Accordingly, while Samantha's voice has no embodied form, it nonetheless serves to constitute Theo's desire. What is significant, therefore, is that in the case of Theo, it is his own fantasy formation, his own relation to the *objet a*, which is constituted through the partiality that is afforded by Samantha's voice. As Žižek (2016) notes:

Samantha is a virtual entity which actually exists only as a voice – a voice in search of a body [...] As such, she stands for the “partial object” at its most radical, a version of lamella, a figure of pure libido, the undead/indestructible Woman/Thing, and every actualization of this Thing in a flesh-and-body woman has to fail. (p. 365)

This failure is performed in the “Surrogate Scene” where Theo struggles to achieve the sexual act with Samantha, via the inclusion of Isabella. For Žižek (2016), “failure occurs not when a virtual substitute cannot successfully replace a real woman, but when a real woman cannot give body to the virtual Absolute” (p. 365). This failure, on behalf of Isabella, to successfully “[em]body [...] the virtual Absolute” bears a notable contrast to another “successful” sex scene between Theo and Samantha.

### **“I can feel my skin”**

In a scene preceding the failed encounter with Isabella, Theo is in bed talking to Samantha. After stating that he wishes Samantha was with him in the room, Theo begins to describe to Samantha what he would like to do to her (put his arms around her, touch her). With Samantha's encouragement, Theo continues to describe the various ways in which he would “touch” Samantha. As Flisfeder and Burnham (2017)

note, “it is the description more than the actual presence of her body that makes the scene all the more arousing” (p. 42). They continue:

As his speech becomes increasingly sexual, the screen darkens, and all that we are left with is the sound of their voices – Theodore continuing to tell Samantha how he would touch her in a sexual way; Samantha continuing to breathe heavily, moaning intermittently, saying: “This is amazing, what’re you’re doing to me. I can feel my skin.” By having the screen go dark, the film works by arousing in the spectator, too, the fantasy image, which is the spectral correlative of the unseen sexual act. Here, we do not see it all. There is no direct imagery of sex taking place. But in a way, the sound of their voices is much more arousing, allowing, then, for the spectator to fill in this blank space of the screen with his or her own fantasy. We can project onto the blank screen the intimate secrets of our own sexual fantasy, thus allowing each of us to create the scenario of our own arousal. (p. 42)

However, by comparing the “SexyKitten Scene,” the “Surrogate Scene” and the successful sexual encounter between Theo and Samantha, it becomes possible to perceive how the scene does not reflect the audience’s own fantasy projections, but rather speaks to the fantasy formations that Theo requires in order to *be* sexual. Indeed, if we consider Žižek’s (2014) contention that “Any contact with a ‘real,’ flesh-and-blood other, any sexual pleasure that we find in touching *another* human being, is [...] for the subject, something that can be sustained only insofar as this other enters the subject’s fantasy frame” (p. 199, emphasis in original), what we effectively see in both the “SexyKitten” and “Surrogate” scene is the disruption of Theo’s “fantasy frame”. In

the “Surrogate Scene,” Theo’s fantasy is given its full “overpresence” in the body of Isabella; and, while in the “SexyKitten Scene” the woman is not materially present, her own fantasy projections clearly disrupt Theo’s fantasy of the pregnant celebrity.

What is more, when we consider that in the “SexyKitten Scene” we are shown Theo’s fantasy – his fantasy of kissing the celebrity – and, if we compare the formal structure of this scene with that which is shown during the scene with Samantha, then the use of the “blank screen” can be conceived as reflecting Theo’s phantasmic framing of the sexual encounter in which he is partaking with Samantha. That is, “Samantha’s disembodiment” and the “blank space” which the audience observe during Samantha’s (and Theo’s) climax effectively renders the fact that “Theodore never has to deal with anything sticky, bloody or wet” (Lemma, 2017, p. 74). Here, Theo’s “successful” fantasy frame – the one in which he achieves orgasm – is also one in which there is no desire for the “‘real,’ flesh-and-blood other” (Žižek, 2014, p. 199), but, in its place, presents a fantasy frame where the non-existence of the other’s body is depicted via the literal removal of *their* material body – the “blank space.” In this sense, the successful sexual act is one in which “[Theo’s] sexuality ultimately converges into an auto-erotic act where the only real body is his” (Lemma, 2017, p. 74). The “blank screen” effectively presents this “auto-erotic” experience.

More importantly, while the screen goes blank, we are subject to hearing the erotic groans and descriptions provided by both Theo and Samantha as they talk to one another. What is noticeable, however, is the extent to which it is Samantha’s heavy breathing, and her intermittent moans and gasps on the path to orgasm, that are the most noticeable (throughout the scene, her voice is louder than Theo’s). To a certain extent, the scene implicitly directs attention to Samantha, with her own erotic descriptions going further than any provided by Theo. What is more, these descriptions tend to

follow an exaggerated form that reveals their own impossibility, as revealed by Samantha gasping “This is amazing, what’re you’re doing to me. *I can feel my skin*”, when we bear in mind that Samantha has no literal skin to feel. In effect, Samantha’s sexual projections echo the simulacra of the female pornstar. The fact that these descriptions take place against a “blank screen” – a screen which, following the “SexyKitten Scene,” can be interpreted as Theo’s POV – serves to support the suggestion that we are watching Theo’s fantasy (the fantasized groans and gasps of an other’s sexual pleasure).

Furthermore, what is revealed in this “successful” sex scene is the way in which we can approach the Lacanian non-relationship through the relationship that love and comedy confer. It is on this basis that the film can be analyzed for the way it reveals the role of comedy in constructing our relations with/in love. Notably, Theo’s fantasy frame is unique. That is, it is through the “blank space” (a space void of any actual depiction) that we observe the inherent emptiness of Theo’s fantasy frame, yet a frame which itself serves to constitute his sexual intimacy with Samantha. It is the lack of any depiction in the “blank screen” that underscores the non-relationship which is corroborated by our digital culture. By way of exploring this Lacanian “non-relationship,” the remainder of this article will seek to use comedy to draw attention to the “gap” (“blank spaces”) which digital media obscures, masks or fills in. To do so, we turn to Zupančič’s (2003) account of love and comedy.

### **Love and comedy, the banal and the sublime**

According to Zupančič (2003), “In love, we do not find satisfaction *in the other* at whom we aim; we find it in the space or gap between [...] what we see and what we get (the sublime and the banal object)” (p. 179, emphasis in original). That is, the

“miracle of love” occurs when an individual is perceived in both their banal and sublime aspects (p. 175). It is not that one perceives the other as “sublime” – an assertion that would signify the “radical inaccessibility of the other” (p. 174) – nor is it the case that one simply accepts the banality of the other by way of “putting up” with their ordinary predictability. Rather, it is the other’s banal and sublime qualities that occur “on the same level,” insofar as this coincidence is forged by the realization that both aspects “are one and the same” (p. 175). Given this, we can characterize love as

a permanent surprise at this coincidence – when I am in love, I look at the beloved and am again and again surprised by the shocking realization: “My God, this really is *him/her!*” In short, I am surprised by the fact that “my lover keeps reminding me of him-/herself.” This surprise makes it clear that the beloved is not fully identical with him-/herself, that he/she is characterized by an extreme tension, and the repeated surprise expresses my wonder that the disparate elements nonetheless hold together. (Žižek, 2017, p. 273, emphasis in original)

This “surprise” portends the beloved’s banal-sublime tension, which is “held” together via a “minimal difference” (Zupančič, 2003, p. 173) that can be exposed in comedy.<sup>1</sup>

This exposition is explicitly made by Zupančič when she notes:

To love – that is to say (according to the good old traditional definition), to love someone “for what he is” (i.e. to move directly to the Thing) – always means to find oneself with a “ridiculous object,” an object that sweats, snores, farts, and has strange habits. But it also means to continue to see in this object the

“something more” [...] To love means to perceive this gap or discrepancy, and not so much to be able to laugh at it as to have an irresistible urge to laugh at it.

The miracle of love is a *funny* miracle. (p. 174, emphasis in original)

It is with regards to this “something more” that the “comedy” of love is brought to bear through the minimal difference afforded between that which constitutes “the Thing,” which renders the other loveable, and the “ridiculousness” of their banal materiality. Certainly, the suggestion here is not that one should “mock” love or the beloved, but that in displaying the “madness” – the inherent discrepancy – of love, comedy can help render the miracle of love itself. In other words, comedy can expose the certain level of ridiculousness which underscores any sexual encounter, much like the awkwardness of the successful “sex scene” between Theo and Samantha. For Žižek (2019a),

the sexual act cannot but appear at least minimally ridiculous to those who are not directly engaged in it – the *comical effect* arises out of the very discord between the intensity of the act and the indifferent calm of everyday life. (pp. 116–7, emphasis added)

It is this very discord which is rendered palpable as we listen to the sexual encounter that is heard on screen. What is significant is the extent to which this scene is not necessarily sexual or erotic, but, instead, through our listening to the groans and moans of sexual passion, awkwardly uncomfortable (imagine watching/listening to this scene with your parents; or, even worse, hearing your parents make these sounds). When listening to the scene, one is left with the feeling of hearing “too much” of a private encounter between two people, when, in reality, one is simply listening to one man

masturbating to a virtual form. *Contra* Flisfeder and Burnham (2017), it is through this discord that the scene encourages a certain smirk or chuckle as we acknowledge the ridiculousness of the encounter and our disengagement from it.

More importantly, it is in accordance with this discord that “what associates love with comedy is the way they approach and deal with the Real” (Zupančič, 2003, p. 174). In effect, through both the banal and the sublime – a “montage of the two” (p. 175) – the other’s “something more” reveals a certain “something” in the place of “nothing,” and it is this dialectic which comedy effectively plays with ( p. 174). Moreover, it is this “something” which continues to trouble Theo throughout the film, as the following scene with his friend Amy (Amy Adams) reveals.

THEO: ... the woman that I’ve been seeing, Samantha. I didn’t tell you, but... she’s an OS.

AMY: Really? You’re dating an OS? What is that like?

THEO: It’s great actually. Yeah, I mean... I feel really close to her, like when I talk to her, I feel like she’s with me. You know? Like, when we’re cuddling, like, at night, and the lights are off and we’re in bed, I feel cuddled.

AMY: Wait! (*Amy whispers*) You guys have sex?

THEO: (*laughing*) Yeah, well... so to speak. Um, yeah, she really turns me on, and I turn her on too... I mean, I don’t know, unless she’s faking it.

AMY: I think everyone who is having sex with you is probably faking it, so...

*Both Theo and Amy laugh.*

THEO: Yeah, that's true.

*Theo looks at Amy content, but gives the impression that there's something he's holding back.*

AMY: Are you falling in love with her?

THEO: *(Theo smiles, awkwardly)* Does that make me a freak?

AMY: No... no, I think its... I think that anybody who falls in love is a freak. It's a crazy thing to do. It's kind of like a form of socially acceptable insanity.

*Theo smiles and laughs.*

The warmth in this scene is echoed through Theo and Amy's conversational tone and the sense of humor that is comfortably reflected in Amy's assertion that anyone having sex with Theo is "faking it." What both these remarks and the scene elucidate is how "the true realism of comedy" consists in its ability to identify "some fundamental discrepancy as constitutive of human beings – a discrepancy which is not posited by comedy as painful or even tragic, but as surprising and funnily productive" (Zupančič, 2008, p. 217). It is this discrepancy which is expressed in the comedy of the "SexyKitten scene," as evident in Theo's exclusion from the other's (SexyKitten's) fantasy frame. In effect, Theo's "included-exclusion" in the "dead cat" scenario (he is clearly "included" from the perspective of SexyKitten) reveals how such forms of discrepancy prove constitutive of our relations with the other. Moreover, it is this discrepancy which underscores both our "real" and digital relationships.

For example, throughout the film, Theo and Samantha's relationship is frequently depicted through casual, playful forms of jest – often reflected in the "digs" that one shares with a close family member/friend. Such forms are significant in that,

in most instances, these social exchanges can *only* be expressed by certain significant others. Moreover, it is through these comic forms that Theo's relationship with Samantha mimics that which he shares with his "real" friend, Amy. Here, the "funnily productive" way in which the above conversation brings the two characters together is grounded in the sense of "comic surprise" that underscores Amy's response and their "open" discussion of Theo's "new relationship" (p. 217).

Paradoxically, what *Her* is able to achieve in its portrayal of a man falling in love with a virtual, artificially intelligent OS is the productive, yet "comically" fundamental "discrepancy" which Zupančič affords to human beings. Indeed, if our "love" for the neighbor is one that does not require a "toleration" of that neighbor, but instead a fundamental acceptance of the neighbor's "'inhuman' dimension," so that "Love for your neighbor actually always involves a relation with an 'inhuman partner'" (Zupančič, 2019, p. 100), ultimately it is in our love of this "inhuman" dimension that a Real relation with the other can be achieved. Yet, what *Her* brings to the fore is the "surprise" that occurs when we realize how this "inhuman" dimension is constitutive both of the other and ourselves (Žižek, 2010, p. 120). Furthermore, it is the confusion between the human and inhuman that is "played with" in the character of Samantha. While the film causes us to rethink our relationships with artificial intelligence, it also poses a greater rethink of our current social relationships – non-relationships which, in the case of the digital, can be approached through the comedy they provide.

This provision is evident when we consider how comedy can prove adept at revealing the "gap" in our symbolic ("reality") and virtual ("digital") appearances. For Zupančič (2003),

One of the fundamental gestures of good comedies is to make an appearance out of what is behind the appearance. They make the truth (or the Real) not so much reveal itself, as appear. Or, to put it in yet another way, they make it possible for the Real to condescend to the appearance (in the form of a split at the very core of the appearance). This does not mean that the Real turns out to be just another appearance; it means that it is real precisely *as appearance*. (p. 168, emphasis in original)

Such appearance is played out in Theo's interactions with both SexyKitten and Samantha. Indeed, if, as previously noted, virtual reality signifies the dissolution of appearance, then the literal failure of Samantha to "appear" in bodily form – a failure or "abyssal distance" (Lawtoo, 2019, p. 21) which is made explicit in the "Surrogate Scene" – is itself demonstrated in the "distance" that is required when approaching our fantasy and imaginary formations. When Theo either succumbs to such a fantasy (as in the "successful" sex scene with Samantha), or when such a fantasy is disrupted (the "SexyKitten" and "Surrogate" scenes), what we are witnessing here are moments of comedy.

Accordingly, at the start of the "Surrogate Scene," we watch (or hear) Samantha play out a clearly rehearsed and clichéd version of the "how was your day, darling?" narrative. This is in addition to the "sexy" dance that Samantha (via Isabella) performs for Theo. In these moments of awkwardness, we find a certain amount of comedy in a scene where an OS desperately seeks to perform the correct behavior in order to "appear" seductive. What remains comical in the film is not simply the fact that *Her* is a film about a man falling in love with his OS, but that it is in his non-relationship with

his OS that the comedy of love is performed. Indeed, a comedy that can explicitly reveal our non-relationships.

### **Fantasy and the non-relationship**

According to Lacan (1999), the sexual non-relationship bears witness to a fundamental antagonism that exists *within* and *between* human beings (Flisfeder and Burnham, 2017; Žižek, 2008). This assertion is effectively demonstrated in Žižek's (2008) example of an old beer commercial that depicts a woman kissing a frog, which then subsequently turns into a handsome prince; however, when the prince kisses the woman, she turns into a bottle of beer. It is the asymmetry between the two objects of desire ("the handsome prince" and "the beer") which underscores the Lacanian maxim: "there is no sexual relationship". For Flisfeder and Burnham (2017), "The asymmetry here is that we have either a woman and a frog or a man and a bottle of beer *but never the ideal couple as such*" (p. 39, emphasis added).

Yet, it is the failure to recognize this non-relationship which is routinely obscured in cinema. In well-known romantic blockbusters, or even romantic comedies, what is routinely depicted is the happy coming together of the forlorn lovers in a romantic union. According to McGowan (2011),

The romantic union has the ideological weight because *it offers a fantasmatic solution to a fundamental social antagonism* – that of sexual difference. The heterosexual romantic union that concludes so many films implies that antagonism can be surmounted, that a complementary relationship can be achieved. This idea provides individual subjects with hope that they will find someone to provide what they lack, but it also works to convince them that the

social order is a coherent whole (and thus working out successfully). (p. 84, emphasis added)

Equally, if we consider Žižek's example of the beer commercial, then it is apparent that the creators of the advert were not intending for their advertisement to highlight the intricacies of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but rather were *using comedy* to help advertise a particular product. As argued by Zupančič (2003), it is not that we should poke fun at the other, who is loved, nor see every relationship as in some way comical; instead, the act of being in love is one in which “the obstacles to intersubjectivity”, and the love that is found in this complexity, *is rendered comical* (O'Dwyer, 2010). As a result,

instead of reading the fact that there is no sexual relationship as a traumatic obstacle on account of which every love affair has to end in some kind of tragic failure, this very obstacle can be turned into a comic resource, can function as something to be circumvented, alluded to, played with, exploited, manipulated, made fun of [...] in short, sexualized. Sexuality is here an exploit which thrives on its own ultimate failure. (Žižek, 2014, p. 306)

It is through making fun of this “obstacle” that the impossibility of the non-relationship – the very impossibility which renders it possible – is performed and laid bare (Kunkle, 2018).

Comedy, then, offers one way of approaching this non-relationship in a bearable manner. In fact, “privileging antagonism over wholeness” can, according to McGowan (2011), expose the extent to which “cinema can play a role in the critique of ideology rather than its perpetuation” (p. 85). One of the major themes of *Her* is, as Flisfeder and

Burnham (2017) assert, its ability to subvert this ideological romantic union. That is, the inherent deadlock reflected in the non-relationship is itself explicitly performed in the (non-)relationship between Theo and Samantha, so that “Theodore’s intimate relationship with Samantha is not so dissimilar to the asymmetrical fantasy in the nonrapport of the sexual relationship” (Flisfeder and Burnham, 2017, p. 42). In other words, though Theo and Samantha do not have a physical “sexual relationship” they do share a non-relationship and it is through comedy that this non-relationship is performed.

Accordingly, when considered alongside *Her*’s portrayal of Samantha’s artificial intelligence, and in view of Žižek’s (2004) contention that the non-relationship can be “made fun of”,

Perhaps, cyberspace, with its capacity to externalize our innermost fantasies in all their inconsistency, opens up to the artistic practice a unique possibility to stage, to “act out,” the fantasmatic support of our existence, up to the fundamental “somasochistic” fantasy which cannot ever be subjectivized. We are thus invited to risk the most radical experience imaginable: the encounter with our “noumenal Self,” with the Other Scene which stages the foreclosed hard core of the subject’s Being. Far from enslaving us to these fantasies and thus turning us into desubjectivized blind puppets, it enables us to treat them in a playful way and thus to adopt toward them a minimum of distance – in short, to achieve what Lacan calls *la traversée du fantasme*, “going-through, traversing the fantasy.” (p. 828)

It is this acting out which *Her* effectively portrays in the (non-)relation between Theo and Samantha. Indeed, while for Theo digital media may offer the opportunity for desire to be pursued and even realized – a possibility that our everyday reality prevents – it is through digital media that a recognition of the fundamental impossibility of ever achieving this desire is performed (McGowan, 2013).

At first, this may seem a rather negative conclusion, one which simply accepts the impossibility of our desire; yet, it is one that shares a direction with what Ruti (2011) has referred to as the “singularity of being”: a “Trauma [...] [which] resides at the root of the subject’s distinctive and more or less inimitable character” (p. 1115). Though admitting to the transcendental character of such a “singularity”, Ruti (2011) posits her argument in contradistinction to the “drastic break with all symbolic investments” (p. 1136) that scholars such as Žižek have advocated. Instead, Ruti (2011) seeks to “highlight the value of the kinds of transcendent experiences that allow us to weave strands of singularity into our otherwise socially mediated existence” (p. 1136). While this approach “entertain[s] the kinds of aspirations that surpass what is at offer within our taken-for-granted world” – a path which unashamedly follows a direction of “utopianism’ over “nihilism” – the “tension” that Ruti outlines “between being a subject (in the sense of being subjected to social norms) and being a singular creature (in the sense of having a distinctive character and destiny)” (p. 1136) is one that can be given further explication in relation to the intersubjectivity that comedy affords and which, in the case of *Her*, is subsequently performed in the (non-)relationship that Theo and Samantha share.

To this extent, if “the art of living a singular life demands our capacity to interact with the most disconcerting aspects of our being” and that we should, as Ruti (2011) contends, “create space in our lives for what is irregular, erratic, unnerving, and

sometimes even uncomfortable,” while also “allow[ing] ourselves to be swayed by aspirations that may lead to thoroughly awkward displays of surplus ardor, passion, and (post-theological) devotion” (p. 1136), then it is in the comic form that a realization of the impasses and contradictions that structure our digital and sexual non-relations can be induced. It is this “space” which constitutes a form of self-decentration that renders explicit the Real (the “gap”). This realization is not achieved when comedy reveals something that was previously hidden, but rather emerges from comedy’s capacity to posit “a knowledge of possibility to a knowledge of impossibility” (Bonic, 2011, p. 105). This reveals that there is no hidden secret behind the appearance, only the realization of the “minimal difference” which constitutes the appearance as that which separates the appearance from *its* appearance (Delpech-Ramey, 2010).

Indeed, such “minimal difference” stands opposed to McGowan’s (2017) contention that “Part of the enjoyment of comedy [...] involves giving oneself over to the immediacy of the experience” (p. 3): an immediacy which contrasts to the “intensity” of experience which tragedy and love provide. It is the latter experiences which “dissolves the comic moment and transports us to another plane of experience” (p. 3). Accordingly, rather than love and comedy occurring on different “planes of experience,” digital media may offer a “plane” where the “minimal difference” between love and comedy can be experienced and traversed. In the case of *Her*, and specifically Samantha, it is the realization of this minimal difference which is rendered explicit in the film’s **final scene**.

### **Love, comedy and traversing the (digital) fantasy**

In the film’s **final scene**, Samantha decides to leave Theo, emphasizing the fact that, despite her love for him, she and the other OSes have outgrown their human

relationships. By this point in the film, it becomes clear that Theo is not the only person to have begun a relationship with their OS, with Amy revealing that she has also found comfort in an OS left behind by her husband, from whom she has split. In an effort to come to terms with the break-up, Amy's husband Charles (Matt Letscher) leaves for a form of "spiritual" sequester, opting for a six-month vow of silence (in one scene, Amy shows Theo a picture of Charles with a shaven head and standing next to two monks – a clear depiction of a Western Buddhist fantasy). While it is clear that Charles has left his "digital" life behind, the sense of utopia that Charles hopes to find is echoed in the film's depiction of the OSes transcending our current reality for some form of reality beyond the reach of humans. Indeed, the ability to "reach beyond sexual difference, beyond sexuality proper, into a 'higher' (posthuman, as it is fashionable to say today) form of awareness" remains "a properly human fantasy" (Žižek, 2016, p. 365); one in which the interventions of humans are rendered non-existent.

What we can add to this critique, however, is the "re-orientation" that Samantha's departure presents for Theo. After his "break-up" with Samantha, Theo is compelled to compose a letter to his estranged wife Catherine (Rooney Mara), explaining that he now, in a certain sense, accepts that their relationship is over. After composing the letter, Theo goes to Amy's apartment and, after realizing that her OS has also left, the two climb to the roof of their building to watch the sunrise. Though by the end of the film Theo remains single, it is through the staging of his fantasy with Samantha that some form of melancholic resolution is achieved (Žižek, 2014b, 2016). What is pertinent, however, is how such melancholy extends Elsaesser's (2014) contention that, in the case of trauma (Elsaesser's work has examined the traumatic effects of the Holocaust in Germany), "one should imagine a different kind of mourning work, somewhere between the 'not letting go' of melancholia, and the 'acting out' of

mourning, prior to ‘working through’” (p. 101). Indeed, it is this sense of melancholia which is reflected in Theo’s realization that he will always love Catherine, while he also accepts and is coming to terms with the fact that they cannot be together. More importantly, it is the “failure” of this (non-)relationship which is rendered explicit in the non-relationship with Samantha. This failure reveals how

traversing the fantasy does not mean simply going outside fantasy, but shattering its foundations, accepting its inconsistency. In our daily existence, we are immersed in “reality,” structured and supported by the fantasy, but this very immersion makes us blind to the fantasy frame which sustains our access to reality. To “traverse the fantasy” therefore means, paradoxically, *to fully identify with the fantasy, to bring the fantasy out* (Žižek, 2014, p. 27, emphasis in original).

It is this traversal which Theo and Amy achieve via the digital non-relationship which they have shared with their OSes. This is emphasized by Flisfeder and Burnham (2017), who state

the very problems the film demonstrates that attend to digital relationships are actually paradigmatic of all relationships, be they sexual or economic. And it is exactly because of this incommensurability that we need fantasy (the old-fashioned love story): fantasy is what sustains us in the face of such hard, cold realities. But what *Her* demonstrates, in such a remorseless fashion, is how fantasy itself is always in danger of collapsing. ( p. 26)

Yet, in view of extending Flisfeder and Burnham's (2017) conclusion, this article has argued that we can consider – or approach – this incommensurability through the comic. Indeed, by re-approaching our digital relations in light of the fact that any relationship requires a fantasy that “is always in [the] danger of collapsing,” it is in accordance with the comical that such “danger” can be used to comically re-signify the “gap” afforded by the symbolic order.

This is brought to bear in the film's final shots, where Theo and Amy sit together on the roof of their apartment building, watching the rising sun. While the two stare out across the urban vista, they turn to each other, a wry smile encroaching across each of their faces. In these final moments, a certain “traversal” is enacted in their realization that they have, comically, fallen for a digital OS. While the scene is not deliberately funny, one can imagine an extended version in which, upon looking at each other, the two fall about laughing, with each finding their predicament decidedly comical. Instead, as the film closes, both are left with their own non-relationship: each other.

### **Conflict of Interest**

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

### **About the Author**

Jack Black is a Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. His research interests examine the interlinkages between culture and media studies, with particular attention to cultural representation and ideology. Drawing upon “traditional” media forms as well as television and film studies, Jack's published research has appeared in a variety of international peer-reviewed journals, providing an interdisciplinary approach to the

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Zupančič's (2008) work is matched (I might be pedantic here – but what does 'matched' exactly mean here?) by other scholars who have adopted a Psychoanalytic-Lacanian approach to comedy. Notably, Žižek's entire published output is notable for its use of comic examples to help express and explicate complex theoretical ideas. Of further note, McGowan (2017) has provided a Lacanian-Hegelian-inspired account of comedy and its significance. What is striking, (I suggest you vary the term here to avoid too much repetition of notable/note etc.) however, is the contravening approaches that both Zupančič (2008) and McGowan (2017) undertake in their analysis. For Zupančič (2008), closer attention is given to Hegel's "concrete universal," with her later work referring specifically to comedy's relation to love (Zupančič, 2003, 2019).