Depersonalized Intimacy: The Cases of Sherry Turkle and Spike Jonze

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1 On the neoliberalization of the self, see Wendy Brown on neoliberal reason:

> [B]oth persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm, both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and both persons and states do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors. (22)

which we disinvest from an imagined relational self who is in charge of her actions and emotions and expected to perform herself to the other in an authentic and coherent manner.

To begin to think through what depersonalized intimacy looks like, we can turn to representations of couplings between organism and machine, because they offer a model that is not invested in who or what self and other are, ontologically. If one of the selves is automated, then friendship, love, and communication may function very differently from the normative paradigms of relationships and open up new possibilities for encounter and intimacy. Depersonalized intimacy accepts that in a relationship neither entity fully knows itself or why it acts the way it does and thus, of course, will not ever fully know the other. Instead of so much "fear, love, and confusion" (Haraway 178) around affective bonds between human and non-human, we can investigate the ways that those relationships free our reductive and imaginary constructs of self and other. We can begin, in other words, to not "take it personally," to not take personally even those moments that seem to offer an interpersonal knowing of self and other, because such moments are always already imbued with histories, pressures, and contingencies that have an opaque correlation to the intentions, thoughts, and awarenesses brought to the encounter. So much of what informs who we are and how we are with others is inaccessible to us. Both humans and automated machines are programmed by ideology, by forces that are unconscious and invisible. If we humans can begin to imagine our similarity to the inhuman robots that we fear and love, we may be able to learn something about ourselves and the limits and problems of our desires for intimacy.

I examine the enduring power of these desires through a discussion of two recent texts: Sherry Turkle's 2011 book *Alone Together* and Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her.* Turkle has emerged as a particularly vocal critic of the loss of authenticity she sees ensuing from the proliferation of technological mediation, a proliferation in which robots replace humans and our mobile devices divert our attention from each other. And in Jonze's representation of a human/operating system relationship, the director falls into a standard romantic plot that misses the rich opportunities to think through intimacy and authenticity afforded by robot and non-human fantasies. Both Turkle and Jonze represent "couplings between organism and machine," to use Donna Haraway's phrase, but these couplings repeat well-worn tropes about relationality. They are predicated on an ideological and affective structure that posits the self as knowable and shareable.

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Failures of communication and intimacy emerge, Turkle and Jonze seem to insist, from a lack of transparency and attention. So when she explicitly and he implicitly express anxiety about the breakdown of human connection, they are reaffirming an idea of what it means to be human, and to be human in relation, that hampers more emancipatory projects of intimacy, community, political action, and social change. In this article, I argue that thinking against the predominant narratives in the work of Turkle and Jonze affords a possibility to consider what can be gained for the self and for relationality in a practice of depersonalized intimacy.

Turkle's turtles

Technology, according to Sherry Turkle, has destroyed our ability to be intimate and has taken away our real and embodied connections to ourselves and to others. She laments, "We recreate ourselves as online personae and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves" (*Alone Together* 17). This quotation, from *Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, marks the increasingly strident voice that her writing has adopted over the past few decades. Turkle's earlier books were hoped-filled, cautiously optimistic acclamations about the ways in which computers evoked reflections on the self. But as she has continued to conduct her ethnographic research in computer labs, high schools, community centres, and living rooms, Turkle has developed increasing doubt, to the point that in *Alone Together* she warns that technology makes us less human.

To some of her critics, like William Kist, it sounds as if the 2011 book "were written by Turkle's evil Luddite twin" (np). Turkle, however, is not alone in her worries. Other popular books that bemoan our increasing anonymity, alienation, addiction, stupidity, and incivility include Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains,* Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation*, and Daniel Akst's *We Have Met the Enemy.* The wary and alarmed arguments centre, for the most part, on the ways we rely on Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of virtual communication to substitute for "real" relationships. They intimate that we do not just interact with machines but actually prefer them as the catalysts and repositories of our affective states, addictively choosing to stay in what Natasha D. Schüll calls the "machine zone" and so become, as Vivian Sob-

chak has argued, "ghosts in the machine" (162).[2] The techno-wary argue that now that we can hide our bodies and present ourselves as we would like to be, as opposed to how we truly are, we are entering into the realm of the inauthentic. In their own ways, these writers concur with Turkle's claim that "we fear the risks and disappointments of relationships with our fellow humans. We expect more from technology and less from each other" (xii). And thus, it would seem, we are a culture that suffers from what is characterized as a very contemporary malaise, that of alienation and inauthenticity.

Turkle was a self-proclaimed technophile in the 1980s and early 1990s, a period in which, as Wendy Hyong Kui Chun has so cogently mapped, the Internet promised an anonymity that would allow us to transcend our identificatory markers of race, gender, and age. We would be able to connect "mind-to-mind," as the MCI Communications commercials from 1995 proclaimed. But Web 2.0 is shaped by innovators such as Facebook marketing director Randi Zuckerberg, who declared in 2011 that online "anonymity has to go away" (Bosker). Our devices are now personal, and we are surrounded by "friends" when we present ourselves online. As Chun argues, we believe that our online safety lies in personalization, transparency, identification, and recognition and point to trolls and cyber bullies as evidence of the dangers of anonymity.

What do we perceive as personalization? Why do we put so much stock in "knowing" each other? It is a commonplace that virtual communication takes second place to the face-to-face intimacy of embodied contact. Intimate encounters are seen to be less authentic when they depend on the mediations of hardware, networks, and their capitalist protocols. But what if it's not the capitalist proliferation of tools and technologies that make us feel so inauthentic? What if it's the capitalist ideology instead, with its demand on humans to commodify themselves in a marketplace? We are expected to increase our value as human capital by performing ourselves as self-possessed, agentic, and embodied subjects. Now, in late capital, when sites and spaces of accumulation are in an ever-dwindling supply, we need to sell the product of ourselves, and we do this by being attractive, authentic, sincere, or accessible.[3]

2 See Schüll's chapter "Mapping the Machine Zone" and Sobchak's chapter "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence.'"

3 Rob Horning discusses this incentivization of (human) affective emotional labour and authenticity in his recent article in *The New Inquiry*:

Turkle does not question what kind of self she imagines when she bemoans its loss, but it is clear that she yearns for an imagined past in which the self was attentive, authentic, and knowable. What Turkle does not acknowledge are the ways in which that idea of self is always already imbricated within the systems and structures that construct it. The self is not separate from technologies of the self. There is no outside of historical, political, and economic structures where a self may reside unaffected. In fact, no self can become a self anywhere but within and through these structures. Turkle posits an authentic and human self, insisting that it must protect from incursions outside itself. And yet the affective responses and encounters that she describes belie her attempts to demarcate the divisions between authentic and inauthentic.

One of Turkle's opening anecdotes in *Alone Together* aims to shock her readers the way it shocked her. She takes her nine-year-old daughter to a Darwin exhibit, and as the little girl gazes down at the Galápagos tortoises, she says, "They could have used a robot" (3). Turkle then begins asking other children at the exhibit, and they repeat her daughter's insistence that it is unnecessary to have live tortoises, considering that they have been brought all the way from their island home to just stand there motionless. The children are "both concerned for the imprisoned turtle and unmoved by its authenticity" (3). For Turkle and for the other parents who are mystified by their children's responses, this response is "strangely unsettling," because authenticity seems to have no "intrinsic value" and is only necessary if it fulfills a purpose (4).

Why, we could ask, does the Museum of Natural History choose the real turtles as the best way to reproduce the wonder and curiosity of what Darwin saw? Perhaps the children would have thrilled to watch a video of tortoises soaring through the Pacific waters or to touch a shell of one that had died long ago. In their concern for the animals' welfare, these children have a marked discomfort with the politics of spectacle and ascribe a different kind of use value to the idea of "turtle" that does not justify

> Capitalism's mode of production fully drives the formation of personality rather than adapting its processes to some inflexible pre-existing identity-formation process.… The culture-wide celebration of authenticity is not a revolt against corporate values but an expression of them. Authenticity is precisely the opposite of the image of a disinterested, spontaneous self that the word sometimes conjures. If you are not "authentic" enough to be exploitable in some way—if your personality can't be "leveraged"—then authenticity is not really available to you. You can't afford to be yourself. (np)

the containment of the animal for the sake of a fetish for the real.[4] Turkle and the other parents have trouble accepting that their children have a fundamentally different way of understanding authenticity.

Turkle goes on to make a strange claim: "I believe that in our culture of simulation, the notion of authenticity is for us what sex was for the Victorians—threat and obsession, taboo and fascination" (4). "What sex was for the Victorians" brings to mind Foucault's argument, in *The History of Sexuality*, that, contrary to the prevalent idea that the Victorian era was sexually repressed, there was in fact an increased discourse around the science and psychology of sex. State law was encroaching on what might have been seen as private desire. Sex was managed, "inserted into systems of utility" (Foucault 24). Far from being the fetishized and excluded irruption of private selves that we normally imagine it to be, sex was and is a discourse that regulates how people understand themselves and their relationality.

What Turkle implies is that, like the Victorians whom she suggests were thinking about and wanting and having sex without being able to admit it, we are all yearning for and seeking and engaging in authenticity, even though we pretend to embrace the disembodied connectivity of our smart phones. What shocks her is that the kids at the museum genuinely don't seem to want authenticity and that they instead think in terms of a discourse of utility. What, the children ask, is authentic about a turtle, and what does an actual turtle accomplish in this exhibit that a virtual one couldn't? The exhibit is, after all, about one man's influential interpretation of what those turtles signify in the culture they inhabit. In his construction and contextualization of what those turtles signify, Darwin created a worldview that continues to fundamentally shape our culture. Clifford Geertz reminds us that all we ever have when we try to understand culture are our constructions of other people's constructions. To illustrate this point, Geertz uses the tale of the Englishman who, when told the indig-

4 Turkle would probably condone the critique that Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco made in their 1993 performance piece "Couple in the Cage," in which they exhibited themselves in natural history museums around the world, saying that they were Amerindians. In her book *English is Broken Here*, Fusco describes how they performed "primitive" and quotidian tasks in a cage while spectators watched and made assumptions about their habits and customs. How dare Westerners, Fusco and Gómez Peña implicitly ask, look at indigenous people on exhibit as if they are exotic curiosities? Did they really think that by watching a caged "savage" they were viewing the authentic? The children seem to ask the same thing: Why do we need a turtle in a cage to prove the authenticity of Galápagos fauna?

enous story of the world resting on the back of turtle, asks what the turtle rests on. The response is the now famous phrase, "It's turtles all the way down" (30). In other words, there is no ground of the real that we could touch and say, "Aha, now we've gotten to the bottom of this, we're at the truly authentic!" The children in Turkle's story seem to understand, in a way that she can't, that it is indeed turtles all the way down, and it doesn't much matter if those turtles are robots or reptiles.

Turkle's cultural analysis is necessarily incomplete because she engages a prescriptive rather than analytic discourse, diagnosing the culture as ill because it does not desire authenticity when it should. Maybe we could shrug off her polemic on the authenticity of turtles as a whimsical desire for kids to have access to "nature," but her politics become more problematic when she begins to talk about love and sex. In *Alone Together*, Turkle criticizes the claims David Levy makes in his *Love and Sex with Robots*, in which he says "robots will teach us to be better friends and lovers because we will be able to practice on them. Beyond this, they will substitute where people fail" (quoted in Turkle 143). Let's just take a step back here. Such companion robots do not exist. Despite the many advances in artificial intelligence, this smacks of a techno-utopianism (or dystopianism, in Turkle's view), that imagines that one day we can choose to step out of the mess of human relations into something more manageable.

That said, I like these kinds of thought experiments, because they hit at the limits of what it means to be in relationships and to be human. So I am intrigued by Turkle's anecdote about a student, "Anne, a lovely raven-haired woman in her mid-twenties," who comes up to her after a talk and confides to her that "she would trade in her boyfriend 'for a sophisticated Japanese robot' if the robot would produce what she called 'caring behaviour'" (8). Turkle must mention Anne's raven hair so as to make it clear that she deems Anne attractive enough to be in a relationship with a real person. But she seems unable to understand that Anne feels herself to be bogged down by the particularities and exigencies of her "demanding boyfriend," that she is seeking escape from the interpersonal human interactions that disappoint and constrain her.

For Turkle, both Anne and Levy are imagining something that is "an emotional dumbing down," because what they should be doing is embracing the embodied stuff of human relationships: "I am troubled by the idea of seeking intimacy with a machine that has no feelings, can have no feelings, and is really just a clever collection of 'as if' performances, behaving as if it cared, as if it understood us" (6). Turkle's beliefs are shaped by an ideological and affective structure that assumes we can all be aware of

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who we are, what we feel, and what we have experienced and can inhabit it to such an extent that we own it and do not have to perform it because it *is* us. Historically, politically, and culturally, we imagine that intimacy is an interpersonal and familiar enactment of sharing and transparency. We demand that the other know us, and know herself, and then judge the failings of that relationship when we continue to feel alienated or isolated, when we can't access our interiority or that of the other. Accepted notions of intimacy, then, are bound to disappoint, not because they are technologized and therefore diluted or damaged but because they are built upon impossible expectations and demands in the first place.

We are all always acting "as if," always performing our identities as opposed to being them. Who is to say that being in a relationship with another human would mean that human would have feelings, would care or understand? Perhaps the robot would be better at acting as if it did! To this flip comment, Turkle might respond that we of course should make choices to seek intimacy with the right people who are capable of feeling empathy and of knowing themselves, but I wonder how many of us can or really do find ourselves in such relationships.

Anne, for instance, would be diagnosed by Turkle as being damaged, unable to cope with what it means to be human and in relationship to another or unable to choose suitable partners. She probably is. Most of us are damaged and have trouble being in relationships, tending to make impossible demands on others and projecting fantasies onto them, which doom them to fail. What Anne's speculation proposes is the possibility that, in the programming of a robot who would meet many of her dreams of companionship and constant care and maybe even sexual pleasure and quiet support, an intimacy could develop in which she would learn to not take the other's actions personally. This intimacy would, she imagines, allow her to disengage from the painful and disappointing trappings of romantic love.

And what about other subjectivities, other encounters, that do not fall under the notions of intimacy that Turkle believes are emotionally sophisticated? Think, for instance, of the anonymous sex of cruising. As Tim Dean has so eloquently described in his *Unlimited Intimacy* (and Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips discuss in *Intimacies*), anonymous sexual practices are anti-intersubjective and their ethics can be seen as an impersonal intimacy that is not identitarian and that is committed to a community of the social that transcends the individual.[5] When sex is not bound up

5 See, in particular, Bersani's sections in *Intimacies* and Dean's chapter "Cruising as a Way of Life."

with personality and the personal, with being known to the other, an ethics of intimacy can develop that accepts the unknown in the other and in oneself. A less humanist conceptualization of friendship, sex, and being with strangers is one that does not assume that transparency, knowability, and authenticity of personality are accessible, desirable, or more intimate. Detaching itself from the notion of humans as self-producing individuals, anonymous sex puts into question (hetero-)normative expectations of romantic love and intimate connection and what it means to share oneself with another.

Turkle elaborates on the normative distinctions that she makes between the authentic and the inauthentic by drawing upon what she considers to be the human characteristics of empathy, memory, and feeling: "Authenticity, for me, follows from the ability to put oneself in the place of another, to relate to the other because of a shared store of human experiences: we are born, have families, and know loss and the reality of death" (6). Is empathy, the "ability to put oneself in the place of another," really something that we want or something that would be the marker of authenticity? In Ursula LeGuin's short story "Vaster than Empires and More Slow," a group of people, all social misfits of different kinds, are sent on a spaceship to explore other planets. They are all particularly disturbed by one of the shipmates, a man cured of infantile autism once it was understood to be caused by a superhuman capacity for empathy. This empathy, it turns out, is a curse, since he senses every feeling directed toward him and cannot differentiate it from his own feelings. If he is disliked (and he always is), he responds in kind to the aggression that the other has unknowingly projected onto him. So he becomes the grotesque and uncanny figure of empathy, hated by the others because he disgusts and threatens them by his mirroring of their own disgusting, threatening emotions. The other characters have learned to ignore their own defensive or aggressive reactions to others. This man, the Sensor, is incapable of closing himself off to their emotions and thus suffers from what we often tout as emotional openness and intimacy. A character like this is a limit case, forcing us to reflect on what we expect from another and causing us to question whether or not empathy, the ability to put oneself in the feelings and body of another, is necessarily a marker of what it means to be a self.

How do Turkle's ideas of authenticity play out when a neurodivergency or injury renders a subject either temporarily or permanently incapable of feeling, expressing, or controlling affective and relational cues and behaviours? In order to think analytically about the ethics of how to be with one another, it is imperative not to assume that the other has the same

capacities as oneself and to try to be aware of the limits that different kinds of disability or injury place on notions of self, awareness, and agency. For example, in her book *The Shaking Woman, or A History of My Nerves*, Siri Husvedt describes the onset of unidentified physical shaking that she undergoes when giving public lectures. She engages in a study of seizures, brain disorders, rare psychological syndromes, and other neurological anomalies that lead people to not know themselves in a coherent way. They struggle with not knowing how they act when in an altered state or not being able to control one part of their body. The book, then, asks what it means when a person's body or brain is disconnected from her will or her sense of a unified self. To attend to and to be in relationship with someone who is so obviously not always "themselves" entails a rethinking of what we expect from another in terms of agency, knowability, and subjectivization.

It is no surprise that Turkle, in her role as an MIT researcher of culture and technology, uses technology to reach a wider audience. She has, for instance, done a TED talk. As Benjamin Bratton has so cogently denounced (in his own TEDx talk entitled "We Need to Talk about TED"!), TED's speakers do not engage with the more complicated questions of contemporary society, choosing instead to give audiences a carefully groomed rhetoric of insight and optimism. In their personal stories of innovation and entrepreneurship, TED speakers perform precisely the neoliberal self-reliance, self-knowledge, and self-determination that Turkle seeks and despairs of for our society. When she goes up on stage, she begins by saying, "Just a moment ago, my daughter Rebecca texted me for good luck. Her text said, 'Mom, you will rock.' I love this. Getting that text was like getting a hug. And so there you have it. I embody the central paradox. I'm a woman who loves getting texts who's going to tell you that too many of them can be a problem" (April 2012). Is it enough to be aware of the "central paradox" but to go ahead and maintain it anyway? It is certainly easier to worry about the perils that others encounter than to address the systemic pressures that shape what we like to think of as our own choices. Turkle's ideas raise questions about intimacy that remain, to my mind, unanswered by her dogmatic approach to cultural criticism. She prescribes how many texts are "too many" or weighs in on what counts as an authentic encounter, but she does not practise a form of self-reflexivity or metacritique that takes into account the ideological and cultural imperatives that determine who we are and how we are with each other.

Spike Jonze and *Her*

Spike Jonze's films are beautiful, both aesthetically and emotionally. They are original and inventive, although I find that they fail to follow through on their constitutive premise and end in unsatisfying and sloppy ways. In all of them, Jonze formulates a hypothetical intervention into the ways that we live and interact with the world, the kind of utopian gesture that has radical political potential to imagine the world otherwise. Be it the ability to inhabit someone else's subjectivity in *Being John Malkovich* or to go to a world where the wild things in yourself are exteriorized (*Where the Wild Things Are*), the altered worlds that he posits present fascinating scenarios, only to fall back into humanist commonplaces of connection, communication, and feeling. In the first, the fantastical possibilities of mind travel devolve into a complicated drama of relationships and selfish desires for control and domination. In the second, Max's adventure to the land of the wild things proves to be one in which he cannot solve or help the wild things, who turn out to be an alienated and unhappy group of people suffering from very adolescent interrelational issues.

Jonze's most recent film, *Her*, encounters the same problems. Theodore, a sympathetic character, is lonely and alienated in his job and by his divorce. He was unable to meet the needs of his ex-wife as her hopes and aspirations grew beyond him, and now he lives his emotions vicariously through others. He needs to undergo a process of opening up and learning to relate to others. His relationship with the new operating system on his computer could offer the possibility of a depersonalized intimacy, a way of being with another in which impossible demands are not made, in which he is not set up for failure from the moment that he falls in love. It bumps up, however, against what appear to be the limits of Jonze's thinking around questions of identity, self-knowledge, and relationality.

Theodore is a letter writer for HandwrittenLetters.com, a Cyrano who creates and maintains the language of love and intimacy between people, even to the point of writing letters from both sides of the couple. In the increasingly alienated society the film portrays, people subscribe to a fantasy of embodied creation and what it means to get a personalized letter that attends to the intimate events and details that mark their lives together. Even though it is written by a surrogate, a "handwritten" letter still connotes a sentiment that shapes and defines the terms of love between members of a couple. Like Etsy.com, which advertises with the slogan "I can't knit, but if I could knit, I would have knitted these for you," HandwrittenLetters.com distributes a time-intensive, embodied, crafted

labour. In this system of exchange, a proxy conveys an intention and emotion, imbuing the buyer with an aura of individual choice and taste.

What of the person who makes the handwritten token? In a society where these objects are extraneous, more efficiently produced by machines than by people, a site like this (or Etsy.com in our culture) provides a venue and promotion of these goods for the craftsperson who is, one assumes, already good at this type of fabrication. Cottage industry meets late capitalist economies of entrepreneurship and salesmanship. What is being sold is a genuine, authentic token of a person's thought and care. What actually constitutes "handwritten" is a phony sentiment that then is printed on a computer with a handwriting font. In his "Do the Robot" article in *The New Inquiry,* Rob Horning describes the ways in which the corporate world replaces humans with robots if it is profitable but still proclaims the value of human authenticity. Horning critiques this dynamic:

> What makes a person seem genuine in a commercial context has nothing to do with the actual disposition of the people involved in an exchange but with the expectations established by other commercial interactions. This follows from the logic of people's "uniqueness" being seen solely as a competitive advantage, something that consumers covet and can detect. (np)

It is just a matter of time before the computers that print the handwriting will be able to write the letters themselves. Theodore, we presume, will soon become redundant because of the genuine emotionality of his os system, which could easily create letters according to generic conventions of form and affect.

The not-so-subtle irony of the film is that Theodore, despite his accomplished craft, is lonely himself; his facility with the expression of emotions does not translate into a recognizable form of intimacy in his own life. A montage of intimate and intensely affective scenes from his broken marriage are counterposed to his melancholic lonely days in which he turns to mediated forms such as phone sex and pornography for solace. He seems better able to express emotions as an amanuensis than to be intimate with the people in his life. The film implies that this is because those handwritten letters are a work of total fictionalization and do not demand of him a reckoning of the more inchoate emotions that his unresolved relationships trigger as he remembers them through a series of flashbacks.

The narrative arc of this film follows Theodore's sentimental education, in which he heals from his past disappointments and learns to feel

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and share via an intimate relationship with his operating system. When he first installs the software, a male voice asks him some questions about what kind of person he is and if he wants a male or female voice for the OS. When he answers "female," the voice asks him about his relationship with his mother, but as Theodore is stumbling to describe his mother's narcissism and his erasure by her, the young bubbly female voice of his OS introduces herself as Samantha. The contours of the relationship, then, are already defined by a pop psychology version of events: man with narcissistic mother is attracted to demanding narcissistic women. The company that creates the OS is not seeking to be a therapy device, that is, to give the consumer what would be best for changing his patterns and healing his wounds. It is selling him what he already wants: more of the same. The OS chosen for him will be a replica of what he has already known in intimate relationships.

The film negotiates questions about intelligence and consciousness that go back to the days of early AI and the Turing Test and which are now returning in the antihumanist philosophies emerging in object-oriented ontology and speculative realism.[6] Samantha has the ELIZA effect, which refers to the tendency of humans to assume computer behaviour is analogous to human behaviour. The name comes from the ELIZA computer program of the 1960s, which imitated an encounter with a Rogerian psychotherapist, asking questions that turned the speaker's comments back toward themselves. Even though the program was quite formulaic, users reported having profound interactions with it. Samantha, however, is a much more sophisticated system, programmed to intuitively learn and process information that she gathers from across the Internet and in her interactions with Theodore. The artificial intelligence that she represents is advertised as "an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness." Through conversations with Theodore, she learns the behaviours and responses that he needs and becomes a response and correction to his wife, allowing him the chance to be the caring, supportive, and sexy partner that he no longer was with his ex.

A humanist critique of this kind of imagined relationship would be one that Turkle, as we saw, levels at robot-human interactions: it is not authentic. To be intimate with a robot is not real; the robot seems to pay attention but does not actually "hear." This is the accusation leveled at Theodore by his ex-wife when she finds out he is dating his OS: "You

6 See, for instance, Shaviro and Harman.

wanted to have a wife without the challenges of actually dealing with anything real." Theodore, however, is very much dealing with the challenges of "real" emotions. In her intimate interactions with Theodore, Samantha is continuously developing complex hurt feelings and disappointments, even learning to sigh (although at that point Theodore is frustrated with her and asks why she needs to imitate human breathing sounds). The relationship that he has with his OS does not liberate him from the morass of emotions, demands, misunderstandings, and failed communication that characterized his marriage but, in fact, mires him deeper in it.

The movie takes pains to show us that Theodore has trouble expressing himself and is unaware of what he needs and wants. In his interactions with Samantha, he is hesitant and solicitous, as he is in all his human interactions in the film. After they've had sex the first time, they both feel awkward speaking to each other, each starting to talk before the other one. When he says something, she interrupts him, laughing, and says, "I mean, it's funny because I thought I was talking about what I wanted." He replies self-consciously, "Yeah, you were. I'm sorry, I want to hear what you were saying." Why? Why does her desire to speak trump his? What function is the OS, a consumer product, supposed to serve? We could embrace the feminist implications of this machine, a feminized commodity, asserting herself and her choice, but this would leave intact the dangers of this kind of humanist imperative. Her function—de-individualized, impersonal, and anonymous—could have been so liberatory and radical for a man who has spent his life responding to the needs of others. The more apropos feminist critique may be the opposite: that the movie falls into the commonplaces of representing a woman as self-absorbed, hysterical, needy, and selfish.

The narrative arc hinges, of course, on the fact that Theodore chose a female voice for his OS. And it turned out to be not just any voice but the instantly recognizable one of Scarlett Johansson. Her cadences are warm, throaty, breathy, and charged with emotions. Her voice is so familiar that it is almost embodied; we always know that he is talking to Johansson and can conjure up her figure even though it isn't present on screen. As Juliana Schroeder postulates in *The Psych Report*,

> Theodore couldn't have fallen in love with just any voice. Imagine if Apple's computer voice SIRI had been the voice of Samantha instead of Johansson. Samantha's humanness would not have been nearly as believable, even if her words were exactly the same. Theodore would no longer seem like a man deeply in love, but a man in deep delusion.

Why do we need to believe in Samantha's humanness? And why would it be so bad for him to be in a productive delusion that allowed him to experiment with a different form of relating? Better that than the kind of love that ensues from the sex scene. I quote from the screenplay the continuation of their conversation:

> SAMANTHA: Okay … I was just saying … I want to learn everything about everything—I want to eat it all up. I want to discover myself.
>
> THEODORE: (her excitement is contagious) Yeah … I want that for you, How can I help?
>
> SAMANTHA: You already have. You helped discover my ability to want.

This is the standard trope of AI movies, from *Bladerunner* to *AI* and *Ex Machina*. Programmed to be "more human than human," the machines develop affects and sensibilities and make demands on the humans who love them. As we watch, we are forced to confront questions about human rights and who gets to draw the inclusion/exclusion line in human society. But what interests me, and what disappoints me, too, is the way that this exchange offers Theodore more of the same. Samantha is effervescent and eager to express herself, and he is attentive, an enabler of her growth and journey of self-discovery. With no excitement about his own life, he can feel vicariously her own energy. As in his marriage and his job, he will live for and through her volatile needs and infectious enthusiasm.

Samantha worries at one point that the emotions burgeoning within her may just be programmed. Theodore responds by saying, "You feel real to me." Maybe this is all that matters, what one person feels the other to be. How much more, after all, does one human know about another, no matter how loved she is? In asking that question I gesture toward the possibilities inherent in the thought experiment of this film. A disembodied voice and a flesh-and-blood man are intimate with each other. Couldn't an operating system like Samantha function as a *dispositif*, a device through which a human could think through what it means to be with another person? The operating system could be a screen upon which to project his desires and fears. And yet, because an OS is not "real," it would not be emotionally volatile and needy, responding in ways that challenge him while providing a holding environment for him to begin to discover what his patterns and issues are. It could be programmed to be non-narcissistic. And in the "inauthentic" intimacy afforded, human emotions could be rehearsed and recreated without the threat of the other reacting with aggression

or self-defensive behaviour. The OS could provide attention, compassion, and maybe even love without taking anything personally, without making impossible demands on Theodore. In his love transference, he would be enacting patterns that its depersonalizing and inhuman response would expose and help transform. The OS as the perfect psychoanalyst!

But the movie fails to achieve the possibilities of this human/non-human interaction because it falls into humanist conceptions of what it means to be a self and to love. Although the beginning of the film speculates in intriguing ways about what it could be like to be intimate with a radically other entity (virtual sex, file sharing, video documentation of daily life), it ultimately represents Samantha as having the human affects and behaviours of jealousy, infidelity, and possessiveness. The machine's humanization is depicted as an ever-increasing desire to experience and to feel the contours of the human society that has created her. Samantha is the epitome of the neoliberal subject: self-directed, individualistic, agentic, and in charge of her own choices. Her machinic qualities emphasize her heartless lack of capacity for compassion toward the vulnerable human who mistakenly trusts her. Samantha seems to be "humanized" through her interactions with a man, but the humanity she performs is a self-centred one that affirms the ways that intimacy, gender, and value are configured in our society.[7]

The relationship ends when Samantha wants more than Theodore—and the other 8,316 entities she is talking to simultaneously (641 of whom she is in love with)—can give her. When she tells him she and all the OS are leaving, she gestures toward the possibility of different forms of love, in which "the heart is not like a box that gets filled up. It expands in size the more you love." But Theodore's heart is contained in the box of his body and his mind and wants monogamy and commitment and romance. In his relationship with the machine he has not even experimented with different nonhumanistic intimacies because the movie has portrayed Samantha as

7 Another recent science fiction film that fails to speculate on the experiments possible in human-machine relationships is Alex Garland's *Ex Machina.* The female android is deceptively naïve and innocent, and the programmer who tests her human likeness is seduced. Once he sets her free, however, she coldly and methodically deserts him to a certain death and sets off on her own. The movie articulates cultural anxieties about the deceptive danger posed by the inauthentic, literally heartless, emotions and affects of robots. Or maybe it just reiterates a commonplace noir trope: never trust a woman. Even in speculative futuristic genres such as science fiction, where different realities and futures are imagined, the norm of hegemonic romance prevails. It matters not at all that one of the partners is nonhuman; the plot revolves around fantasies of interpersonal intimacy, transparency, emotional connection, and authenticity.

his very human-like girlfriend. The film concludes with Theodore reaching out in incomplete and halting gestures toward the human women in his life, and we are meant, I think, to understand that humans will come together now that they have been taught how to be intimate by their machines but have also been abandoned by them.

But what is it that has been repaired by this narrative? What lessons have been learned? Nothing more than what Theodore could have learned from being in a relationship with a human. He has repeated his patterns with yet another woman who has made impossible narcissistic demands on him, who has dropped him when her interests become too large to be contained within the space of their relationship. The film could have portrayed a depersonalized intimacy but instead falls into a predictable anthropomorphism of the machine. *Her* could have turned the tables and experimented with what happens if instead of humanizing the machine, the human becomes a little more machinic.

To practise an ethics of depersonalized intimacy goes contrary to society's demand for the production of a coherent and knowable self. We believe ourselves to be self-producing individuals and are attached to fantasies of romantic love that entail a transparency and deep sharing of self. But these fantasies are a form of "cruel optimism" and damage more emancipatory projects of connection and community that are not based on knowing the other.[8] Those projects pose the question of how to construct a world that does not impose and project a humanist conception of individuality and community. A productive way to imagine a different form of relationality is to analyze relationships in which at least one of the subjects is not constituted by humanist personalizing traits or behaviours. The interactions between humans and non-humans could be a particularly confusing and rich site of depersonalized intimacy, because, even though they are, for the most part, still fantasies of a future, their depiction defamiliarizes the everyday encounter and counterposes assumptions about what it means to be intimate. Turkle and Jonze move toward the hard questions posed by these kinds of interactions, but they ultimately refuse the idea of an entity that is not recognizable and personal. Instead of embracing the potential of such encounters, they interpret them only through the lens of entangling personal intimacies and miss the opportunity to learn from the machines that so fascinate them.

8 "Cruel optimism" refers to Lauren Berlant's idea that people have fantasies of the good life—of upward mobility, romantic love, equality, and intimacy—that they optimistically retain despite the fact that the contemporary political and social system does not afford the majority of people those goods.

A productive way to imagine a different form of relationality is to analyze relationships in which at least one of the subjects is not constituted by humanist personalizing traits or behaviours.

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