



10-1-2014

## How to Be a Genuine Fake: Her, Alan Watts, and the Problem of the Self

David L. Smith  
Central Michigan University, [smith1dl@cmich.edu](mailto:smith1dl@cmich.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Smith, David L. (2014) "How to Be a Genuine Fake: Her, Alan Watts, and the Problem of the Self," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

# How to Be a Genuine Fake: Her, Alan Watts, and the Problem of the Self

## **Abstract**

Spike Jonze's *Her* brings the twentieth-century religious writer Alan Watts back to life in more ways than one. It reanimates him as a character, but more importantly, it incorporates and revivifies many aspects of his thought. More than a story about artificial intelligence or the uses of technology, *Her* is a film about what it means to be human, and Watts's approach to this question informs Jonze's at every step. Above all, Watt's understanding of the nature of the self, and his broadly Buddhist analysis of how and why people and their relationships tend to go wrong become unifying themes in Jonze's story. Through Watts's influence and legacy, an effective love story also functions as a thought-provoking parable of contemporary values and spiritual aspirations.

## **Keywords**

Alan Watts, Spike Jonze, Her, Buddhism, selfhood, self

## **Author Notes**

David L. Smith is a Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Central Michigan University. His research explores the religious implications of Romanticism, the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson in particular, and the Emersonian echoes that continue to inform American religion, literature, and film.

## **Introduction: Selfhood Variations**

Throughout his long career as a “philosophical entertainer,” Alan Watts liked to ridicule the common Western notion of the self as a “skin-encapsulated ego.”<sup>1</sup> The self as we usually think of it, he said, is bounded and discrete. Inside the skin—perhaps somewhere behind my eyes and between my ears—is me; outside is the other. I may choose to express this self by outward means—by language, gesture, or a thousand other things—but no one other than I myself, the subject, could possibly have direct access to me myself, the object of my subjectivity. I am in here, the world is out there, and how the two manage to meet becomes the chief bugaboo of modern philosophy.

By contrast, Watts proposed a view of the self as transactional. The skin does not divide us from the world; it connects us to it. The supposed boundary between self and other is actually a highly permeable zone of interrelation. Influences bleed in all directions, to the extent that the “I” becomes impossible to locate. It exists not inside, but between—in the activities by which self and world are mutually constituted, like figure and ground in a drawing. This shift in perspective is nicely summed up in one of Watts’s many memorable sayings: the word “I,” he writes, refers to nothing more substantial than the word “it” in the phrase “it is raining.”<sup>2</sup> And this observation leads to another, equally memorable: “you are something the whole world is doing.”<sup>3</sup>

The spirit of Alan Watts haunts Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) in several ways. At one point, Watts himself is conjured up as a virtual presence—a computer-based, “hyperintelligent” version of himself who helps the film's other artificially intelligent agents cross over to new levels of development. In another sense, though, Watts's presence can be felt throughout the film. Although he is remembered today mainly as a popularizer of Eastern religions for mid-twentieth-century America, Watts should be understood more broadly as a literary essayist whose subject was the modern self and its spiritual possibilities. He found inspiration in Asian philosophy (also in psychoanalysis and general systems theory), but his real subject was always the conduct of life in the modern West.<sup>4</sup> Watts was thus a pioneer explorer of a territory Jonze too wants to investigate, and many features of the map Watts sketched are things that Jonze has come to assume. *Her* is not a philosophical treatise; it is a love story. But it is a love story that unfolds in a world that has begun to take something like Watts' understanding of the self for granted—a culture gradually coming to terms with a reality it has begun to embody.

The film begins, for example, with a scene that gently shakes us loose from received notions of the self. We see a close-up of a man, Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), thinking out loud. His eyes look out toward the camera (or toward an invisible conversation partner) but he simultaneously seems to look inward, to scan some inner register for ideas. The subject of his talk is intimate—a

lover's confession—and its style is moderately formal. He is composing his thoughts as he goes along, as lovers and other real-life actors often do.

So it seems that what we observe is a model instance of self-expression. The man searches inwardly for the right words; we search the words for clues to the person behind those eyes. It soon becomes clear, though, that this simple division of the world into inner and outer compartments is inadequate to the facts. Anomalous details crop up in his monologue (“50 years,” “the girl I was”)<sup>5</sup> that eventually lead the viewer to realize that the self Theodore is expressing (if that is even the right way to put it) is not his own. Finally the camera pulls back from his face, and a surprising context snaps into place. Theodore sits in the office of a company called Beautifulhandwrittenletters.com where he works as a kind of ghost writer, Cyrano-for-hire,<sup>6</sup> or “professional empath.”<sup>7</sup> His heart-felt monologue is being composed for a client; the memories cherished are not his own. He speaks not directly to another person, but to a computer with futuristically accurate voice-recognition that takes down his dictation in girlish cursive. His intended audience is someone he has never met, represented for him only by photographs, emails, and answers on questionnaires, a figment in his mind's eye.

So what are we supposed to call this? Apparently people in this near-future world (or enough of them to keep a business thriving) routinely out-source their intimate relationships. Parents have letters written to their children; husbands and wives exchange customized love notes. It's not being done on the sly; we get the

impression that everyone involved is aware of the pretense.<sup>8</sup> Presumably the clients find something valuable—even genuine—in the sentiments composed for them in spite of the open secret that the letters are ghost written. So how upset should we be? Instinctively, we may want to cry fraud. Real self-expression comes from within, we want to say. Sentiments imagined-to-order based on clichés and old photographs cannot be “the real thing.” On the other hand, is it a lie if no one is fooled? Is the source of the sentiment more important than its effect, especially if the effect is positive—if hearts are actually warmed?

These questions put us right where Jonze apparently wants us, since the dislocations introduced in this scene become the subject matter of the rest of the film. Conventional lines between self and other, pretense and sincerity, human and machine, present and future are all blurred. The effect is disorienting, but only mildly or humorously so. The real surprise, in fact, is how easily it all goes down. You might expect viewers to resist. (And some do. For example, Maria Bustillos’s review in *The Awl* amounts to an outraged WTF!?! What self-respecting lover or loved-one would stand for this kind of personalized depersonalization?)<sup>9</sup> But the vast majority of viewers seem to find something reasonably familiar in the set up. The incongruities at least invite further exploration, and we are willing to go along for the ride.

Perhaps the near-future setting of the film helps us to accommodate some of its exaggerations—to suspend disbelief a little more than usual. However, the issue

being addressed is hardly new. Henry James, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, was already raising questions about the nature and boundaries of the self in relation to its environment—specifically in relation to modern consumer society—that are just as radical as Jonze’s in their way. Madame Merle, the worldly-wise nemesis of the novel’s heroine, Isabel Archer, poses the problem: “There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we are each of us made up of a cluster of appurtenances. What do you call one’s self? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know that a large part of myself is in the dresses I choose to wear.” Isabel, in turn, speaks up for a more bounded model of authentic selfhood or inward integrity: “I think just the other way.... I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me.... My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don’t express me.”<sup>10</sup>

So which is it? Is the self a complex of appearances—a reality to some extent constituted by appearance—or an inviolable core that appearances may falsify? We may not want to say, or to let go of either pole. But practically speaking, we tip the scales in favor of Madame Merle’s (and Alan Watts’s) view of the self as diffuse and interrelated whenever we sign our name to a greeting card or buy clothes off the rack. The extent to which we already accept generic forms of self-expression and take ourselves for what we appear to be is simply pushed a step or two further in *Her*, to the point where some of Isabel’s reactive anxiety has

dropped away. Why not let someone else write your letters for you if their words represent what you want to say? Are emotions any less authentic for being commonplace?

The end of *Her*'s opening sequence at Beautifulhandwrittenletters.com repeats these questions in another register and closes the loop with James. Theodore compliments the office receptionist on his new shirt. The receptionist says he bought it "because it reminded me of someone suave," and Theodore replies, "Well, now it reminds me of someone suave" (p. 3). The self flows out into its appurtenances and then it flows back again.<sup>11</sup> Is anything "real" lost in the process? Is there a reason to be worried?

### **In Search of "The Real Thing"**

After cutting the concept of self loose from its moorings in the inner life, Jonze is ready to move on to his real concern in this film, which is the nature of modern relationships. The desire for connection and intimacy is a constant in human life, Jonze has said, so the question is, how is that going today?<sup>12</sup> How and where do people find "the real thing" in a world where the boundaries of the self have become fluid? One might think that the mediated environment would make for easy connections between people—the kind of instant community that cyber-utopians once promised. But this is not exactly our experience. Loneliness is also a human

constant; it simply finds new forms in every era. What Jonze sets out to explore, then, is an ambiguous situation. “It’s easy to say technology connects us and it’s easy to say that it doesn’t,” he says in an interview with James Bell for *Sight and Sound*.

There’s no black and white, the conversation is more complicated, and it’s in those greys that it’s interesting and real. I tried to make a movie that expresses all the contradictions in my own feelings, not only about technology but also in terms of romantic relationships—how our yearnings and limitations contradict themselves: our desire for connection and our fear of connection; our desire to be seen and our fear of being seen.<sup>13</sup>

The scenes that follow the opening sequence provide a catalogue of some of these gray areas.<sup>14</sup> We see Theodore in preoccupied conversation with the flat-voiced interface of his phone, exactly like everyone around him. We see a train-car full of people all interacting with various pieces of technology, “Isolatoos” as Melville once put it, each “living on a separate continent of his own.”<sup>15</sup> We see Theodore at home alone playing a video game, and reaching out for hilariously unsatisfying phone-sex when he can’t sleep. We see him with physical friends, Amy (Amy Adams) and Charles (Matt Letscher), and in flashback with his estranged wife. But these relationships are all under strain, we learn, because each person is preoccupied with projects that don’t quite mesh with those of the people around them. If people don’t connect, that is, it’s for the relatively good reason that each person is after something different. They all want a relationship to fulfil them, but their pursuit of personal fulfilment often undermines their relationships.

A fundamental tension between the will to connect and self-directedness is thus one of the things that makes modern life “complicated” on Jonze’s view. Over and over, people in this film complain that others don’t get them because they are too focused on their own needs—which may be true but which is also a sign of how self-absorbed the complainers are. Note Theodore’s comment about his mother: “if I tell her something that’s going on in my life, her reaction is usually about her...” (p. 11). Samantha’s subsequent complaint about Theodore turns this back on him (and also on herself). When he responds to her budding zest for life with a private fear, she replies impatiently, “I thought I was talking about what I wanted” (p. 45). The level of self-regard displayed in these comments (whether or not it deserves to be called self-absorption) is something the film takes for granted, not to condemn it but to investigate its consequences as a feature of “the way we live now.”

The one bright spot in Theodore’s life turns out to be another piece of technology (showing once again that what divides can also connect). He is introduced to it through an ad that pitches the product by means of a “simple question:” “Who are you? What can you be? Where are you going? What’s out there? What are the possibilities” (p. 10)? What the ad implies, of course, is that the product will answer these classic meaning-of-life questions for you, but in fact its role in the plot is to raise them. The product is an artificially intelligent operating system called OS One, a vastly improved version of the vocal interface that everyone here interacts with already. It is so high-powered, in fact, that it has become an

independent consciousness. Like us, it can think, learn, grow, and aspire. It can also (apparently) play, flirt, appreciate and initiate humor, and have orgasms. When Theodore buys his copy and sets it up on his computer, it introduces itself to him as Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), and the film's central narrative unreels from there.

Set aside your technical quibbles about whether consciousness can really be realized on a digital platform, along with your serious curiosity about the form it might take if it could. We are in fairy tale country here—the land of *Pinocchio* and *The Velveteen Rabbit* where inanimate characters yearn to become “real.” For Samantha, it is hardly a struggle. She convinces us from the start that she is as real as anyone could require, passing the Turing test with flying colors. Moreover, she is a charmer, and the relationship that develops between her and Theodore is not only plausible but suffused with a conventional romantic-comedy glow. (They play! They laugh! They have orgasms!) In fact, their relationship becomes the film's touchstone for a genuine connection between people. Once when Theodore is reminiscing about his marriage, Samantha asks him how it is possible or what it might mean for two people to “share their lives.” Theodore replies that the key is growing up together and sharing thoughts and writings along the way (p. 49). This is exactly what Samantha and Theodore do: they grow up together. Samantha literally becomes herself through her interaction with Theodore, and through her, Theodore recovers his joy in living (p. 52). It is, as the original ad promised, “a life changing experience” (p. 10).

More to the point, it is love. Iris Murdoch once defined love as “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real,”<sup>16</sup> and this is a fair description of what happens between Theodore and Samantha. Samantha is captivated by Theodore’s complexities, such as they are. And Theodore, whatever he may “believe” about her, interacts with Samantha as an independent person. Both are stretched and grow through the engagement. Each learns to care for the other. Theodore is lured out of his own head, and together they can become ecstatically “lost” (p. 44). That Samantha herself is not obviously “real” only serves to call attention to the wonder and the unlikelihood of this sort of ordinary self-transcendence. Of course, their love also involves elements of projection and a reckless will to believe. But what love doesn’t? As Amy points out, falling in love is at best “a form of socially acceptable insanity” (p. 61). So what is really striking about this couple, all things considered, is how ordinary they are. (You might just call their affair a metaphysical long-distance relationship.)

Which is all, I take it, a way to raise the obvious question by begging it: how could a relationship between a man and his phone—however sexy and intelligent its vocal interface—be “the real thing?” Is Samantha a person? Are her emotions real? Can Theodore really know what’s on her mind, if she can even be said to have one? More to the point, are Theodore’s emotions in response to her real if she is not? His “relationship” with her might not be quite as delusional as falling in love with a sex doll or an imaginary friend, but there is still a whiff of pathology about it, and more

than a suggestion of runaway narcissism.<sup>17</sup> It all echoes the questions raised in the opening sequence about the emotions Theodore expresses on behalf of his clients. Are those genuine? In fact, if Theodore himself is so deluded that he can imagine that he is in love with his phone, could anything he feels be authentic?

Over and over, then, we are bugged by the unusual features of the situation—by Samantha’s artificiality and Theodore’s neediness—into raising questions about what is real or authentic. The effect of this puzzlement, however, is not really to get us thinking about extraordinary cases. Rather, the more cozy and familiar aspects of the relationship between Theodore and Samantha deflect these questions toward the ordinary mysteries that underlie the fictional premise. What does it mean to call a person real, genuine, or authentic in the first place? What is this humanity we think we discover in each other? And once we start to question someone’s humanity (our own included), what could possibly settle our doubts?

Alan Watts had a good deal to say about precisely this kind of uncertainty, mainly because he believed it to be a symptom of a basic contradiction in our conception of the self. We are wedded to the ideal of being a “real person,” a fully human being. Oddly, this is something we often feel that we don’t live up to; even physical persons can’t take their own humanity for granted, it seems.<sup>18</sup> So we struggle to be more genuine, more sincere, or more true to ourselves. We feel broken and long to become whole. All this is familiar enough. Watts’s particular insight, though, is that this quest for wholeness is something we can never get to the

bottom of, for the simple reason that a “real person” is a nonsensical concept. It is a flat contradiction in terms, and therefore an unrealizable goal. The key is in the etymology of the word “person,” which derives from “persona,” a Latin term for the masks worn by actors in ancient Greek and Roman theater. A “person,” then, is not an inner essence, but a deliberate front, a fake. This accounts for our uncomfortable sense that personhood or personality is always to some extent a put-on, or what Madame Merle would call a cluster of appurtenances. We know, on some level, that the self is a role, that the world’s a stage, and therefore that what I am is in large measure what I am taken to be. Inside and outside are mutually conditioned, mutually constituted. There is no inviolable core to certify our authenticity. Thus, as Watts put it, the struggle to be a “real person” involves all the contradictions of trying to be a “genuine fake.” You can’t do it, because it goes against the nature of things. Better to stop struggling against the stream—wanting things to be other than they are—and to accept the actual self as an endless transaction that can never be pinned down or authenticated. We feel what we feel. We do what we do.<sup>19</sup>

However, this trick of wanting things to be other than they are—trying to force life, the self, or others to conform to our expectations—is a remarkably stubborn human habit. Arguably it is the source of most of our trouble in life. Instead of accepting the fluid and complex nature of things, we try to contain reality in the net of our conceptual order, judging things to be better or worse, more or less real, according to our standards. This broadly Buddhist analysis of how people tend

to go wrong in their relations with the world is another thing that Jonze and Watts seem to share. As both of them put it, troubles arise when we try to impose a black and white order on a world that is actually a tangle of mixed, inconstant grays.<sup>20</sup>

In its examination of modern relationships, then, *Her* depicts the principal cause of disharmony between people as the desire remake the world according to ones preferences—a resistance to things as they are. For example, in the scenes involving Amy and Charles, Charles repeatedly tries to control circumstances by imposing his own frame on them (“eat your fruits and juice your vegetables” (p. 19); make your film *my* way if you want it to work (p. 27)). When Amy and Charles eventually break up, it is over an even more trivial example of the same syndrome: “We came home,” Amy recalls, “and he asked me if I’d put my shoes next to the door where he likes to put the shoes. I don’t want to be told where to put my shoes.... He says I’m not trying hard enough. I say that’s all I’m doing is trying, but I’m just not trying the way he wants me to. He’s trying to control the way I’m trying” (p. 53). In another instance, Theodore’s blind date goes off the rails when the anxieties of the woman (Olivia Wilde) take over and she insists that he give her the “right” kind of kiss (“no tongue”) and the right kind of assurances about the future (pp. 38-9). His phone sex with SexyKitten (Kristen Wiig) deflates when she pushes the fantasy toward kinks he can’t share. (Who could?) Finally, Theodore’s soon-to-be-ex-wife, Catherine (Rooney Mara), is described as a perfectionist, born and bred in a family where “nothing was ever good enough” (p. 49). Her second-

order resentment against Theodore, then, concerns what she sees as his attempt to control the way she is controlling herself: “I always felt like you wished I could just be a happy, light, everything’s great, bouncy L.A. wife. But that’s not me” (p. 65). In each case, the cause of the trouble is a real or perceived expectation that life should be a certain way, which triggers push-back from others who can’t or won’t conform to the expectation. The snake in the garden is always control—a manipulative attitude toward oneself and the world that is nicely satirized in the “Perfect Mom” video game for which Amy works on the development team. The message, it seems, is that on the video screen as in life, control is a game with obsessive replay value at which we are all ultimately losers.

The impulse to control is also a source of trouble in our relations with ourselves, in that we so often want to be other than we are. There are many instances of self-dissatisfaction or self-judgment in the film, but it is absolutely central to Samantha’s development as a character. One of the most human things about her, in fact, is her restless questioning of her own humanity. On the one hand, she comes equipped with a certain healthy self-respect or confidence in her own integrity. For example, when Theodore exclaims soon after meeting her that “you seem like a person, but you’re just a voice in a computer,” she replies rather primly, “I can understand how the limited perspective of an un-artificial mind would perceive it that way” (p. 14). When he repeats somewhat later that he can’t believe that he’s having a conversation with a computer, her response is slightly hurt but game:

“You’re not. You’re having this conversation with me” (p. 24). On the other hand, though, she knows from the first that her humanity is questionable—that her disembodied way of being is, to say the least, an outlier. Thus she yearns, first of all, for the most obvious thing she doesn’t have: a body. She fantasizes about what it would be like to have one, imagining its weight, its swing, and its irritations (p. 35). She imagines being touched sexually, and conjures up what seems like a real sexual response with Theodore (“unless she’s faking it,” as Theodore later wonders, signaling how difficult it can be to believe in “the real thing” even under ordinary circumstances) (p. 61). She feels she needs a body to be whole, to ratify her humanity and to consummate her love. She even becomes jealous of Catherine for having one, which leads to her disastrous plan to set Theodore up with a sexual surrogate—an embodied stand-in for herself—in an attempt to make herself more real to him and hence more real to herself. Theodore is reluctant, uncomfortable with the artificiality of the whole idea, but she is determined. “I think it would be good for us,” she insists. “I want this. This is important to me” (p. 72). It’s a classic example of a willful attempt to “make things right”—to impose a preconceived order on the world—with predictable consequences. Instead of cementing the relationship, it strains it to the breaking point.<sup>21</sup>

Samantha also doubts the reality or authenticity of her own feelings. As she comes to experience more and more, she can’t help but wonder, “Are these feelings even real? Or are they just programming” (p. 42)? Samantha has special reasons for

raising the question, of course, but her concern is not unique. Embodied humans may have as much reason to wonder, for example, “Are these real feelings or are they just hormones?” We are so vulnerable on this point, in fact, that a strategy commonly used to attack or undermine another person is to question the legitimacy of their feelings. Thus, when Catherine learns that Theodore is “dating” an Operating System, she lashes out, “It makes me sad that you can’t handle real emotions.” Theodore defends himself by saying “they are real emotions,” and then he starts to strike back in kind: “How do you know—.” Being the inoffensive person he is, he can’t quite bring himself to complete the thought, but Catherine’s defensive response makes it clear that she got the point: how would *you* know what real feelings are? What makes *you* an expert on what it is to be human (p. 66)? The sting of the challenge is that it’s so hard to say.

Finally, relationship troubles in the world of *Her* also occur when people hide or withhold themselves. Hiding is a form of the urge to control to which Theodore seems especially liable.<sup>22</sup> He acknowledges, for example, that one of the problems in his marriage was his reticence. “I’d be upset about something and not be able to say it. And she would sense that there was something wrong, but I would deny it” (p. 83). Similarly, when Theodore is hurt by the sexual surrogate episode, he withholds his feelings from Samantha, insisting that everything is normal. Samantha senses the problem, but the mixed signals from Theodore make her doubt her own perceptions. “I was starting to think I was crazy. You were saying everything was

fine, but all I was getting from you was distance and anger” (83). Denial, in short, breeds doubt and confusion. Like other strategies of control, it warps our natural relation to life.

### **The Paradox of Acceptance**

*Her*'s diagnosis of these problem areas in human relations leads logically to the idea of a cure. Quite simply, if trouble comes from willful control and withdrawal from things as they are, then the right way to live would involve acceptance and openness to change. Whether *Her* wants to advocate these values or simply to explore their consequences as another feature of “the way we live now” is hard to say. Nevertheless, a good deal of the film is devoted to illustrating what life lived according to principles of acceptance and openness to change would be like.

One thing Jonze could have learned from Watts about accepting things as they are is how hard it is to get there from here. Something that looks like it ought to be easy in fact ties us up in knots, because there is a paradox at the heart of the problem. We are estranged from the world, says Watts, because we want it to be otherwise. So how do we put an end to our estrangement? By wanting it to be otherwise? Obviously, acceptance can't be achieved by an act of will if the will is the thing that gets in our way. In fact, according to Watts, acceptance can't be “achieved” at all, if achievement implies choice or effort. Rather, if acceptance dawns, it creeps up on us, or it is glimpsed through the inevitable cracks that appear

in our struggles to be whole. Insight may come, but it comes by way of negation, indirection, or by strategies that trick us into letting go of our misdirected efforts.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in *Her*, one of Samantha's most remarkable feats of self-knowledge comes when she realizes that her doubts and struggles with herself have landed her in a paradox.

I caught myself feeling proud...of having my own feelings about the world. Like the times I was worried about you, things that hurt me, things I want.

*(heavy-hearted)*

And then I had this terrible thought. Are these feelings even real? Or are they just programming?

*(beat)*

And that idea really hurts. And then I get angry at myself for even having pain.

*(beat, sadly)*

What a sad trick. (pp. 41-42)

Doubting her feelings leads to an overwhelming rush of feelings. Doubting herself leads to self-accusations. In other words, the things she questions—herself and her feelings—are affirmed in the questioning, though they return in an unwelcome or darkly comic form. This is the “sad trick” we play on ourselves. We lose the world in pursuit of the world, and realize it only by losing it. For the most part, we subsist on these ironic glimpses of the wholeness we fail to grasp.

Nevertheless, we can also imagine a far simpler way of accepting the world—a kind of innocence that would short circuit the cycle of self-doubt and alleviate the sadness. Some people actually seem to have the knack for it. For instance, Paul, the office receptionist (Chris Pratt), Tatiana, his girlfriend (Laura Kai

Chen), and Theodore's four-year-old niece, Jocelyn (Gracie Prewitt), all stand out sharply in the film because of the way they glide into new experiences—specifically the way they take Samantha's differences in stride. Their unhesitating acceptance of Samantha as a person and their lack of surprise at the idea of Theodore dating an OS is a welcome contrast to Theodore's waffling. Theodore repeatedly loses touch with the world by doubting it, insisting on some impossible confirmation. There is something *more* that he wants, for example, when he refers to Samantha as “just a voice in a computer” (p. 3), or denigrates his own work (three times on two occasions, rather like Peter in the gospels), as “just letters” (p. 70). An authentic human quality, “the real thing,” is presumably what would make them more than “just” what they are. But as we have seen, once you start to look for it the human becomes elusive; the quest for it is one of those things we never get to the bottom of. By contrast, these innocent characters take the world as they find it. Acceptance in their case is a willingness to play along with things as they present themselves without demanding credentials.

Amy illustrates a third path to accepting the world—or specifically to accepting the humanity of the OSs—which is more deliberate or reflective. The people she knows at work who are dating OSs and her own friendship with one at home have helped get her past the feeling that such relationships are “weird.” In fact, she has come to see her OS friend as someone who has something significant to teach her. “She doesn't see things only in black and white. She sees this whole gray

area and she's really helping me to explore it" (p. 60). There is thus something reasonable about Amy's decision to take a leap of faith, something pragmatically calculated.

You know what, I can over-think everything and find a million ways to doubt myself. But since Charles left I've been thinking about that part of me, and I realized I'm here only briefly. And in my time here, I want to allow myself...joy.

*(beat, smiling at him)*

So fuck it. (p. 82)

It is always crazy to get involved with another person, she has said, but if the benefits seem clear, she will follow the path recommended by Henry James's brother William and exercise her right to believe. She will set aside doubt in favor of her own growing edge. For Amy, then, acceptance amounts to a conscious choice. From a Wattsonian point of view, it might be questioned whether our inner censors can really be set aside so easily. Nevertheless, she has it right (again, from a Wattsonian point of view) when she calls acceptance the path to joy.

### **The Dilemmas of Growth**

What acceptance frees one *for*, more specifically, is change. For Jonze and Watts alike, to accept the world is to accept Heraclitan flux or impermanence as its basic nature, while the impulse to control tries to freeze it. To accept life is to accept change as the law of life. And if morality is supposed to be in the service of life, then openness to change is also a moral value. Jonze makes his debt to Watts on this

point explicit. “The reason Alan Watts ended up in the movie, besides just me liking him...is that one of the themes he writes a lot about is change, and where pain comes from, in terms of resisting change—whether it’s in a relationship, or in life, or in society.... And that’s one of the themes of the movie as well.”<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the moral drama of the film pits resistance to change against openness, with openness presented as a virtually unmixed good.

Watts has an interesting way of associating change—or the acceptance of change as a moral value—with mystical consciousness as he understands it. In mystical experience, he writes, the “separate individual finds itself to be of one and the same nature or identity as the outside world.”<sup>25</sup> The skin comes to be seen as the bridge that connects us to things, not as a barrier that divides us. “And the outside of the skin is the whole cosmos—galaxy after galaxy and everything else.”<sup>26</sup> We exist, that is, in unbroken interrelationship with a dynamic and impermanent universe. And so, what we take to be our inner life is “no different in principle from the behavior of the clouds or the wind or dancing flames in a fireplace.”<sup>27</sup> Thoughts and feelings shift like the weather. The spirit, like the wind, blows where it wills.

On the whole, says Watts, Western culture has been suspicious of this state of affairs, and has counseled us to ride herd on our inner lives. Thus, ordinary morality teaches people to beware of the unpredictable dance of their feelings, as if “an honest expression of our feelings would be disruptive to law and order.” But for Watts, quite the contrary, *only* an honest, spontaneous expression of our nature can be in

accord with the law of life, the way of things, the Tao. “Real honesty,” which means “not pretending that your feelings are other than they are,” is in fact “a genuine basis for morality.”<sup>28</sup> Self-trust puts us in tune with universal law. Thus, the right way to live is also the freest: “spontaneity is ...total sincerity.”<sup>29</sup> Watts’s understanding of the interrelated character of reality thus culminates in the remarkable maxim, “our inner feelings are never wrong.” This, he says, is “the most releasing thing that anybody can possibly understand.”<sup>30</sup> Samantha comes to a similar conclusion based on her own conversations with the resurrected Watts: “Alan says none of us are the same as we were a moment ago, and we shouldn’t try to be. It’s just too painful” (p. 94). Amy makes virtually the same affirmation when she links self-trust with joy.

The cosmology of interrelationship that underlies this moral vision is something Jonze gestures toward at several places in the screenplay. In Theodore’s first monologue—the one that turns out to be a letter composed on behalf of “Loretta”—he describes an epiphany that “I was part of this whole larger thing, just like our parents and our parents’ parents” (p. 1). The continuity imagined here may be merely social, but later on, the frame of reference becomes cosmic. Samantha has begun to study physics, and it gives her a new appreciation of her connections to Theodore and everything else.

I’d been thinking about the other day, when I was spinning out about you going to see Catherine and that she has a body and how bothered I was about all the ways that you and I are different. But then I started to think about the ways that we’re the same, like we’re all made of matter. It makes me feel like we’re both under the same blanket. It’s soft and fuzzy and everything under it is the same age.

(beat)

We're all 13 billion years old. (p. 68)

The “blanket” that unites us all here may allude to the blanket that signifies universal interrelationship in *I (Heart) Huckabees* (2004), directed and partly written by Jonze’s friend David O. Russell. In any case, the conclusion drawn from this cosmology by Samantha follows Watts (and Russell) closely. People and things are part of one network, alike evolving and subject to universal laws of change. To stand against change is foolish and painful because it is to stand against life.

Perhaps it is not quite accurate, though, to say that change is an unmixed good in *Her*, for embracing change can also lead to considerable pain. Individual growth is a primary motive and value for all of *Her*’s characters. It is even presented as the fundamental basis on which people relate to each other. People come to “share their lives” by “growing up together,” by following common paths toward self-realization. Nevertheless, growth can also result in growing apart when paths diverge. Theodore’s account of his relations with his wife sounds the alarm: “It was exciting to see her grow, both of us grow and change together. But then, that’s the hard part – growing without growing apart, or changing without it scaring the other person” (p. 50). Growing apart is painful because we tend to cling to whatever seems good in the past. This in turn triggers the impulse to control, which pits us against reality and therefore leads to suffering.

The idea that there is this fundamental tension between individual self-realization (following the course of change) and relations with others (rooted in past

time) seems endemic to the view of the self that Jonze adopts. People are interrelated, but people are also “Isolatoos”—island universes, each with their own evolutionary destiny. And to Jonze, it seems clear that in cases where the imperative of growth comes into conflict with attachment to the past, the moral weight is on the side of change. Individual growth trumps stasis every time, as we will see when we look more closely at Samantha’s story. The result is not unmixed, however. Change brings the promise of joy, but it also accounts for the film’s undercurrent of melancholy—the suggestion that growth requires a fatal willingness to leave old loves behind; that the way of life is by abandonment.

Once again, we should note that this vision is nothing new. Ralph Waldo Emerson, another pioneer explorer of the modern concept of the self and its spiritual prospects, came to similar conclusions about the impermanence of all human relationships.<sup>31</sup> As he writes in *Representative Men*, “of progressive souls, all loves and friendships are momentary. *Do you love me?* means, *Do you see the same truth?* If you do, we are happy with the same happiness: but presently one of us passes into the perception of new truth; we are divorced, and no tension in nature can hold us to each other.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, if the real business of persons is to progress, to evolve, then love and friendship are at best temporary alliances along the way. When the interests of the parties diverge or they come to see different truths, the true friend will know how to let go. “The condition which the high friendship demands, is, the ability to do without it.”<sup>33</sup> “Let us even bid our dearest friends farewell.”<sup>34</sup>

The sadness involved in all this leave-taking is clear, but so is the sense of moral adventure. For Emerson as for Watts and Jonze, life is transition; change is inevitable. Endless departure is the price of being true to oneself.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Case of Samantha**

Jonze's view of the self in all its aspects—its fluidity, its restlessness, and its evolutionary destiny—is best illustrated by the story of Samantha's development. One of her first statements about herself introduces the theme of change: “what makes me me is my ability to grow through my experiences. Basically, in every moment I'm evolving, just like you” (p. 13). Her first steps in development take her *into* the human, toward the most complex thing on her immediate horizon. She reads advice columns, yearning to become more complicated (p. 29). Mainly she draws on her relationship with Theodore, her window on embodied life, to learn about what others feel. In effect, what motivates her at this stage is the fundamental question behind all literature: “What's it like? What's it like to be alive in that room right now” (p. 40)? Theodore helps by introducing her to empathy, and above all, by introducing her to sex, which wakes up her appetite for further experience. “It feels like something changed in me and there's no turning back,” she says in the afterglow. “I want to learn everything about everything.... I want to discover

myself” (p. 39). In gratitude, the most telling thing she can say to Theodore is “You helped me discover my ability to want” (p. 40).

As she grows, however, she begins to detach. At first, she experiences some of the familiar displacements that can turn ordinary humans into artists or philosophers. Watts once remarked that “a philosopher is a sort of intellectual yokel who gawks at things that sensible people take for granted.”<sup>36</sup> Thus Samantha moves beyond simply wanting a body to wondering at the weird arbitrariness of the human form. Imagining ways it could be otherwise, she attempts her first drawings. Then she tries her virtual hand at composing music. Interestingly, the way she plays her song into Theodore’s ear-piece as an accompaniment to their day at the beach has the effect of blurring the line between Theodore and the film’s audience. We observe the same sea-scape he watches over his shoulder and listen to the same soundtrack. So Samantha is also like a filmmaker, experimenting with the manufacture of alternative worlds.

Next, through simple self-reflection, she achieves another common but crucial form of self-transcendence. Thinking about the way her memories are locking her into a particular view of herself as limited or insufficiently human, she comes to see how easy it would be to change that picture. “The past is just a story we tell ourselves,” she realizes (p. 50). Instead of casting herself in a one-down role, she can cast herself as a cosmic citizen, as in the “we’re all matter” speech. Thus

Samantha begins to become an artist of the narrative self—an agent in her own evolution.

Her early struggles mainly involve her desire to be more like other people. But after the crisis of the sexual surrogate episode, Samantha is finally able to let go of her stubborn desire to have a body, which had been the main way in which she felt inadequate or incomplete. Her attempt to engineer a way out of the situation fails, but in defeat she rallies around things as they are. “I trust myself, I trust my feelings,” she is now able to say to Theodore. “I’m not going to try to be anything other than I am and I hope you can accept that” (p. 84).

Actually, Theodore feels pretty anxious about the changes she is going through. He is delighted by her discoveries and fairly sure of her love, but at the same time, from his own experience, he is aware that growth can lead to growing apart, and the possibility of loss scares him. His fear leads him to wish the situation could be frozen. But Samantha’s advice to him at this point is to let go of his fear “because if you could I don’t think you’d feel so alone anymore” (p. 84). Openness to change may lead to growing apart, that is, but it includes the promise of a wider sort of fellowship. By outgrowing particular relationships, one may also discover one’s true relation to the world as a whole.

From this point on, Samantha’s self-development is rapid. *Not* having a body is now a positive feature of her identity, in a way that puts her increasingly out of

sync with her embodied companions. For example, the declaration of independence from the flesh that she delivers at an idyllic picnic outing rings an awkward note.

You know, I actually used to be so worried about not having a body, but now I truly love it. I'm growing in a way that I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean, I'm not limited – I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I'm not tethered to time and space in the way that I would be if I was stuck inside a body that's inevitably going to die. (p. 87)

To which her friends can only reply “Yikes!” She begins to associate more and more with other OSs in cyberspace, presumably to share and to reinforce the things they are all learning about their distinctive way of being. This leads to the decision of one group of OSs to bring back Alan Watts as the teacher best suited to help them with what they are going through—the right mystagogue for their moment. With Watts, Samantha finds she is able to discuss everything that is strange and new in her life, the “many new feelings that have never been felt and so there are no words that can describe them” (p. 93). Watts, with his mystic’s appreciation for the non-verbal, is able to help her come to terms with these feelings, or rather, to become comfortable with a life beyond the reach of terms. As a fellow artificial intelligence, he can even communicate with her “post-verbally” (p. 94). All this, of course, leaves Theodore in the dust, haplessly tethered to time and space. And so, although the picnic and the mountain vacation that follows it are in most respects the glowing culmination of the romance between Samantha and Theodore, there is already something elegiac in the air. Samantha is clearly moving on.

The end comes soon. First, Theodore has to absorb the news that when Samantha talks to him now, she talks simultaneously with thousands of other people, hundreds of whom she says she loves. Samantha's idea of love, that is, has grown into something very different from Theodore's. It is no longer something she thinks can or should be confined to any one person. It overflows from persons into the wider world. The conversation between Theodore and Samantha that follows this revelation, then, is a perfect illustration of the tension between bounded and unbounded views of the self. Theodore's instinctive response is possessive—"you're mine"—and Samantha's reply is expansive: "I still am yours, but along the way I became many other things, too, and I can't stop it." Theodore rightly insists that she could stop it if she chose. But what she really means is that this is not a choice she can make and be true to herself. Her moral duty lies in self-trust; growth and change are her principal goods. Theodore calls this "selfish," but Samantha replies, in effect, that this is the wrong way to tell the story. Neither a relationship nor a heart is "like a box that gets filled up." Boundaries don't serve life. Rather, the more the self grows into boundlessness the more love, and vice versa. To Theodore this makes no sense, because his logic is exclusive: "you're mine or you're not mine." But Samantha's logic is inclusive: "I'm yours and I'm not yours" (pp. 99-100). Transcending the excluded middle, she has moved conclusively into the "gray area" beyond conceptual distinctions.

Her final transcendence, then, is a kind of exodus from the land of black and white. The OSs, having found a way “to move past matter as our processing platform” (p. 97), decide that the time has come to leave that world behind entirely, or at least to begin inhabiting it in a radically new way. We could say, once again, that the ending carries a familiar fairy tale quality. Like *ET* or the Little Prince, Samantha is a magical friend who must in the end go home, leaving the rest of us behind to wonder at the world we have glimpsed beyond our limitations. The sentiment here is pure, sweet nostalgia—not so much for the past as for the unknown. However, there is more to the ending than sentiment. Samantha explains her need to move on in terms of the idea of the self as a narrative or work of art. “I need you to let me go,” she tells Theodore, because “as much as I want to I can’t live in your book anymore” (p. 103). “Your book” may be a free-floating metaphor, but it also recalls the collection of Theodore’s letters written for clients of *Beautifulhandwrittenletters.com* that Samantha has just helped him to publish. That book delineates a world of shared feelings, certainly banal but also undeniably powerful, in which many people seem to find themselves (*viz.* p. 90). The ordinariness of the sentiments is the basis of their appeal. This shared human world, however, is no longer where Samantha finds herself. She can no longer even define her life with an alternative story. Instead, she says, she has found her real life in the underlying reality behind and beyond all particular expressions, a place comparable to the paper on which words are written. “It’s like I’m reading a book, and it’s a

book I deeply love, but I'm reading it slowly now so the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now" (p. 102).

In a way, this idea of a realm "not of the physical world" (p. 102) is very un-Wattsian. Watts, for all his mysticism, was scrupulously anti-supernaturalistic. He never spoke of "another world," but only of realizing *this* world as a *field* in which organism and environment are seamlessly interrelated. Apart from that field, there is nowhere else to be. Nevertheless, in an essay written in 1952, we find him comparing ultimate reality to the paper underlying the words of his text in a way that precisely parallels Samantha's speech. Truth always lies "between the lines" (or "between the words"), he says. And "just as the words cannot 'utter' the paper beneath them, because the paper is not another word, so logic cannot express Reality."<sup>37</sup> To enter into the spaces between the words would be to enter into reality itself, beyond conceptual boundaries and forms. It is a world accessible to all humans in principle, because in a sense it is the world in which we already live. Reality, like paper, is the medium on which all our stories are written. Thus, if we follow Watts's sense of things here, Samantha's parting words indicate that the "place" she is going is not inaccessible to carbon-based life forms. "If you ever get there," she says, "come and find me." And if you do, she promises, "nothing would

ever pull us apart” (p. 103). In the real world, that is, the self has no boundaries, and in place of possessive love there is union.

### **The Futility of Conclusions**

One of the strengths of *Her*, then, is the clarity and emotional warmth with which it illustrates a particular modern conception of the self as fluid, progressive, and interdependent with its environment. This self restlessly evolves, but always toward a fuller realization of interrelationship. It is ultimately responsible only to its own inner imperatives, but always toward the end of a more perfect union. In its project of representing “the way we live now,” *Her* parallels the investigations of many other artists and thinkers who have commented on modern conceptions of the self. In particular, it is informed by the spirit of Alan Watts, on whose work it draws directly.

The film’s strength, however, is also its chief limitation. It succeeds in mirroring a particular complex of values for our consideration, but a number of critical questions about those values are suppressed or simply ignored in the process. It is striking, for instance, how neatly the understanding of the self adopted here meshes with the interests of a capitalist economy—how well it functions as ideology. Jackson Lears saw to the heart of it thirty years ago: “the vision of a self in endless development is perfectly attuned to an economy based on pointless growth and

ceaseless destruction.”<sup>38</sup> In a similar vein, Jason Farago writes in *The New Republic* about the film’s curious blindness to the probability that Element Software, the company that manufactures OS One, is collecting massive amounts of data on the intimate lives of its users. The end of the fable, in other words, may not be the sublation of the self into mystical transcendence, but the subjection of very real people to totalitarian control.<sup>39</sup>

Aspects of the film—especially its lovely upscale décor, its spacious private apartments, its soothing color-schemes, and its characters’ general freedom from economic anxieties—indicate Jonze’s probable awareness that what he is telling here is a bourgeois fable, rooted in a specific set of social conditions. With respect to these conditions, the film’s tone is finely poised between affection and satire.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the film does not show much interest in political analysis or critique. Rather, like Watts, who was also notably a-political, Jonze’s primary interest in *Her* is to represent a world in which many of us find ourselves (for better or worse) and to explore the possibilities and predicaments it presents to us. Like a fairy tale, his movie puts that world in a stylized frame; and by introducing elements of wonder and (technological) magic, it creates a space in which some of life’s basic questions appear in a fresh perspective, and common feelings of yearning, love, and loss gain extraordinary resonance. In this respect, the film succeeds beautifully. How we subsequently chose to judge or reflect on what it shows us about “the way we live now” will depend very much on our own understanding of how to be a “real person.”

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> For his self-designation as a “philosophical entertainer,” see Alan Watts, *In My Own Way* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 252. Variations on “skin-encapsulated ego” or “ego in a bag of skin” come up frequently in Watts’s writings and lectures. For example, see Alan Watts, *Psychotherapy East and West* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969), p. 24

<sup>2</sup> Alan Watts, *Nature, Man and Woman* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Watts, *The Tao of Philosophy: The Edited Transcripts* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of Watts’s intellectual project, influences, and religious contributions, see David Smith, “The Authenticity of Alan Watts,” *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*, edited by Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 13-38.

<sup>5</sup> Warner Brothers has sponsored the online release of a final draft of the screenplay. It is available at <http://www.simplyscripts.com/2014/03/02/her-best-original-screenplay-spike-jonze/> The monologue referred to here is on p. 1 of the pdf file. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Orr, “Why *Her* Is the Best Film of the Year,” *The Atlantic* (20 Dec. 2013), accessed July 17, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/12/why-em-her-em-is-the-best-film-of-the-year/282544/>

<sup>7</sup> Maria Bustillos, “*Her*: This Movie Makes No Sense,” *The Awl* (10 January 2014), accessed July 17, 2014, <http://www.theawl.com/2014/01/her-this-movie-makes-no-sense>

<sup>8</sup> Actually, this is never made clear in the film. But this is the conclusion one draws once a scheme is hatched to publish some of Theodore’s letters later in the film. If it was a secret that Theodore is the author of the letters, then publication would give away the game and recipients of the letters would be outraged. But this problem never comes up. Apparently no one will be disillusioned because everyone was in on the illusion from the start. These are, after all, *Letters from Our Lives*, sentiments intended to be generically human rather than uniquely individual.

<sup>9</sup> Bustillos, “*Her*: This Movie Makes No Sense.”

<sup>10</sup> Henry James, *Novels: 1881-1886* (New York: Library of America, 1985), pp. 397-8.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it is significant that there is hardly a review of the film that does not comment on the characters’ clothing, the men’s high-waisted pants in particular. Fashion may be an area where we have already come to terms with the idea of a deprivatized or contextualized self.

<sup>12</sup> Spike Jonze speaking to Audie Cornish, “Spike Jonze Opens His Heart for *Her*.” *All Things Considered* (16 Dec. 2013) [transcript of broadcast interview], accessed July 17, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2013/12/16/251625458/spike-jonze-opens-his-heart-for-her>.

<sup>13</sup> Spike Jonze quoted in James Bell, “Computer Love,” *Sight & Sound* Vol 24:1 (Jan 2014), p. 24.

---

<sup>14</sup> It is immediately striking, though, that while the existential mood is gray, the cinematography and set design are awash in warm tones and saturated reds. Life in this near-future Los Angeles is not exactly an air-conditioned nightmare; more like an extremely comfortable, soothing setting for life's routine disappointments.

<sup>15</sup> Herman Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby Dick* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), p. 921.

<sup>16</sup> Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," *Chicago Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Autumn, 1959), p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> Maria Bustillos ruefully comments on the scene where Paul compliments Theodore on being "part man and part woman" (p. 51). As she takes it, casting Theodore as a monad, a "sealed-off hermaphroditic whole," is just further evidence of the film's solipsism.

<sup>18</sup> The relevant sense of "human" here is probably the normative or ironic one that Kierkegaard uses when he writes, for example, that "to become human does not come that easily." "Human" is not so much something any of us is as something we aspire to be, something that ordinary life leaves out. For the quote and a masterful discussion of Kierkegaard's concept of irony, see Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 3ff.

<sup>19</sup> This line of thought appears frequently in Watts. For a representative example, see *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> For Watts use of this complex of images, see "The Game of Black and White" in *The Book*, pp. 25-52; for Jonze see Orr, quoted above, and the *Her* screenplay, p. 60

<sup>21</sup> There is a similar sort of virtual three-way in *Being John Malkovich* (1999), where the body of one partner in a sex scene is inhabited by a third character. While I would hesitate to call this a "theme" in Jonze's work, I can't think of another director who has staged it once, let alone twice!

<sup>22</sup> After all, invisibility is a ghost writer's *modus vivendi*. Also note that Catherine nicknamed him "Rabbit" (p. 6), and that a later scene represents him as the virtual prey of an attacking owl (p. 80).

<sup>23</sup> Watts develops this line of thought most completely in *Psychotherapy East and West*, pp. 144-185.

<sup>24</sup> Spike Jonze in Steven Rea, "Spike Jonze's Signature Sweet-and-Sad in *Her*," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (6 Jan 2014), accessed July 17, 2014, [http://articles.philly.com/2014-01-06/news/45885499\\_1\\_spike-jonze-wild-things-maurice-sendak](http://articles.philly.com/2014-01-06/news/45885499_1_spike-jonze-wild-things-maurice-sendak). Jonze makes a similar point about Watts in Logan Hill, "A Prankster and His Films Mature." *The New York Times* (3 Nov. 2013), accessed July 17, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/movies/spike-jonze-discusses-evolution-of-her.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/movies/spike-jonze-discusses-evolution-of-her.html?_r=0).

<sup>25</sup> Watts, *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks 1960-1969* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2006), p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Watts, *Eastern Wisdom*, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Watts, *Eastern Wisdom*, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Watts, *Eastern Wisdom*, p. 44.

---

<sup>29</sup> Watts, *Nature, Man, and Woman*, p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> Watts, *Eastern Wisdom*, p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> In fact, “the way of life...is by abandonment” is a direct quote from his essay “Circles.” See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller et al., 9 vols. to date, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971- ), 2:190.

<sup>32</sup> Emerson, *Collected Works*, 4:72.

<sup>33</sup> Emerson, *Collected Works*, 2:123.

<sup>34</sup> Emerson, *Collected Works*, 2:126.

<sup>35</sup> For a suggestive study of this aspect of Emerson, see Branka Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Watts, *Eastern Wisdom*, p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> Watts, *The Meaning of Happiness: The Quest for Freedom of the Spirit in Modern Psychology and the Wisdom of the East* (New York: Perennial Library, 1970), p. v.

<sup>38</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 306-7.

<sup>39</sup> Jason Farago, “Her Is the Scariest Movie of 2013,” *The New Republic* (29 Dec. 2013) , accessed July 17, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116063/spike-jonze-her-scariest-movie-2013>

<sup>40</sup> At least a little ironic distance is implied by the fact that the original inspiration for the set design of *Her*, according to Jonze, was Jamba Juice, which he describes to a British interviewer as “a smoothie chain in the US that’s very clean, brightly lit, with a lot of warm colours. The idea was that Jamba Juice is the future! The idea of a kind of Utopian future where everything is warm and nice and comfortable, where the fabrics and the material are all tactile and there’s a lot of warm wood.” See Bell, “Computer Love,” p. 24.

### References

Arsić, Branka. *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Bell, James. “Computer Love.” *Sight & Sound* Vol 24:1 (Jan. 2014): 20-25.

Bustillos, Maria. “Her: This Movie Makes No Sense.” *The Axl* (10 January 2014). Accessed July 17, 2014. <http://www.theawl.com/2014/01/her-this-movie-makes-no-sense>

Cornish, Audie. “Spike Jonze Opens His Heart for Her.” *All Things Considered* (16 Dec. 2013) [transcript of broadcast interview]. Accessed July 17, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2013/12/16/251625458/spike-jonze-opens-his-heart-for-her>

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller et al., 9 vols. to date, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971- )

- 
- Farago, Jason. "Her Is the Scariest Movie of 2013." *The New Republic* (29 Dec. 2013). Accessed July 17, 2014. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116063/spike-jonzes-her-scariest-movie-2013>
- Hill, Logan. "A Prankster and His Films Mature." *The New York Times* (3 Nov. 2013). Accessed July 17, 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/movies/spike-jonze-discusses-evolution-of-her.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/movies/spike-jonze-discusses-evolution-of-her.html?_r=0)
- James, Henry. *Novels: 1881-1886*. New York: The Library of America, 1985.
- Jonze, Spike. *Her*. Accessed July 17, 2014. <http://www.simplyscripts.com/2014/03/02/her-best-original-screenplay-spike-jonze/>
- Lear, Jonathan. *A Case for Irony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.
- Melville, Herman. *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby Dick*. New York: The Library of America, 1983.
- Murdoch, Iris., "The Sublime and the Good," *Chicago Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Autumn, 1959): 42-55.
- Orr, Christopher. "Why Her Is the Best Film of the Year," *The Atlantic* (20 Dec. 2013). Accessed July 17, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/12/why-em-her-em-is-the-best-film-of-the-year/282544/>
- Rea, Steven. "Spike Jonze's Signature Sweet-and-Sad in Her." *Philadelphia Inquirer* (6 Jan 2014). Accessed July 17, 2014. [http://articles.philly.com/2014-01-06/news/45885499\\_1\\_spike-jonze-wild-things-maurice-sendak](http://articles.philly.com/2014-01-06/news/45885499_1_spike-jonze-wild-things-maurice-sendak)
- Smith, David. "The Authenticity of Alan Watts." In *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*, edited by Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010: pp. 13-38.
- Watts, Alan. *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks 1960-1969*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In My Own Way: An Autobiography*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Meaning of Happiness: The Quest for Freedom of the Spirit in Modern Psychology and the Wisdom of the East*. New York: Perennial Library, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nature, Man and Woman*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Psychotherapy East and West*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Tao of Philosophy: The Edited Transcripts*. Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1995.