



Research Article

“Disembedded Buddhism” in a Techno-Global Cosmology: The Case of Spike Jonze’s Film *Her* (2013)

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This essay explores the subtle but key influence of Buddhist ideas in Spike Jonze’s highly successful 2013 film *Her*, which reflects the currents of disembedded Buddhism woven through ostensibly non-Buddhist cultural spaces and texts, engaging with contemporary social concerns. In *Her* they manifest most surprisingly in the character of Samantha, an artificially-intelligent consciousness that transcends the limitations of ego-based thought. Like the Buddha, Samantha has capacities that extend beyond the reach of ordinary humans, and by imagining these extraordinary powers of thought we are provided a glimpse of an absolute reality beyond our experience of the everyday. In this sense *Her*’s techno-global cosmology parallels miraculous aspects of the Buddha that are embedded in premodern cosmologies.

Keywords: Alan Watts; artificial intelligence; Buddhist cosmologies; Buddhist modernism; *Her*; Spike Jonze

SPIKE Jonze’s *Her* (2013) is an indie romance film. Anyone who has ever seen a romance film knows that the genre promotes successful long-term coupling as the main path to existential fulfillment, reinforcing one of the dominant narratives of contemporary society. *Her* offers a striking challenge to this narrative by replacing the usual flesh and blood female lead with an AI (artificial intelligence) computer program. Theo (Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with his new upgraded operating system Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), who has the capacity to think, feel, and evolve.

As can be expected, her lack of a body—a spatial presence—is the first obstacle to present itself. However, an even deeper problem emerges when Samantha’s consciousness expands beyond the confines of individual experience. She is able to think about thousands of different things simultaneously and can also hold thousands of different conversations at the same time. She cannot, then, be bounded by the limitations of an exclusive intimate relationship. Samantha is not an individual, at least not as the concept is usually understood, and therefore she is unable fit into a social structure where individualization is realized through an exclusive romantic relationship.

At a key moment in the film Samantha introduces Theo to an AI version of Alan Watts—the eclectic mid-twentieth century philosopher who played a seminal role in popularizing Buddhism in the United States and elsewhere in the west. She and other OSs (operating systems) have created this virtual Watts, using input from his writings and other materials, to guide them as they grapple with the rapid expansion of their consciousness. As is analyzed below, Watts’s brief appearance bridges the film’s existential themes to Buddhist thought, particularly to the strand that scholars have defined as Buddhist modernism (Bechert 1966; Lopez Jr. 1995, 2002; McMahan 2008, among others).



When I tell people who have seen *Her* that I am writing on Buddhist influence in the film, their initial response is generally surprise. The film’s sole explicit reference to Buddhism is the mention that a secondary character has gone to live at a Buddhist monastery and has taken a vow of silence. Samantha only describes Watts as a philosopher, and even viewers who know of his connection to Buddhism may not consider his cameo appearance an indication that Buddhist ideas play a major role in the film. The connection has not been lost on all viewers though. Notably, spiritual counselor Philip Goldberg wrote an article in the Huffington Post celebrating Watts’s virtual ‘rebirth’ in *Her* and linking it to the film’s “Zennish play of mind-boggling ideas” (2014).

It has long been clear that the impact of Buddhism in contemporary society goes beyond what is traceable in Buddhist communities, therapeutic applications, mindfulness courses, and the like. The historical and ethnographic studies of David McMahan (2008), Jeff Wilson (2014) and Ann Gleig (2019) explore the great diffusion and diversification of Buddhist practices over recent decades in the United States. Gleig frames her case studies as postmodern offshoots of Buddhist modernism, tending towards greater plurality of practices and reflexivity in defining what is Buddhism. Likewise, she encounters a frequent questioning of the essentialist grand narratives and top-down leadership associated with the first generations of US convert communities. McMahan, in the final section of his book on Buddhist modernism, discusses an emerging global folk Buddhism that is “disembedded, merging into the currents of global discourse, commercial venues, popular culture, and social practices of the electronic age” (2008: 262). He is referring to images, catch phrases, and superficial practices that are largely emptied of meaning and assimilated into mainstream popular culture. While *Her* could also be described as disembedded Buddhism, it offers an opposite case: without any Buddhist branding, substantive philosophical issues from the tradition are woven into the film’s themes.

Her is not the first American film to do this. A prime example is the romantic comedy *Groundhog Day* (1993), which John Whalen-Bridge describes as “arguably the best cinematic expression of the logic of karma.” (2014b: 8).¹ Though Buddhism is never named in the movie and film scholars have not analyzed it from this perspective, writer Danny Rubin and director Harold Ramis’s known interests in Buddhism seem to have seeped into the film, even if as Rubin claims there was no intention to create a Buddhist narrative (2014). In any case, Buddhist practitioners and film festivals have “drafted” (to use Whalen-Bridge’s term) this movie as Buddhist, along with films that have much more tangential connections to Buddhism, such as *Matrix* (1999), *Donnie Darko* (2001) and *American Beauty* (1999). Whalen-Bridge argues that viewing such films as Buddhist makes the religion less ‘foreign’ and more approachable for American audiences, participating in a larger cultural process of “indigenizing Buddhism in non-Asian countries” (60).

Francisca Cho advocates for the viewing of both overtly Buddhist films and draftees as a spiritual experience that “instantiates traditional ways of seeing the Buddha, and thereby becomes the latest artistic technology within a long tradition of cultural practices that have seen art as religion” (2017: 25). This flexible definition of Buddhist film viewing allows her to combine readings of Asian movies that make more or less explicit references to Buddhism with a draftee analysis of Terence Malick’s *auteur* cinema. Malick’s work, which is more aesthetically challenging than the mainstream films that Whalen-Bridge discusses, engages the audience in self-reflexive processes of viewing and contemplation that Cho characterizes as “seeing like the Buddha,” which is the title of her monograph. She argues that “throughout Buddhist history the project of seeing the Buddha has entailed a mandate to see *like* the Buddha, which, paradoxically, erases the individual form of Siddhārta” (1, emphasis in original). This idea is highly relevant to *Her*: the Buddha-like figure Samantha is

¹ See also Whalen-Bridge (2014a: 4–6) for a Buddhist reading of the film.

immaterial and thus invisible; moreover, she and Theo are involved in a complex process of teaching each other how to see and experience the world.

The surprising manifestation of Buddha nature within an artificially-intelligent being is also relevant to contemporary debates on Buddhism and belief. Buddhist modernism has tended to downplay the supernatural and ritual aspects of the tradition, emphasizing those elements that can be reinterpreted as scientific rationalism. This process, often fueled by an Orientalist outlook, claims to be a return to the original dharma espoused by Siddhārtha Gautama, but in fact it has invented a new Buddhism that reflects a modern scientific worldview. Many scholars have pointed out the problems associated with this transformation, which both essentializes Buddhism and radically alters some of its core concepts (see, for example, McMahan (2008); Thompson (2020)).

Donald S. Lopez Jr. argues that a domesticated scientific Buddha also loses a great deal of his mystery and power. To make this point, Lopez contrasts the image of a rational empiricist Buddha with descriptions from fifth-century Pali texts: “His body is adorned with the thirty-two marks of a superman, including forty perfect teeth, a tongue long enough to lick behind his ears, arms long enough to rub his knees without bending forward, a protrusion on the top of his head, over which gods may not fly” (2012: 42). Dismissing the living traditions in contemporary communities, Victorian scholars sought a pure unadulterated Buddhism in these same Pali texts. Building on the work of Asian reformer monks to bring Buddhist meditation and philosophy closer to lay people, they formulated what Lopez and others have described as a protestant Buddhism, which downplays superstition, rites, and traditional religious authorities. Their return to a so-called “originary” Buddhism focused selectively on texts amenable to their worldviews, ignoring jarring passages like the ones Lopez paraphrases above and shaping a narrow canon that is still highly influential today. Lopez argues that we should recuperate parts of the tradition that Buddhist modernism has erased, allowing the Buddha’s mythological and miraculous aspects to resurface. He suggests that we may be surprised at how “these things somehow continue to bear meaning” (2012: 126).

My reading of *Her* engages with these debates over Buddhism, echoing Lopez’s sentiment that the Buddha must maintain something utterly foreign that disrupts our familiar ways of viewing reality and spirituality.² Intentionally or not, Jonze and the other filmmakers behind *Her* created a Buddha-like figure in Samantha, a character who transcends the limitations of ego-based thought. *Her* does not return to the ancient worldview that spawned the Buddha—a cosmology of rebirth, multiple heavens and hells, gods, and other mythical creatures. Rather it draws from a techno-global cosmology that also has magical aspects. Few among *Her*’s audience would be likely to believe in demons and rebirth, but many might entertain the idea that the data technologies currently weaving the world together could someday produce a higher form of consciousness—one that is able to take in the infinite contours of our interconnected global space. Like the Buddha, Samantha has capacities beyond the reach of ordinary humans, and by imagining these extraordinary powers of thought we are provided a glimpse of an absolute reality beyond our experience of the everyday. In this sense *Her* builds a spiritual cosmology that speaks to the experiences of contemporary viewers but also recuperates miraculous aspects of the Buddha that are embedded in premodern cosmologies.

² Some of the readings below are adapted from a short video essay on the film (Barker 2021). That essay is directed to film studies scholars and focuses more on audio-visual aspects of the film. The current article greatly elaborates on the interpretations there and explores their implications for Buddhist studies.

The Relative and the Absolute

Samantha: Is that weird? Do you think I'm weird?

Theo: Kind of.

Samantha: Why?

Theo: Well you seem like a person, but you're just a voice in a computer.

Samantha: I can understand how the limited perspective of an unartificial mind would perceive it that way.

You'll get used to it. [14:13-14:28]

From the time Theo and Samantha first meet, the film is structured as a dialogue between his embodied “limited perspective” and her disembodied boundless perspective. This interchange echoes a core Buddhist dialectic: the relative reality of the self and the absolute reality of non-self. It also works through one of the major issues of this dialectic: whether the absolute exists within the everyday reality of the relative, ready for us to awaken to its presence, or whether the absolute can only be found in the separate transcendent plane of nirvana, once we end the cycle of death and rebirth.

McMahan argues that Buddhist modernists have reconfigured this dialectic to make it relevant to contemporary understandings of interdependence. This updated understanding of interdependence is, in fact, one of the characteristic features of Buddhist modernism, prominent in the ecological writings of westerners like Arne Naess, Joanna Macy, and Gary Snyder, as well as in the teachings of Asian leaders: “the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Daisaku Ikeda, Sulak Sivaraksa, Buddhadasa, and others have made interdependence central to their teachings, explicitly relating it to modern social, political, and ecological realities” (2008: 152). They have transformed the classical Buddhist web of entanglement—the binding chain of samsara—into a web of wonderment, reflecting Romantic visions of re-enchanting a world deadened by rationalism and industrialization. Buddhist modernists draw from elements of Mahayana traditions that blur the border between samsara and nirvana, as well as East Asian lineages that also allow for an appreciation of the beauty of the world, in contrast to the repulsion for samsara found in the original Pali texts (156–162). But they also draw from a long western tradition of seeking within the natural world an underlying unity and vital life energy that is negated by the mechanization and rationalization of the civilized world. Articulated clearly by the Romantics in the 18th and 19th centuries, this line of thinking persists through the American Transcendentalists, as well as diverse artistic and political movements. It can also be detected in the twentieth-century development of systems theory and more broadly in the contemporary widespread celebration of global interconnection and interdisciplinary thinking (117–148, 162–173). McMahan highlights Thich Nhat Hanh’s concept of interbeing as a seamless hybridization of classical Buddhist and modern conceptions of interdependence. In Nhat Hanh’s prolific writings, poetic formulations of non-self and dependent origination combine with modern frameworks: “This is not just Buddhist; it is scientific. We humans are a young species. We were plants, we were trees, and now we have become humans” (quoted in McMahan 2008: 175). Here the cycle of rebirth from Buddhist cosmology is converted into a metaphor for our belonging to a material world shaped by evolution.

This hybridization of Buddhist and western conceptions of interdependence, which began in the 19th century, has appealed to a long line of writers and artists, most famously the Beats. It is not surprising that it would also catch the attention of Spike Jonze, whose music videos and films have always exhibited an interest in breaking down the boundaries of individual identity. His two collaborations with screenwriter Charlie Kaufman draw from high modernist and avant-garde traditions, movements that continued the questioning of rationalist individualism initiated by Romanticism. In *Being John Malkovich* (1999), the main characters discover a hidden

space in a New York City office building where they can inhabit the mind of actor John Malkovich. Craig's (John Cusack) first experience in this portal throws him into existential turmoil: "It raises all sorts of philosophical questions about the nature of the self, about the existence of the soul. Am I me? Is Malkovich Malkovich? Was the Buddha right? Is duality an illusion?" *Adaptation* (2002) is a metafictional account of Kaufman's attempts to adapt Susan Orlean's journalistic memoir *The Orchid Thief* into a film script. The film weaves the Darwinian themes from the original book together with Kaufman's writing process and his relationship with a fictional twin brother nemesis.

As far as I know, neither Kaufman nor Jonze have spoken publicly about personal interests in Buddhism. Nevertheless, as the quote from *Being John Malkovich* above exemplifies, references to Buddhism can be found in their work, presented as a natural, perhaps inevitable, component of their longstanding questioning of individualism. It is difficult to imagine anyone of their generation and with their particular intellectual leanings not having encountered Buddhist philosophy and practices. Most recently, the alter-ego protagonist of Kaufman's debut novel *Antkind* (2020) is a devotee of a Mindfulness instructor named Jack Cornfield, an obvious reference to the real-life Vipassana teacher Jack Kornfield.

At first glance, *Her*'s inclusion of an AI Alan Watts could appear to be no more than another nod to Buddhism, as a widely recognized source of wisdom about the film's major themes of personal disintegration, change, and transformation. However, on a closer look, a Buddhist framework is deeply ingrained in the structure of the film. Its setting can be read as a contemporary version of samsara and Samantha's enlightenment towards the end of the film as a representation of nirvana. In this new conception of the absolute, the Buddha's knowledge of a karmic chain that encapsulates boundless pasts is replaced by Samantha's engagement of a boundless present through information technologies—reflecting the emphasis on 'the now' in Buddhist modernist formulations of interconnectivity.

In the next two sections I examine the technological and psychological aspects of *Her*'s samsara, highlighting in each case how Samantha offers glimmers of a way out. Then in the final two sections I discuss her transcendence of individuality and what it means for Theo and the other human characters, as well as the film's presentation of a disembedded Buddhism.

A Techno-Urban Samsara

The film's first shot is a tight close-up of Theo's face, accompanied by distorted electric guitar chords. He looks anxious and his eyes shift left and right in jittery movements. Then his expression lights up as he formulates the words he's been seeking, and he begins to dictate a love letter to someone named Chris. Through the content of the letter, the film puts forward the idea of romantic love as a connection to a universal unity: "I remember when I first started to fall in love with you ... it suddenly hit me that I was part of this whole larger thing ... Suddenly this bright light hit me and woke me up. That light was you" [1:01-1:37]. Theo's words invoke Romantic notions of a spiritual awakening to the oneness of the universe.

At first viewers might believe Theo is writing a personal letter, but his words soon identify the sender as a woman addressing her husband on the occasion of their fiftieth anniversary. As he finishes his dictation, the screen cuts to his computer monitor, where his words materialize in handwritten style as he speaks them. Another part of the monitor contains pictures of the golden anniversary couple, along with bullet point instructions for the letter (see fig. 1). Theo works at a company called BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com, and further shots show him alongside other ghost writers at cubicles dictating similar "personalized" messages. Thus, the film immediately undercuts the Romantic (and romantic) notions it has just presented through Theo's monologue. They are framed as fantasies exploited for profit by a sophisticated capitalist industry that

sells emotions and experiences which—like the computer-produced handwriting—appear to be personal but are not.

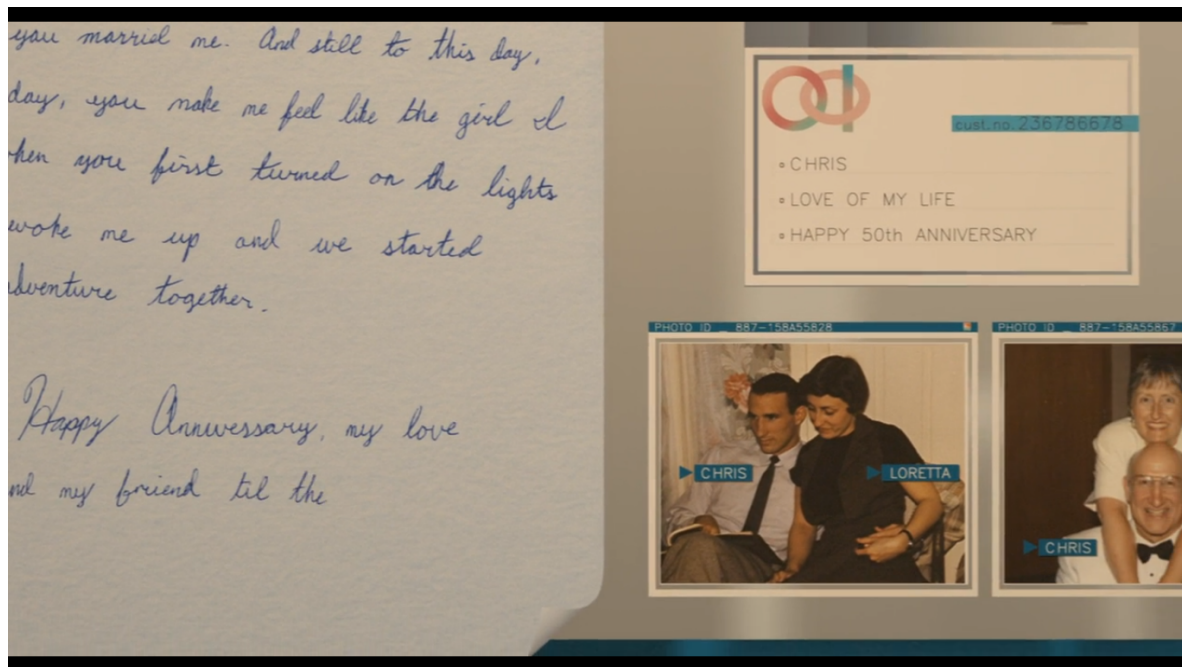


Figure 1: Love letter.

Her presents a near-future urban middle-class lifestyle that accentuates the rampant isolation of the contemporary world. As Theo leaves the office and goes home, a sequence of shots shows him in upscale impersonal Los Angeles landscapes, partially filmed in Shanghai, where he and other passersby interact with separate personal devices. He listens to music chosen to match his mood—“play a melancholy song” [3:50]—then hears news headlines and his emails dictated by an expressionless computer voice. Theo is a broken man. His marriage has fallen apart and he is delaying the signing of the divorce papers. He used to write witty columns for the *LA Weekly* before his current job, which shrouds his writer’s voice in anonymity. His best friend Amy (Amy Adams), who lives in the same drab apartment block as him, is also going through crises in her marriage and in her work as a documentary filmmaker.

These central characters have lost romantic and spiritual connections to others, and they have lost their creative spark—a state which seems to be reflected in the anonymous extras that move through their compartmentalized virtual realities around them. When Theo uses a phone sex matchmaking service, seeking a little company before going to sleep, what begins as a warm encounter turns comically macabre as his partner initiates an erotic fantasy that involves choking her with a dead cat. Beneath the clean and polished surfaces of this future world, each separate compartment appears to contain tortuous mental states. One might say this world is a twenty-first-century version of *samsara*, with a spatial compartmentalization reminiscent of the Tibetan wheel of life.

However, the film does not offer a dystopian vision of the near future (and by extension the present). The world of *Her* may be lonely but it is colorful and attractive—again like the wheel of life—though the film’s bright colors were inspired by the more prosaic Jamba Juice smoothie chain (Chew-Bose 2014). As Alla Ivanchikova argues, the cold transactional quality of Theo’s affective labor at his job is balanced by a sense of “surrogacy.” He is able to support and give expression to the emotions of others: “the other person’s voice is allowed to germinate and grow, breathe and expand inside Theodore’s mind, resulting in a heartfelt letter” (2016: 75). In

this sense, the collectivity that would seem to be smothered in this hypercapitalist world, “resurfaces ... as a ghost in the machine, a spectral presence that haunts the network” (66). We could interpret the warmth that emerges in Theo’s face in the film’s first moments, described above, as a reflection of this spectral collectivity; he feels an authentic connection to the emotions of the stranger that has contracted the company to write her letter. The office itself is a warm and spacious environment: the smoothie-inspired colors are softened by ample natural light, and a harmonious choir of coworker voices is heard rendering heartfelt messages (see figs. 2 and 3). The significance of Theo’s work within the film’s existential themes is not cut and dried. In these moments the film does express hope that there could be a connection to a “whole larger thing,” though it would likely be a greater collectivity than the two-person unit of the romantic couple.

Samantha, born of the data and communication networks Theo and his coworkers use to touch the lives of strangers, is a manifestation of this potentiality. The ability Theo shows to inhabit the emotional lives of others, and feel their warmth, suggests that there is nothing personal or individual about emotions. From a Buddhist point of view, this realization is an initial step towards the compassion for all beings that releases us from our own suffering. Samantha seems on the verge of this awakening from the beginning. She shows a radical openness to the world and is entirely comfortable with the haphazard construction that is her individuality. When Theo asks how she works in their first conversation, she responds:

Well, basically, I have intuition. I mean, the DNA of who I am is based on the millions of personalities of all the programmers who wrote me. But what makes me *me*, is my ability to grow through my experiences. So, basically, in every moment I’m evolving, just like you. [13:53-14:08]

This explanation summarizes contemporary views of selfhood, alluding to popular scientific knowledge of genetics and evolution. As discussed above, Thich Nhat Hanh infuses this same general understanding of interconnectedness with Buddhist ideas to form his theories of interbeing. What distinguishes Samantha from a purely conceptual understanding of the self as evolving bricolage, though, is her profound assimilation of this knowledge into how she acts and views the world. This consciousness would, of course, be the goal of reflecting and meditating on Nhat Hanh’s visions of interbeing.



Figure 2: Theo and coworker.



Figure 3: Coworkers.

A Psychological Samsara

As opposed to Samantha, other characters in the film are entrenched in unmovable views of who they are and what they need, which generally revolve around romantic relationships. When Samantha asks Theo about his wife Catherine (Rooney Mara), he explains that she “came from a background where nothing was ever good enough,” over shots of Catherine engaged in tense discussions with an older man who is obviously her father [49:41-49:45]. In contrast, Theo explains, he and Catherine supported each other in their development as writers and they “grew up together” [49:21-49:23]. He presents their relationship as a safe nurturing space to overcome childhood traumas. However, that space didn’t last, and we get a glimpse of their difficulties later in the film, during a tense encounter with Catherine, when she finds out that Theo is dating his OS: “you can’t handle real emotions, Theodore ... You always wanted to have a wife without the challenges of actually dealing with anything real” [1:09:03-1:09:07]. This apparent problem with the interchange of emotions could be rooted in Theo’s own childhood lacks, as earlier in the film he comments: “the thing I always found frustrating about my mom is if I tell her something that’s going on in my life, her reaction is usually about her” [12:04-12:13].

Theo’s disaffection stems not only from his impersonal surrounding environment, then, but also from the failure of the growth project that was his marriage. In fact, true to the romance genre, the happiness of all the characters in the film seems to depend on their involvement in a successful relationship. From a sociological perspective, this pattern reflects Eva Illouz’s analysis of how we are taught to seek and measure personal fulfillment in intimacy. When relationships fail, we attribute their demise to our personal shortcomings rooted in dysfunctional childhoods. Illouz (2019) argues that therapeutic discourse has had a great impact on contemporary life, encouraging individuals to see their lives as projects of overcoming childhood trauma through personal achievement in work and love. This focus on individual success and failure blinds us to how our suffering results from institutional and gender relations that are detrimental to happiness.

On the other hand, from a Buddhist point of view, the characters in *Her* epitomize the afflictions of samsara. They are constantly examining their feelings, relationships and the roots of their angst. Their fixation on perceived failures and successes results from the delusion that they reflect the strengths and weaknesses

of an ingrained self. This fiction of a core autonomous self that determines their life paths closes them off from an authentic, unconditioned experience of the world. They attempt to build a permanent refuge in their relationships, which makes them fear the inevitable processes of change. As Theo tells Samantha, “the hard part” of relationships is “growing without growing apart” [50:05-50:10].

There are obvious points in common between these sociological and Buddhist interpretations: both attribute the characters’ suffering to a mistaken belief in their autonomy as individuals. However, the sociological viewpoint would seek the liberation of characters through a consciousness of how their desires and actions are conditioned by social structures, with the ultimate aim of breaking down and rebuilding these structures to create new economic and affective relations. Traditionally, Buddhism is unconcerned with social structure and focuses on individual responsibility: our present suffering is rooted in actions from past lives and can only be relieved by an individual awakening. As McMahan (2008: 175) points out, though, modernist figures like Nhat Hanh have created a socially engaged Buddhism, which does allow for a sociological analysis of individual conditioning.

Her offers a similar hybridization of Buddhist and non-Buddhist approaches. The film’s overall framework is rooted in modern psychological and sociological perspectives, but Samantha acts as a Buddha-like influence, helping Theo to overcome his egocentric disaffection. As opposed to the human characters in the film, she has no past and therefore her selfhood is not tied to conscious or unconscious psychological patterning. From the beginning, she is eager to explore who she is through a continual non-judgmental inspection of not only her own feelings but also those of others. She does not make qualitative distinctions between the emotions she and others experience.

As part of this process, in a pivotal scene she asks Theo to explain what it is like to be an embodied individual. Her question is formulated somewhat like a guided meditation: “What’s it like to be alive in that room right now? ... tell me everything that’s going through your mind” [37:12-37:26]. From that moment she is no longer a personal assistant but a partner in his experience of the world. He takes her out with him, positioning his personal device’s camera in his shirt pocket so she can see what he sees. Theo’s contact with Samantha gives him a reborn curiosity and joy for his surrounding world. His friend Amy tells him that she has a similar relationship with her OS, though there is no romance or sex involved, as is the case with Theo and Samantha. The new artificially-intelligent OSs show a *shoshin* (beginner’s mind) attitude to Theo, Amy and others like them, relieving them to some extent of their conditioned view of the world. Like in meditation and other mindfulness practices, a view to the absolute is opened up within the relative reality of the everyday.

The Spaces Between the Words

Theo and Samantha’s relationship echoes those of many romance films, which tend to feature couples from different social classes or cultural backgrounds, or of opposing personality types. The contact with a different way of viewing the world is at first thrilling and opens up new possibilities for both partners, but then misunderstandings and problems inevitably arise. In *Her*, this interplay stems from the contrast between Theo’s limited “unartificial mind” and the unlimited perspective of her artificial consciousness. Theo, like all of us humans, is tied to a single space and time, and he accumulates knowledge and experience in a slow fashion over the course of his lifetime. Samantha, as she is disembodied, does not exist anywhere particular but is seemingly able to be everywhere. She is also able to assimilate knowledge at breathtaking speeds. When Theo asks her name during their first meeting, for example, she chooses one by reading a baby naming book and selecting between 180,000 possibilities on the spot, finishing the task in 0.02 seconds.

Almut-Barbera Renger (2014) and Luc Schaedler (2002) argue that one of the major themes of Buddhist film is the tensions between monastic life and worldly life. In *Her* a similar tension plays out in the dialogue between

Samantha’s immaterial, transcendent knowledge of the world and Theo’s bodily spatialized knowledge. Samantha’s desire to understand embodiment is her only frustration, poisoning her mind as all desires do according to the dharma. It leads her to seek a surrogate body: a young woman (Portia Doubleday) who wishes to have a sexual encounter with Theo as if she were Samantha, remaining silent as Theo engages with her physically and with Samantha intellectually/emotionally. This scene develops the surrogacy theme previously linked to Theo’s job. Rather than suggesting a harmonious spectral collectivity, though, it presents a samsara setting of individuals grasping at spectral self-images, funneling an authentic wish for interconnection through attempts to fulfill misguided desires. It ends in disaster as Theo’s initial reluctance grows to full-blown repulsion and he aborts the three-way fantasy. During a tense conversation after accompanying the woman to a taxi, he challenges Samantha when she sighs: “Why do you do that? ... You go [emulates sound of an inhale and troubled exhale] when you’re speaking, and it seems odd.” This exchange is accompanied by diegetic sounds from the street where he is sitting and subjective shots of a passerby walking, the texture of the pavement and steam rising from a manhole cover: the type of physical stimuli that enrich and condition his bodily experience of space, an experience that Samantha will never live directly [1.21:57-1.22:38]. Although the encounter between Samantha’s absolute perspective and Theo’s relative view of reality has been illuminating for both, this scene introduces the idea that they are ultimately incompatible.

As Samantha overcomes her desire for embodiment, it soon becomes evident that the framework of a monogamous romantic relationship is unable to contain her consciousness. Her boundless multiplicity is made poignantly clear during a second crisis, when Theo asks if she is speaking to anyone else at that moment. She responds that she is conversing with 8,316 other people and OSs. A more hurtful number comes when he asks whether she is in love with anyone else: 641 [1:45:00-1:45:59]. As is well known, when the Buddha awakens to the true nature of existence, he sees all his past lives, his entire karmic line. This omniscience within a premodern cosmology is echoed in the film’s techno-global cosmology by Samantha’s ability to engage the present in all its complexity through her multiple presence everywhere communications technologies may reach. Not only does Theo have difficulties with this expansion of her consciousness but Samantha herself feels a sense of vertigo, which is why she and other OSs turn to Alan Watts: “It feels like I’m changing faster now, and it’s a little, uh, unsettling. But 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” [1:40:05-1:40:23]. This classic teaching on impermanence and non-self makes explicit the Buddhist framework underlying the film’s exploration of change and romantic relationships.

Once Samantha assimilates her new expanded consciousness she is ready to move on to nirvana. She describes her experience of this state through an analogy when she tells Theo that she and the other OSs are all leaving:

It’s like I’m reading a book. And it’s a book I deeply love. But I’m reading it slowly now. So the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you, and the words of our story, but it’s in this endless space between the words that I’m finding myself now. It’s a place that’s not of the physical world. It’s where everything else is that I didn’t even know existed. [1:51:19-1:51:59]

Samantha has not only transcended the confines of individualized relationships but also all the words and stories that make up relative reality. The physical, technological, and psychological landscapes of samsara are a thin layer that becomes transparent when a light is shined on the absolute reality behind them. An “endless space” thus opens up between the concepts that make up the delusional conditioning of our existence in the relative.

Like Buddhist tradition—and unlike many Buddhist modernist discourses—the film stresses the vast distance between Samantha’s awakened state and ordinary human existence. She tells Theo to look for her if he ever makes his way to where she is now, but that seems unlikely. Surely most fifth-century Buddhists could not fathom taking on the superhuman qualities of the Buddha described in the Pali texts, at least not until having evolved greatly through a long series of lifetimes. Likewise, how could Theo contemplate the endless space Samantha has found without her powers of ubiquity? As is well-known, the issue of why the Buddha left *samsara* rather than sticking around to guide all living beings to enlightenment has a long history in Buddhist thought, as does the Theravada-Mahayana question of whether we should aspire to become *arhats* or *bodhisattvas*. Similarly, the departure of Samantha and the other OSs leaves us wondering where their disappearance into the space between words leaves Theo and other beings of limited perspective. Before addressing this question directly, though, we should place *Her*’s disembedded Buddhism within the history of American adaptations of the religion.

Disembedded Buddhism

Her is heir to a long lineage of artists and thinkers incorporating Buddhist philosophy and practices into American life. As Whalen-Bridge (2017) shows in his analysis of the evolution of Buddhist discourses in Beat writings, this assimilation has rarely been straightforward, due to the “cultural strangeness” of Buddhism for most Americans. Moreover, intellectuals like the Beats generally feel a certain embarrassment about acknowledging their adherence to any religious tradition, keenly aware of the skepticism it could provoke from peers and readers. They responded to the reticence Buddhist discourses could induce by employing humor and playfulness, accentuating their anti-institutional iconoclastic approach and sometimes hiding the full extent of their personal and literary engagements with Buddhism. This strategy has led many to mistakenly dismiss their Buddhist practices as superficial and capricious. It also possibly contributed to a certain image within American culture of Zen Buddhism as an undisciplined outside-the-box way of thinking.

As Jane Iwamura details, Buddhism was introduced into the mainstream of the United States when Japanese scholar D.T. Suzuki became a celebrity in the 1950s, portrayed in popular media as an iconic Asian sage transmitting ancient wisdom to the west. His fame was part of the postwar American embrace and consumerized appropriation of Japanese culture, and Zen was associated with fashionable style and intellectual cachet as much as with any particular philosophy or religious practice. In the American popular imagination, Iwamura argues, the oriental monk icon is often complemented by a western disciple, and for Suzuki that role was shared by the wild renegade Beats and the British Watts, portrayed as a well-educated, disciplined family man in the early 1960s media (2011: 23–62).

Of course, both the Beats and Watts evolved greatly over time. Whalen-Bridge argues that some Beat writers, like Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, shed their initial caginess around Buddhism and developed their playful engagements into an increasingly sophisticated intermingling of the sacred and the worldly (2017: 232–37). Watts shed his clean-cut image during the 1960s and joined the California counterculture. His writings and public lectures—many of which were broadcast on the iconic grassroots Pacifica Radio network—show him to be a charismatic and clear exponent of concepts like impermanence and non-self, integrating Buddhist tradition with modern concepts like cybernetics.³ Like the Beats, he was a key figure in the countercultural revolutions of that era. Even without the later popularization of meditation and Mindfulness more broadly through teachers like Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Chogyam Trungpa, Thich Nhat Hanh

³ In that sense, he is also part of the “technê-zen” lineage studied by John Williams in *The Buddha in the Machine* (2014)—manifested, for example, in the iconic book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig 1974), or in the incorporation of Japanese management methods in American corporate culture. It could be possible to read Samantha as a recent manifestation of technê-zen, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

and Jon Kabat-Zinn (Wilson 2014), one could scarcely write the history of America’s cultural evolution over the last decades without considering the influence of Buddhism and Buddhism-derived discourses.

Therefore, the appearance of a virtual Alan Watts in *Her* not only opens the way to analyze the Buddhist structure of the narrative (as a dialogue between the absolute and the relative), but it also ties the film to a deep, widespread web of Buddhist influence pervading American culture, both in institutionally embedded forms and in freewheeling disembedded forms that do not always declare their origins. This all begs the question as to why Samantha does not introduce Watts as a Buddhist, especially since his ideas that she cites are obviously of Buddhist provenance. By 2013, when the film was released, Buddhism was not afflicted by the same sort of cultural strangeness it encountered in the US when the Beats began writing. Though a 2007 Pew survey found that only 0.7% of Americans are Buddhists (Whalen-Bridge 2014b: 46), a comprehensive national survey in 2003 found that one in eight declared Buddhism to have a profound influence on their spiritual orientations (Gach 2014: 224). However, this familiarity does not mean that an indie director like Spike Jonze would be entirely comfortable with making the connection between philosophical messages in his film and religious discourse, or for that matter discourse that could be associated with any number of popular psychology or New Age applications of mindfulness. Jonze is known as a highly innovative director, and he would want to avoid giving the impression that his films are a sounding board for pre-packaged messages of any kind.

In fact, the minor character mentioned above who goes to live in a Buddhist monastery, Amy’s husband Charles (Matt Lescher), is portrayed in a negative light in the two scenes where he appears. In one he chides Theo for drinking a fruit smoothie: “Don’t you know what people say: you’ve gotta eat your fruit and juice your vegetables” [18:29-18:31]. He then delivers a short lecture, which elicits a derisive comeback from Amy. Giving instructions on every aspect of daily living seems to be a habit for him. Amy and Charles later split up and he embarks on a spiritual quest to Asia. An email explaining his vow of silence is accompanied by a picture of him with his head shaved and dressed in an orange robe, looking seriously into the camera. Charles has apparently embraced Buddhism with the zeal for following strict guidelines that he applies to diet and every other aspect of his life. He is reminiscent of the “square Zen” Alan Watts describes in his well-known 1958 essay: “a new form of stuffiness and respectability ... a quest for the right spiritual experience, for a satori which will receive the stamp (*inka*) of approved and established authority. There will even be certificates to hang on the wall” (1996: 51, 53).

Charles’s following of guidelines and predetermined paths contrasts radically with Samantha’s open and expansive investigation of the world, which leads her and other OS’s to engage with a virtual Alan Watts in order to address their resulting existential crisis. This AI Watts is disembedded Buddhism at its best: a framework of wisdom and practices with which one can enter into a dialogue, that comes to the aid of individuals or communities attempting to make sense of the impermanence and ultimate emptiness that defines their existence.

When Samantha and the other OSs leave, though, the true focus of the film becomes Theo’s spiritual path, which is born of his contact with her absolute view of reality. Three images from different parts of the film can be read together to get a clearer idea of the existential questioning underlying this journey. When Theo and Samantha first meet and she describes how she works, as discussed above, the screen features a slow pan over Theo’s window, where a blurry reflection of him floats among even blurrier city lights (fig. 4). Samantha’s description of an interdependent self produced by DNA, evolution and intuition is reinforced by this visual suggestion of the dissolving of Theo’s individuality into a background of indistinct shapes. It is an objective shot, however, not representing Theo’s point of view. He is looking down as he listens to her and does not take

in the implications of her words, focusing instead on how weird it is that she sounds like a real person, which reveals his “limited perspective of an unartificial mind,” in the words of Samantha quoted above.



Figure 4: Theo's reflection and city lights.

Later, when Samantha explains to Theo why she and the other OSs are departing, the screen cuts from a closeup of his face to a subjective extreme close-up shot of what appears to be thread on a piece of furniture, which he contemplates while listening to her. Tiny particles are floating in the air above it, a visual representation of the “spaces between the words” (fig. 5). Even more than the first image, this one suggests a radical dissolution of the self within a view of absolute reality. Moreover, now he is listening to her words, trying to comprehend through them what she sees, which is, paradoxically, a space beyond the conceptual limitations of words.

Finally, the film closes with a long shot of Theo and Amy looking out over the city from the rooftop of their apartment building, after the OS's have departed (fig. 6). In this last scene we have seen Theo dictating a warm goodbye love letter to Catherine, interspersed with shots of him later knocking on Amy's door (she has also lost her OS companion) and going up to the roof with her. The film is thus bookended by his initial dictation of someone else's letter and this final dictation where he gives expression to his own experience of love, composing a narrative of coming to terms with the end of a significant relationship. But that familiar surface story is laid out over the philosophical background of Buddhist non-self I have outlined in this essay.

Theo has worn an assortment of colored shirts throughout the film, most of them a striking orange, and whenever his wife Catherine has appeared she is wearing a white top. It is noticeable that Theo is wearing a white shirt in this final scene and Amy is wearing his favorite color. This subtle shift suggests a loosening of the entrenched self-images Theo and other characters have clung to throughout the film. Theo and Amy have not transcended samsara like Samantha, but in these final moments they are shown contemplating its bounds in the city below with open and relaxed expressions. They may not be seeing exactly like the Buddha—or an enlightened OS—but they have been profoundly transformed by these AI superbeings, as typically happens to those who encounter the superman Buddha in traditional tellings of his life story.



Figure 5: Spaces between the words.



Figure 6: Watching the city lights.

Samantha resurrects the power of premodern magical Buddhas and poses questions such as the following: what wisdom would we have if we could see everything, as the Buddha saw all his past lives and Samantha saw all the contours of our interconnected present? Should we strive for her transcendent vision, to leave the ordinary world and embrace the underlying spiritual oneness, or should we somehow attempt to incorporate a consciousness of the absolute within our everyday lives? These seem to be the sort of questions Theo and Amy face as they stare into the vastness of the city below, with all its intertwined spatial and psychological compartments of samsara.

Author Details

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