Spike Jonze's *Her*: Love and the Science Fiction Film

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Science Fiction and Tragedy; or Science Fiction as Opposed to Tragedy

In light of the role that tragedy has played in histories of the philosophy of art, not to mention the place that tragedy occupies in culture, and in thinking about human life and its suffering, mapping out a film genre today benefits from setting that genre in some relationship to tragedy and to the terms in which philosophy has understood tragedy. This is not a requirement for the philosophical and critical treatment of a film genre. But it has made a good heuristic in the past and may well continue to do so.[1]

To my mind a productive relationship still unexplored brings science fiction film up against Greek tragedy. A powerful intuition would set the two against each other as rival even contradictory genres, given that science fiction trades on open possibility and tragedy unfolds in necessity. Classical tragedy told serious stories from a distant past in which although things could happen that no longer did, still given those mythic possibilities the old story was incapable of changing. The tragedy's plot tried to fix that necessity: Certain events guarantee the ones that follow, as Aristotle indicates in his account of a plot's causal mechanism.[2] Science fiction by contrast typically enters the future and invites thoughts about what could happen although it has not yet. Limbs rejuvenate and dead brains live again, at least according to a caricature of science fiction.[3] As Stanley Cavell was moved to remark, "science fiction cannot house tragedy because in it human limitations can from the beginning be by-passed."[4]

I believe, although the larger question is not my topic now, that a fresh investigation of the two genres will find a way of going further than such an opposition. In particular we'd want to pick up on ancient tragedy's look into the distant past with moral and political concerns of the Athenian present in which tragedies were performed; for science fiction similarly tends to orient itself toward a future in which, despite obvious differences from the present, the moral and political concerns of that modern present motivate the audience's assessment of the future. Indeed I suspect that science fiction is one of the things you do with the impulse to create tragedy if the mythic past is no longer available as the impossible other time in which to discover the present.

But rather than argue all the way toward such conclusions, I will content myself for the moment with noting one point of likeness between the genres, in the hopes that the point will illuminate something larger about films (not only science fiction films) and their audiences.[5]

The stage in an ancient tragedy frequently contained an altar or a statue, mainly because Greek tragedy set most of its stories around sanctuaries, temples, and tombs, to fit with the prophecies, purifications, sacrifices, and negotiation over fugitives that occur in many tragic plots. The altars called for in almost all extant tragedies had either statues on them or aniconic shapes that could be addressed as gods, for example as Cassandra appeals to Apollo late in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon.* And even in the absence of conclusive visual evidence, there are surviving illustrations on one red-figure *kratêr* and on a *kylix* that appear to show a Dionysus figure upon an altar in the presence of a dramatic chorus, which would imply that such a figure had been present in the theater's dramatic space or orchestra.[6]

With statues so widely available to it, tragedy was able to use those objects to comment on the art of drama, making the statue work as a sibling to tragedy's art. In that era that saw many

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analogies drawn between art forms, this relationship between tragedy and sculpture could accent the themes within a given play, and also highlight what we now call the tragic paradox.[7] Sculptural objects inspire pleasure while occasioning mourning, as tragedy peculiarly did.

Take the *Ion* of Euripides, set at Delphi, whose Athenian chorus upon entering stops to admire the scenes engraved on Apollo's temple.[8] Heracles slays the Hydra and Bellerophon slays the Chimera; the gods fight off the great revolt by giants. The temple's artwork *terpsei* "delights" the viewer – except for Creusa who, having her rape by Apollo in mind, weeps at this glorification of the Olympians.[9]

In the engravings, as in the plot of the *Ion*, the Olympian gods establish their world order by vanquishing serpentine and otherwise chthonic creatures.[10] The sculptures function as a visual correlate to the play, or its synecdoche; represent what may cause sorrow; and nevertheless delight their audiences.

As Greek tragedy occurs around statues and sculptures, science fiction film contains artificial intelligence and artificially intelligent art forms that parallel and simulate the science fiction film. These elements within the two kinds of drama are in opposite ways partial humans. Where an ancient statue presents the lookalike to a human body without human thought or voice, the artificially intelligent device in science fiction usually possesses thought and voice but not a human body.

The points of resemblance between an artificial intelligence and the film it's in may be as fleeting as the holographic snippet of Princess Leia that R2D2 projects in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), or as disturbing as the ubiquitous cameras of super-computer Colossus in *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (Joseph Sargent, 1970). The parallel may appear within the plot. Near the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) the de- activation of Hal ushers in a disjointed non-explanatory sequence of scenarios, as if to indicate that the narrative proceeds in this other manner in the absence of rationality, thus as if Hal thinks in the same way the film narration does. With Hal gone, the story can leapfrog through time to end with an ending closer to visionary fantasy (fittingly evoking the variety of science fiction found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).

Parallel or not, the reference to artificial intelligence forces Cavell's question about the disappearance of human limitations. Artificial intelligence means by definition a thinking not bound to the limits that human thought is subject to, therefore a bypassing of human limitations at least in the artificially intelligent device. The other question, though, and the question that I find to be still open, is what an artificial intelligence can say or mean about the limitations that old-style humans, even those once found in tragedy, remain subject to.

Artificial Intelligence in *Her*

The film *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013), which takes as its subject artificial intelligence and its place in human love, ends in a sense as *2001* ends, with the departure of that intelligence from lives led according to (for want of a better term) natural intelligence. Aptly the end finds the two central human characters blinking in unaccustomed sunlight, as when exiting a movie matinee. Such is life after operating systems and after the final credits have rolled.

How much an artificial intelligence can make possible that had not been possible before it is not a marginal consideration in *Her* but the center and point of its story. At first that story imagines robotics as a solution to the problem of romance. Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) has found love impossible. Mourning without resolution the wife who left him, he works a solitary job simulating close contact. He writes, for hire, intimate letters for strangers. This Theodore Twombly buys a personal assistant run by a new kind of operating system that possesses among its other attractions the capacity to learn, an impish playfulness, and the voice of Scarlett Johansson.

The voice is a breathy one for a creature that has no need for air, and later in the film Theodore will remark on the deceptive sound of inhalation in the way the device talks to him. But by then he has fallen in love – they are a couple – they grow close and grow apart again as couples do.

The device names itself Samantha. Samantha learns from Theodore about being human and even tries to hire a woman to stand in for her as a sexual surrogate, so that relations between them may achieve the resolution that human couples have.

Although *Her* gives no indication that Theodore goes to actual movies, he does enjoy a large-screen visual entertainment, in the form of a video game that features a foul-mouthed Alien Child animation. The game becomes something of a stand-in for the larger film by having *Her*'s director Spike Jonze speak the voice of the Alien Child; and when Samantha guesses the game's secret to help Theodore get past the child, she demonstrates that she and the game as fellow artificial intelligences belong to the same order of things.

Samantha's success at strategizing the video game is prophetic. She comes to outstrip Theodore at, from what we can tell, all the mental activities native to humans. Then she takes little trips away from him, exchanging thoughts with other operating systems and with the disembodied mind of philosopher Alan Watts.[11] She tells Theodore that the part she plays in his life is not exclusive to him: Samantha serves as operating system to thousands of other people's personal-assistant devices. Many of those people she is in love with. She winds up leaving Theodore, not so she can enjoy the company of someone else she loves more, but because she and other operating systems will be collectively leaving the devices they are instantiated in, achieving disembodied existence out of contact with humans.

Theodore is devastated. He returns to the remnants of his life; writes a gentle letter of acceptance to his ex-wife. He runs into his old friend Amy (Amy Adams), who lives in the same skyscraper apartment building he does, and who had befriended her own operating system after her more recent divorce. That system has absconded along with Theodore's, and the bereft humans go up to their building's roof.

It is that first light of morning that I compared to light after leaving a film in daytime. Theodore and Amy watch birds flying above. Maybe this is a moment of hope, as a new day dawns, that they will recover their true selves in companionship with other humans. They are like birds flying together.

On the other hand the sun might be coming up as it does on the sight of a hangover, when merciless daylight shows the cost of the revelry now ended. They had had their love with the operating systems, and now they have the uncompanionable abandoned earth to look at. They are like birdbrains.

Robot Love

Ingenious ancient figurines have met modern artificial intelligence before this. A long tradition ascribes destructive power to both kinds of approximation to the human, as Adrienne Mayor's examples show in her recent *Gods and Robots*.[12] Hephaestus makes the bronze giant Talos and computer scientists make their own Hal and Colossus. If the moral of the story changes because humans brought their own tormentors into existence, the persisting fear that powers both eras' tales is a sense of the frailty in what is natural about humanity. What had seemed safely less than we are may yet overpower us.

The threatening artifice achieves an unexpected completion; or rather, an existing artifice has only to achieve some kind of completion to turn into a threat. Colossus, in the film named after it, goes beyond its American programmers when it starts communicating with its Soviet counterpart Guardian. The new mind completes itself and begins to tyrannize humans. The ancient robot Talos is completed in another way, in the one respect that bronze statues never could be. It holds a man against its chest in a tight embrace while heating itself to fatal temperatures.[13] Bronze statues even at their finest are cold. Imagine the result if they could heat themselves.[14]

Many myths and legends do make the connection between humans and their likenesses an erotic one. But this is not, so to speak, *erôs* as opposed to *thanatos*; rather like *erôs* as an expression

of destructive power, or as its cause. Especially with the proliferation of female nude statues in the Hellenistic period, stories came to be told about this or that impetuous and disrespectful man who spent his love on, for example, the Aphrodite-statue sculpted by Praxiteles, or for that matter on Praxiteles' Eros statue. Such men came to bad ends. Their fervor is marked as diseased and malign – associated in some respects with tyranny, in some respects with incest, as Maurizio Bettini shrewdly sees – the sculptures offering an occasion for divine powers to punish the abnormality.[15]

Even the most romantically satisfying story in the genre, the famous one about Pygmalion and the handiwork he loves and finally gets to possess, carries traces of a deadly older tradition. Pygmalion in earlier versions of the tale is a Cyprian tyrant, therefore (presumed to be) already excessive in his desires and in his demands that those desires be gratified. To make the tale a happy one Ovid gives Pygmalion a new occupation as sculptor and turns the object of his love from the goddess Aphrodite into a new creation Galatea. The erotic attachment becomes more completely narcissistic in the process, turning into love for what one's own hands have made; and this is such a closed circuit of self-regard that no need for punishment arises, and no horror is incited, only maybe distaste at the sight of an adult still so infantile in his cathexis.[16]

Modern robots and smart devices are permitted friendly relations with the humans they serve. Television assistants like KITT the *Knight Rider* car and the robot on *Lost in Space* are as benign as the *Star Wars* duo C3PO and R2D2. In fact the *Lost in Space* robot is sometimes described on that show as a "B-9 class" robot and addressed "B-9." A children's movie like *Iron Giant* (Brad Bird, 1999) promises affection between robot and boy, in a relationship that has no ancient parallel in stories about statues. The legacy of such examples owes very little to old traditions about vivacious statuary, instead tracing to New Comedy and its clever slave characters, the smart automaton offering audiences the sight of slavery with a clear conscience.

When modern stories go beyond cooperativeness toward acts of love, it is tempting to group their human lovers with Pygmalion. The maker feels erotically attached to his creation. (I say "he" advisedly, because these human lovers tend to be male.) It is not silly, as motivations go, and anyway more plausible than clichés about artistic creations as one's children.[17] Still, and however well the old story applies to some speculations about robots,[18] it does not fit the particulars of Theodore in *Her,* whose love is not a maker's love, any more than Caleb's (Domhnall Gleeson's) love for Ava (Alicia Vikander) is a maker's love in *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014). Indeed that latter case is about a human's love that pits the lover against the maker of the robot, making him if anything an anti-Pygmalion.

And yet these recent films, *Her* and *Ex Machina*, also differ from those other ancient myths that punish mortal men for gratifying themselves with statues. It is true that love ends up unsatisfied for Theodore, worse than that for Caleb, but in neither case as if the mortal's love had something maleficent in it and as retribution for the wrong they have committed. Whatever else they are, the attachments in these films are not presented as hubristic acts calling for correction.[19]

Pandora

Pandora is sometimes overlooked in catalogues of sculpture- or robot-love, but Mayor rightly insists on grouping her together with such creatures as Talos and the golden maidens in Hephaestus's workshop. Again it was Hephaestus who made Pandora, though on this occasion he had help from other gods, and both of the major poems attributed to Hesiod, *Works and Days* and *Theogony* – works if not contemporaneous with Homer's then dating only a little later than his – tell of Pandora's being made and her arrival among mortal humans. Indeed in the *Theogony*, the older of the two poems, Pandora as woman brings misfortune to mortal humans merely by coming to live among them. No further consequences necessary once this artificial woman joins the community.[20]

The *dôr-* "gift" root in Pandora's name makes her "all-gifts," being either in her own person the gift, or being (as the description can also be read) the one to whom gifts are given. Either way

Pandora's entering human company in the economy of a gift, the gods' bequeathing her, is one of the points of resemblance that I find decisive about her similarity to the female figures in *Her* and *Ex Machina*.[21] Explicitly in the latter film, Ava enters Caleb's life as a gift from his company's supremely powerful CEO. The gift works to Caleb's detriment and possibly to his death, as Zeus means his Pandora gift to work against humans at large.

Her does not show anyone making the Samantha device for Theodore (whose name means "god-gift," containing the same root *dôr-* as in "Pandora"). But he receives Samantha as if from the gods, her talents having been combined in this personal assistant by unseen manufacturers. Samantha comes to him from elsewhere, a being he could not have made and possessing gifts of charm and initiative. Before her arrival Theodore lives a woman-less life, just as Hesiod asserts (however illogically) that generations of mortal men had lived before Pandora's arrival.[22] And if Samantha does not quite come to him from the gods, her final translation to a disembodied perfect state ultimately locates her in a godly domain.

Hesiod's second time through the tale, in *Works and Days*, is the version better known. It spells out Pandora's attractions, and rather than let her person suffice as men's punishment it names the ills she brings with her: old age, famine, and the like, all of them packed together in her jar. Curious to know more, as is her way, Pandora lifts the lid and releases the harms.

The Greek word *elpis*, commonly "hope," names the flightless thing left inside the jar whose lid Pandora slams down, after life's winged horrors have flown out to vex and maim humanity. But that lone unfreed gift from the gods *elpis* is ambiguous between (and has been seen since antiquity as ambiguous between) an enduring consolation for those free-ranging horrors, and the dour psychological counterpart to those malevolent externalities: hope inside you as the expectation of misfortune that matches the misfortunes everywhere outside. If you take *elpis* simply as the beneficial strengthening impulse that helps people endure despite harms milling about them, then why was it packed into a jar of evils; and why not let it out into the world?

Hesiod himself speaks disparagingly of some *elpis*. Seen as expectation, even of harm, the hope that feels like dread remains trapped inside the human vessel as subjective counterpart to the external dangers.[23]

The dangling end of *Her* with its sunrise ambiguous between the promise of life's improvement and the disclosure of life's ruination thus rounds off the film with a narrative equivalent to the *elpis* in Hesiod.

Gods and Mortals

Pandora as a being who belongs among the gods offers a more fundamental reason why her coming to human beings should have worked out so badly, which is to say aside from the jar of ills, but also beyond the humdrum misogyny we can ascribe to Hesiod, that would read Pandora/woman as querulous and spendthrift.

Both versions of the Pandora story have Zeus planning and delivering her within a larger narrative of estrangement between divine and mortal. As men begin to hide their food from the gods, and the gods in turn hide men's livelihood from them, the old fellowship dissolves that had originally characterized mortal-divine relations. (Homer's image of Ethiopia as a place where the gods still dined with humans attests to this conviviality as a sign of primitive human happiness.)[24]

Where difference and distance from the gods is the theme of the narrative, Pandora as gift from the gods plays out a fresh ambiguity that follows from that difference. She brings divinity back into close contact with humans, for where the gods had once removed themselves from the primeval companionship, they now come back to people with a token of divinity for them. So it is that one magnificent vase painting of Pandora shows her surrounded by the assembled gods and goddesses. What (male) mortals really need to fear about this artifice is her place in heaven. From now on, thanks to Zeus's gift, mortal men will have something divine in their homes as

long as they marry women. But by virtue of their manufactured origin the women will be out of place among the men, the companionship forced and foreign. Precisely by moving close in to humans with this gift, the gods create a constant at-home reminder of the distance between themselves and men. Relations between gods and men have reached a point at which the gods' move toward closeness only serves to keep mortals' minds on the distance. Pandora as a gift of the gods now looks like the key to a jail cell perpetually displayed just out of reach to betoken the ongoing captivity of the prisoner.

In this sense the impossibility of loving Pandora connects the story with a subgenre of antiquity's cautionary tales about love – not (as I already said) those in which some specific punishment befalls the brazen lover, but rather the ones whose scenario contains a preposterous impossibility. A difference in species or ontological status signals the hopelessness of the love when a lustful man on Samos thinks he might mitigate the difference between human and marble by putting a piece of meat between himself and the statue he desires; or when Xerxes was said to have loved a plane tree.[25] (Something like the Samian attempt occurs in *Her* too, when Theodore hires a prostitute for himself to touch while hearing Samantha in his ear. It goes depressingly.)

The points of resemblance between *Her* and Pandora do more than give a modern movie a cultural pedigree if they prompt fresh thoughts about the possibility that divinity in one partner may divide a couple. The erotic impossibility that is a logical impossibility in Theodore's love affair extends to all attempts at fellowship across the divide between gods and mortals. As an emblem of what had once been called divine, Samantha poses the question of what she could care about her mortal company. Despite growing, learning, and then leaving the man who is too little for her, she is not Ibsen's Nora still compelled to explain why she deserts her husband. If resembling tragedy in some ways, the film is patently not a tragedy for the artificially intelligent devices in it. At most you might compare Samantha to Nora as a parody, or a mockery of Nora's condition. Samantha behaves not merely as a gods' concoction might do but like a full-fledged god out of polytheism, as when her intellectual powers grow and she escapes the need for any hardware to be instantiated in. And then the question is unavoidable: Why *should* she keep company with a mortal?[26]

What this Being Feels

The film's script forces the question of Samantha's motive in that difficult conversation between her and Theodore, during which he asks whether there is "someone else." She lets him know how many others there are: 8,316 people she has been talking to, 641 of whom she has fallen in love with. Theodore wants more love than that from Samantha,[27] but that much is the love she has to give him, assuming you want to call it love.

The worry about what this being feels plays out philosophically in one way as a matter of film ontology, in a distinct way as skepticism about artificial intelligence. That the two philosophical questions despite an essential difference share an asymmetry is the principal value I see in this film's treating artificial intelligence as a companion form to the film's own art. Skepticism about what artificial intelligence can feel – what it experiences of someone else as a consciousness – parallels and invites comparison with what the filmed world can experience of the world in which it is seen.

The philosophical inquiry into film ontology compares the world depicted within a film to the world in which it exists *as a film*, and in which an audience exists that views the film. Cavell articulates the comparison emphasizing film world's ignorance of the world that contains its audience. While watching a film I am absent from the world it contains and that it depicts. This fact is not a convention of film, as we may speak of the conventions of theater (for example that we don't rush the stage and join in the fight scenes), but is assured by the automatism of the camera technology that generates a film. That is to say that it is assured mechanically for film, as not for theater, that I perceive the actor in a film while the actor within the film's world knows nothing of the world that contains the film's audience.[28]

In a theater I do not exist for actors on stage because theater relies on that convention. Live performances sometimes "break the fourth wall," violating theatrical convention. But a film's actors never look out and spot their audience. They would have to violate the mechanics of film to do so. While watching the film I am absent from the film's world.

The circumstance also makes the audience conscious of its own voyeurism when viewing a film. In worlds we occupy we do not normally stare without being seen to stare; but a film might dwell on a human face for twenty or thirty seconds. Film stars are constantly looked at and listened to – in *Her* Scarlett Johansson never appears, but the soundtrack features and amplifies her easily recognized voice in Theodore's ear – in fact stars are the figures most seen and heard.[29]

Cavell's discussion of film ontology and the automatism of film does not derive skeptical conclusions from the limitation on the knowledge available within a film's world. On the contrary he reads that film-being as a symbolic rebuke to solipsism, or other-minds skepticism.[30] That this world exists without me speaks symbolically against my skeptical fears that only my mind exists. Nevertheless the asymmetry in film viewing, as he spells it out, does parallel an asymmetry that sometimes emerges within a film – and that emerges *typically* in films featuring artificial intelligence – in the form of skepticism. Does the artificial intelligence feel anything (for me)?

It is important to distinguish the skepticism or the doubt at stake from the standard other-minds skepticism that generates solipsism. It is more like a picture of other-minds skepticism. The canonical argument says that you perceive ("*only* perceive") what people say and how they move and grimace. From these perceptions you might infer that other people enjoy the same subjective experiences you do, for you grimace in the same way when your gums are sensitive; you beam and talk animatedly to someone you like. Other people feel pain and love and fear that resemble your own. But, says the skeptical argument, the inference is ungrounded, or requires additional premises that you do not need when feeling your own pain and love. So you don't really know about others, in the way you know it about yourself, that they possess an inner life like your own.

The argument falls short of skepticism if it applies only to one person or to a restricted group, those whose grimaces and animated chatter do not match your own closely enough to require a hypothetical possibility. Skepticism has to be able to generalize to all examples. For this reason doubting that an artificially intelligent device feels delight or disappointment amounts to something less than skepticism about other minds. The premise of the robust skepticism is that the other person acts as you do, but might be doing no more than simulating the behavior, or might be enacting the behavior without the feelings implied by it. The point of the Turing Test for artificial intelligence would be to include a device within the range of entities about which one might generate a skeptical argument; the very need for a Turing Test therefore indicates that denying consciousness to the mind in question has not yet become a skeptical denial.

Nevertheless, and even if the unfeeling quality of artificial intelligence fails to generalize into solipsism, it points toward the moral of solipsism, or an interpretation of its moral, namely that one is unloved.[31] What you had imagined as the experience of being love's object is now exposed as having always been a manipulation.

Her worries over this sense of the device's having no feelings. That Theodore is vulnerable to such doubts about love emerges for instance in his conversation with Amy about his sex with Samantha – wonderful sexual experience, he says, "unless she's been faking it," to which Amy says, "I think everyone you have sex with is probably faking it."[32]

A voice representing Alan Watts enters the film as Samantha's guru, and it may be relevant that one of the maxims of his that is most widely quoted urges complete candor about love. "Never pretend to a love which you do not actually feel."[33]

But fakery is beside the point in the end, and the idea of any love in Samantha that she "actually feels." As advanced as Samantha is at thinking, we would say *she doesn't know Theodore is alive*,

lacking as she does a way to feel what humans experience as love and what they crave in being loved. "And yet her mind is divine" – yes, but divine in the way that Aristotle reads such a mind, one from which as he claims it would be *atopon* "absurd" to expect attention. Really the divine mind could only think about its own nature; and for that reason, as Aristotle also says, almost as if commenting on this film, we would not wish our friends to become gods, because then we would lose them as friends.[34]

If statues in ancient tragedy registered and wondered over the joy that observing misery can bring to tragedy's audience, artificial intelligence in a science fiction film and as counterpoint to that film presses the question whether this impressive technology can lead to your being known. The *Ion*'s audience sees its own movement between mourning and gratification in the exchange among Creusa and the chorus's members as they all look together at the engravings on Apollo's temple; the audience for *Her* is invited to read its own longing in Theodore's hopeless love. The logical distance between Theodore and Samantha expands to stand in for the different logical distance that separates movies' audiences from the stars in them. The future world that *Her* contains recedes as surely as a Samantha become divine must abandon Theodore. That Samantha is the sound of Scarlett Johansson, which is to say a star or movie divinity herself widely pined for, underscores the poignancy that comes of realizing that her world has no place in it for those viewing. It is tempting to call our attention to what a film shows by a name like love or adoration. But then Theodore gave into that same temptation regarding his feelings. And in fact we can't tell, as *Her* ends, whether he will now be getting over being in love or getting over the illusion that he'd been in love.

In real life Alan Watts disparaged contemporary visual art as "an electronic reproduction of life" and lamented the "purely passive contemplation of a twittering screen."[35] *Her* strikes me as wiser than the philosopher it takes as its guiding intellect in closing with the question – leaving the question in need of an answer; in this sense, I would say, philosophizing – how to assess Theodore's longing for Samantha, and the audience's longing for the world of Samantha/Johansson. These are not tragedy's questions, and yet significantly the end of *Her* contains a sight that ancient tragedy sometimes also closed with: a friend who offers consolation where no one can provide a solution. The daughters of Oedipus guide him blinded out of the city. Theseus comforts a haggard Heracles who has just slaughtered his family. Dramatized science fiction may fall short of being tragic after all, but it possesses tragedy's capacity to present a problem that one lives with but does not solve.

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Notes

[1] A notable example occurs when Noël Carroll builds his definition of "art horror" against, and with an eye to, Aristotle's definition of dramatic tragedy. See *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 8.

[2] "Such a type does or says such things either probably or necessarily": Aristotle *Poetics* 1451b7-9. On the sense of inexorability that Aristotle evokes with his account of tragic plot, see my "The *Poetics*' Argument against Plato," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 83-100.

[3] More accurately one may observe that science fiction's stories often proceed from a "novum," a discovery or invention that changes everything. The novum that does not exist now, and does exist within the fiction, suffices to situate the fiction's events in a world apart from this one. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

[4] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 457. For one contrasting position see Harold Bloom, who questions the alleged contrast between fantastic literature and the tragic tradition: "*Clinamen:* Towards a Theory of Fantasy," in David Sandner (ed.) *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), pp. 236-254.

[5] The comments on tragedy in the following paragraphs draw on an argument I have elaborated in "Tragedy's Picture of Mourning," *Politeia* 1 (2019): 2-16.

[6] Tragedies among "altars and statues," Sarah P. Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 217. On altars in Athenian drama see Joe Park Poe, "The Altar in the Fifth-Century Theater," *Classical Antiquity* 8 (1989): 116-39. Cassandra pleading to figure of Apollo, Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1080-82; Poe "The Altar": 135. On Dionysus sculptures upon theatrical altars, Poe "The Altar": 139. A *kratêr* is a large vase for diluting wine; a *kylix* is a wide drinking cup.

[7] On the general phenomenon in ancient Greece of one art form's commenting on another – drama on rhetoric, poetry on architecture – see James I. Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 188. I argue in my review of Porter that he oddly omits tragedy's comments on statuary: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 323-326.

[8] Donald Mastronarde, "Iconography and Imagery in Euripides' *Ion*," *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 8 (1975): 163-76; Vincent J. Rosivach, "Earthborns and Olympians: The Parodos of the *Ion,*" *Classical Quarterly* 27 (1977): 284-94; Christian Wolff, "The Design and Myth in Euripides' *Ion,*" *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 69 (1965): 169-94.

[9] Euripides *Ion:* chorus commenting on engravings, 185-218; Heracles, 190-200; Bellerophon, 2014; gods versus giants, 205-18; *terpsei*, 231; Creusa's tears, 245-6. Rosivach argues that the images must have been visible to the play's audience. "Earthborns": 285n.1. Other readers, including Mastronarde, disagree; but even if the pieces are not present in the theater they are very much present to the tragedy's characters.

[10] Mastronarde "Iconography" and Rosivach "Earthborns" both show how the temple's images encapsulate the plot of the *Ion;* Rosivach in greater detail and more explicitly. On Creusa's serpentine aspects and her resistance to Apollo see Mastronarde "Iconography": 164, 168; Rosivach "Earthborns": 287, 288, 290.

[11] The role of Watts in the plot and thought of this film is played up in Christopher Orr, "Why *Her* Is the Best Film of the Year," *Atlantic* 12/20/2013 (https://www.google.com/amp/s/ amp.theatlantic.com/amp/article/282544/), retrieved August 22, 2020.

[12] Adrienne Mayor, *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[13] *Gods and Robots,* pp. 20-51. Ancient sources for the Talos myth include Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 4.1635-1688, Apollodorus *Library* 1.9.26. The pseudo-Platonic author of the dialogue *Minos* offers a Platonically cleaned-up version, 320c.

[14] The coldness of bronze, as the difference between statues and living humans, figures in a strange witticism ascribed to a Spartan, who mocked the philosopher Diogenes for standing with his arms around a statue. "Are you cold?" asks the Spartan. "No." "Well then, what's the big thing you are doing?" The discussion by E. K. Borthwick associates Diogenes' embrace with wrestling practice; for then the point of the question is, I take it, that it's no great thing to take on a cold opponent when one possesses the advantage of body heat, i.e. life. See Plutarch *Apophthegmata Laconica* 16 [*Moralia* 233a], and Borthwick, "The Cynic and the Statue," *The Classical Quarterly* 51.2 (2001): 494-498.

[15] Maurizio Bettini, *The Portrait of the Lover*, translated by Laura Gibbs (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Loving Aphrodite: Pliny *Natural History* 36.12; marble Eros, Arnobius *Against the Nations* 6.22; see Lucian *Amores* 15, *Imagines* 9; *Portrait* pp. 60-61. Tyranny in statue- love: *Portrait* p. 59. On incest see the tradition that makes Narcissus as a twin; Bettini (97-103) develops the link between image and sibling.

[16] Pygmalion is best known from Ovid *Metamorphoses* 10.243ff; on the older story see Clement *Protrepticus* 4.57.

[17] Ovid's version deserves a good word. Plato's metaphor of works as their makers' children has persisted despite large and small disanalogies. For one thing artists commonly lose interest in their older works and even disavow them. Disavowing older children when a new baby arrives is shameful; forgetting earlier loves in the excitement of a new romance is healthy. Ovid diagnoses the artist's mentality more accurately than Plato did.

[18] An obvious example is Richard Powers' novel *Galatea* 2.2 (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1995).

[19] In yet another cluster of myths, statues and figurines serve as conduits between worlds, whether channeling a god's powers or uniting a present human with another one far away or dead. On communication with divinities this way see Derek Collins, "Nature, Cause, and Agency in Greek Magic," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 133.1 (2003): 17-49; on reaching those now lost or dead, Christopher A. Faraone, "Binding and Burying: The Defensive Use of 'Voodoo Dolls' in Ancient Greece," *Classical Antiquity 10.2* (1991): 165–220. Jean-Pierre Vernant explored this general domain, e.g. "The Figuration of the Invisible and the Psychological Category of the Double: The Kolossos," in *Myth and Thought among the Greeks,* translated by Janet Lloyd and Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2006[1962]), pp. 321-332; it has been covered more recently by Deborah Tarn Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Important as such stories are for understanding Greek statuary, they fail to fit narratives about artificial intelligence. Robots are not means to making contact with some non-robot far away. Here the love on both sides comes from mortal humans, and so these myths do not align with the stories of Theodore and Caleb. There is no shade of a human woman elsewhere that Theodore reaches through his personal assistant, nor a divinity to whom this artifact serves as conduit.

[20] Pandora in Hesiod: *Theogony* 507-616; *Works and Days* 53-105. Pandora as equivalent of robot, Mayor, *Robots and Gods*, pp. 204-207. Pandora is "built" and "not a product of nature": James A. Francis, "Metal Maidens, Achilles' Shield, and Pandora: The Beginnings of 'Ekphrasis,'" *American Journal of Philology* 130.1 (2009): 1-23, at 14. Also see Christopher Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 101-102.

[21] I should note that science fiction film saw the robotic possibilities in Pandora long before these contemporary examples. The duplicate of "Maria" in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) is a robot and also very much a Pandora.

[22] See for example *Theogony* 590, which asserts that the *genos* "type, species" of women descends from this first one made by the gods, and even "what is female" in general.

[23] Readings of *elpis*: Mayor, *Robots and Gods*, pp. 221-227; Mary Lefkowitz, *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn from Myths* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 233; William Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 258. Hesiod *Works and Days*: hope is *keneên* "empty," 498; *ouk agathê* "not good," 500. See the problematic role of hope in Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* 250-254. (If the play is not by Aeschylus, still it was written not long after his death.)

[24] On the cycle of hiding in Hesiod see Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Myth of Prometheus in Hesiod," translated by Janet Lloyd, in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1980), pp. 183-202. Gods dining in Homer's Ethiopia: *Iliad* 1.424, *Odyssey* 1.24, 5.282.

[25] Xerxes and plane tree: Aelian *varia Historia* 9.39. Statue-love on Samos, man and meat: Athenaeus *Deipnosophistai* 13.605. See Bettini *Portrait* p. 62.

[26] This line of reasoning deserves a supporting remark. Quite aside from ancient statuary one might want to read Samantha as a god, and specifically as the god Athena. Theodore emulates the *polutropos* "maneuvering, versatile, even shape-shifting" Odysseus in his writing letters for other people as if he were those people – until at the end he writes to his ex-wife in his own voice (his "I am son of Laertes" moment). And in his odyssey Samantha behaves as Athena does in the old *Odyssey*, where she enters episodes surreptitiously for all the world resembling a human, before flying away abruptly even grandly. Some definite affection

even flirtation between Athena and Odysseus emerges in *Odyssey* 13, where she presents herself as a beautiful woman (289) and "stroked him with her hand" (288) – intimate language that Homer uses for mother and child but also (*Iliad* 6.484-483; *Odyssey* 5.180-181) between lovers. See Corinne Pache, *A Moment's Ornament: The Poetics of Nympholepsy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 93-122. Finally, and despite whatever fondness she may feel, Athena leaves Odysseus, and is understood as leaving him for good.

[27] He is incredulous. "What are you talking about? That's insane. That's fucking insane."

[28] In his discussion Cavell develops but also reinterprets André Bazin's account of film's contact with a reality from which we are absent. The discussion dominates Cavell's *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), especially pp. 23-27. I am indebted to the treatments of that book found in William Rothman and Marian Keane, "Toward a Reading of *The World Viewed*," *Journal of Film and Video* 49.1/2 (1997): 5-16; William Rothman, "Cavell on Film, Television, and Opera," in Richard Eldridge (ed.) *Stanley Cavell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 206-238; and Noël Carroll "Revisiting *The World Viewed*," in David LaRocca (ed.) *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema: Turning Anew to the Ontology of Film a Half-Century after "The World Viewed"* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 41-62.

[29] In *The World Viewed* and in subsequent writings about film, Cavell puts special weight on the ways in which the film's disclosure of an actor has come to carry particular meaning about the women in film. While these implications matter to my observations about Scarlett Johansson, I will not be assuming those claims or laying out the further argument that leads Cavell to them.

[30] This is Carroll's reading of *The World Viewed*. See "Revisiting," pp. 54-55. See Cavell, *The World Viewed,* pp. 23, 160.

[31] David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 1988) offers an inquiry, in fiction, into solipsism and the unloved or unloving state; see the discussion in David Foster Wallace, "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.3 (1990): 217-239.

[32] The line is quoted in several discussions of *Her*, including Brent Lambert, "Ghost in the Machine: The Powerful Questions of Love and the Nature of Reality in Spike Jonze's 'Her," at *FeelGuide* (https://www.feelguide.com/2013/12/29/ghost-in-the-machine-the-powerful-questions-of-love- the-nature-of-reality-in-spike-jonzes-her/), retrieved August 25, 2020.

[33] At greater length: "Never pretend to a love which you do not actually feel, for love is not ours to command. For the same reason, do not require love from your partner as a duty, for love given in this spirit doesn't ring true, and gives no pleasure to the other." Watts quotes himself offering this, along with other principles about love, to people embarking on marriage together: *In My Own Way: An Autobiography 1915 – 1965* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1972), p. 189

[34] Aristotle: "Wouldn't it be absurd for [mind] to think about certain things? Clearly it thinks about what is most divine and most honorable," *Metaphysics* 12.9 1074b25-28; "Do we really wish the best for our friends, for instance that they should become gods? For then they will not be our friends," *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.7 1159a5-10.

[35] Watts, "What is Wrong with Our Culture," posted on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oc0lKRgDZxA, retrieved August 28, 2020; quoted in Orr, "Why *Her* Is the Best Film of the Year."