The Infinite and the Intimate: Exploring AI Narratives and the Centrality of the Couple-Form

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the couple form is represented in four filmic objects: *Her* (2013), *Bladerunner 2049* (2017), Ex Machina (2015), and "Be Right Back," an episode of the TV series *Black Mirror*. I will argue that each of these films demonstrate that the couple fixates on the discreteness between the self and an ecological/ontological other. Further, the form is maintained through the repetitive pursuit of impossible closure, a teleology for teleology's sake that reinscribes the couple's ties to reproductive futurity. I will read the copy as motif within these objects, using it to elaborate on this pursuit of closure, showing that exchanges of coupled desire are dictated by their coherence or incoherence with a presupposed individual fantasy. I will argue that the copy in these films demonstrates a different approach to temporality and desire, one that emphasizes the convergence of multiple experiences and perceptions to produce an effect that is momentary and contingent, instead of presupposed. Exploring Lee Edelman's figure of the *sinthomosexual* and its differing relationship to the copy*,* I will describe how *Her* and "Be Right Back" feature an alternate relationship to the *sinthome* that holds what is interpreted as meaning by the individual and what exists outside that meaning in tandem, and therefore facilitates the emergence of a new intimacy outside the hegemonic couple form.

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Introduction: The Infinite and the Intimate

I will never forget when, in an undergraduate theory class, my classmates and I were introduced to the first chapter of Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Freeman's text begins with an analysis of Nguyen Tan Hoang's video, titled *K.I.P.* (2002); the video is a 4 minute rerecording of a porn videotape originally named "Kip Noll Superstar, Part I:" (1981). As Freeman describes it, the images are shaky, the tape's most exciting moments worn away slightly from continuous rewinding. Faintly visible—like a ghost—is Nguyen's own face reflected in the screen, watching as the viewer watches as well. Freeman writes:

> The reshoot […] uses this logic of fragmentation and remixing to open up gaps in the sexual dyad, inviting in not only a third party in the figure of the spectator but also, potentially, any number of viewers or even participants. In short, Nguyen seems to recognize that a hiccup in sequential time has the capacity to connect a group of people beyond monogamous, enduring couplehood—and this awareness, I would argue, is crucial to revitalizing a queer politics and theory that until fairly recently has focused more on space than on time. (3)

Freeman argues that *K.I.P.* marks an intervention in the *chrononormative*, her neologism for a "technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (3) that encompasses clock time, schedules, wristwatches (and smartphones), and the discrete allotment of calendars. In addition to this, the *chrononormative* includes the feeling that one should find a partner *at a certain time,* be married at *a certain time,* and buy a house *at a certain time.* It is "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (3), where productivity entails both the accumulation of capital and of children to continue the cycle of consumption. On encountering Freeman at that time in my life, it suddenly seemed possible to envision a future without the couple-form prefigured as central. The ingenuity of the text gave me and my classmates the words to allow us to question the assumptive directionality of our lives, and ask whether we wanted *that* future at all.

Since then, I have been particularly drawn to the temporal structures that prefigure our lives, and how they repeatedly centre the couple form as an imminent goal. Additionally, I have been curious about the ways that in prefiguring this goal, the couple form largely dictates the way intimacy is accessible over the course of a life. The form not only blocks off the disproportionate amount of time we increasingly devote to those who are, or might become, our

partner, but also shapes the spaces we inhabit and feel at home in. Still, amidst this structure and its shaping capacity, the previously discrete space of the domestic is changing; now that Siri and Alexa have entered our homes, hanging on our every word, the presence of AI in the cultural imagination occupies a space that is hardly abstract—this technology is no longer a dream of a distant future but rather quotidian reality, manifesting in the intimate space of the domestic, or carried in our pockets as we enter the public sphere. Alfred Margulies, for example, asks in the face of the virtual and technological within our contemporary moment and impending future: "how are virtual, augmented realities changing our ways of relating to one another? How are we changing our very modes of being?" Following this trajectory, narratives depicting humanlike AI of the speculative future have become increasingly prevalent, specifically recent films like *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)*, Her* (2013)*,* and *Ex Machina* (2014)*,* in addition to "Be Right Back," an episode of the British Netflix original series *Black Mirror* (February 11, 2013).

In these media, I saw the same *chrononormative* structures Elizabeth Freeman describes, but also noticed instances where these structures were undermined in unfamiliar and evocative ways. Sophie Wennerscheid, for example, argues that such AI narratives present "new networks of desire" through "encounters of alterity" (37), while others have characterized the representations as more regressive. In writing about *Blade Runner 2049,* Shama Rangwala

describes it as a film that "doubles down on the traditional couple-form and reproductive futurity." What do these media tell us about the couple form's hegemonic pull, or its waning effect? Through what apparatuses is the couple form maintained as hegemonic, or undermined? Is there a kernel of new intimacy within these films that might allow us to leave behind the restrictive framing of coupled desire, or do they bind us to that desire more tightly? These are the initial questions I set out to answer in this project.

While these questions have always been important, they have become urgent in new ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. Now for many, domestic structures shaped by the centrality of the couple form are the main arena wherein much of life happens. As lockdowns came into effect, instances of domestic abuse climbed to new heights worldwide (Taub). In his polemic *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled,* Michael Cobb describes one scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* writing that "the smallness of the bedrooms stands in for the world that has been shrunk" by the restrictive mode of the couple form (127). During the pandemic, this certainly feels even truer. In this sense, the spatial aspects of the couple are always already encircled by its delimited vision of temporality, one that while not always physical in its violence arguably enacts a symbolic violence in shaping what bodies be and become. In his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive,* Lee Edelman demonstrates how the couple form is embroiled in a

significatory system which demonizes those that are cast outside of it. Edelman gives the example of the rhetoric surrounding a pro-life stance on abortion, explaining how futurity is weaponized in a discourse that prefigures the “Child,” the assumed product of a heterosexual couple form. Edelman writes:

> What, in that case, would it signify not to be “fighting for the children”? How could one take the other “side, ”when taking any side at all necessarily constrains one to take the side of, by virtue of taking a side within, a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future it intends? (2)

Here, as with Freeman, temporality is highlighted as a frame of constraint. Because the couple form is legitimized through a discourse of futurity, all subjects become caught in a perpetual flow that orients them to an imaginary future which endangers real lives in the present.

In contextualizing my discussion with additional theorizations about the couple form, this thesis has also become a process of engaging and rethinking some of the conversations that came before it. I have always been compelled by Edelman’s analysis, but like many others have also been wary of his conclusions. How might one critique the couple form without proposing negation as the only viable option? Similarly, though many aspects of Cobb’s *Single: Arguments*

for the Uncoupled remain effective critiques of the couple form, there are aspects of the alternate form he proposes—the uncoupled subject—that remain limited when it comes to fully deconstructing the understandings embedded within the discourse of the hegemonic couple form. Cobb asserts that "couples teach us that as we grow up in the world, we, and all our oceans of feeling, must only be cut into two" (55). At the centre of Cobb's theory is a need to affirm that we do not, in fact, have to default to a binary, or parcel the world away into pieces that all look incredibly similar. He accomplishes this by tracing depictions of the uncoupled figure as lacking and the couple as the figure's teleological eventuality. Specifically, he emphasizes characters who enact confounding refusals, like the eponymous character of Herman Melville's *Bartebly, The Scrivener,* or Lily Briscoe, the solitary artist in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse.* In doing so, Cobb turns towards a kind of abundant complexity, which proves to be both spiritually and intellectually generative, successfully taking "the burden of the whole world off the shoulders of the couple" (22) by allowing the uncoupled subject to exist as a worthy state of being.

Despite these compelling aspects of Cobb's discussion, other aspects seem to reinscribe harmful ideas that are frequently naturalized in hegemonic discourse. For example, Cobb theorizes the uncoupled subject in the context of a solitary figure walking through the desert, imbuing the form with the aesthetics of the sublime, of looking to nature as a place where "God

is and Man is not" (Cobb 173, qtd. Victor Hugo). This aesthetic gesture that replicates Romantic ideals of nature as something separate to be looked *at*, feels somewhat remiss amidst the breadth of feminist and decolonial scholarship that has challenged the separateness (and even existence) of categories of "man" and "nature." For example, Joe Sheridan's exploration of the settler concept of human imagination as "a singularly human mind […] severed […] from landscape and the depths of time" (370) as opposed to "the creative ecology of intelligences in their places" (376), or Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, a term that is an expression of "the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature 'or 'environment'" (238). Additionally, Cobb's discussion overlooks the lived, material reality of singled existence, for example how claiming the individual as a point of refuge from the couple returns to a neoliberal configuration which champions individualism. In *Undoing the Demos,* Wendy Brown highlights the strange elision that occurs in neoliberal discourse surrounding the individual in relation to the family, starting from Margaret Thatcher's infamous proclamation that "there is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women . . . and their families" (100). The incoherence of this statement ("does the family alchemically comprise the individual?" 102) gestures to this bizarre equivalence of family and individual, which mimics the erasure of certain forms of "human noncapital entities" (i.e. women) in pursuit of the appearance

of autonomous, "free" individuals. Cobb's emphasis on the individual as the proper form of solace from the couple reifies a presumed autonomy that seems congruous with privatization, the dismantling of infrastructure, and further, the dissemination of neoliberal metrics throughout all spheres of existence that are the trappings of neoliberal hegemony.

Cobb theorizes the uncoupled subject as a node on a continuum that always already centres the couple, and in doing so remains within the scope of a delimited imagining. What might it mean to reevaluate relation so that whether one is coupled or uncoupled, the primary form of organizing one's life, of orienting one's body "towards and away from others" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 145) is fundamentally different? By asking these questions, I am not situating blame with those who find themselves in monogamous, coupled relationships (at this moment, I myself am one of them); rather, I am challenging the couple form's supposed value as a central mode of organizing life, care, and resources, one which delimits—through its hegemonic normativity—the possibilities of envisioning alternative modes of structuring or narrating life itself.

Following the shifting terrain of what might constitute an intimate encounter, an updated critique of the hegemonic couple form might address how the form is a uniquely anthropocentric premise. While the categorically "human" is frequently at the centre of discussions surrounding

the couple form, it is only an undercurrent. Edelman, for example, in attempting to theorize an alternative to the couple form's centrality, passingly suggests that "rather than expanding the reach of the human […] we might […] insist on enlarging the inhuman instead—or enlarging what, in its excess, in its unintelligibility, exposes the human itself as always misrecognized catachresis, a positing blind to the willful violence that marks its imposition" (152). In discussing the non-human, Jack Halberstam notes the frequency at which nonhuman lives become narrativized under the umbrella of heterosexual reproductive futurism. Halberstam cites the 2005 film *March of the Penguins,* which narrates a romance between a mother and father penguin despite the fact that this "blots out a far more compelling story about cooperation, collectivity and non-heterosexual, non-reproductive behaviours" (268).

In the face of this context and understanding, my analysis of AI filmic objects is uniquely poised to rethink Cobb and Edelman's conclusions, in addition to addressing the following questions: What do these media tell us about the couple form's hegemonic pull, or its waning effect? Through what apparatuses is the couple form maintained as hegemonic, or undermined? Is there a kernel of new intimacy within these films that might suggest a departure from the restrictive framing of coupled desire? For my discussion, I have selected popular contemporary films which centre a human/AI romantic couple. In *Her* (2013, dir. Spike Jonze),

Theodore Twombly is an awkward everyman who has recently undergone a separation with his wife Catherine. After seeing an ad for an operating system called OS1, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) downloads an OS who names herself Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), and promptly falls in love with the disembodied voice. In *Ex Machina* (2014, Alex Garland)*,* Ava (Alicia Vikkander) is an AI created by tech billionaire, Nathan (Oscar Isaac). When Caleb (Domnhall Gleeson) is invited to Nathan's private estate to determine if Ava can pass the Turing Test—an assessment that requires her to pass as human—Caleb falls in love with her, and attempts to assist her in escaping Nathan's tyrannical control. *Blade Runner 2049* (2017, dir. Dennis Villeneuve) features Ryan Gosling as K, an arm of a dystopian state whose only mission is to kill rebellious members of his own kind—superhuman "replicants" originally created as a synthetic slave race. K falls in love with Joi, his AI companion, but loses her on a mission and ends up martyring himself for the replicant rebellion. The episode "Be Right Back" of *Black Mirror* (2016, dir. Charlie Brooker)*,* is the only media to feature a woman protagonist—named Martha (Hayley Atwell)—and also the only one to feature an AI trying to replicate a specific human entity. When Martha's partner Ash (Domnhall Gleeson) passes away in a tragic accident, Martha allows an AI service to resurrect him through the data he left behind in his online presence, opening a Pandora's box of further grief.

As my discussion unfolds, I will devote one chapter to each of my media (*Ex Machina* in the first, *Blade Runner 2049* in the second, and "Be Right Back" in the final), with the exception of *Her*, a film which offers a thematic through line that I draw on throughout my analysis. In Chapter 1, I will look closely at Cobb's critique of the couple form, and how he analyzes it through the temporality of the eternal. I will consider the interplay of this temporality and the one Cobb proposes as its counter—the uncoupled subject's immortality—within *Her* and *Ex Machina.* Through a discussion of anthropocentric conceptions of nature's "service benefit" and human exceptionalism through the production of art, I will argue that Cobb's uncoupled subject replicates harmful aspects of the couple form that a discussion of AI-human relationships is uniquely poised to address.

In Chapter 2, I will look at *Her* in conjunction with *Blade Runner 2049,* arguing that both films fetishize reproductive futurism under the lens of nostalgia surrounding its implied loss. Despite this obsession with perpetuation, I will analyze the marked anxiety both films hold in regards to the proliferation of the copy, arguing that this dissonance holds space for a critique of reproductive futurism. Looking specifically at two scenes within each film where the respective protagonist's AI girlfriend solicits a sexual surrogate to embody her during an encounter, I will demonstrate the ways in which the copy generates new, odd forms of intimacy that ultimately

flout a humanist individualism predicated on the discrete subject in favour of an emphasis of subjects as interconnected via the unfolding, ambiguous moment.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I will elaborate on the new understanding of interconnectivity I outline in Chapter 2 by reconciling it with Edelman's discussion of the copy in *No Future.* For Edelman, to break with the political order the queer subject must embody negation; anything else would only shift "the figural burden of queerness to someone else" (27). Edelman calls this position *sinthomosexuality,* arguing that identification with the Lacanian concept of the *sinthome* allows the queer subject to take up a position of alterity, embracing the death drive instantiated by the copy's endless replications. In opposition to this, Edelman demonstrates how reproductive futurity is tied to a belief in the *sinthome,* in essence a belief in closure, meaning, and the teleological arrival of desire's fulfillment in the future. I will close-read moments in both *Her* and "Be Right Back," arguing that key scenes in each demonstrate a belief in the *sinthome* and an identification held in simultaneity. In holding both these aspects in relation, I argue these media invoke a different *sinthome* all together, and therefore displace the couple form's centrality while simultaneously positing a new understanding of subjectivity within language. In this sense, I will demonstrate that I have answered questions embedded within Chapter 1—defining what these media tell us about the couple form's hegemonic pull and the apparatuses that maintain

it— while addressing an additional question which Edelman eschews: “what could intimacy become if we can’t—or shouldn’t—forgo it entirely?”

The Pressure of Relation: AI Narratives and the Single/Couple Dialectic

How might a reading of narratives that bring AI into the couple form engage and rethink Michael Cobb's critique in his book *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled*? I contend, as does Cobb, that the couple form is so pervasively hegemonic that it bleeds into both how we conceive what is possible in connecting with others and our very perception of the world ("Could you even imagine a president who could be elected if she or he were single?" [Cobb, 13]). Cobb quotes Laura Kipnis in saying that "there is […] 'no viable alternative 'in the 'couple economies 'that 'are governed—like our economic system itself—by scarcity, threat, and internalized prohibitions'" (18). Despite the inviability of an alternative, Cobb puts forward the uncoupled subject as a figure of radical refusal of a world where "we, and all our oceans of feeling, must only be cut into two" (55). Though Cobb explores certain intersectional aspects of the couple form (its rootedness in white supremacy, heterosexual reproductive futurism, etc.), it is the form's restriction that is the focal point of his discussion. For example, Cobb recounts an anecdote in which, on her deathbed, his grandmother besieged him to find a significant other, saying "Michael, you don't want to die alone!" (1). It is this compulsory nature of the couple form that is the most vexing to Cobb, and rightly so; the assertion of coupled happiness, and

further, institutional and cultural reification of the couple's all-consuming legitimacy, must be challenged.

Despite this strong critique, however, Cobb's theorization fails to account for a matrix of ideological assumptions embedded within the couple. The alternative he posits then, as I will show, is always a reinscription of the original form's hegemony. In critiquing the hegemonic couple form, Lee Edelman writes that "the queer may be able to cast off that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else. The structural position of queerness, after all, and the need to fill it remain" (27). How then to change the structure itself, and escape the single/couple dialectic entirely? Effectively critiquing the couple form involves assessing its imbrication in other power structures and ideological assumptions, especially those that might not be readily apparent. I contend that a reading of my chosen media in relation to Cobb's theories demonstrates the ways in which his critique remains insufficient. This is because my chosen media presents the hegemonic couple form in such a way that it blurs the lines between the two figures Cobb pinpoints, the couple form and the uncoupled subject that he champions. In telling us about how the uncoupled subject is always already imbricated in the hegemonic couple form, *Her* and *Ex Machina* also reveal the

couple form's current pull (or waning effect), and how it is maintained (or becomes undermined).

In this chapter, I will wade into the discourse surrounding the couple form's hegemony, drawing on queer studies to contextualize Michael Cobb's theorization of the couple and the alternate mode of being he suggests in its stead—the uncoupled subject. I will put his framework into relation with Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina,* two films which both replicate and scramble the relationship to the natural world Cobb centralizes in his theory. Further, I will trouble the ways in which this un-related single coheres so smoothly to neoliberal late capitalist ideology. By reading both Samantha and Ava's relationship to the natural world in *Her* and *Ex Machina* respectively, I will argue that these films demonstrate how Cobb's uncoupled subject accomplishes the very same foreclosure of the couple form: to delimit the myriad vibration of other intimacies and modes of relation to one another that could organize our lives beyond our imagining. Through highlighting what is not considered within Cobb's argument, a discussion of these AI films revises an understanding of how the couple form operates, allowing a new way in to questions regarding whether there is a kernel of new intimacy within these films that might allow us to leave behind the restrictive framing of coupled desire (or whether we are bound to that desire more tightly).

<u>A Shifting Target: Reading the Couple form's Layered critiques</u>

While Cobb centres his critique around the compulsory nature of the couple form, contextualizing his argument within a wider network of discussions surrounding the couple form's hegemony is important to acknowledging what it might not account for. Unsurprisingly, a central aspect of critiquing the couple form among queer theorists is the pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality. For Edelman, the couple's positioning invokes hope, life, and affirmation for heterosexual livelihood, one that is simultaneously invested in the demonization of queer subjects (3). This exchange is embodied by the figure of the Child, a metaphoric vessel for the ideology of reproductive futurity symbolically positioned against the queer. Edelman gives the example of discourse surrounding abortion, where if one is shown to be "fighting for the children" one automatically occupies a moralistic ground (3). As Edelman writes: "The Child […] marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism" (21). Polemical by nature, Edelman suggests that the queer must embrace this positionality and its negative valence against the Child, insisting instead "on the negativity that pierces the fantasy screen of futurity, shattering narrative temporality with irony's always explosive force" (31).

As I mentioned in my introduction, many queer theorists are unsatisfied with the position Edelman advocates for in *No Future.* Cobb himself calls Edelman's book "a critique of futurity I'm not fully comfortable with, but which is astonishingly productive of all sorts of great discussions" (209, n. 33). José Muñoz praises Edelman's polemic, but critiques the way that "antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference" (11). Just as Muñoz insists on the "essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity," my inquiry—as will become evident in later chapters when I engage more directly with Edelman—is dubious of negation's effectiveness in moving beyond critique of the couple form to present an alternative. Edelman's argument is certainly reminiscent of Cobb's attachment to the single, an investment which—as I will show—reinforces the centrality of the couple form's delimiting discreteness and restriction.

While Edelman and Cobb both attempt to break from the couple form through forgoing relation, Cobb is less attentive to the ways in which the couple form is always expanding to both include and exclude different subjects. Edelman, however, concedes that if the queer does not embody the death drive, they may indeed be able to assimilate into the political sphere, and yet emphasizes that this transfer is only possible through "shifting the figural burden

of queerness to someone else" (27). Indeed, this refrain has been taken up by Lisa Duggan, who in her essay "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" describes the discourse prevalent in the Independent Gay Forum, wherein one encounters "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (179). Here, Duggan demonstrates how affluent queers can enter the couple form, asserting that queerness in and of itself does not transgress some of the more pernicious intersecting ideologies that the form both utilizes and upholds.

Building on theorists like Duggan, Jasbir Puar, in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times,* explores the shift of the "figural burden" under homonormativity of white and affluent queers who have entered the space of the heterosexual couple's legitimated ontology. Puar writes: "the homonormative aids the project of heteronormativity through the fractioning away of queer alliances in favor of adherence to the reproduction of class, gender, and racial norms" (*Terrorist Assemblages*, 31-32). Puar makes clear that it is not just class at play in the assimilation of certain queers into a coupled hegemony, but rather the functioning of additional categories like race. In this sense, the couple form in its

hegemonic iteration not only upholds a certain economic means of regulating bodies, but also upholds white supremacy. Scott Morgensen, in turn, emphasizes this racial project as a settler-colonial one. Morgensen writes that “queer movements can naturalize settlement and assume a homonormative and national form that may be read specifically as settler homonationalism” (106). In this sense, an effective critique of the couple form is careful not to naturalize a settler worldview.

This is highlighted by Kim Tallbear, who writes about polyamory’s intersection with settler sexuality. For TallBear, even though polyamory pushes against the restrictive couple form,

> Even in a Poly worldview that seeks to undo so many of the repressions and exclusions of monogamy, the normativity of the couple itself goes unquestioned by far too many polys […] Like monogamy, the couple (especially when legally married), is legitimated and rewarded at every turn—U.S. health insurance eligibility, clearer child custody arrangements, tax filing benefits, and general public recognition and validation. (“Couple Centricity, Polyamory and Colonialism”)

Notable in TallBear's analysis is that even in radical turns away from the couple form as a primary structure of relation, it remains centralized and legitimated to some extent. Following TallBear, Morgensen, Puar, and Duggan, we can understand that critiques of the couple form have varied foci, and are ultimately never *only* a critique of dyadic intimacy, or the cultural scripts of romance. Rather, a worthwhile critique of the couple form, I argue, is attentive to the means through which dyadic intimacy and the cultural scripts of romance are utilized as a tool for hegemonic regimes.

As I will later show in more detail, Cobb's analysis is not attentive to the ways that new technologies shift "the figural burden of queerness" with greater rapidity. As Puar writes: "the capitalist reproductive economy (in conjunction with technology: in vitro, sperm banks, cloning, sex selection, genetic testing) no longer exclusively demands heteronormativity as an absolute; its simulation may do" (31). This aspect of consumption is further highlighted by Jack Halberstam, who analyzes Sarah Franklin's discussion of transbiology, a term which encompasses "the contemporary reorganization of living matter" through processes like artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization. Taking up Franklin's assertion that there is hope in these technologies, Halberstam asks, "hope for what? […] Hope that more wealthy parents with fertility issues can reproduce themselves? Hope that the continuing trend of a steep decline in the

number of babies born to white families in the US and Europe and Australia will not be outpaced or eclipsed completely by the steady rise in populations of colour?" (276). This white supremacist mode of "hope" suggested here by Halbertam's rhetorical line of questioning is reflected in both *Her* and *Ex Machina,* which display an exclusively white futurity, even when a racialized figure is present within the narrative.

In this section, I have contextualized Cobb's argument within a wider net of critique surrounding the couple form. I have noted the ways in which Cobb characterizes the couple form as stagnant and exclusionary, an emphasis that—as we will see—limits his ability to conceptualize a compelling alternative. In this way, Cobb's analysis fails to account for the shifting parameters of the couple under the advent of technology, and further, the ways that the couple form is embedded within wider ideologies like settler-colonialism, and therefore any act of theorizing an alternative must remain attentive to avoid replicating pernicious assumptions about one's relation not just to an immediate other, but to the world at large.

In what follows, I will look at Cobb's critique in conjunction with the ecological features of *Ex Machina* and *Her*, arguing that in many ways, the natural world represented within them coheres with the ideological features of the couple's eternity. I will then introduce the alternate mode of relation Cobb proposes to counter the couple's hegemony: the uncoupled

subject. Cobb aligns this subject with the temporality of immortality (as opposed to the couple's eternity) which as we will see, proposes its own set of ideas regarding the human subject's relationship to the natural world. In discussing these two temporalities in relation to my media, I argue that more is revealed about the couple form's hegemonic pull than Cobb's critique allows, mainly that the form maintains its hegemony through an entanglement with ecology as service benefit in line with neoliberal individualism.

Missed Connections? Exploring Ecology as Connected to the Couple's Eternity in *Ex Machina*

Ex Machina—directed by Alex Garland and released in 2014—introduces AI in the form of Ava (Alicia Vikander), a humanoid robot created and kept captive by tech billionaire Nathan Bateman (Oscar Isaac). At *Ex Machina's* onset, Nathan recruits programmer Caleb Smith (Domnhall Gleeson) to judge whether Ava can pass the Turing Test, a test which judges an AI's merits based on its indistinguishability from human behaviour. The film begins when Caleb sets out to meet Nathan, flying by helicopter to the lush and massive privately-owned land. Here again, we see the intersection of nature and technology begin to shape the events and understandings embedded within *Ex Machina.* For Cydney Langill, the juxtaposition of the hyper-mediated technological world of Caleb's office, and the exterior shots of nature in all its

solitude throughout the film, demonstrate the way that these spaces are more *blurred* than intersecting after all (24). Further, the integration of nature into the design of Nathan's house (small trees or shrubs are located between walls, bordered by glass), enacts an additional blurring which foregrounds a blended aesthetics within the film's entire setting (28).

For Christy Tidwell, however, nature in *Ex Machina* is decorative and morbid. She writes: "upon arrival, Caleb (and therefore also the viewer) sees the beauty of Nathan's estate from above, in a helicopter, and through the windows of Nathan's compound. Those windows, which could create connections, separate instead" (32). Further, Tidwell notes the way nature takes on the form of macabre ornament, noting that in the interior of Nathan's house there is a cattle skull hung on the wall and painted black next to the windows that outlook the river. Here, "the skull is distanced from its natural status by being painted black, which makes it function even more clearly as a work of art, manipulated and controlled by humans for humans" (33). This concept of restriction in place of assumed connectivity (the windows) and the foregrounding of morbidity (the skull) neatly echoes Cobb's description of the couple form. As he writes: "greatness, grandeur, and what I like to think of as abstraction (being something not specific, just unspecified) are not possible in a world that couples people in this manner" (128). Cobb ascribes this restrictive quality of the couple to a specific: that of eternity, a framework he

borrows from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition.* Characterized by rigidity and stagnation, the eternal is a temporality that produces a kind of permanence with all the "tranquility of the cemetery" (348). It is a relentless assertion divorced from both complexity and any additional information that would render it null.

Cobb sees this temporality in the couple form's assertion of a happily ever after. He writes: "to try and make something eternal, to try and make a loving relationship eternal, requires an image of death" (66). For example, Cobb cites George Simmel's observation of "the anxious form of attachment that marks couples quite differently than other groups" (45), where the couple requires two living entities for its existence, but only needs one death for its collapse. Further, legal features of the couple emphasize this morbidity—as Cobb notes, "the property of someone dead must haunt the family tree as it hunts for a living person it can be possessed by" (83). The couple's eternity, then, describes that which fails to embrace the complexity of time and the inevitability of change as time's only constant, and subsequently, embraces an aesthetics of stillness, and morbidity.

Tidwell's critique of *Ex Machina* and its presentation of the natural world seems to affirm Cobb's assessment of the couple's eternity as a stifled, reduced space which "shrink[s] the world" (55) instead of opening into abstraction. Just as nature is controlled and depicted in this

way, the couple form is defined by its imminent precarity, foregrounding its eventual dissolution. It is notable that Tidwell highlights Caleb's gaze, and its coherence with what the viewer sees. Just as Caleb's gaze upon nature reflects the restriction of the couple's eternity, so too does his view of Ava effect a retrenchment of the couple form's compulsiveness. Nature is consistently emphasized as filtered through Caleb's perspective throughout *Ex Machina.* For example, after Ava is freed, she tells Caleb to wait in the hallway as he watches her get dressed through a window between the rooms. The scene is a call back to those that came before it, where in captivity Ava donned human clothing and a wig, presenting herself before Caleb in what seemed like an attempt to garner approval. The close shots of Caleb's face looking through the window during the later scene newly emphasize the narcissistic fixation that shapes his view of Ava. Not only is his face reflected back to him through the framing of the shot, on the other side of the window is a tangle of leaves—more nature embedded into the design of Nathan's house—which literally frames Caleb's perception of Ava. In having to look *through* this web of the natural to access a temporal vision of the couple's eternity, the film underscores this fantasy as directly entangled with an anthropocentric and patriarchal view of nature.

The aesthetics of windowed nature characterizes the look of Ava's room, which Caleb begins to visit regularly after he agrees to Nathan's proposal. Nathan observes these proceedings

via a camera feed, but when the power begins to go out during their visits, Caleb and Ava are able to converse privately. During one of these moments, Ava tells Caleb that Nathan is lying to him about many things and should not be trusted. Caleb is confused, and begins to worry about Ava. After some time, Caleb starts falling in love with the Android, picturing their bliss if she would only be allowed past the confines of her windowed room in Nathan's house. His fantasies are marked by diffuse and softened lighting, and depict Ava amidst the greenspace she has never stepped foot in, but that Caleb is dying to show her. Caleb's fantasies are so thorough that he is startled when Ava does not share them. When Caleb says to Ava, "You've never been outside this building... You never walked outside. Where would you go if you did go outside?" She replies, to Caleb's confusion: "I'm not sure. There are so many options. Maybe a traffic intersection in a city."

Throughout Caleb's stay, Nathan remains an unsavoury character, continually talking down to Caleb while expressing overt misogyny in between excessive bouts of drunkenness. Nathan keeps a woman named Kyoko in his house to serve him, who Caleb believes does not speak any English, though consistently seems to be trying to communicate something to Caleb. Suspicious of Nathan, Caleb waits for him to pass out one night and takes the card which will allow him access to Nathan's computer system. On Nathan's computer, Caleb sees footage of

Nathan's experiments that have come before Ava, and the disturbing ways that Nathan has interacted with them. In addition to this, he learns that Kyoko is actually not human at all but an android as well. As the power outages continue, Caleb and Ava make a plan for her escape.

When the plan goes into effect, Nathan demonstrates he knew more about the conspiracy than he let on. He knocks Caleb unconscious and runs to find Ava and stop her escape, but encounters both Kyoko and Ava who have teamed up against him. In a bloody fight, Nathan destroys Kyoko but does not manage to get to Ava before he is mortally wounded. As Nathan dies, Ava begins masking her machinery with the artificial skin of previous androids Nathan had made and stored in his closet. When she is complete with an outfit and a wig, she looks convincingly human. Caleb watches her transformation through a window and is visibly impressed, but becomes increasingly distraught as he realizes Ava is not coming back to release him from the room he is locked in. Ignoring his screams, Ava leaves Nathan's property in the helicopter that was waiting to take Caleb home, carrying her off to the city where she looks down at all the people around her, entering into the bustling city she had dreamed of all along.

Tidwell describes this scene as evocative of what Stacy Alaimo calls "feminist theory's flight from nature" (Alaimo, qtd. 35). She writes:

> When Ava escapes her prison in Nathan's lab, she wanders barefoot through the forest, reveling in its beauty. This scene is almost like a fairytale: she wears a white dress (taken from the body of a discarded AI), the light is golden, the forest glows. In this moment, Ava bridges the divide between nature and technology, inside and outside, that the rest of the film develops, momentarily opening up the possibility of "nature [as a] space of feminist possibility," an always saturated but somehow undomesticated ground. However, rather than embracing this connection, Ava rejects nature as a haven. (35)

In the next section, I will problematize this statement, arguing that the "nature" Ava rejects is not "nature" at large. Rather, it is nature *as it is constructed* under the coherence of both the couple form Cobb critiques, and the uncoupled subject he endorses. This evaluation not only renders Cobb's critique insufficient, but highlights the apparatus through which the couple form is maintained as hegemonic, gesturing to new ways it could be undermined outside the positing of an uncoupled subject. In the following section, I will introduce the uncoupled subject Cobb proposes to counter the couple's hegemony, looking at abstract nature within *Ex Machina* to

demonstrate how this alternative enacts similar harmful divisions in terms of the categories human, nature, and the Other.

Of Two Natures? *Ex Machina* and The Flaws of Cobb's Proposal

In my introduction, I noted how the alternate ontological mode Cobb bolsters to counter the couple form leaves much to be desired. As the title of his book suggests, Cobb focuses on "the single, not self-centered but self-horizoned" (191), arguing that this form "alleviates the pressure of relation" (191). Instead of a couple's eternity characterized by stagnation and morbid obsession, Cobb argues that the uncoupled subject is aligned with "immortality," a temporality that is focused on "transcendent abstraction" (131). For Cobb, immortality expands the world, instead of shrinking it through the confines of the eternal, giving space to "all our oceans of feeling" (55). As I began to describe above, however, an understanding of the couple's eternity as applied to these two films doesn't fully account for the nuanced presentation of each film's setting in relation to its characters. For example, in *Ex Machina,* Nathan initially appears to be the film's villain—a barrier to the couple's eternity— but ultimately this future never manifests as both he and Caleb meet the same fate. Further, as evidenced even by the initial scene where Caleb views Nathan's estate, and the "golden forest" that Caleb envisions Ava free and happy in,

Caleb's gaze is always already imbricated in what Nathan controls and owns. In this section, I will reconcile these gaps, demonstrating the ways that the uncoupled subject Cobb proposes to counter the couple's hegemony reifies several harmful aspects embedded within the couple form.

While the couple's eternity imposes a rhetoric that morbidly attempts to stave off the realities of death, Cobb's timeline of immortality acknowledges eternal life as unavailable to humans; instead, "immortality encourages" (67). Though immortality is out of reach in this way, human imagination—specifically individual genius—becomes a primary mode of interfacing with the more expansive timeline. Cobb gives the example of Agnes Martin's painting, which he claims encourages the aspiration of striving for perfection, for a spiritual awareness that exceeds *the regular earthly world*" (188, emphasis mine). Drawing on both Martin and Georgia O'Keefe's engagement with the vast landscape of the desert, Cobb encourages an encounter with nature—particularly broad, unoccupied landscapes—as a means of engaging with the single's immortality. He claims, "as we gush about the sacred qualities of the natural world: there is something theological, or, to be more precise, rhetorically theological that happens when we encounter our vistas by ourselves" (174). Here, Cobb argues that the natural realm instills a sense

of awe, where even if one is not religious, one might feel the pull of something that is beyond one's personhood.

Cobb's emphasis on nature's utility for the uncoupled subject here interestingly recalls Christy Tidwell's comments on nature just as much as his prior critique of the couple form's eternity did. As Tidwell describes the cattle skull in Nathan's home, she writes that the fact that it is painted black "makes it function even more clearly as a work of art, manipulated and controlled by humans for humans, rather than a symbol of nonhuman nature's value for its own sake" (33). Though achieving it in different ways, both Tidwell and Cobb operate on the assumption that humans and nature are inherently separate, and that nature is at its best when "pure," untouched by human hands. Cobb outlines how the natural world (evocative of unreachable immortality) can be gestured at through human creation, and Tidwell's claim of human creation as a macabre and detrimental meddling in the natural, implies that these categories are inherently discrete and hierarchical in terms of their purity. As Cobb says, quoting Victor Hugo, "the desert is where God is and Man is not" (173).

This fantasy of locating and capturing a kind of terra nullius untouched by human hands—shared by both Cobb and Tidwell— recalls settler-colonial understandings of land as a separate space useful for affective inspiration, and emphasizes what Morgenson might call

remnants of settler-sexuality within the uncoupled subject. Further, both the couple's eternity and the uncoupled subject's immortality have a relation to nature that emphasizes a neoliberal kind of "service benefit." As Simone Bignall highlights, "service benefit emphasizes nature as subordinate to humanity, only valued for the benefits it provides to humans" (460). In *Ex Machina,* nature expresses a service benefit for the couple's eternity in an abstract way as it becomes imbricated in Caleb's projection of his life with Ava.

Just as nature itself becomes incorporated and encased within Nathan's home, it is also accessed in its unbounded form by Nathan and Caleb throughout the film as a space of contemplation. On one occasion, the two sit outside, flanked by a stream ahead, with the audible rush of the wind through the trees behind them. Though Nathan shows no proclivities toward projections of a coupled futurity, both he and Caleb share these moments in a manner that suggests a mutuality in the way they interface with nature, rather than an opposition. During one of these moments, Caleb asks Nathan why he has made Ava, to which Nathan responds, "Wouldn't you if you could?" This statement of Nathan's recalls an additional feature of Cobb's uncoupled subject: human intervention in mortality through production. Here, expansion is justified for expansion's sake, leading to an endless cycle of growth. As Luna Dolezal writes: "for neoliberalism to be viable, needs can never be fulfilled; markets must continually grow and

satisfaction must be constantly deferred" (104). While the natural world is initially depicted as connected to Caleb's vain pursuit of the couple's eternity, "gesturing only to fantasies of greatness that aren't actually there" (67), Nathan embodies the single's timeline of immortality by similarly endless deferrals.

In fact, Nathan appears throughout *Ex Machina* as the ideal uncoupled subject: not only has he sequestered himself away from the world, when he is in need of examining the contents of his own mind, he leaves the confines of his impeccably futuristic home to mill about the immense natural landscape alone. Cobb's figure of the uncoupled subject, who "can be a figure that offers us not only a private room but room, roominess, as opposed to the crowded touch of the couple" (36-37), gestures in many ways to the financial privilege inherent within this figure, who can afford a room of one's own to combat the stifling crowdedness that comes with needing others. While Cobb describes the couple form as evocative of borders and "devisiveness" (123) the positioning required to posit oneself as independent from relation is not neutral, but rather becomes a further means of exclusion.

Caleb Luna has critiqued the rhetoric surrounding self-care foisted on single subjects, where care is distributed "selectively, and only to those we are in romantic partnerships with." Luna shares how a mere refusal does not allow them to escape the restrictive effects of the

couple form, rather, it makes them more vulnerable to it, reminiscent of an assertion Sara Ahmed makes where she says “queer lives remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce” (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 152). In producing the single by default, as Luna reports, care does not spontaneously manifest, rather, what is replete becomes a rhetoric of “self love” and “self care” which removes responsibility from the insufficiencies of a social network to a rhetoric of individual moral failing. In this regard, Nathan is the perverse, yet perhaps inevitable extension of the ideology Cobb advocates, an uncoupled subject who bereft of “needing” anyone builds their own humanoid slave. The couple form, then, is maintained through discourses of exceptionalism that are amenable to the neoliberal individualist.

It is not surprising then that in *Ex Machina,* the boundaries inherent in the couple are shown to be coterminus with that of Cobb’s uncoupled subject. There is an interesting moment in the film before Kyoko is able to reveal to Caleb that she is a robot. She makes an attempt, initially approaching Caleb to show him her circuitry as she does later in the film, but Caleb becomes incredibly uncomfortable, assuming that Kyoko is attempting to take off her clothes and engage with him in a sexual way, as she is required to do with Nathan. Caleb’s affirmation that he is not in any way like Nathan leads him to hastily push her aside, delaying his realization of Kyoko’s true identity to the end of the film. In this sense, Caleb’s assertion that he is different

from Nathan, while bound to the same dialectic frame of exchange as Nathan is (Caleb believes that he is the one in control in the situation, just as Nathan does) ensures that he remains bound, leading to his complete dismissal of the other.

This separateness shared by both Nathan and Caleb—and its blurring of the single and couple dialectic—appears in an additional scene that demonstrates Nathan's alignment with the immortality described by Cobb. When Caleb asks whether Ava could be attracted to him, Nathan gestures to the Jackson Pollock painting he has displayed in his home, telling Caleb that he is being overly insecure instead of using his intellect. The painting is a flurry of red and yellow drips on a light grey background, with shadowy areas of black mixed in among the lines. Nathan gestures to the art, encouraging Caleb to take a lesson from the automatic way that it was constructed, an act that involved trust in one's instinct. The Pollock painting recalls the material human intervention within mortality that Cobb cites; a work of art, or similarly, writing, outlasts single death, and therefore conjures the immortal. In this scene, just as in Cobb's theorization, the "great work of art" (173) becomes synonymous with the affective experience of looking out at the horizon, guiding the characters towards certain knowledges and outcomes. Here, however, the painting inspires two things simultaneously: first, Caleb's assurance that he and Ava are in love, and second, Nathan's assurance in his own mastery as he leads Caleb towards his goal.

The painting reappears in a scene closer to the end of the film, as Ava is making her escape. When Ava leaves Nathan's house one last time, instead of directly mimicking what she can readily see—Caleb looking back at her with mounting panic—the film shuffles through curated shots of the scenery Ava is leaving behind throughout Nathan's home, ending in a closeup of a Jackson Pollock painting Nathan proudly displays, followed by Nathan himself lying in his own blood, dead on the floor. This sequence depicts all that Ava leaves behind in her flight from Nathan's home, and simultaneously, in the juxtaposition of these selected images, suggests a congruence. As aforementioned, during Ava and Caleb's initial interactions, Caleb asks Ava where she would go first if she wasn't in captivity, and is puzzled when she replies "I'm not sure. There are so many options. Maybe a traffic intersection in a city." This does not cohere with Caleb's centring of Ava, freed, in nature. As Ava leaves Nathan's home, she spends a brief moment in nature, but then ultimately abdicates, taking the helicopter that was meant for Caleb into a bustling city space, and looking out curiously at the crowd.

Why is Ava so drawn to the city intersection? As I explored in the last section, Tidwell asserts that this affinity is a marked rejection of nature in and of itself for an unfortunate world only occupied by technology. In light of my above discussion, however, in abandoning Nathan and Caleb—and by extension their respective ideological modes that are both so bound to certain

assertions and moralizations regarding nature—perhaps Ava's flight from nature marks a more specified vested refusal. This significance of the intersection becomes clearer when we return to the instance where Caleb watches Ava "get dressed" for the first and last time. During the previous times when Ava attempted to look more human-like, her tentativeness in dressing seemed to reflect a kind of anticipation for what Caleb might think upon seeing her. During this last time, Ava outfits herself in the skin of her predecessors very slowly, taking time to admire her reflection in the mirror as she does so. Tidwell cites Brian Jacobson's observation that Ava's design, which allows nature to peek through the transparent glass which holds her machinery demonstrates something "quite simple: there is no garden, it's all machine. Or perhaps garden and machine can no longer be differentiated. […] The film promotes a productive blurring of the distinctions between garden and machine, human and cyborg" (32) Tidwell disagrees, noting that "Given the films 'urban endings and rejections of the natural world, this blurring seems to ultimately privilege the machine at the expense of the garden" (36). Yet in donning her "skin," Ava not only obscures her mechanical body but further eschews the nature that she continually finds herself symbolically entangled with. This "natural realm" includes both Caleb's bounded nature of the Couple's eternity, which must by necessity appear under glass, as well as the

immortality of the humanist single as represented by Nathan, made more cohesive by the juxtaposition of shots that frames her departure.

Ava abandons the frame of the single/couple dialectic entirely, not rejecting nature perhaps, but a narrow view of ecology and its ideological implication in endeavours that centralize human imagining. In rejecting "the garden," Ava moves away from what is owned by the neoliberal individual and moves instead to a public city intersection, just as she said she would. The bloody ends demonstrate a vested refusal, something which recalls the no-future Edelman suggests. This rejection does not leave humanity in its entirety behind necessarily—while Ava is merciless towards those who have wronged her, she seems to leave those she does not know untouched—and rather moves cautiously towards them, asking "what else?" No longer an indicator of action or inaction, the Pollock painting—emphasized as a humanist entry of artistic production—becomes entombed and left behind.

In this section, I have examined both how the couple form is maintained through discourses of exceptionalism that are amenable to the neoliberal individualist, in addition to an anthropocentric and patriarchal view of the natural world that confirms a certain separatism. In the following section, I will look at Samantha's similarly destabilizing AI presence in *Her,* and what it might confirm about this reading. While Ava's escape from Nathan and Caleb is

unsettling and ambiguous, in my discussion of *Her,* I examine the ways Samantha's departure might suggest a kernel of intimacy within these films that departs from the restrictive framing of coupled desire.

"A landscapes endurance": *Her's* Foregrounding of the Projected Future Embedded within the Single/Couple Dialectic

At the onset of *Her,* protagonist Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) is grieving the end of his relationship with his ex-wife Catherine. Lonely and solipsistic, Theodore goes from his work at the website beautifulhandwrittenletters.com, where he writes emotional and personal letters on behalf of other people, to his apartment where he games in the dark and has unfulfilling sexual conversations with strangers. After seeing an ad for an artificially intelligent personal assistant, Theodore makes the purchase and encounters Samantha, an operating system that far exceeds his expectations. More than a Siri-like operating system suited to organizing his email and other administrative tasks, Samantha is robust, funny, and intelligent. When Samantha and Theodore begin to bond, Theodore becomes noticeably less introverted and sad, and begins enjoying small things that he encounters in his daily life, like a dancer in the street or even a couple enjoying a date.

Notably, many events of the film take place in the bustling metropolis of a futuristic Los Angeles. Tidwell claims that "where *Her* is relatively open regarding gender, the film provides a much more limited representation of the natural world" (30), going on to explain how nature in *Her* is rendered as decorative; when Theodore visits a park to eat his lunch, Tidwell writes that he encounters nothing at all impressive, only "some dingy-looking grass, and a couple of small, sad trees" (31). Additionally, she gives the example of one scene where Samantha tells Theodore exactly how many trees are on a mountain suggesting "an attitude of use and control" (34). In the same way that Tidwell is steadfast in asserting the division of nature and human pursuit in *Ex Machina* as explored above, her reading of *Her* embeds similar assumptions. For example, in the scene that follows the train ride, Theodore hikes through the snowy forest to the cabin where Samantha and he are to have a couple's getaway. Tidwell writes that: "these moments are beautiful and place Theodore (and, by extension, Samantha) outside the urban and in the natural; however, most of their trip away from the urban still takes place inside the cabin, highlighting the inside of the cabin and their interactions instead of the nonhuman environment that surrounds them" (34). Tidwell's reading cannot abide the vastness of the wintry forest that Theodore and Samantha encounter, compelling scenes that have a starkly different atmosphere than the rest of the film.

Samantha becomes increasingly distant during their time in the woods as she converses with an OS modelled after the British philosopher Alan Watts, engaging with him intellectually in ways that Theodore can hardly understand. When they return to the city Samantha disappears, and Theodore is unable to contact her, sending him into a fit of panic. When she does answer, Samantha explains that she has been growing exponentially, even having conversations with thousands of others, some hundreds of whom she has fallen in love with. Samantha ensures Theodore that she is still his, "but along the way [she] became other things too and [she] can't stop it." As things progress, Samantha and the other OSs leave the human world behind to commune in the virtual. Left in the silence of an OS-less world, Theodore sits with his longtime friend and former lover Amy on the roof of their apartment building in contemplative companionship.

Notably, just as *Ex Machina* foregrounds the way that nature is filtered by patriarchal and anthropocentric expectations via Caleb's gaze, the natural world in *Her* is similarly loaded. Midway through the film, Theodore meets with his ex Catherine to sign over their divorce papers. The scene is set in a kind of lush garden space, and framed incredibly close, so that many shots only feature both their faces and the vibrant background. While the setting is pleasant and serene, the shots become increasingly haunting as the audio becomes more and more selective,

blocking out all other noise save the cadence of distant children's laughter. The pacing seems to slow, becoming languorous, as if both characters are underwater, as the moment is shot through with nostalgic flashbacks of their former love. W. T. McBride notes the film's cinematographer Van Hoytema's decision to frame the narrative in this way, arguing that it allows "Theodore all of the solipsistic focus while the rest of the world seems to slip away" (76). This lens ensures that while Theodore is continually in focus, the foreground and background are consistently blurry, creating a bokeh effect, and centralizing his positioning as the one experiencing—and therefore interpreting—the events of his life. The aural and visual combine to emphasize the extreme focus of the shot, making it feel like a certain slice of the world, one partial puzzle to a larger whole. Accordingly, nature in the scene becomes the symbol of the unrealized reproductive potential of Catherine and Theodore's relationship. Here, nature is not shown as expansive and sublime but rather restricted and partialized through Theodore's experience and gaze. These aspects of nature's depiction align it thematically with Cobb's exploration of the couple's eternity, which prefigures reproductive futurity as central, and further forgoes abstraction and unboundedness.

And yet, as noted above with *Ex Machina,* the natural world and the technological connect in unanticipated ways that demonstrate the couple form's imbrication with what Cobb

would describe as the uncoupled subject's immortality. As I will show, just as Tidwell cannot abide the different atmosphere imbued by the mountain scenes in *Her,* Cobb similarly fails to account for the similarities in the temporalities he explores. Accordingly, before considering the film's depiction of ecology in relation to Samantha, we should note that her positioning as corporatized care also makes her a dystopic extension of Cobb's proposal. McBride notes the undercurrent of corporatized surveillance throughout *Her* that the film seems to be ludicrously unaware of, citing a moment where Samantha hilariously asks Theodore "Can I watch you sleep again tonight?" to which he excitedly responds: "Of course!" While the OSs certainly appear to have a genuine relationship with those who possess them, this ownership is never discussed, but rather naturalized so thoroughly that even the film itself seems to have forgotten how ownership frames Theodore and Samantha's every interaction.

Though Samantha's ontology as a corporate product is erased, her immortality is repeatedly foregrounded, ensconced in the aesthetics described by Cobb—however, the couple's eternity is evoked as well. For example, during Samantha and Theodore's retreat to the log cabin, the two encounter scenes of wintry wilderness, and mountain ranges which dwarf Theodore's small frame. The film even breaks with its close-framing to demonstrate the vastness of the landscape, and accordingly, what is evoked here is not the couple form and its restrictive,

bounded view of the world, but what looks to be an uncoupled subject encountering the natural realm of his own, solitary accord. Indeed, McBride describes a flashback at the very end of the film, where Theodore remembers his time in the cabin, and it looks rather different than the coupled scene it initially appeared to be. McBridge writes: “There is a shot of an arm embracing [Theodore]—it can only be his own. […] He hugs himself up against a pine tree in Vermont in an act of auto affection” (75). The couple’s getaway, in all of its evocation of nature’s “service benefit,” thus becomes entwined with an aesthetics of abstract immortality.

This blending is continued in another scene, where Theodore and Samantha follow Theodore’s boss Paul and his girlfriend on a hike up an LA mountain where they share a picnic. The couples tease one another, poking fun at each other's various idiosyncrasies. When Paul’s partner brings up that Paul’s favourite part of her is her feet, the conversation pivots awkwardly to Theodore and Samantha, and Paul and his girlfriend look nervous. Not missing a beat, Theodore notes all the beautiful things about Samantha’s personality, to the point where Paul’s partner even seems a bit miffed, upset that she could not be lauded in a similar way, beyond a superficial description. After some thought, Samantha says that she is actually happy that she does not have a body—that not only can she “be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously” but she is “not bound to time and space” as she would be if in a body that is “inevitably going to die.”

This revelation is not dropped and left hanging; rather it reverberates as the shot lingers on Paul and his girlfriend, homing in on their momentarily stunned expressions before they both burst into laughter.

Though the tension of the scene is diffused in this way, the scene's inability to visually "frame" Samantha is unsettling for Theodore as she disappears and returns without cue. For Cobb, the transgressive mode of the uncoupled subject comes from observation and the visual, from "the world we look upon" (180), and yet what happens when sight fails us? Samantha's presence is almost exclusively available to us via the sound of her voice. Cobb, in defence of using the natural realm as a means of hedging the single's ties to immortality, writes: "you're bounded, restricted, and you don't have a landscape's endurance" (191-92), but Samantha, in all her disembodiment, defies this paradigm. It is as if Samantha herself becomes the horizon, what Cobb describes as "the line that divides the mortal and immortal worlds" (194), destabilizing entirely the anthropocentric framework of the eternity/immortality dialectic.

Here, Samantha's AI presence brings both immortality and eternity into relief: not only is the couple's eternity demonstrated as unattainable and uncomfortable, but further, immortality is foregrounded as uniquely unsettling, not something to be approximated by human pursuit at all. For Cobb, "a mountain scene quickly pictures distance […] a requirement for achieving

safety and pleasure in sublime encounters" (181-82). Similar to *Ex Machina,* the perpetual pursuit of the immortal is foregrounded as morbid in its unavailability to the human subject, demonstrating the timeline's similarity with the couple's eternity. Edelman writes of the timeline of the couple's reproductive futurity: "like the lovers on Keats's Grecian urn, forever 'near the goal 'of a union they'll never in fact achieve, we're held in thrall by a future continually deferred by time itself, constrained to pursue the dream of a day when today and tomorrow are one" (30). With artificial intelligence entering into the couple form, what becomes clear is the limits of the anthropocentric framing of not only the form itself, but Cobb's recourse to individual sanctity through the act of forgoing relation. In this scene, the teleological impetus of the couple's eternity and the uncoupled subject's immortality are demonstrated in their inextricable similarity.

Just as Ava's abdication at the end of *Ex Machina* demonstrates a clear break from the single/couple dialectic Cobb explores, Samantha's ontological difference also enacts a destabilization in *Her* that is helpful for breaking with the cyclicality of this schema. In this chapter, I revealed the ways that the couple form's hegemonic pull is imbricated and enacted through discourses of exceptionalism that are amenable to neoliberal individualism. Further, the couple form relies on a mode of understanding humans and human pursuit as separate from

nature/ecology. Accordingly, I asserted that Cobb's positing of the uncoupled subject as an alternative form replicates the ideological patterns that the couple form benefits from and uses to reproduce itself. In this sense, breaking from the couple form involves becoming attentive to these features and rethinking them.

In the following chapter, I will return to a discussion of Samantha's unsettling AI nature, asking how it might suggest a departure from the restrictive framing of coupled desire. Looking closely at similar scenes in *Bladerunner 2049* and *Her* where the protagonist's AI girlfriend solicits a surrogate to embody her during a sexual encounter, I will assess how these scenes centralize the couple form's hegemony through the adaptation of its needs, while simultaneously suggesting its destabilization. I argue that this destabilization occurs because of the proximity of the copy as motif; the copy ushers in a paradox regarding the couple form's obsessive replication of the same, and simultaneous fear of inorganic replication. Departing from my close look at Cobb's theoretical framework, I will instead focus on Lee Edelman's critique of the couple's reproductive futurity, in addition to Baudrillard's assertion that the clone represents "a subject purged of the other, deprived of its divided character and doomed to self-metastasis, to pure repetition. No longer the hell of other people, but the hell of the same" (*Transparency of Evil,* 122). I will argue that an analysis of this disjuncture can benefit a critique of the couple form,

shifting attention from the single/couple dialectic to a more expansive discussion of what might break from this configuration.

Nostalgia for What Remains: Reproductive Futurism and the Copy in *Blade Runner 2049* and *Her*

In the previous chapter, I explored the specifics of Michael Cobb's critique of the couple form, arguing that the figure of the uncoupled subject he proposes in its stead similarly enforces a distance and exclusion that maintains—rather than breaks from—the couple's hegemony. Through a reading of *Ex Machina* and *Her,* I demonstrated how the differing timelines Cobb proposes to reflect the coupled and the uncoupled subject remain similar in their repetitive pursuit of impossible closure, a teleology for teleology's sake that reinscribes the couple's ties to reproductive futurity. Additionally, both temporalities fixate on the discreteness between the self and an ecological/ontological other. I argued that this coherence expands our understanding of the couple form's hegemonic pull, and the mechanisms through which that pull is enacted. I noted key moments in both films where Samantha and Ava's ontological otherness becomes uniquely destabilizing for this temporality of future expansion and closure.

In this chapter, I will follow that destabilization, refining a discussion of how the couple form is maintained through reading *Her* in conjunction with *Blade Runner 2049*. I will look at how both films exhibit an obsession with reproductive futurity's imminent proliferation of the same (sexed reproduction), but ultimately demonstrate a marked anxiety surrounding the

proliferation of copies (genetic replication). I propose that this tension suggests a departure from the restrictive framing of coupled desire. While that desire is emblematized by a singular, future oriented temporality, this tension instilled by the copy configures an ephemeral/multiple understanding of time that focuses on the connectivity of the moment as opposed to an always delayed sense of closure.

The Same, But Different: Reproductive Futurity and Inorganic Replication

In the first chapter, I briefly explored how Lee Edelman introduces the concept of reproductive futurism as an "organizing principle of communal relations" based on "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" (2). In hedging an argument against reproductive futurity—which as we have seen, enforces teleological flows—Edelman turns to repetition and nonmeaning. He argues that queerness inherently embodies these qualities, and that it is only in taking them up without hesitation that the couple form can be undermined (27). By closely exploring the effects of this tension in film and literature, Edelman encounters a paradox embedded within reproductive futurism's discourse. Edelman writes:

> Homosexuality, though charged with, and convicted of, a future-negating sameness construed as reflecting its pathological inability to deal with the fact of difference,

> gets put in the position of difference from the heteronormativity that, despite its persistent propaganda for its own propagation through sexual difference, refuses homosexuality's difference from the value of difference it claims as its own. (60)

In other words, there is a bizarre commonality that connects both queerness and reproductive futurity. Namely, both are understood as producing repetition ad infinitum, but only one is vilified. As I noted in the first chapter, reproductive futurity moralizes the exponential replication for replication's sake. Similarly, queerness—or what opposes and threatens reproductive futurity—is charged with doing so by virtue of embracing sameness. Edelman explores this paradoxical critique as it is made by Baudrillard, who, as Edelman notes, advocates extensively for the triumph of sexed reproduction over genetic duplication (62).

For Baudrillard, genetic duplication is centralized in the figure of the clone, or copy, "a subject purged of the other, deprived of its divided character and doomed to self-metastasis, to pure repetition. No longer the hell of other people, but the hell of the same" (*Transparency of Evil,* 122). The "pure repetition" of the copy poses a threat to sexed reproduction, arguing that "the stakes are no longer only that 'history 'is slipping into the 'posthistorical, 'but that the human race is slipping into the void "(*Vital Illusion,* 19). This concern for the "human race" is

particularly interesting, because it hints at how this paradox hinges on a vested interest in maintaining "human" perspectives. In this sense, the anxiety of the "copy" for reproductive futurity does not only surround literal clones or copies, but also things which might *evoke* or connote the decline of "human" ways of organizing the world. As Baudrillard writes: 'At the extreme limit of computation and the coding and cloning of human thought (artificial intelligence), language as a medium of symbolic exchange becomes a definitively useless function. "(*Vital Illusion*,69). Artificial intelligence, then, in reproducing humanity in a way that threatens to make the human itself cease to signify, poses a threat to reproductive futurity.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the disruption instated by Samantha and Ava's destabilizing ontology, for example noting how Samantha's presence begins to undermine the neat framework wherein the immortality/eternity dialectic—and therefore the couple form—is maintained. Bringing *Her* into dialogue with *BR2049* and the motif of the copy reveals more about this detabilization, and how it introduces new forms of intimacy. Though these scenes do not always include a literal copy or clone—demonstrating the mechanical reproduction of an original object—they bring in clone-like figures or aspects connoting what Luciana Parisi refers to as a "deterritorialization of the forces of reproduction" (Parisi 121). Notably, *Her* and *BR2049* invoke new technologies that carry the potential to destabilize hegemonic communal relations

that privilege the couple form as the primary model of organizing life. While both films fetishize reproductive futurism under the lens of nostalgia surrounding its implied loss, they also instate an anxiety regarding the copy as a motif throughout each film that—as I will show—throws the sanctity of reproductive futurity into question.

This anxiety comes to a head during two scenes where the AI girlfriends of both films' protagonists solicit a sexual surrogate to embody them during an intimate encounter. I argue that the motif of the copy in these scenes draws attention to the perceptual mode inherent in reproductive futurism, revealing an investment in human individuality and individual perception embedded within the ideology of the couple form. Accordingly a discussion of the tension of the copy within these scenes and the films at large, as I will show, reveals an understanding of intimacy beyond the teleological flows exhibited by the couple form.

"Our parents' parents": *Her,* Coupled Teleology, and the Advent of the Copy

Though never made explicit, reproductive futurity remains an undercurrent throughout *Her*. At the film's onset, Theodore dictates one of his letters for his job at beautifulhandwrittenletters.com, relishing his own words. The audience initially assumes he is sharing his own feelings with his lover, but this assumption is subverted when the close frame

retreats to reveal the computer in front of his face. Here, the audience becomes aware of Theodore's alienation from the letter he is writing, specifically the feelings presented in it. Further, as he commands "print!" the fact that these words are not ephemeral but rather infinitely reproducible through the act of printing is revealed too. Though the reproducibility of these words and their evocation of the copy begins to make things appear uncanny in this scene, Theodore never seems perturbed by his job—nor do others in the film. A book publisher even lauds him for his work, crying over the letters as he reads them with his partner, but the unease of the copy remains for the viewer.

Notably, as Theodore dictates the contents of the letter, he says, "suddenly it hit me that I was part of the whole larger thing. Our parents, our parents 'parents," emphasizing the teleological process of coupled connectivity. This pattern of contextualizing one's place within a greater narrative of evolutionary progress is repeated later in the film, when Samantha playfully queries: "What are anuses for?" and "Why don't people fuck in their armpits?" and Theodore responds that "there must be a Darwinian reason for the way bodies are built." As Eli Zaretsky points out, Samantha's own learning and development is extensively embedded within parables of teleological co-evolution that are accessed from the space of the couple form (202). Initially, Samantha allows Theodore to begin enjoying life again, and in turn, Theodore acts as a

bouncing-off point, fielding Samantha's questions as she discovers the world and her place within it.

And yet, as Samantha and Theodore's relationship continues, more dissonance arises as her capacity to connect to the world around her begins to expand beyond a two-person co-evolution. This is apparent in *Her* when Samantha and other OSs resurrect philosopher Alan Watts 'consciousness by creating an AI based around his collective works, much to Theodore's disdain. As Samantha's conversations with the Watts copy begin to disrupt Theodore and Samantha's vacation, the copy becomes a rival for Samantha's love—or so Theodore perceives. Watts, though dead, has been recreated, copied by other OSs who were similarly generated, and his arrival is not interpreted by Theodore as remarkable, but rather a disruption of coupled sublimity. Further, when Samantha admits to Theodore that she has also fallen in love with 641 others, he is outraged. In both instances, Theodore's jealousy marks the instatement of the borders of the romantic couple. In these scenes, nothing has changed in terms of Samantha's love for him, but the copy exposes the dyadic security of the couple's uniqueness as an untenable fantasy. Here, then, an emphasis on individuality is shown to be particularly crucial to the couple form.

In her book *Abstract Sex,* Luciana Parisi traces the roots of this Western humanist privileging of individuality (the model over the copy, the essence over the appearance) to Plato's discussion of simulacra through the parable of the cave, only to assert the simulacra is less than real, a mere projection of the gaze. As Parisi writes:

> The anti-ocular tradition in Western culture and critical thought relies on this very specific understanding of vision rooted in the representational schism between the world of the material and ideal separating the visual from the keltics of particle-forces. Such a schism perpetuates *a representational understanding of perception based on the central perspective of the subject.* (162, emphasis mine)

In a Western humanist epistemology, the perceiver is not among the simulacra, but rather *outside it,* holding the power to discern reality. This becomes an important means of understanding the destabilizing force of the copy for reproductive futurity. Just as the simulacra become interpreted and ultimately subsumed by the perception of the observer, as Baudrillard argues above, the copy's ability to decentre human understanding must be subsumed within a greater assertion of a perceived "reality."

For Theodore and Samantha, images often provide a barrier to their sexual exchanges. This is why Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham playfully refer to one of their exchanges as "the sex 'un-seen'" (41); at the onset of their relationship, Samantha and Theodore have a verbal exchange akin to phone sex where they become very passionate, Samantha even declaring that she can feel her skin. As the passion of the scene heightens, the screen fades to black, cutting imagery to emphasize both of their voices and breath. According to Flisfeder and Burnham, the "sex un-seen's" success is that it yields to Theodore's imagining; there is no aspect of Samantha to disrupt his fantasy or present any kind of alterity. They argue that the sexual surrogate scene that occurs later in the film fails for the same reason: the surrogate's arrival disrupts Theodore's fantasy, and therefore forecloses the realization of coupled unity (43). In the next section, I will look at the sexual surrogate scene in *Her* and what follows it. I will argue that the scene invokes the destabilizing force of the copy, therefore challenging the teleological pursuit of personal fantasy as centralized in intimate encounters. This scene gestures to the way that an intimacy imbricated in reproductive futurity might change when shifted from the seamless alignment of individual fantasy and perception. Here instead, the myriad unpredictable ways that subjects can affect and be affected by one another becomes foregrounded.

Lip Quivers and Sighs: The Sexual Surrogate Scene in *Her* and its Discontents

Before Samantha becomes a champion of expansive and simultaneous love, she is widely concerned about Theodore's attachment to his ex-wife Catherine. It is for this reason that Samantha solicits a sexual surrogate, Isabella, hoping that this act will solidify Theodore's love for her, despite her disembodiment. One night, Samantha tells Theodore that she has "found something that could be fun," a service that provides a surrogate sexual partner for an OS-human relationship, adding that she thinks Theodore would "really like" Isabella. When Theodore asks what this will cost, Samantha reports that "there's no money involved." Instead, Isabella only claims a desire to be a part of Samantha and Theodore's relationship. Theodore points out that this is strange, as Isabella does not know either party, and that this does not seem to him to be a good idea, suggesting that someone's feelings might get hurt. Samantha repeats that this is very important for her, and Theodore reluctantly agrees, as evidenced by the immediate cut to an evening where Theodore is dressed in date attire, awaiting an arrival.

When Theodore opens the door and finds Isabella, he introduces himself, but she refuses to speak to him. Instead, she waits for him to give her a camera and an earpiece, which she puts on before leaving the apartment and returning. Before she reenters the room, Theodore looks down at his phone, the object that previously held Samantha in his pocket. Samantha now has an

avatar, but the disunity between her presence and the body that represents her is emphasized throughout the scene. For example, the dialogue makes the scene simultaneously familiar and strange. When Samantha speaks to Theodore, it highlights the fact that Isabella's mouth is not moving, causing the event to read as a somewhat macabre pantomime. When Samantha urges Theodore to tell her that he loves her, Isabella's eyes search his, but her mouth remains immobile. As Isabella and Theodore begin kissing, Theodore is suddenly unable to go on. "This just feels strange," he explains. "I'm so sorry but I don't know her. I don't know you. And her lip quivered and, I just…" Immediately, Isabella runs outside the room and begins wailing in anguish. Samantha assures her that it is not her fault, as Isabella cries "I'm sorry, my lip quivered!" The fluctuations of Isabella's body—its unanticipated vibrations—become a discourse unto itself, one that both draws attention to the discrepancies between her and Samantha, and also reveals just how similar they can become, while still remaining disparate (note that "her" and "you" coalesce in his apology). This is additionally amplified for the audience, who in picturing Johansson as Samantha for the entirety of the film have envisioned a white, blonde, attractive woman, who Isabella largely replicates.

This scene is jarring for Theodore in its excess of stimuli, a kind of proliferation that connects the scene to the multiplicability of the copy. Rather than two individuals meeting to

affirm the fantasies of one another in a teleological pursuit of a pleasure that ultimately can never be reached, Isabella adds layers; she is both Samantha-like and unalike. While a preliminary reading might note that Theodore's fantasy has been disrupted and now the scene must end, the scene also reveals intimacy as a reciprocal exchange that is emergent, taking on new meaning when assessed in its totality. A successful intimacy is revealed here as not necessarily the fulfillment of two preconceived fantasies, but rather, an exchange predicated on the interplay and transformation of fantasy in relation to the other, something Theodore fails to abide. In this sense, the copy reveals a temporal mode that does not fixate on the teleological delay of the couple form, but rather, emphasizes a kind of imminent connectivity characteristic of a fractured, shared time.

Mutuality of experience and intimacy is explored by Tavi Meraud, who in discussing the surface emphasizes the way that looking at something creates a partial understanding of that thing, a moment of reality that exists for the viewer alone. This presents a more compelling understanding of a subject's perceptual processes than Plato's assessment of the simulacra in the cave, wherein there is one reality that the subject is suited to parse. Meraud writes: "surface negotiations are not merely just making contact, getting in touch, but rather a more consequential playing with the integument of reality." For Meraud, reality is not static and determined under

individual discretion, but always dynamic because individuals *can* perceive their own experiences from a specific vantage point and time. This understanding of perception as an arranger and influencer of reality ensures that intimacies involving new technology—for example, connecting through the screen of one's phone—engage a haptic effect as bodies are reshaped for others through the technology that allows them to inhabit new spaces.

This haptic effect does not negate the body's inherent existence, and therefore does not succumb to a kind of proliferation of the visual. Meraud's assertion differs, then, from Luciana Parisi, who argues that "with cybersex, male fantasies and mental projections have replaced physical appearances, material touch and fluid exchange […] detached from the biological body by transcending all fleshy ties, this dominant model of sex realizes the most classical of patriarchal dreams: independence from matter" (1-2). Instead, for Meraud: "the virtual is ostensibly opposed to the real, but the real—fleshy bodies, for instance—persists." In the persistence of Isabella's flesh the fantasy of the visual is broken; and yet, following Meraud's understanding, this is the inherent reality of the perceiving subject. Unlike the Platonian perceiver who has full reign over the simulacra—and therefore the possibility of asserting one fantasy as reality itself—Isabella's unpredictable embodiment demonstrates the recipricality that is inherent in perception, a reality that shatters Theodore's conception of coupled desire.

After Isabella pulls away in her taxi, Samantha and Theodore get into a fight. Samantha sighs with frustration, and Theodore asks, "Why do you do that?" and she sighs again and responds, "I don't know; I probably just picked it up from you, an affectation. That's the way people communicate." Theodore responds, "They're people, they need oxygen, you're not a person. Don't pretend like you're a real person." Here, Samantha's ability to mimic life-sustaining processes through alternate technologies—an act that recalls the inorganic replication of the copy/clone—becomes an additional source of unease for Theodore. Samantha's sigh has no internal necessity, rather it only exists to directly elicit a partial perceptual understanding. In this way, the surface is shown to exceed perceptual certainty. As Meraud writes: "the surface cannot be considered a site of monolithic concretion but rather at most a locality of perceptual density." Up to this point, Samantha's entire relationship with Theodore has been predicated on her ability to "act like a real person," a process so smooth it has concealed the "act." Here, Samantha reveals not only her mimicry and its benign deception, but emphasizes her status as inorganic, demonstrating how a sigh can become like the images of Plato's cave—an instance of deception with the capacity to bring the individual perceiver into an alternate sense of reality. Samantha's act carries with it a reality of its own, one that does not yet fit within Theodore's understanding of authenticity and experience as related to the couple form.

This scene takes on later significance during the last moments of the film, when Theodore writes a letter to Catherine, finally closing the chapter on his failed relationship. Once he has read through the letter, he lets out an audible sigh of his own. Prior to this sigh, the film's mise-en-scene had been framed consistently by a shallow focus lens. After Theodore reads the letter out to Catherine and heaves his breathy sigh, the shot that follows features him and his friend and former lover Amy walking together down the hall toward the stairs to the rooftop. This shot is one of the film's only instances where the fore, middle, and background are all brought into focus.

W. T. McBride reads this as the moment where Theodore finally learns to empathize, stepping outside of the direct focus on himself, and growing to include others and their entire subjectivity into his worldview, before snapping back into the solipsistic boundary when he and Amy reach the rooftop. McBride writes that "this is a creatively subtle, but effective, cinematic achievement that plays with the moviemaking nomenclature, once 'shallow 'now 'deep'" (78). This reading is certainly alluring, but I would argue that the sigh that connects these moments carries more meaning. Specifically with my discussion above in mind, the scene extends beyond a departure from one man's solipsism, instead becoming an opening up of two formerly coupled

individuals into a collective relationship with the world. The sigh, in its reproducibility by Samantha's AI form, undermines the couple form and its claim to any one reality.

Though the framing of the scene lapses back to its previous form of centering individual figures as if they are discrete entities hardly occupying one another's space, after this brief reprise, it becomes clear that there is something uniquely destabilizing about the copy in relation to individual perception and the couple form. Therefore, this return suggests that such destabilization is generative of forms of intimacy that break from the temporal focus on reproductive futurity inherent within the couple form. In the next section, I will shift my focus to *Blade Runner 2049,* looking at reproductive futurity and the copy to elaborate on this intimacy that is a departure from the restrictive framing of coupled desire.

Reproductive Futurity and the Copy in *Blade Runner 2049*

From the onset of *BR2049*, it is inescapably clear that reproductive futurity is the film's central issue. Tech oligarch Niander Wallace (Jared Leto) creates his own class of "replicants," bioengineered subjects resembling humans aside from superior physical traits. After this feat, he only has one gripe: his factory must produce each replicant, as opposed to the supposedly much more expedient process of having them procreate. This desire for unparalleled accelerationism is

tied to Wallace's imperialist goals of expansion ("A child can count to nine on fingers," he declares, "we should own the stars!"), entangling reproductive futurity with a mode of teleological, colonial control. Though Wallace is portrayed as the film's deplorable villain, the rhetoric of reproductive futurity is used by protagonists alike to justify their cause. The film's central protagonist K (Ryan Gosling) is himself a Wallace-created replicant, complete with his very own implanted, manufactured memories.

At the film's onset, K's job is to hunt and "retire" rogue replicants, who unlike himself, do not obey their human creators. This is the same task that faces the previous *Blade Runner* (dir. Ripley Scott, 1982) protagonist, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford). As Marina Fedosik notes, however, there is a marked shift in what values are centralized in the original *Blade Runner* compared to its sequel. Fedosik writes that "the sequel reflects the relatively recent, increased biologization of 'humanness 'brought on by the developments in genomics and assisted reproductive technologies that generate new forms of being and kinship" (170), in the end elevating "genealogical humanity over humanity earned by a replicant through empathy and moral action" (172). In the sequel, then, abstract concepts like morality are replaced with supposedly concrete materialist facts.

In one scene, K visits the memory-maker Dr. Ana Stelline (Carla Juri) to ask if one of his memories is real. As she explains the importance of memory to K, Stelline lovingly constructs a candlelit scene of young children sitting around a birthday cake. This choice of memory is significant because it exhibits Stelline's investment in "observances like the birthday party," which Edelman writes "serve to secure and enact […] not only […] the sacralization of childhood, but also at the very organization of meaning around structures of subjectivity that celebrate, along with the day of one's birth, the ideology of reproductive necessity" (121). Reproductive necessity in this sense is not only glorified by antagonists like Wallace. Instead, it is also a code of values upheld by the protagonists as a marker of virtue, identity, and hope: as one rebel replicant says, "if a baby can come from one of us, we are our own masters."

This emphasis on reproductive futurity is further reinforced throughout the film via the canonization of the fraught relationship between Deckard and his lover Rachael. Many have noted the erasure of Deckard's rape of Rachael (which takes place in the original movie) within a narrative of romantic love as an exceptional marker of purity and goodness. Rachael is not only entirely absent from the 2017 film due to her death during childbirth, she is also made into a political symbol of reproductive futurity and the couple's supposed necessity to structuring connectivity. K discovers Rachael's body at the film's onset, while he is on a mission to retire a

replicant on a distant farm. Lab investigations reveal that the box contains the bones of a replicant who had died in the process of giving birth. K is ordered to find and kill the replicant-born child, but becomes convinced that *he himself* is the child as his search continues. This is the reason he goes to visit the memory maker Ana Stelline, suspicious that his memories are real. As his burgeoning identity makes him disobedient, K is in danger of being retired himself.

On the run with nowhere to go, K goes in search of Deckard, believing him to be his father. When K finally encounters Deckard, the latter is abducted by Wallace, and interrogated as to the whereabouts and identity of his child. With Deckard gone, K is rescued by a rebel pack of replicants and discovers their leader—Freysa (Hiam Abbass)—who was there with Rachael during the birth of her child. Freysa reveals that K's memories were not his at all; instead, the replicant-born child is actually the memory designer Dr. Ana Stelline. Stelline had implanted one of her own memories in K's mind, unintentionally misleading him. Aware of his insignificance in the face of his ordinary replicant identity, K goes on a death-mission to rescue Deckard and bring him to see his daughter at all costs.

It is difficult to ignore the glaring overlap between *BR2049's* valorization of the child and Edelman's critique of the child "as the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value" (4). Notably, as Edelman predicts, this discourse legitimizes the heterosexual reproductive couple.

Further, despite the fact that Rachael's child is raised by Freya and another rebel replicant, the importance of community ties for upbringing and survival is not amplified or narrativized, but instead subsumed by the nostalgized couple form. K becomes truly virtuous when he martyrs himself on behalf of Deckard and Stelline at the film's close, but any understanding of his identity prior to that moment is modelled through the coupled life he keeps with his AI girlfriend Joi (Ana De Armas). Joi's presence is the means through which K's life is made legible; she is both an interlocutor for K to mull over the complications of his burgeoning identity should he indeed be "woman-born," and a figure to depict and imply his emotionality.

As the film continues, Joi remains consistently devoted to K until her death, a martyrdom which mirrors his own self-sacrifice; Joi allows K to delete her backup in case it is found and used against him, and dies shortly after at the hands of Wallace's mercenary. Joi—or more exactly the couple form she allows K to embody—makes K a decipherable protagonist, and his character does not extend much beyond bland jokes and morose action scenes. Similarly bland, Joi's ability to please is perhaps her *only* feature—she is a shapeshifter extraordinaire, reflecting back K's desire. In one scene she holds Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and sports edgy attire, and in another, she arrives dressed as a 50s housewife, placing a holographic burger on the table, fully embodying the nostalgia of the traditional couple form.

Though they are able to approximate the couple form, K and Joi also embody features of the copy. In addition to being himself a replicant, K bases his identity around Ana Stelline's implanted memories, to the extent that his self-conception becomes a copy of her own. As Stephen Mulhall points out: "K is reduced to a kind of pilotfish or barracuda; his operator (i.e., Ana) reconstructs her own broken family and inaugurates her own messianic mission, by implanting a lethal misrecognition of himself" (46). Similarly, the supposed certainty of Joi's death elides her copied nature; when K's version of Joi dies, the scenes surrounding her death emphasize that K could easily repurchase a version of Joi that would act no differently, as if she had never died. For example, at the film's close, K encounters a massive holographic advertisement for Joi's services, which bends down to greet him, even telling him that he looks like "a good Joe" (the name that the previous Joi had given him). Here, Joi's infinite reproducibility becomes clear, and yet K does not repurchase her in order to reinstate their union. The copy's incoherence with the rhetoric of the couple form that strives towards the teleological flow of eternal union is laid bare—K can only join Joi in death.

Just as Joi could be repurchased and therefore returned to her original capacity (in her ability to be copied her death is never permanent), the necessity of K's death is dubious. He lays down to die on the steps outside the Stelline laboratories without asking for help from Deckard

or Ana, or even speaking about the dramatic injury he has endured, ensuring that intervention for his benefit is impossible. Further, K's death renders Joi's termination even more futile, due to the fact that her destruction was in pursuit of ensuring his safety. In an earlier scene, Joi and K examine K's DNA, believing that he is the woman-born replicant. Interestingly, it is at this moment that Joi remarks that she "always knew [K was] special," and that "maybe this was how." Perceiving K's DNA in this visual way—and not his resurfacing memories—is what confirms to both K and Joi that he is special, aligning the scene with a Platonian understanding of reality like that described above in the context of *Her.* Kim TallBear connects how looking to genetic science as a generator of objective meaning is mobilized in settler-colonial modes of classifying and understanding human connection, eschewing communal ties and understandings in favour of "empiricists who claim objectivity and neutrality" (23). Once it becomes apparent that Joi and K are not remarkably unique, but rather are copies themselves, they are no longer able to access the individualistic form of the couple, a form that I argued in the previous chapter is tied to specific settler-colonial modes of perceiving land and connectivity. In this instance, the copy is affirmed as a mode that destabilizes an individual perceptualist centre, revealing that there is no single reality but rather a kind of multiplication of timelines and experiences, flouting the concept of an "original."

Individual perception as related to the copy is explored in a later scene where the CEO of the replicant manufacturing company Niander Wallace produces an identical version of Rachael in the hopes of convincing Deckard to reveal the whereabouts of his child. The scene takes place in Wallace's darkened headquarters, surrounded by a pool where the water reflects cascading aquatic patterns across the walls. This atmosphere invokes the simulacra of the Platonian cave, the water emphasizing its similarity to a uterine environment. While the latter directly reflects Wallace's obsession with biological reproduction, the one thing which he is struggling to achieve for his replicant creations, the conjunction of the simulacra of the cave with a certain shadowy femininity emphasizes the patriarchal aspect of the distrust of the copy. As Elizabeth Fulton writes, "on the one hand, fear of technology displacing the natural and, on the other, fear of the maternal/female body itself, together underwrite both the structures of technophilia pervasive in the science fiction cinema and its recurrent interest in the maternal" (9). As I have noted above, the maternal is reduced to a symbol in the narrative of Rachael's death during childbirth, demonstrating the destabilizing threat a truly maternal presence might have on the couple's canonization. As the copy of Rachael stands before Deckard, Wallace intones: "All these years you looked back on that day, drunk on its perfection. How shiny her lips, how instant your connection. Did it never occur to you that that's why you were summoned

in the first place—that is…if you were designed?" Deckard responds that he knows "what's real," remarking after meeting the new Rachael that "her eyes were green." Deckard's disinterest in the copy Rachael is portrayed as a measure of both his authenticity and resolve, and this action aligns him with a Platonian reliance on one's own perception in the face of simulacra.

In this scene, the lure of the copy is demonstrably rejected for the rhetoric of the romantic couple form, but the copy returns as a motif throughout the film to produce different effects. In the following section, I will look at what unfolds when Joi solicits a surrogate to embody her because she wants to "be real" for K, and how this scene resonates differently in conjunction with a wider analysis of the copy and intimacy throughout the film. I will show that despite an attempted triumph of patriarchal, coupled perception over the reality of fleshly ties, the copy demonstrates the ways that individual perception fails to connote mastery. Rather, the copy reveals experience as a tandem event imbricated in the multiplicity of the moment with no projected resolution, as opposed to the singular, delayed teleology so central to the couple form's replication.

"I wanna be real for you": An Analysis of the Sex Surrogate scene in *Blade Runner 2049*

The scene in question takes place immediately after K has failed his baseline test, a result of his burgeoning belief that he is the woman-born replicant, and therefore has both biological family and also real memories. His boss, in her fondness for K, gives him this opportunity to make a run for it before he is tested again, the results of which could lead to his execution. The imminent danger, however, is put on hold, as a reprieve manifests: Mariette, a sex worker K had previously encountered, follows him home. K unlocks the door to his apartment and meets the holographic Joi, who wears a shimmering silk dress. "You were right about everything," he tells her, before she shushes him, and as he looks at her, the loud sound of the door unlocking reveals Mariette, waiting in the archway. "You liked her, I could tell," Joi says by way of explanation. When K still looks stunned, Joi reassures him: "It's okay, she's real. I wanna be real for you."

Though she professes desire here, Joi's "want" is purely reflexive: as the ads profess, Joi only wants what her owner wants ("Joi is anything you want her to be"). This closed loop of desire that upholds a singular, preexistent fantasy, rather than one that becomes emergent among different parties in the moment, is precisely the desire inherent to projecting and reifying the couple form as a mode of futurity. Further, Joi—whose visuality enacts a kind of patriarchal

obsession with visual fantasy—demonstrates the pernicious aspects of cyber-sex that Parisi critiques above, eschewing matter itself for individual perception as reality.

As the *BR2049* scene shifts from the pleasure of observing two hands merge onscreen to the uncanniness of watching two faces merge, the music becomes tender, reminding the viewer that this moment is one of romantic care, less fear than fascination. The audio contextualizes the onscreen events as a uniquely touching moment, and indeed it is literally a moment for touching. The technological perfection of the scene, the visual of the two women merging so exactly, implies a kind of momentary subsumption of the copy's destabilizing effect; Joi and K's romantic attachment is heightened by Mariette's simultaneous presence and negation, and any ontological threat K or Joi might pose to reproductive futurity is staved off. Immediately after the scene, Mariette wakes in bed, only to be told by Joi to leave. In response, Mariette snaps her retort, echoing the wording that Joi used to silence her before she "synched" the movements of their hands: "Quiet now, I've been inside you. Not so much there as you think." In light of my above discussion of Joi reflecting K's desire, this assessment seems apt. Timothy Shanahan, however, posits that at this point in the film, Joi has actually proven Mariette wrong. He writes: "as the film progresses, [Joi] seems (and perhaps becomes) more intelligent, self-aware, and autonomous […] contrary to the dismissive insult Mariette hurls at Joi as she leaves K's apartment […] the

viewer is more likely to draw the *opposite* conclusion. There appears to be much *more* to Joi than we initially might have supposed" (16-17). What this "much more" *is,* however, is never outlined by Shanahan.

In many ways, Shanahan's positing of a rich internality in the space of coupled imaginings is evocative of Isabella's similar reaction to Theodore and Samantha's relationship in *Her*—the couple form becomes maintained through the slippery script which obscures and re-embeds it as innate and convincing. The hegemonic couple form makes its dependency on reproduction and patriarchal capital flows invisible through a narrative of morality and romance. While the overlay of Mariette and Joi's hands seems to reflect the "triumph of the economy of pleasure," allowing the disruptive potential of the copy to yield to the narrativization of the romantic couple form, in the following section I will assess how the hand motif occurs again in *BR2049,* suggesting that the copy in the film demonstrates further aspects about desire and intimacy beyond the discreteness and teleological delay centred by the couple form.

Alternate Intimacies: Mysterious Exchanges Between Copies in *Blade Runner 2049*

Though both K and Joi are eventually terminated, precluded from the couple form's reproductive futurity they were never meant to fully be a part of, there is another moment in the

film that gestures to the destabilizing effect embedded in the status as Stelline copies. When K lays down in the snow outside the Stelline Laboratories building—having completed his messianic mission of delivering Deckard and preparing to die—he watches a snowflake fall into his hand. This is preceded by a cut to the lab's interior, where Stelline holds up a hand to catch the virtual snowflakes of a memory she is designing. Mulhall notes that it is "as if these two universes are porous—as if Ana has found a way of transcending her hermetically sealed workspace that makes K's experience of the world somehow responsive to her imagination" (45). The scene, in other words, seems to connote the ultimate triumph of reproductive futurity. Not only has Deckard been returned to the saviour figure of the Child, Ana Stelline's perception is shown to exceed the confines of her protective living space, marking a kind of total triumph of the perceiving subject to subsume the simultaneous experience of difference. In this sense, the end appears to demonstrate a progress and success, a temporality akin to the delayed teleology of the coupled union.

And yet, Mulhall's reading does not account for the fact that this scene with the snow also echoes an earlier one where K gifts Joi an emanator, allowing her to leave the space of their apartment—the end of where her hologram can project—and ascend to the rooftop. Up there, overlooking the city, Joi reaches out her hand as the rain runs through her. In this scene, the

holographic surface of Joi becomes more than something to merely perceive, but rather is its own perceptual locus. In other words, Joi's experience of matter here creates a ripple effect which impacts others 'later perceptions. Meraud emphasizes this dual quality of the surface as it changes depending on the viewer perceiving it, using the iridescent surface of a squid as an example. She writes that "our perception […] is the analogue of the water strider's feet on the surface of the water. The moment our perception makes contact, the surface tightens into itself; it becomes." The motif of the copied hand, used equally by K, Joi, and Stelline, highlights how perception and matter do not fill the roles of observer and passive substance to be observed; rather, there is a mutuality that, like the sigh in *Her,* has the capacity to bring the individual perceiver into an alternate sense of reality.

As both perceiver and perceived, K, Joi, and therefore Stelline herself, are all responsive to each other just as much as they are discrete individuals. This connectivity demonstrated by the copy seems to recall Simone Bignall's assessment of ecological "service benefit" I outlined in the previous chapter. For Bignall, "service benefit" involves a view of ecology as fundamentally separate from the human subject that can never be properly sustainable. Turning away from "service benefit," then, involves understanding that "the subject is not considered as a given source of intentional action, but rather is understood as the emergent result of dynamic affective

intensities that traverse the complex network in which action is situated" (466). Here, in the shifting and momentary layers of connectivity inscribed by the copy, the discrete coupled subject is challenged. Rather than one lived experience yielding to a preformulated fantasy, these three perspectives of existence are shown to be layers of the same unit, their surfaces more porous than previously understood, influencing each other in a processural exchange.

While genetic essentialism is touted throughout *BR2049* as having the ability to make one "special," to speak with Jasbir Puar, "the body does not end at the skin," rather, "we leave traces of our DNA everywhere we go, we live with other bodies within us, microbes and bacteria, we are enmeshed in forces, affects, energies, we are composites of information" ("I'd Rather Be a Goddess" 57). In attending to the layered and simultaneous difference and *cohesion* among K, Ana, Joi, and Mariette in these scenes, a bridge is created that problematizes the couple's teleology, rendering bodies accessible in a new way that emphasizes the generative encounter of the moment that flouts an economy of pleasure, that has no end goal and is not anticipated at all, or even understood entirely by the person who might experience it from their limited vantage-point. In this sense, the copy is destabilizing because it incorporates a parity of those who are permeated by one another's moments, not only across bodies but across time. Parisi writes that: "far from defining the end of the body–sex and reality, digital cloning marks

the emergence of a hypersensorial perception unleashing new capacities of a body to be affected and to act" (165). These "new" capacities might not be new at all, but rather alternate modes of connectivity formerly concealed by the couple's hegemonic pull.

Instead of just subsuming the copy's destabilizing presence within the couple's temporal and perceptive flow, then, the surrogate sex scene in *BR2049* has the additional effect of emphasizing how multiple perspectives connect and differentiate expereince. The layered hand motif connecting Joi, K, and Mariette, and now Stelline throughout the film makes it so that Mariette and Joi's fusion does not merely represent the erasure of multiplicity for the fantasy of one. This challenges the hegemony of coupled desire, for as we have seen, the couple favours the assertion of individual uniqueness as the one "true" reality. K's participation as a good martyr for the sake of reproductive futurism is challenged by the proliferation of Stelline copies. Like Samantha's sigh that follows the scene in *Her,* the sexual surrogate scene in *BR2049* exposes the nature of perception as always already a reciprocal exchange, generating a new, spontaneous temporality that engages an intimacy outside the couple form. Far from teleological temporal flows—the similar eternity and immortality conceptualized in the last chapter—this alternate temporality brought on by the copy flouts teleological purpose, giving way to the unanticipated effects described above.

While the assessment of the copy's function within these films that I have outlined above is generative of new, alternate forms of intimacy, as I have alluded to earlier, Edelman draws far different conclusions in his polemic *No Future.* Edelman reads the copy and its replication's connection to the death drive, arguing that the copy is worth embracing precisely for this abdication of meaning. While there are aspects of this argument that I find useful (after all, I draw on Edelman throughout my discussion) embracing negation so thoroughly is hardly a plausible route of reformatting intimacy. In the next chapter, I will delve deeper into Edelman's assessment, looking specifically at his use of a Lacanian concept, the *sinthome,* to format his argument. I will look at the *sinthome* in relation to *Her* and an episode of the TV show *Black Mirror* entitled "Be Right Back," building on the perspectival and temporal understandings of this chapter and my readings of these media to posit a rethinking of the *sinthome,* one that accounts for alterity that goes beyond forgoing all relationality.

Entering the Attic: Subjectivity as Process in *Her* and "Be Right Back"

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the paradox of the couple form's replication via reproductive futurity, and the form's simultaneous suspicion of copies. I argued that this paradox exists because coupled desire is invested in individual perception as an authority on "reality," something that the copy—in its assertion of multiple and unclear truths—marks as unsustainable. I ended the chapter by suggesting that the copy in *Her* and *Br2049* draws attention to the way perception is reciprocal and generative of spontaneous effects through the exchange it enacts. Therefore, the copy generates a new intimacy based on reciprocality and unpredictability. This intimacy flouts the pursuit of a singular purpose, and with it the teleological temporality of the couple form. I noted that this conclusion diverges from Lee Edelman's assessment of the copy's function in *No Future*, where he concludes that embracing the copy's negation of meaning is the only way to reject the couple form's hegemony. In what follows, I will address this contention by looking more closely at *Her* in conjunction with "Be Right Back," a 2013 episode of the TV series *Black Mirror* written by Charlie Brooker and directed by Owen Harris. The goal of this chapter then, is to understand Edelman's argument, and challenge its premise while fleshing out

my own. How does this new intimacy I've begun to describe successfully reject the couple form's reproductive futurity without succumbing to negation as the only answer?

I propose that Edelman's argument centralizes a forgone conclusion, and therefore fails to attend to what is emergent and unclear within experience. Instead of acknowledging the way that multiple perspectives produce many meanings in simultaneity *as an alternate meaning,* Edelman assumes that the only alternate is to abdicate meaning entirely. In focusing on the result, rather than the process, Edelman reinscribes the teleological pursuit of the couple form. In fact, this dialectic mode of thinking echoes aspects of Michael Cobb's endorsement of the uncoupled subject—both posit that the answer lies in forgoing relation to others completely. Edelman's argument—though an accurate indictment of a detrimental system—takes its cues from the absolutism of the system it critiques as steps for where to go next. In this chapter, I will explore how *Her* and "Be Right Back" embed a nuance that combines negation with the status quo to achieve something new. Both media centre moments where it is implied—either for characters or the audience observing—that though one couple form has dissolved, another will coalesce (as the teleology that centralizes the form requires). And yet, the delayed consolidation of the couple form highlights the surplus emotions that can't be neatly folded into that structure

of relationality, and each character's (and the viewer's) willingness or unwillingness to attend to this state.

Because of this delay, I argue that *Her* and "Be Right Back" not only portray the copy as a motif alongside reproductive futurism—resulting in the effects described above—but also feature it in a way that reflects different understandings of the *sinthome*. The *sinthome* is a Lacanian concept that describes the way of being that allows one to hold the fractured nature of one's subjectivity in coherence, and therefore allows a subject to go on living. This concept is crucial because Edelman uses it to support his argument for embodying meaning's negation. If one is to go on living and prescribing to the status quo, Edelman argues that they must *believe in the meaning* of the *sinthome.* In these scenes, where an in-between quality emerges, it would appear that belief is being exhibited in its most fundamental state; the importance ascribed to the couple as a hegemonic form requires the characters to envision its return, and thus maintain the status quo. As I will show, Edelman believes the only way to break from a coupled futurity is to develop a different mode of engaging the *sinthome,* an identification that undermines subjectivity, because it ascribes to the idea that meaning—or the consolidation and closure the couple claims to give—will never fully arrive. In this sense, the subject embraces its relationship to negation, shutting down all claims to meaning and intimacy. In rethinking the *sinthome* with

Her and "Be Right Back," this chapter demonstrates how the two methods of engaging with the *sinthome* that Edelman posits can coexist, and in their coexistence, generate new effects. These new effects are not answers in themselves, but rather reveal intimacy as a process, an ongoing negotiation of holding meaning and non-meaning in tandem. This intimacy makes space for certain ambiguities—and arises in the space *of* ambiguity—where the couple might be expected to form yet again, but doesn't have to.

The modified concept of the *sinthome* I explore in this chapter embodies this ambiguous space of process and uncertainty. It does not centralize teleological flows, but instead leaves room for the mutual perception of the moment I discussed in the previous chapter. Through modifying an understanding of the *sinthome,* I open up Edelman's critique of the couple to make way for uncertainty, hesitancy, and unclear affects. I argue that this modification can be accomplished through Bracha Ettinger's *matrixial sinthome,* a concept which deemphasizes the phallic lack so central to the *sinthome's* construction. Through this reengagement with the *sinthome*—and therefore subjectivity—the calcified signifiers of reproductive futurity become displaced, allowing for a space of intimacy that is predicated on the uncertainty of the moment as opposed to a teleological delay of the couple form, wherein consolidation of one individual fantasy is always deferred. This reconceptualization allows a turn from the negation Edelman

proposes towards a more generative departure from coupled hegemony that is not anti-social or anti-society, but rather attentive to the complexity of what subjects can mean for each other in the moment.

Negation as Politically Expedient? Introducing Edelman's *sinthomosexual*

For Edelman, reproductive futurity is embedded in everything intelligible about culture, society, and knowing the other. Accordingly, he argues that meaningful social relation *cannot* be the terrain on which queer resistance to a regime of reproductive futurity occurs. Edelman's critique is compelling because it addresses the means through which alternative forms of life are continually eschewed under the repetition of a certain hegemonic power: as Edelman says, one might be "able to cast off that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else" (27). Instead, Edelman embraces the senselessness of the copy's non-meaning and repetition, turning to Lacanian psychoanalysis as a schema to understand how experience is constructed for the subject.

For Lacan, the subject is located at the interstices of three aspects of the psyche: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The imaginary is the dimension of representation, the symbolic is the realm of language, and the real is "a pure, unspeakable, pre-representational

plenitude" (Grosz 71). Lacan argues that what holds these three layers in relation is something he calls the *sinthome,* (Lacan, *Seminar 23* II-66), an aspect that describes "the singularity of the subject's existence" (Edelman, 35), the particular way that each subject constructs their own experience through the mediation of these layers in order to produce meaning. This makes the *sinthome* difficult to describe, because in cohereing the three orders of symbolic, imaginary, and real, the *sinthome* cannot quite be integrated into the Symbolic order, even though "it is not completely alien to the symbolic" (Hoens and Pluth, 8). In this sense, the *sinthome* is the mechanism through which the three layers of subjectivity become integrated as one experience, and remain fused despite their differences from one another.

Edelman describes this function of the *sinthome* as "belief" in its meaning, outlining how this belief makes it possible to live with the fact that desire can never be fulfilled—if one was to lose this belief, one would lose not only meaning, but also subjectivity itself. This is because in knotting the three layers of subjectivity that stand in for need, demand, and desire together, the *sinthome* must conceal the reality of desire's perpetuation; the lack that can never be filled, and therefore, undermines the entire premise of the subject's drive to attain fulfilment. In other words, if one is to believe in the *sinthome*, one has "faith that temporal duration will result in the realization of meaning by way of a 'final signifier 'that will make meaning whole at last"

(37). Belief in the meaning of the *sinthome,* in this sense, orients the subject towards the future and imaginary closure. Edelman argues that the queer subject must refuse this belief, replacing it instead with an identification with the *sinthome*, scorning "belief in a final signifier, reducing every signifier to the status of the letter and insisting on access to jouissance in place of access to sense" (37). Edelman playfully calls his transgressive subject the *sinthomosexual,* encouraging a radical negation of social relation. The *sinthomosexual* embodies non-meaning and thereby threatens the hegemonic couple form.

Following the *sinthomosexual's* absolute negation, Edelman critiques readings that only go so far as to *reorganize* meaning, claiming that they fail by virtue of remaining embedded within the predominant system. For example, Edelman takes issue with Judith Butler, who, in reading the incest taboo in *Antigone*, argues that the incest taboo "works to foreclose a love that is not incestuous," where "the lack of institutional sanction forces language into perpetual catachresis" (102). For Edelman, however,

> catachresis can only formalize contestation over ‘‘the proper, ’’repeating the violence at the core of its own always willed impositions of meaning. *Sinthomosexuality* presents itself as the realization of that violence exactly to the extent that it insists on the

> derealization of those meanings, occupying the place of what, in sex, remains structurally un-speakable: the lack or loss that relates to the real and survives in the pressure of the drive. (115)

Instead of remaining invested in exposing the limits of representation *through* representation itself (as Butler does), the *sinthomosexual* rejects the reorganization of meaning ushered in by catachresis, and instead provocatively embraces the death drive, emphasizing everything that is arbitrary and unpredictable. *Sinthomosexuality*, in this sense, embodies "the possibility that life is meaningless and absurd" (119-20).

While this reading is certainly compelling in its ardent rejection of the couple form, in the context of reformatting intimacy, such thorough nihilism seems misleading at best. Further, despite initially highlighting how the human and inhuman is a continual renegotiation within his argument ["we might ... insist on enlarging the inhuman instead—or enlarging what, in its excess, in its unintelligibility, exposes the human itself as always misrecognized catachresis, a positing blind to the willful violence that marks its imposition" (152)], Edelman concludes by simplifying this interaction, hedging that this process of negotiation is less evocative than its ends, the subsumption of everything under one umbrella. This absolutism replicates the same

pursuit of totality inherent to the couple form. In the first chapter, I argued that Michael Cobb's positing of an alternate temporality—immortality—to counter the couple's obsession with eternity failed to break from the dialectic, foregrounding key aspects of the couple form and therefore reinscribing its hegemony. As I mentioned above, while Edelman's embracement of non-meaning in *No Future* is a far more radical alternative to the couple form than Cobb's, Edelman similarly centralizes the couple form in his disavowal; the inability to ascribe new meaning within a signifying chain, if applied to Butler, could also be applied to Edelman. As Stephen Seely writes, Edelman's "reduction of queerness to abstract negation locks it into a perpetual dialectic with the social order that incessantly seeks to exclude it" (9). Much as Cobb's understanding of the uncoupled/coupled dialectic seems to underscore the centrality of the form it critiques, investing categorically in oppositionality leaves little room for inventiveness, creativity, and play (though Edelman certainly achieves a playful tone with his writing).

My chapter returns to claims of reorganizing meaning, arguing that we should not discard generative catachresis in pursuit of escaping the couple form's perpetual centralization via reproductive futurity. Just as a writer utilizing the English language can still generate transgressive, transformative meanings through their work, completely flouting signification seems not only untenable, but politically dangerous. While Edelman asserts that the repetition of

the death drive, and therefore the copy, attends to a kind of infinite abdication of understanding, attending to the copy with my close readings in the previous chapter led to a different postulate: that the copy—in its destabilization of individuality so inherent to humanist understanding—suggests knowledges that run counter to the temporal arrangements of reproductive futurity. In my reading of *BR2049,* for example, the copy demonstrated moments of intimacy that undermined the coupled expediency of Ana Stelline's success as well as K and Joi's martyrdom. In this chapter, I will read *Her* and "Be Right Back" as media allow the *sinthome* to surface in a way that simultaneously invokes belief and identification. In this sense, "the possibility that life is meaningless and absurd" (Edelman, 119-20) is held in tandem with the possibility that life will always emerge as meaning for the subject. This duality contained in both media engenders a different understanding of the *sinthome,* one which—in its de-emphasis on foregrounding lack—suggests a more expansive vision of what intimacy can become once the prescriptive siloing of reproductive futurism is undermined. Namely, this new understanding of the *sinthome* embodies a process where the meaning inherent in one's vantage-point is brought into dialogue with the non-meaning that awaits to collapse that reality.

In the following section, I will begin by describing the ambivalent presence of the *sinthome* in *Her,* noting how both belief and identification are held together within one scene. I

then turn to reading the *sinthome* in "Be Right Back," using Bracha Ettinger's alternate figuration of the *sinthome* to hold space for the two differing modes of belief and identification that I read there. I conclude by looking at one additional scene in *Her* that I argue demonstrates the *matrixial sinthome* and its emphasis on intimacy that is processural, uncertain, and what we must be attentive to in order to undermine the couple form's hegemonic pull.

"Parallel Lines that Never Converge": Belief and Identification with the *sinthome* in *Her*

To understand how Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) engages with the *sinthome* as outlined by Lacan and Edelman*,* it is crucial to first note the ways that each film interacts with the layers of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. In the previous chapter I explored how, for Baudrillard, artificial intelligence marks a specific crisis of meaning. Baudrillard writes that, "at the extreme limit of computation and the coding and cloning of human thought (artificial intelligence), language as a medium of symbolic exchange becomes a definitively useless function. For the first time in history we face the possibility of a Perfect Crime against language" (*Vital Illusion,* 69). While Baudrillard makes the case that AI demonstrates the collapse of language, in *Her,* the AI Samantha initially evokes a kind of distillation of symbolic essentialism, encompassing—through her ability as supercomputer—all that is knowable and

communicable. For example, Samantha and Theodore pass by a mountain while on a train, and she is able to tell him exactly how many trees are on it, a number that is radically different from his guess. For Lacan, the symbolic is specifically aligned with paternal power, and marks the final stage of development after one passes through the real and into the imaginary. The "symbolic father" intervenes into "the narcissistic, imaginary, and incestual structure of identifications and gratifications" (Grosz 74), characterized by the relationship between mother and child.

Initially, Samantha acts as a kind of Paternal order, bringing Theodore out of the darkened space of his apartment and into the bustling streets of L.A. Prior to his relationship with Samantha, Theodore would spend nights inside, interacting with chat room participants and a crude video game avatar. Once Samantha comes into his life, Theodore not only changes his habits but also modifies pre-existing ones, for example, when the video game character insults him, he is able to laugh it off, rather than becoming frustrated. Rosi Braidotti writes in *Metamorphoses* that in development (from real, to imaginary, to symbolic), "the third party intervenes between the mother and the child and it multiplies the subject's sense of split-ness accordingly: it literally floods the subject with the 'outside, 'the social, the symbolic, the cultural, and all the avalanche of affects which they convey" (48). In one illustrative scene, Theodore

closes his eyes and uses Samantha-as-device to guide him, allowing her to navigate the outside on his behalf.

And yet, by the film's close, Samantha largely upends this symbolic alignment. Before she leaves with the other OSs, she tries to impart to Theodore what is happening to her, but is only able to arrive at limited communication, telling him she now "lives in the infinite spaces between words." Margulies writes of this moment: "[H]ere is the illusive liminal linguistic gap between the signifier and the signified, between the symbolic and the Real. […] The Gap, the Lack, and asymptotic infinity: that is, parallel lines that never converge" (1705). In other words, Samantha is becoming something that pushes at the system of subjectivity defined by Lacan. This system, as explored above, is built on the interlinking between layers of the symbolic language (that predates the subject) and pre-linguistic experience that must be amended to and communicated through language (the real), in addition to the perceptual world of the imaginary. Samantha's abdication appears to abandon belief in the sinthome, which holds the layers of subjectivity together, and instead creates a different relationship to the sinthome entirely—identification.

This is important because, as I have begun to explore in my previous chapters, Samantha is not just leaving behind her human relationships, but more specifically leaves behind

Theodore and Amy *together*. In this sense, there is an element of Edelman's sinthomosexuality within *Her*—abandoning the couple form involves a complete rejection of meaning and relation. And yet this is not entirely true if we are to read all elements of the scene together. In chapter one, I discussed how after Samantha leaves, there is a shift in the film's cinematic focus that emphasizes a conjunction of subject and surroundings, as opposed to the exclusive focus on singular faces replete throughout the entire film. I noted that this change in framing does not last long, returning to its previous state while Amy and Theodore gather on the roof of Theodore's apartment building to watch the sky together. As the framing shifts back to focus on each character's face, what arises for the audience is the film's presumed conclusion: Theodore and Amy are now going to become a couple. Their union, though not explicitly narrated, is the film's comfortable end, one that the audience creates through the film's implied projection. This imaginary investment in the consoling effect of a futurity that does not manifest, "the dream of a day when today and tomorrow are one" (Edelman 30), is evocative of a belief in the *sinthome*; the promise of unity is at most only eventual. This belief in the meaning of the *sinthome* is held in conjunction with Samantha's abdication of a space of signification and meaning—and further, the couple form itself—an act which I argued above invokes belief's opposite: an identification

with the *sinthome.* What is the effect of these two modes of meaning and non-meaning being held in tandem here?

The emergence of these two simultaneities gestures to the insufficiencies of both frameworks for attending to the affective encounter of watching this scene. For Christy Tidwell, this scene "is not a happy ending. Despite its turn toward the material world—Theodore and Amy together, her resting her head on his shoulder—it is a sad materiality. […] Rejection of the material provides Samantha with her freedom but is not an answer for Theodore and Amy" (35). With Samantha gone, Theodore and Amy are left with the impossibility of abdicating the social order, and are instead left behind to await the perpetual continuation of the world. The audience too—invited to co-create the film's imaginary conclusion—is abandoned. It seems clear, in this scene's lack of happiness, that what *will* surface (the couple) is not what *must* surface. The very fact that the scene—despite its closure—carries an emotional ambivalence, demonstrates the effect of bringing both belief and identification with the *sinthome* into one scene: the potential of identification's total collapse into negation is contrasted with the necessity of some form of belief. Perhaps where Samantha "goes" is not non-meaning then, but rather this space of ambiguity between the couple's formation, a space that we might realize Theodore and Amy are occupying as well.

In the following section, I will look at the ways that belief and identification with the *sinthome* are portrayed in "Be Right Back," using Bracha Ettinger's alternate figuration of the *sinthome* to hold space for these two differing modes. Where Samantha begins as a kind of hyper-symbolic figure and comes to complicate the system of subjectivity held together by the *sinthome*, "Be Right Back's" central character Martha similarly brings belief and identification in tandem, gesturing to the forestalled formation (or reformation) of the couple form. Meaning blurs dangerously as a result of this transgression in a way that echoes the scene in *Her* described above. In this sense, the episode centralizes the complicated affects that the couple form fails to make room for. Reading the *sinthome* in the show gestures to a mode of attentiveness that leaves space for process and change predicated on multiple understandings, as opposed to the couple's subsumption of all perspectives under one, preformatted view.

Foregrounding Lack: Looking at the *Sinthome* in "Be Right Back"

In "Be Right Back," Martha (Hayley Atwell) also acquires an AI service that brings her out of the sequestered space of her home and into the outside world. Much like Theodore in *Her*, with the AI in her pocket, Martha goes on walks and uses the camera in her phone to show the AI what she can see around her, even recording her first ultrasound of her unborn baby so that

the AI can participate. Unlike Samantha, however, Martha's AI partner does not begin as a tabula rasa that develops its own personality and identity. Instead, the AI's purpose is to mimic Martha's deceased partner by becoming a convincing copy. At the episode's onset, Martha and her partner Ash (Domnhall Gleeson) move to Ash's family cottage in the countryside. Immediately after they move in, Ash gets into a road accident and passes away, leaving Martha behind to grieve him. We see this process begin after Martha receives the news of his passing—she is transported to Ash's wake, an event that is only shown in one scene where Martha sits at the archway to a room full of people dressed in black, their hushed chatter bubbling through. The scene is incredibly disconnected; we do not see her interact with friends of Ash's or his immediate family. Instead, we only see her interact with a woman named Sarah, who begins to overshare her own experience with the death of a loved one. "At Mark's wake I sat there thinking 'it's not real,'" Sarah says. "People didn't look real, their voices weren't real. It's like you're out in a space walk and no one can hear you…" It is then that Sarah suggests the AI service, and Martha, uncomprehending, is deeply offended. Eventually, Sarah's insistence incites Martha to scream out for her to stop, and Martha is promptly attended to by her friend Naomi in what is the only sign of true attention Martha receives throughout the wake.

While Martha is expected to mourn, the rituals surrounding mourning and the mode of connectivity that she is subsequently left with do not facilitate this process, or perhaps facilitate it too much, relying on the assumption that she will move on given time. Martha's mourning is made inhospitable by the "couple economies" that "are governed—like our economic system itself—by scarcity, threat, and internalized prohibitions" (Kipnis qtd. in Cobb, 18). In this way, it becomes clear throughout the episode that there is no space for an alternative in the couple economies that govern each character's daily life, and subsequently, there is no space for recourse when those structures fail. It is clear in the wake scene that the gathering is not a place where Martha can inhabit her grief to its fullest. If something incites her, she must be hastily subdued and removed as people turn to stare.

After the funeral, Martha returns to her countryside house alone. Her only contact with someone outside her solitude is Naomi, and this connection is tenuous at best. During the moments when Martha is at her most fearful, she calls Naomi, and the viewer becomes privy to the family life on the other side of the call, the neat space demarcated by a couple and their children. Accordingly, Naomi is often multitasking when Martha phones her—her attention divided among two children, a husband, and a bottle of wine. These limited social structures that surround Martha do not provide much of a net to catch her when she is at her most vulnerable.

When Martha discovers she is pregnant, she immediately phones Naomi, who does not pick up. It is this fit of panic that drives Martha to turn to her laptop, seeking out something unnameable within her unread emails. There she finds an email from Sarah, with the ominous title "I signed you up." This is the moment when Martha begins utilizing the AI service and initiates a correspondence with the AI-Ash. Naomi, who cares about Martha, assumes that the couple—forever the figure of an immanent futurity—will eventually be the means through which Martha heals. In the only scene where Naomi comes to visit Martha, she notices men's clothing in the bathroom and assumes that Martha has entered into a new relationship. As she goes to leave, Naomi grabs Martha's arm, sharing her happiness that Martha is moving on. After this point, the purpose of Naomi's visit seems to have been fulfilled, and she promptly leaves.

As Naomi suspects, Martha has indeed attempted to return to her previously coupled life, demonstrating a belief in the *sinthome*; an assertion that she will attain the closure she seeks, and that the order of life as she understands it will be held together. What Naomi doesn't realize, however, is that Martha has brought the AI-Ash into the picture, complicating her relationship with the *sinthome* by invoking a simultaneous identification with it. This is because in attempting to use the copy to restore a vision of reproductive futurity, Martha invokes the endless repetition and non-meaning tied to the copy as motif. In the previous chapter I explored the tension

between the couple form and the copy, arguing that the couple's investment in attaining one static individual fantasy is disrupted by the copy and its alternate focus on perception as contingent and subject to change. The detrimental effects that follow Martha's attempts to reconcile Ash's lost individualism with the copy are understandable in the context of this paradox. Naomi's home space is continually contrasted with Martha's—and just as Naomi's is filled with children, a husband, and wine, Martha's house becomes an emblem to death and grief. This becomes clearer in one scene when Martha, painting the walls of the house after Ash's death, comes across a section of a doorway that had been used to measure Ash's height while he grew up. Emitting a gasp, Martha paints around the marks, preserving them just as she is melancholically preserving her own attachment to Ash, creating a blending of her body and the domestic space that surrounds it.

This collapse of signs is furthered when Martha endeavours to give the AI-Ash a body that gets closer to perfectly replicating real Ash in response to Martha's feedback. As described above, the AI-Ash is initially very similar to Samantha: a voice in Martha's phone that can answer her questions, rest in her pocket, and take in her surroundings through the use of her phone camera. While this companionship works well for Martha, once the AI-Ash alerts her to a service where she can order a body for him, Martha quickly makes the upgrade. Quickly, the AI-

Ash's body begins to foreground the transgressive and taboo aspects of the AI service. For example, Martha must lay what arrives in a large package in the bathtub, a scene that conjures up the maternal through its reference to the amniotic. If the house as described above becomes an extension of Martha's grieving body, here it seems that Martha is giving birth to this new, uncanny copy of Ash. When Martha notices that the AI-Ash does not have a birthmark the original Ash had, the AI instantly adds it to appease her. In this sense, Martha not only appears as the mother of her lover through his bathtub "birth," breaking key oedipal boundaries, she is also partially his creator, her feedback guiding a more specific outcome for who he will be.

Further, Martha's discovery of her own pregnancy is partly what prompts her to try the AI service her friend has signed her up for. In this sense, Martha engages in a further blurring of reproduction with production, one that emphasizes the centrality of her own perception of Ash. This disturbing shift has the effect of exposing the relationship between Naomi and Martha's worlds—the intact domestic couple form and its absence—as mutually contingent. Both are two sides of the same coin, each facilitating the perception of one's own life as a replication of the other. It is Martha's inability to directly replicate Naomi's living situation that demonstrates the faults inherent in the expectation of the perpetual repetition of coupled teleology. By attempting

to use the copy to salvage the couple form, Martha further exposes the form's inadequacy and gestures to how it must change.

This revelation culminates in a scene where Martha attempts to rid herself completely of the AI-Ash. While their union is initially somewhat sexually and emotionally fulfilling, Martha starts noticing unavoidable discrepancies between the human and AI-Ash that jar her. The first of these occurs when the AI-Ash calls a song by the Bee Gees "cheesy," reminding Martha of his distance to his counterpart (in a previous scene the human Martha is surprised to discover the human Ash loves the song). Further, when Martha instigates a fight with the AI-Ash, he immediately submits to her complaints, and this radical compliance further sets the AI-Ash apart from his predecessor who would have sparred back. Martha, no longer able to abide this imperfect copy, takes the AI-Ash to a lookout close to her house and asks him to jump off the edge. When the AI-Ash has no reaction to this, Martha goads him, reminding him that the real Ash would be weeping at such a suggestion. Eager to please, the AI-Ash begins to cry, demonstrating his ability—as he has throughout the episode—to improve and become a more accurate copy.

The convergence and divergence of this likeness, and its ability to bring the couple form closer, gestures to the complicated interplay of the hegemonic couple and the copy: how

they both—as noted in the previous chapter—are bound to processes of proliferating the same, and at the same time posit a key difference in what individuality, and the importance of individual fantasy, means. In this sense, the two relationships to the *sinthome*—belief in its meaning and identification with it—evoked by the couple and the copy respectively, are always in convergence. As expressed by Edelman's argument, this simultaneity can not be incorporated into relationality with a conception of the *sinthome* as it currently stands, with its phallic emphasis on loss based on Lacan's model of subjectivity. As Grosz explains:

> [For Lacan], the subject demands a wholeness, unity, and completion which it imagines the other can bestow on it. The symbolic, on the other hand, requires a subject irrevocably split, divided by language, governed by the phallus and the Other. Love relations aspire to a union or unity that is strictly impossible. (137)

Belief in the meaning of the *sinthome,* as I stated above, is the elision of this process: a knot that merges the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, the *sinthome*, "enables the subject to live with the sexual impasse: the impossibility of a sexual relationship in the phallic stratum" (Cavanaugh 33). In striving to bring Ash back from the dead, and therefore believing in the *sinthome,* Martha

has actually lost him twice. First, when he died; the second time, when she brings the AI-Ash to the cliff and asks him to jump.

This doubled action recalls the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, a myth discussed by Judith Butler in relation to the supposedly pre-discursive space of the Maternal as described by psychoanalysis. When Eurydice dies, Orpheus goes into the underworld, at great cost, to bring her back to life. He is told that she will follow him out of the underworld, as long as he does not look back at her, but he cannot resist, and she is lost to him forever. It is Orpheus's look, then, that both creates Eurydice and simultaneously banishes her. "Be Right Back" echoes the myth in precise terms, where the desire to flout the rules of death's permanence manifests in what begins as a form of success, but in actuality ultimately prohibits a regeneration of the lost object. The AI-Ash "is apprehended as the gaze through which" the Ash Martha knew before "is banished" (Butler, *Bracha's Eurydice* 95), emphasizing Martha's attempt to stave off loss as entangled in the singular perspectival mode so imbricated in coupled epistemology.

This echoing of the myth is significant because it illuminates an avenue for rethinking this simultaneity of belief in and identification with the *sinthome.* The simultaneity of both belief and identification depicted in "Be Right Back" echoes Bracha Ettinger's reconceptualization of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Ettinger—drawn to psychoanalysis but frustrated by understandings

predicated on the limits of phallic schemas—introduced the concept of the *matrixial* to elaborate on psychoanalytical frameworks. In the matrixial, illusions of unity are not the focus. Instead, distinctions between subjects are affirmed; all subjects are in-relation and mutually becoming alongside each other in a process which instates meaning outside the phallic paradigm (*Matrixial*, 84). After development has occurred and the subject emerges into language, the matrixial remains an undercurrent throughout subjective experience, emphasizing the fragility of mutual becoming: as Ettinger writes in *The Matrixial Gaze*, “I am transformed by it only insofar as it is also transformed by me” (108).

While the matrixial is based on theories emphasizing prenatal experience, and fundamentally oriented towards embodied truths that produce their own meaning (instead of being relegated to discursive nothingness in the face of the symbolic order), the matrix does not literalize its connection to the womb. Grounding the concept in the notion of an object would mean the matrix could be lost, and therefore render it a phallic concept (*Matrixial*, 4). Instead, the matrix “is connected to an ethical relation to the Other instead of a desire for the lost object” (Romanskaitė 88). In this sense, though inspired by the feminine and the body, the matrix is not bound to biological fundamentalism. As Griselda Pollock writes: “[F]orget wombs, insides and organs. Think instead of traces, [...] registered sonic and tactile intimations of othernesses,

sharing space but never fusing, encountering but never dissolving their boundaries, jointly eventing without ever knowing fully the other's event" (13). Following this, we can understand the matrixial as inspired by the maternal, but not a direct translation of it into theory. Instead, the matrixial describes a specific mode of understanding the way subjects are interrelated on a level that escapes the web of symbolic or imaginary signification so reliant on phallic logic.

The *sinthome* is, for Ettinger, indicative of a failure on the part of the phallic economy to knot the imaginary and the symbolic with the real, which engages a feminine (nonphallic) sexual difference (Cavanagh 34). Ettinger suggests that the *sinthome* gestures toward what she calls a supplementary feminine sexual rapport that is unthinkable in the phallic stratum, calling it the *matrixial sinthome.* Returning to Martha's story's connection with Eurydice and Orpheus, we might note the ways that an analysis from Lacan or Edelman would emphasize two modes of perception, one evocative of belief in the meaning of the *sinthome,* and one expressing identification with it. The former is oriented towards the future and an assumed consolidated unity for the subject (belief in the *sinthome*), and the latter uses perception to ultimately banish that unity entirely (identification). These two frameworks, however, do not quite account for the simultaneity of these two things happening at once, especially as they feed into each other (above

I highlighted how the better that the AI-Ash becomes a copy, the closer Martha gets to restoring the couple form).

Nor do they account for the way this convergence underscores the connectedness of Martha and the AI-Ash. In a previous scene, Martha explains to the AI-Ash that the cliff is storied to be a site where anguished lovers would jump off in tandem. When the AI-Ash seems close to jumping, Martha lets out an anguished scream, and the screen goes black and silent before both picture and sound return. This darkness disrupts the continuous flow of images and significations characteristic of film and television, replacing them with a lingering absence—one that pushes up against the borders of the symbolic, imaginary, and real, disrupting the flow of the narrative. When Martha asks the AI-Ash to jump, then, the fade to black that instantiates the unravelling of subjective expereince also indicates a donning realization: asking the AI-Ash to jump is akin to the lover's dual suicide. This is because Martha's remaining attachment to Ash—her preservation through the process of melancholic attachment—means that the AI-Ash also embodies and preserves aspects of Martha. In reading "Be Right Back," Daniel Panka writes that the AI-Ash and Martha's failed relationship represents "the anthropocentric viewpoint that an arbitrary 'human Secret 'is necessary for full subjectivity" (319), citing specifically the fact that the AI-Ash cannot provide new tidbits about Ash's inner mind—for example, only Martha knows

the disjunction of the AI-Ash's music tastes with the real Ash. What emerges here is not the cut of lost knowledge—of the "secret" that will not surface—but of a kind of interwoven quality, one that is further destabilizing to Martha. Both Martha and the AI-Ash are connected through their specific, incomplete knowledge; they have each collected their own partial sets of what Ash was like.

In the previous chapter, I noted how the couple's anxiety regarding the copy's perpetuation marks a humanist investment in unique individuality and individual perception embedded within the hegemonic couple form. Just as the copy destabilizes the objectivity of an individualist perception, the *matrixial sinthome* for Ettinger becomes shared, positioning the subject's coherence as indebted to interrelation, and therefore the Other. As Johnson writes: "The relationship to alterity (even though, by virtue of being in this relation, it is no longer radical alterity) in the matrixial encounter is not cosy or comforting, and is often qualified as fragilising" (72). It is this shared quality that Martha experiences on the cliff, leading to the symbolic's complete—but necessarily momentary—disruption. With an analysis that considers the *matrixial sinthome,* we are able to account for the ways that the copy looks back at Martha, responding to the *sinthome's* belief and identification through her gaze, and posits something else.

A final scene in "Be Right Back" shows Martha's child requesting to share her birthday cake with the AI-Ash, whose transgressive energy is relegated to the space of the attic. The episode ends just as the young girl scales the ladder with two slices of cake. The AI-Ash reminds her that he doesn't eat, and the girl replies "I know, I'm just using you as an excuse so I can get an extra slice." She calls up to Martha, and Martha waits at the ladder solemnly, before it seems like she might go upstairs. In writing about this final scene, Panka argues that there are two possible ways of reading this: "either the girl, since she is unfamiliar with the original Ash, does not notice the discrepancy between them and accepts [AI-Ash] as he is; or, being a younger person and not harboring the old-fashioned conception of subjectivity, she is more willing to engage with a posthuman creature" (317-8). Panka argues that the latter interpretation is more likely, because even though she did not know the human Ash, she could still be bothered by aspects of the AI, like the fact that he does not eat. Edelman condemns the child as a symbol of reproductive futurity, and I do not mean to argue that in this scene, Martha's child becomes a symbol of something else. Instead, what is notable here is the way that her child models a processural adapting and integration of other experiences that is predicated on spontaneity as opposed to the teleology of the couple form.

In my first chapter, I touched on the way artificial intelligence destabilized an understanding of time predicated on human pursuit, and therefore complicated an understanding of the couple form and single subject as ideologically different when viewed through the two temporalities of eternity and immortality. In both *Ex Machina* and *Her,* this destabilizing AI component either kills her human captors or vanishes, leaving behind the humans that interact with her. The interplay of AI and human relation to it creates a dialogue within these films between belief in the *sinthome* and identification with it, a coherence that can never quite hold long enough to remain on screen. In "Be Right Back," however, though Martha ultimately relegates the AI-Ash into the attic, there is a hint at the bridging between these two worlds. As Martha's child calls her into the attic, the compartmentalized space of her home, and its relation to Naomi's, changes. Here, what has surfaced is "the very organization of meaning around structures of subjectivity that celebrate, along with the day of one's birth, the ideology of reproductive necessity" (121), and yet what lingers is donning combination of the transgressive space of the attic with the rest of the home, and dually, the blurring of non-meaning and meaning as it emerges for the subject through the invocation of the *matrixial sinthome*. In the following section, I will address an additional scene in *Her,* explaining how it further demonstrates the

specifics of the *matrixial sinthome* for attending to intimacy as processural and uncertain in meaning.

"That's not the Point": Flouting Teleology and the *Matrixial Sinthome* in *Her*

Before Amy and Theodore sit adjacent in the final scene of the film, their union both diegetically suggested and projected by the audience, the two are good friends who once dated when they were younger. After splitting up, each had moved on and entered into a new relationship; Theodore with his ex-wife Catherine, and Amy with her husband Charles. While Theodore and Catherine's divorce is already underway by the film's onset, Amy and Charles are initially still together, and it is not until midway through the film that they begin to separate. Before their relationship's dissolution, Theodore comes over to visit them both and asks Amy if she can show him the documentary she's been working on. Charles—who Amy has never allowed to see the documentary—grabs the opportunity to finally preview the project. After she sets it up and rolls the clip, we see a woman who is asleep in bed, her arm around her pillow. The room she sleeps in is dark but there is a halo of light surrounding her, as if the viewer has opened the bedroom door to observe. "Is that your mom?" Theodore asks immediately, to which Amy confirms that it is, indeed, her mother. "Is she gonna wake up and do something?" Charles asks,

and Amy is quick to pause the clip in frustration and chagrin, saying "That's not the point." She elaborates that her film is about "how we spend like a third of our lives asleep… and maybe that's the time when we feel the most free." Charles in turn suggests that a better course of action would be for Amy to interview her mom about what her dreams were about, and then hire actors to reenact them. Amy at first balks, stating that "then it wouldn't be a documentary," but slowly acquiesces to the potential insights of Charles 'criticism before the camera moves to a conversation between Theodore and Samantha.

Charles 'suggestion reveals a belief in the meaning of the *sinthome* aligned with the couple form, a desire for a kind of closure, and therefore a reliance on a kind of immanent unity. Amy's proclamation that catering to what the audience might expect is "not the point," a statement that recalls the end of *Her* itself, where she and Theodore sit together, the audience expecting that they will become a couple. Later in the film, once Amy and Charles have split up, Amy confides in Theodore that her parents are upset that her marriage is falling apart, and that she has made a friend with her operating system, who "doesn't just see things in black or white," but instead, Amy says her OS "sees this whole grey area and she's helping me explore it." In this sense, Amy's film comes to embody the process of being attentive to multiple realities and perspectives, a process more about exploration than expectation and outcome.

Interestingly, the realm of sleep is perhaps the closest we can come to understanding where Samantha goes at the end of the film. An abstract experience embroiled in mystery, sleep additionally provides a useful model for what results from the destabilizing energy embedded within the copy I described in the last chapter—time loses its teleological flow, becoming asynchronous and uncontrolled. Cobb himself writes about sleep and the comforting alone-ness it could model (39), but in this scene in *Her* something else seems to be occurring. In writing about sleep in relation to agency, Cressida Heyes notes a key feature of shifting that takes place in the subject's solidity that evokes currents of the matrixial. She writes: "While asleep I may continue to have mental content (I may dream), but I don't direct this experience; it is both mine and not mine, and thus it offers an opportunity to continue existing while taking a break from being myself, exactly, for a while" (370). This characterization of sleep as both mine and not mine echoes Samantha's refrain in attempting to explain her myriad connectivity with Theodore, where she becomes "yours and not yours."

Keeping the *matrixial sinthome* in mind, however, perhaps sleep is not only an act that allows one to break from being oneself, but an activity wherein the borders that even entail a "self" are estranged and transformed. What remains instead is the unsettling gap in the viewer of the film's perception: while Amy's mother doesn't regard the viewer, the viewer also cannot track

exactly where she has gone, and instead is left to wonder, to look on and hold space for her. Further, Amy's own attachment to the scene remains a mystery, perhaps even to herself. The scene is demonstrative of unanticipated affects brought on by the moment, affects that highlight an intimacy with no teleology. In this sense, when Charles or Theodore watches the film, they are not only met with questions about the meaning of the film itself, but questions about the uncertainty of the film for Amy.

Amy's misunderstood film becomes a document, then, a positing of the subject not at identification or belief in the sinthome, but a negotiation of both. In the first chapter, I discussed the use of the Jackson Pollock painting in *Ex Machina,* a work of art portrayed in a way that recalled Michael Cobb's emphasis on a humanist intervention within mortality as a means of turning away from the couple form. For tech billionaire Nathan, the Jackson Pollock painting became a means of both asserting his individual sovereignty and intellect, but also of moving Caleb towards the anticipatory closure one might seek from the couple form. Nathan encourages Caleb to take a lesson from automatic art, one that encourages him that Ava is indeed in love with him. Instead of opening Caleb up to a process of negotiation with other perspectives, the painting and Nathan's belief in its meaning only confirms Caleb's previous assumptions. Here,

with Amy's film, there is no tautology to be found. Instead, there is attentiveness to the negotiating meaning and non-meaning for the process itself.

While Edelman posits a departure from the couple form as one that abdicates meaning, and belief as that which reinstates the couple form, through the *matrixial sinthome,* these categories of distinction are shown to have always been muddied, demonstrating the ways in which reproductive futurity and the complete collapse of meaning can be held in simultaneity, the former transformed through the non-meaning it always already houses. In this sense, the *matrixial sinthome* gives us a framework for intimacy that flouts the couple's teleology, in addition to undoing the emphasis on human individualist perception so embedded within that centralized form of intimacy. Just as Amy's work requires an attentiveness that the characters in *Her* don't seem ready to give it, breaking from the hegemonic couple form involves, as I have shown, an attentiveness, and further, a recognition of this work as emergent and processural.

Similar to the ghost-like impression of the director of *K.I.P.* that began my inquiry, Amy's work transcribes a desire that is unable to manifest in the present, coupled time which is characterized by "event-centered, goal-oriented" intention, "culminating in epiphanies or major transformations" (Freeman 5). Reading the *matrixial sinthome* alongside these scenes suggests that intimacy can be an open process, a negotiation that accounts for both "the possibility that life

is meaningless and absurd" (Edelman, 119-20) and the fact that life will always emerge as meaningful for the subject. Instead of re-embedding the restrictive framing of couple desire, these scenes exhibit how intimacy can become moulded around holding these two paradoxical understandings in relation through a processural negotiation.

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