Filmed Love Letters: The Dialogism and Intertextuality of *Lost in Translation* and *Her*

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Abstract
Lost in Translation *(2003), written and directed by Sofia Coppola, and* Her *(2013), written and directed by Spike Jonze, display an intertextual, dialogic conversation that reflexively highlights their friendship, marriage, and divorce in their own lives to create a conversation between the two films. Both films ruminate on the nature of relationships as they begin and end, and they remind the viewer of the deeply personal connections between the films and their respective creators. At the same time, the reflexivity of the directors' prior relationship reveals a working conversation between the films about how each writer and director look at relationships as it relates to their own experiences. Their utterances produce a dialogue in the form of filmed letters – both begging to understand, reflect, and grow from their relationships. Both films explore the emotions experienced by their main characters while they deal with either impending or past divorces that coincide with new loves and partners. Jonze and Copolla's public and private relationship with each other are reflected in their respective films; the writing, settings, soundtracks, and cinematography reveal a dialogic conversation between the two filmed letters that both ask questions and begin to produce their answers to understand the complicated nature of love and relationships. Looking at the films' forms and considering theories of dialogism and intertextuality from Mikhail Bakhtin, the conversation becomes discernible. The resulting conversation between* Lost in Translation *and* Her *arrives at the same conclusion: love is ephemeral, emotional, and ultimately the binding force between everyone.*

Keywords*: relationships, dialogism, intertextuality, soundtracks, cinematography*

Relationships are messy, convoluted, and often come with the task of attempting to bridge a connection between two disparate people. However, the two sides will always have their points of view and letters to write about their experiences. Dialogism and intertextuality allow the sharing of ideas in a way that positions texts to be in conversation with each other, growing from the other's existence, and illuminating new ways that utterances can change throughout time. Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* portrays two people who are desperately trying to understand their failing relationships and marriages, all while the confusing world of Japan buzzes around them. *Her*, Spike Jonze's film, examines a relationship between a man and an AI, but ironically

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embodies a human relationship, examining the emotional directly, rather than the physical portion of a human relationship. The films echo each other on many levels, from the representation of intimacy, the role of memories, the use of impressionistic music, and through their visual designs. When it comes to looking at these two films, however, the similarities are not the only things guiding their dialogic conversation; their differences begin to poke and prod at the ideas of love and relationships to discover what makes them tick. These filmic elements help to form a correspondence as the films voice their points of view on romance.

The dialogue between Sofia Coppola and Spike Jonze leads viewers to understand the most difficult part of relationships: the existence of two sides to every story. By examining the two films in conversation with dialogism and intertextuality, the utterances of both films, from the writing to the aesthetics, elucidate the personal views of the audience. This places viewers in a position where they witness two views on the same subject, regardless of if the presence of the other voice is immediate or distant. Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the possibilities of dialogism in his book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

> This is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person. (1984: 197)

These two films embody the sense of what Bakhtin imagines here; audiences might even think of the films as letters. These letters proudly display the personal voice of the writer-directors, allowing their views to expand in front of the lens utilizing the diverse elements of filmic expression. The resulting conversation between *Lost in Translation* and *Her* arrives at the same conclusion: love is ephemeral, emotional, and ultimately the binding force between everyone.

Before examining the objects at the centre of the conversation, it is important to quickly address the authors of the texts, Sofia Coppola and Spike Jonze, and their brief marriage, as it leads to some of the conversation here. Coppola describes, in an interview with Marlow Stern, that she wrote the film and the relationships that the film depicts "based on what [she] was going through at the time"(2013). Ten years later, Jonze said, "So I think I tried to write about what I was thinking

about…trying to understand relationships and myself in relationships and trying to make sense of it all," in an interview with NPR's Audie Cornish. The distance between works, sometimes by years of their release, can yield important conversations about how the work can anticipate and look for another meaning or answer. The main question comes with how different works even begin to initiate this conversation. It is important to address their public marriage, which would act as a public authorial epitext. Gerard Genette says, "[the public authorial epitext] is always, by definition, directed at the public in general, even if it never actually reaches more than a limited portion of that public" (1997: 352). There is also the private authorial epitext, in which "the author first addresses a confidant who is real, who is perceived as such, and whose personality is important to the communication at hand, even influencing its form and content" (1997: 371). The dialogue between these two films can be centred on the past relationship of the two creators; however, this begins to outweigh the objects at the centre of the conversation. As T. S. Eliot states, "The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done" (1919). *Lost in Translation* and *Her* are emotional pieces that are extremely personal to the creators, but the emotion of the pieces must not rely solely on the talent. Instead, they are in response to each other based on the dialogue and aesthetics of the films. By placing focus on the relationship, which can certainly highlight the intertextual conversation, the objects can be obscured in favour of the talent, as Eliot proclaims. It is important to address how the conversation can first be seen, but then it is up to the reader to begin to investigate the objects themselves to discover the meanings within the texts.

Because of this drawing of influence from one another, *Lost in Translation* and *Her* can be viewed as personal letters to each other, like a correspondence about relationships and how they view the human phenomenon as it exists in the representation of isolation in their settings. Both main characters, Charlotte (Scarlett Johannsson) and Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), are seen isolated from their surroundings in a crowded cityscape. In *Lost in Translation*, Charlotte is often seen exploring Tokyo alone and unable to communicate with those around her due to a language barrier. The film establishes that she is doing this to explore the city and perhaps find comfort in herself and her failing

marriage. Brian Ott and Diane Keeling focus on one of these scenes to discuss how the audience tunes into her isolation:

> When Charlotte visits a Buddhist temple […] and the editing style switches to alternating point-of-view and objectivist shots, the audience already feels an embodied sense of her isolation and dislocation, making it easier to identify with her alienating experience. (2011: 371)

The audience senses this similar isolation in *Her* as well; at the beginning of the film, Theodore steps into an elevator and tells his phone, "Play melancholy song." Theodore situates himself at the back of the elevator, separated from everyone around him. Meanwhile, everyone on the elevator is fixated on their phones or earpieces, and the scene hints at how isolated everyone is. In these complimentary scenes, the audience can draw the dialogue between the two films. During any work's existence, it encounters other texts, or as Bakhtin states, "an alien word not only in the object itself: every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates" (1981: 280). The forward momentum of the word, or work, guides it towards trying to explore new ideas, asking questions, and waiting for a distant response before it finally arrives. With these corresponding themes of isolation, the films are opening the dialogue to begin looking at how to escape that isolation through the discovery of someone else who is looking for meaning as well.

The main characters in both films meet with another person that allows them to explore a shared sense of isolation and discover what it means to be alive and in love. However, this is where the intertextuality between the two pieces begins to hinge on not just similarities but also differences. When discussing auteurism, Peter Wollen states, "Structuralist criticism cannot rest at the perception of resemblances or repetitions (redundancies, in fact), but must also comprehend a system of differences and oppositions" (1972: 93). Dialogism and intertextuality, forms of structuralist critique, must comprehend dialogues that embody both similarities and differences. In the case of *Lost in Translation* and *Her*, one of the clearest differences in creating a dialogue comes in the form of the second half of the main relationships at the centre of the narratives. For Charlotte, she confides in Bob (Bill Murray), who has years of experience in a marriage that, like Charlotte's, is slowly falling apart. *Lost in Translation* posits that to fully

understand a relationship, one might need to find someone with experience to regain clarity regarding a relationship. However, *Her* posits the opposite with the presence of Samantha (Scarlett Johannsson), Theodore's AI that he forms a relationship with. Through discussions with her, Theodore can reflect on the failures of his past marriage and regain a new understanding of love. While both relationships discuss relationships and allow for the main characters to grow and learn about their pasts to change their present situation, the experience of the love interest provides a question about how someone can learn from another with or without experience. Julia Kristeva, the first to coin the term intertextuality, writes, "By examining the ambivalence of the spectacle (realist presentation) and lived experience (rhetoric), one might perceive the line where the rupture (or junction) between them takes place" (1986: 59). The two films position these differing relationships as the rupture that Kristeva alludes to as a possibility for conversation. The relationships with the love interest attempt to help the main characters in both films, but the discrepancy between someone with experience and another without experience creates an interesting conversation that arrives at the same conclusion; they ultimately both agree that finding another person to converse with is the sole way to reflect and discover newly forming passions in another person.

These forming passions then reflect each other clearly in both films as they present the location of the bedroom and the bed as intimate locations to bear one's soul. At the beginning of the films, however, these bedrooms insinuate the position of isolation and loneliness. Charlotte, in *Lost in Translation*, spends a large portion of the film alone in her bedroom, where she is left to contemplate her marriage and the direction of her life. Throughout the film, Charlotte listens to self-help tapes, struggling to find answers to her problems, but remains unable to figure it out. Strikingly, Theodore carries out very similar actions in *Her*. Theodore spends a lot of his time inside his home, playing video games, or lost in the memories of his life. These actions get him stuck in a hole unable to escape to reflect on himself or his life. As these are how the characters are both acting at the beginning of the films, it reflects the idea of these films being utterances about starting at the same place. The feelings of depression and isolation get the characters to reflect on themselves and then reverberate outside of their respective films to find another voice: each other. Robert Stam claims, "[f]ilm […] does not only include utterances, it *is* utterance" (1989: 44). Stam's postulation

positions film as being a complete utterance of ideas and characteristics that can be used to respond and reflect one another. In these two films, the utterances become focused on how to deal with the depression and isolation experienced by lost love. The bedroom, in the cases of the two main characters at the beginning of their films, acts as the place where their doubts begin to fester and grow.

For both films, intimacy then explores possibilities of growth, and helps understanding how relationships function. Both films show the bedroom and bed as becoming the most intimate of places as relationships develop; the characters reveal themselves to each another, they dive into the complexities of their relationships, and are shown at their most vulnerable. When discussing the responsivity of a text, Bakhtin states, "Sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener" (1986: 69). This intimacy, in both films, flourishes in scenes in which the couples share beds and can spill each other's souls, thoughts, and emotions to one another. In *Lost in Translation*, Bob Harris has more experience in marriage than Charlotte but experiences the same feelings of confusion about his relationship. About halfway through the film, there is an extended scene using a bird's eye medium shot of the couple laying on a bed and talking about their lives. Charlotte initiates the conversation by saying, "I'm stuck," regarding her marriage and life. Bob's advice punctuates the scene: "The more you know who you are, and what you want, the less you let…things upset you." Charlotte, after spending time with Bob, can picture herself outside of the marriage; she figures out who she is, but it is at the cost of her marriage. In *Her*, the relationship of Theodore and Samantha is featured predominately through conversations when Theodore is in bed. Unlike *Lost in Translation*, where the main characters only share one tender kiss at the conclusion of the film, *Her* goes as far as to show the couple's sex in an intimate location. After conversations about his marriage and failed dates, the camera inches closer to Theodore's face on the pillow. The screen fades to black and invites the audience into another perspective: one of Samantha's and Theodore's inside thoughts, which places the audience into the most intimate place of their relationship, one which other people cannot see physically. Samantha even says, "The world fades away for a second." In response to the medium shot of Bob and Charlotte in bed, *Her* presents an extreme close-up and confirmation of what both films state: their relationships make the outside world fade

away as they focus on themselves and each other. This discrepancy between the two begins to question the form of film in dialogism and intertextuality: "As an audiovisual medium, cinema can thus correlate word with gesture, dialogue with facial expression, verbal exchange with bodily dynamics" (Stam 1989: 60). In these correlations, differences become not just the things that make two different objects; they begin to dig into the mean of the differences. The dialogue between *Lost in Translation* and *Her*, regarding the intimacy of the bed, begins to ask questions about the body itself in these two scenes. While they both hinge on dialogue bringing about realizations of oneself, the actions of the bodies begin to question the differences between the two. They question how a simple conversation in an intimate location can be just as impactful as one that leads to a sexual act. The removal of the bodies in *Her* by fading to black insinuates that it ultimately finds the dialogue and reflection to be the most important part of informing the intimate location.

The role of memories seeps through the seams of both films and plays a large part in their respective narratives. Characters in both films are consistently lost in their memories of the past and trying to figure out where things changed or went wrong. The intertextual relationship, however, revolves around the means to how memories are explored: through dialogue and image. Mikhail Iampolski, in a book on intertextuality in film, asserts,

> Intertextuality can thus be seen to enrich the meaning and to salvage the very linearity of narrative that it had compromised. In light of the foregoing, I would venture the following definition: The quote is a fragment of the text that violates its linear development and derives the motivation that integrates it into the text from outside the text itself (1998: 31).

With this definition, Iampolski discusses the intertextual nature of Jean Luc Godard's films as a way of borrowing genre clichés, lines of dialogue, and references to other films. It is this exact focus on the form that needs to be highlighted. It can even venture away from direct quotes; instead, an utterance can be responded to, in film, by the differences in the form on a similar theme.

In *Lost in Translation*, the characters are discussing memories and their perceptions of them, so the formation of its utterance hinges on the dialogue and actions of the characters. To start the conversation,

Copolla's film is participating in the intertextual conversation by creating the first utterance that can act as a culmination of influences and the beginning of others. The doubleness here can begin with an earlier iteration that can then be built upon by later films. When Charlotte calls her friend and talks about how she doesn't know whom she married, she is discussing how her memory does not serve her correctly and that she thought she was marrying someone else. Her memories are a time in which the marriage was happy and communicative, but throughout the film, it is obvious that Charlotte is uncomfortable with how things have changed. Charlotte does not reflect on her past alone, however, as Bob, an older actor, is also stuck in a loop about his relationship with his wife. He only has a few moments of conversation with his wife about various subjects, but there is some sort of miscommunication between the two, like Charlotte's own marriage. For instance, there is a scene Bob and his wife argue about their distance from each other. After she hangs up, he hastily says, "I love you," to the dial tone, and then puts the phone back, saying, "That was a stupid idea." For him, the conversation may have been an attempt to rekindle some sort of relationship, one in which they said "I love you" to each other and were interested in each other's days. What is interesting and adds to the conversation between the two films in question is how the audience experiences these memories. Iampolski, discussing how a film can create an intertextual field, states,

> By creating a specific intertextual field as its environment, each text in its way seeks to organize and regroup its textual precursors. Furthermore, the intertextual field of certain texts can be composed of 'sources' that were written after them. (1998: 246)

Lost in Translation is creating a dialogue within itself by looking at Charlotte and Bob, and the field is then asking questions about how memories are processed and remembered. Through either explicit dialogue with Charlotte or the perceived tiredness of Bob's relationship, the film explores these memories through written lines and actions taken by the actors.

In *Her*, the dialogue begins these discussions until they devolve into a montage of visual memories for the characters. The audience is a direct recipient of Theodore and Samantha's memories. However, there is a further focus on Theodore's memories, as the music that Samantha writes as photographs are for Theodore to listen to and experience,

which the audience shares with him. Their relationship mirrors that of Bob and Charlotte, in *Lost in Translation*, as they open to each other and help one another to make realizations and come to conclusions about their confusing lives and they become mirrors to one another: "In this understanding, the ideal listener is essentially a mirror image of the author who replicates him" (Bakhtin 1986: 165). The mirror shapes the relationships to echo off one another, even trying to enact ways of creating memories and photos, which Samantha makes by composing pieces of music in *Her*. There is a scene in which the couple goes to the beach and Samantha writes a song, one that helps to form their memory of the beach. She says, "I'm trying to write a piece of music that's about what it feels like to be on the beach with you right now." The formation of the memory places the audience as an active participant in perceiving the memory. Additionally, there are other moments where music plays over a montage of memories which begins to create the music as a theme for memories: "In a montage, music can serve an almost indispensable function: it can hold the montage together with some sort of unifying musical idea" (Prendergast 1977: 210). This puts the audience upfront in the understanding of memories because instead of just seeing these through dialogue and actions of the characters, the audience can hear the memories and see them as they happen in front of them. Like the relationship that Charlotte and Bob have, the relationship between Theodore and Samantha leads to a creation of memories while they simultaneously reflect on their pasts to grow from those experiences. However, the conversation leads to a consideration of how an audience can perceive and think about memories. Both confirm that dialogue can lead to recognitions about memories, but *Her* considers the possibility of the individual perceiving and thinking about memories as they are being discussed.

Now, it is important to discuss the final pieces of intertextuality as they can exist in the film: the aesthetics. First, music is another means through which the two films seem to bounce ideas off of each other, but they do it in slightly different ways. *Lost in Translation* mixes its music between diegetic and non-diegetic actions; that is, the music is sometimes within the universe of the film, and at other times acts as an overlay on the film, as a montage. The music that is more often laid over the film is usually by the band My Bloody Valentine, which envelops the viewer, and listener at the same time, in a wall-wall sound, or what music critics call shoegaze. This sound creates a soundscape that takes

the viewer into the headspace of the musician, like the sound, while large and epic, is very isolated at the musician, who is bombarded with the layering effects and melodies of the songs. This brings about the questions of how music affects the audience's perception of the images: "While music certainly does have the catalytic ability to change the audience's perception of images and words, it is worth pointing out that there is a corollary: the effect of the image and words upon the music" (Prendergast 1977: 205). In *Lost in Translation*, music can help to understand the inner workings of the main character, as it can have the same effect as the other elements to filmmaking. The immersion helps the audience to understand the characters even further, by allowing them to sit alongside the characters in the universe, much like the role of music in *Her*.

Most of the music of *Her* is arguably diegetic, as the music has a consistent flow and sounds like the music that Samantha writes. The times that it is not written by Samantha and does not sound similar to those pieces, the music is explained by the universe, like when Theodore asks for a melancholy song at the beginning of the film, or whenever Samantha is writing a song. Samantha composes songs on the piano throughout the film with elegance and wonderment, trying to emulate, to the best of her ability, what it feels like to be alive, breathing, and walking around with Theodore. This is all-consuming, like the music in *Lost in Translation*, and it considers how the film music can become an "absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 1986: 37). In this way, the music makes the audience consider how the characters are affected by the music. In *Lost in Translation*, the shoegaze aesthetics envelops the characters and reflects the ways they are surrounded by an onslaught of stimuli; in *Her*, the music can often reflect the dynamics of the relationship. When the characters are eating lunch on top of a building after a fight they had, Samantha begins writing a piano piece, talking about how they do not have any photos together and how the music can act as a photograph. When discussing the music by Arcade Fire, Jonze describes how it pulsates through the film, saying, "I wanted the emotions to be very simple and strong. Very base and not intellectual. The score is loneliness, it's excitement, it's romance, the score is pain, her pain and her love and her disappointments and all—it was a love story and maybe even more so a relationship story" (Perez 2013). This echoes the ideas of K. J. Donnelly, who says, "Indeed, the soundscape itself might be conceived as an analogue to the virtual space

of mental processes, as a repository of half-memories, primal emotion and the seemingly illogical" (2005: 172). Here, music elicits a response that harkens back to the memory bank of viewers, much like how it works with Samantha and Theodore, who can only recreate those memories from the music, rather than photos.

Visually, the films seem to complement each other, both in their different colour schemes and in similar framing and shots. To begin, the colours of the films present two opposing views of memories and love. Bakhtin states,

> Contextual meaning is potentially infinite, but it can only be actualized when accompanied by another (other's) meaning if only be a question in the inner speech of the one who understands. Each time it must be accompanied by another contextual meaning to reveal new aspects of its infinite nature (1986: 145-6).

The competing tones of colours can create two different responses and consider the ways that the films aesthetically consider the emotions of loss and new loves. Coppola's film is shrouded in blues, which gives off a cold atmosphere. These colours also seem unsaturated at certain points, like all the life and other colours have been sucked away as Charlotte and Bob try to grasp life again. There are other colours throughout the film, but the emphasis on blue gives off a feeling of loneliness and depression. They easily bleed together, and the colours make the characters disappear into the background of sounds and sights in Tokyo. Even when the scenes are happier and have a sense of uplifting hope towards the future, the blues still prevail over the others, and the colour and tone darken. In *Her*, however, the colours are warmer with uses of reds and browns. These warmer colours contrast Coppola's film, and the film's colour palette translates how Theodore feels as he slowly exits his depression from his failed marriage and newfound relationship with Samantha. The warmer colours connote a sense of hopefulness as if there is something always around the corner. The warm atmosphere of the film gives the image of relationships being about looking ahead and thinking of the future. The future seems somewhat brighter, warmer, and inviting, and *Her* seeks to show that those moments can always happen, no matter how bad it gets.

Finally, the framing that both films utilize gives off similar ideas of how relationships matter and can be framed in the world around them. For instance, both seem to exercise using shots of the characters

gazing out the window when they are at moments of isolation and clarity. When Bakhtin states, "This is why the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' utterances," he notes the possibility of a moment being resounding in other people, no matter how unique the utterance (1986: 89). The repetition of these shots through both films examines how the isolation is heightened in a large city in which they may feel lost. However, they also reach moments of clarity and understanding. For instance, one of the beginning shots of *Lost in Translation* shows Charlotte staring out over the cityscape of Tokyo with headphones that are playing a self-help CD called *A Soul's Search*. At one point, the man says, "Did you ever wonder what your purpose in life is? This book is about finding your soul's purpose or destiny." While listening to the tape and looking towards the window, she smiles slightly, as if she is understanding what the man is saying; because of this, she begins to figure out a way in which she can better herself and understand her place in the large, complex world. This acts similarly to how Theodore writes a letter to his ex-wife, Catherine (Rooney Mara), after he has learned so many lessons throughout the film. He stares longingly out of the window at the city, contemplating the letter he is about to write, but he becomes more confident as he stares at the expanse of the city. In these scenes, "it is not surprising that the intertext is constantly invoked to normalize new figures of cinematic language" (Iampolski 1998: 83). The cinematic framings of the scenes, both using medium or close-up shots of the characters, are looking to normalize how similar framings can create similar feelings of confidence despite the isolation felt in the large cities. In the final scenes, as well, Bob and Charlotte are framed in a long shot while lost in a sea of passers-by as they embrace for the only time in the film. At the end of *Her*, Theodore and his friend, Amy (Amy Adams) are shown in a long shot siting on top of a building. While the mise-en-scène differs from film to film, the long shots both echo the idea that the films are acknowledging the fleeting existence of one relationship that can be lost to the world around them.

Through similar themes and aesthetics, the two films agree on the ephemeral nature of love through dialogue, the representation of intimacy, and similar uses of music and cinematography. In both films, people seek the attention and the company of someone else, someone they can trust at the most intimate level. The intimacy felt throughout the films stays to the end, as the couples are lost in a bigger world that

they may never be able to understand. But, through the lessons that the couples learn from each other, enacting the function of relationships, and learning about the world around them and how they may cope with the complex and complicated world, they may come out on top, even if their futures are unknown. Not only this, but the films are also enacting revelations about love and life, which Bakhtin hints at in his work, saying, "And finally we encounter those forms of self-revelation that occur in the ordinary course of our everyday lives: the personal letter, the intimate diary, the confession" (1981: 123). The final scenes are framed by the writing of a letter or the confessional whisper unheard by the audience. The films act, then, as personal letters for the directors and letters that are lost in the expanse of the audience. These letters can have their senders and receivers, but the audience can claim whatever piece they want as they learn from them about the ephemerality of love, relationships, and life with another person. They are confessionals that are both attempting to uncover the ways that love can work, and they both beg for the other's response in finding common ground.

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