To analyze a film’s mise-en-scène requires a decoding and subsequent understanding of its patterns, the structural and symbolic repetitions that are woven together into the cloth of the text. Certainly, Lucy Fife Donaldson suggests that all films have texture, “shaped through details of production design, costuming, make-up, sound design, all of which determine the look and feel of surfaces, décor, and bodies” (37). Not only is Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) a profoundly original story—winning the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay—it is also a deeply textured one. The normally incongruous principles of the technical, as a system of operational principles, and the textilic, that which is concerned with feeling and materiality, uniquely merge in the mise-en-scène of *Her*.

It is compelling to note that many reviewers have employed metaphors of tangibility to describe *Her*, especially considering the film’s central conceit of a man falling in love with an operating system (OS) which lacks any semblance of a physical body and therefore never appears visually within the film’s diegesis. *The New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis suggests that the film is “vividly tactile,” calling it “a movie you want to reach out and caress” (8). Writing for *The New Yorker*, Christine Smallwood takes a contradictory stance on the film as “static” and “antiseptic,” reversing Dargis’s spectatorial desire to touch and instead asserting that “no one is at risk of actually touching anyone other than themselves” within the film’s story (8). Yet touch and tactility are at the heart of the film’s mise-en-scène, causing it to adopt an ironic yet meta-level quality in relation to its overall narrative principle. Indeed, the film’s “fabric” is both narrative and woven textile.

Centrally concerned with protagonist Theodore’s (Joaquin Phoenix) inability to feel or to be “felt,” the tactile quality of the film’s images provides the spectator with the warmth and comfort that he has seemingly lost. On the brink of finalizing his divorce, Theodore purchases a talking OS to mitigate his feelings of isolation. The first night he “initiates” this OS, named Samantha (the voice of Scarlett Johansson), Theodore laments his loss: “I think I’ve felt everything I’m ever gonna feel, and from here on out I’m not gonna feel anything new. Just lesser versions of what I already felt.” Through a subjective flashback montage sequence centering on images of Theodore with his soon-to-be ex-wife, Catherine (Rooney Mara), Jonze offers the audience a glimpse—powerfully symbolized by Catherine’s sweaters—of the loving comfort Theodore now misses. In nearly all of these shots, Catherine is seen wearing some type of knit, oftentimes filmed through a diffuse light that creates an additional gossamer-like blanket over the image (Figs. 1, 2, 3).
These highly textured yet explicitly past moments evoke the loss of feeling Theodore is experiencing on the brink of his divorce. Such three-dimensional textures correspond to the coziness of his lost and long-standing love, only available to him now as memories—something “felt” both as past emotion and also something with the textural quality of a fabric, like felt. Additionally, these sweaters symbolize a past wherein Theodore and Catherine’s experiences were entirely interwoven. Having grown up together, their lives were connected in every functional way. Indeed, Theodore’s life coming undone represents the film’s primary dilemma: to quote from the lyrics of Weezer’s song “Undone” (1994), for which Jonze directed the music video, “If you want to destroy my sweater/ Hold this thread as I walk away.” This flattening of affect experienced by Theodore puts him in the structural position usually reserved for the androids that litter the science fiction landscape, a hard-wired characteristic of the “andys” in Philip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? That Theodore resorts to screen love via digital device further suggests a flattening of affect equating directly to and commenting on film spectatorship as well.
Though many consider the film science fiction, *Her* eschews the cold, metal tones of future worlds in favor of warm colours and woven qualities that harken a recycled renaissance. Preliminary discussions between the film’s main creators—director Spike Jonze, cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema, production designer K. K. Barrett, and costume designer Casey Storm—focused on emotions and feelings that they wanted to express, which then gave way to their choices for colours, garments, and settings. Storm confirms that instead of creating “a cold world for yourself,” you would “want something that feels comfortable, happy, less anxious, that shows you participate in society and you’re in touch with your emotions” (Harris 12). To emphasize these elements of “feel” and “touch,” Storm chose “cottons and wools, not metals and plastics” to clothe the film’s characters (12). In terms of colour, the entire group became enamored with using the colour red; Barrett confirms that if you look closely there’s some of it in every frame. The most notable use of red in the film is Theodore’s oft worn button-down shirt and its direct coordination with the red background of the OS’s start-up sequence screen, punctuated by the swirling threads of the program’s signature double helix. Jonze confirms that he was always hoping for the film to be “warm and colourful” (Dodes 11). Red, a colour that often represents passion, love, blood, and other life forces, dominates the warm side of the colour wheel. Jonze also cites the interior of Jamba Juice establishments, whose wood-grained interiors inspired the handcrafted quality of the film’s wood-framed computers and phone cases, as an unlikely influence on the mise-en-scène (Chew-Bose 2) (Fig. 4).

Over the course of the film, and through the development of his relationship with Samantha, Theodore turns this “felt” into a new, metaphorical blanket to keep himself warm. Like his heart, which now has a “tiny little hole” that Theodore hopes to darn, the fabric of his being has ripped and is in desperate need of being mended. Samantha helps stitch him back together, their relationship reinforced when the two have a sexual encounter. One could suggest that they have sexual intercourse in terms of their becoming intertwined like threads do, mainly by “feeling” each other. Surely, this non-traditional coupling is a challenge to represent when
one participant has no three-dimensional presence: Jonze decides to project a blank screen (Fig. 5). Seemingly evoking the utter absence of mise-en-scène, one could instead consider this image as a blanket of darkness covering the lovers. The power of mise-en-scène itself is evinced in relation to many audiences’ uncomfortable reactions to this lack of image, which forces them to face a black screen for over a full minute of runtime. Though this blankness firstly equates to an erasure of any on-screen corporeality, it ironically opens a space for Samantha to begin to “feel” as if she did, indeed, have a body.

*Her* not only tells its story through textures, but also through literal and metaphorical blankets like that of the blank screen, which help cover its vital subjects. Once they become “connected,” for instance, Samantha tells Theodore that it feels as if they are “under the same blanket, it’s soft and fuzzy.” Her relationship with Theodore allows her to inexplicably feel too, and thus leads her to begin using tactile metaphors that harmonize with the tactility of the film’s overall mise-en-scène. The suffix –ility suggests ability, and Samantha had already confirmed to Theodore during their initiating sequence that her DNA, a combination of all the programmers who made her, ensures her “ability to grow through [my] experiences.” Once seemingly in love, Samantha leads Theodore to the beach for a day date; arriving at the summit of the subway station, he looks out onto a beach-blanket composed of the bodies of all the various beach-goers (Fig. 6). On the beach, Samantha provocatively questions what would happen if the patterning of the human body was reconfigured, and ears were where navels were, and so on. Warmed by their companionship and the comforting music she plays for him, Theodore rests on the beach underneath a blanket of rich, warm light (Fig. 7).

The film ends with the unraveling of the internal story woven together by Samantha and Theodore. She tells him she’ll be leaving permanently, and upon her departure she explains: “It’s like I’m reading a book, and it’s a book that I deeply love. But I’m reading it slowly now so the words are really far apart, and the spaces between the words are almost infinite.” Upon her utterance of these
lines, Jonze inserts an extreme close-up of the fabric of the bed’s quilt on which Theodore lies, a tightly woven textile serving to juxtapose the action: at this very moment the fabric of their love story is falling apart (Fig. 8). In the reverse, however, this insert shot might directly suggest that the film sets forth a surprisingly felt phenomenology, a narrative founded on touching in both the literal and metaphorical senses.

When interviewed by Humberto Leon, friend and co-founder of fashion brand Opening Ceremony in 2013, Spike Jonze cautiously affirmed that Her had to be, “what’s the saying? Invented from whole cloth?” (Leon 12). He’s primarily referring to the idiom that suggests pure invention, the fabrication of something entirely new. More importantly, the reference fittingly describes the interwoven aesthetics of fashion and film that converge into Her. Indeed, Jonze spoke to Leon regularly while writing and making the film, admitting that once finished it had consequently assumed a woven quality: “Your and my aesthetics were already so intertwined by the time we got to do a line together” (Leon 11). Here, Jonze refers to their mutual fashion collection, which Opening Ceremony released concurrent with and inspired by the film. After contemplating the film’s heavy investment in the “feel” of textiles, one can see how Jonze’s Her presents both a warmly blanketed romance and his own directorial vision of film for fashion’s sake.

WORKS CITED


