

# 'We make angels': Rediscovering the Victorian 'Angel in the House' in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

ANNIKA MORLING

## Abstract

Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her* and Denis Villeneuve's 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049* (*BR2049*) both present spectral female characters who, despite being wholly constructed by futuristic technology, echo the Victorian image of the 'Angel in the House'. Just as male-engineered changes in technology altered women's roles and responsibilities in the Victorian period, both *Her* and *BR2049* show the software of their respective female characters to be designed by men. Just as the Victorian 'Angel' was perceived as belonging to the domestic sphere, yet denied ownership of property, the technological women of *Her* and *BR2049* are shown to be literally contained within masculine structures, with little personal autonomy. The technologically constructed women are also shown to possess a diminished corporeality, which echoes Victorian conceptions of ideal womanhood as spectral and omnipresent. Lastly, like the ideal Victorian 'Angel', both technological women are shown to exert an ameliorative moral influence over their respective male partners. While they present speculative visions of futuristic societies, both *Her* and *BR2049* paradoxically engage with Victorian ideas of the Angel in the House, suggesting an iterated pattern of female experience related to rapid technological change.

## Introduction

The Victorian ideal of the 'Angel in the House' – an ornamental, salutary housewife of the upper middle class – emerged from a period of technological advancement in Britain over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A product of literature, political rhetoric and societal gender norms, the 'Angel' ostensibly possessed a diminished corporeality, allowing her to imbue the domestic space with a calming feminine influence. She also denied her self-development in order to provide stability and reformation for her family in a time of economic and social change. In this essay I suggest that

these characteristics are reflected, somewhat paradoxically, in the female-coded artificial intelligence of two recent speculative fiction films – Spike Jonze’s 2013 film *Her*<sup>1</sup> and Denis Villeneuve’s 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049* (*BR2049*).<sup>2</sup> *Her*’s Samantha, an artificially intelligent computer operating system, and *BR2049*’s Joi, a hologram, are each the product of male-dominated technological processes, and are constructed to perform an ideal form of womanhood which reflects that of Victorian times. Echoing the confinement of the Victorian Angel to the domestic sphere, Samantha and Joi are both pieces of software contained within masculine-coded hardware. Both women are also bodiless, and this spectrality allows them to constantly recreate the comforts of the domestic space for their respective male partners. Lastly, both women are configured to devote themselves wholly to the development and stabilisation of their male partners. The re-emergence of the Angel in the House motif in the futuristic world of the speculative fiction film suggests how technological change, pioneered predominantly by men, alters societal conceptions of normative womanhood, and speaks to iterated patterns of female experience associated with periods of rapid technological advancement over time.

## Gender and technology

The Victorian era was a period of significant technological and economic development in Britain. During this time, scientific advancements, the implementation of novel and transformative social policies, and the increased mechanisation of modes of production all transformed British society and its dominant ideologies across class boundaries. On a social level, this transformation altered previously held conceptions of national and personal identity, particularly in regards to class and gender. Increasing industrialisation over the late eighteenth century had rapidly expanded the British middle classes; large numbers of men and women moved from rural areas to urban centres, reflecting the broader transformation of Britain from a largely agrarian to an industrial economy.<sup>3</sup> Yet women were largely excluded from the productive aspects of this economy. It was widely understood that a middle-class wife did not partake in wage labour and was instead supposed to undertake philanthropic and household work.<sup>4</sup> Industrialisation thus created a large number of middle-class women who were not of noble birth, yet neither worked in the fields nor in the factories. Given their removal from

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<sup>1</sup> *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze (Culver City: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2013). DVD.

<sup>2</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (Culver City: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2017). DVD.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1993), 87.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that women of the working classes constituted a significant proportion of workers in the farming, textile and proto-industrial industries in the early nineteenth century, and thus made a considerable contribution to production in the Victorian era. This essay focuses on perceptions of the upper-middle class Victorian woman. See: Antony Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 85–7; Maxine Berg, ‘What Difference did Women’s Work Make to the Industrial Revolution?’ *History Workshop* 35 (1993): 22–44.

productive processes, the Victorian era saw the emergence of the ‘woman question’, in which expected societal roles for women were recurrently discussed and redefined.<sup>5</sup> A popular conception of the ideal middle-class wife, promulgated predominantly by men, came to be the ‘Angel in the House’ – a ‘decoratively idle’ figure<sup>6</sup> who exuded a stabilising moral influence within her household.<sup>7</sup>

The technological and scientific advancements which so altered conceptions of womanhood in the Victorian era, and which thereby gave rise to the image of the Angel in the House, were engineered overwhelmingly by men. Prominent figures of British industrialisation included, for example, inventor James Watt, philosopher Jeremy Bentham and industrialist Abraham Darby.<sup>8</sup> Victorian women of all classes were systemically barred from such ‘power-wielding occupations’ as medicine, law, philosophy and science.<sup>9</sup> The systemic male dominance of production and technology in the Victorian era accords with contemporary feminist theories regarding the relationship between science, gender, and social power. If the aim of science, as Gill Kirkup suggests, is to attain ‘power over the material world through knowledge’, it follows that the removal of women from scientific knowledge results in their marginalisation in the material world.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, gender theorist Cynthia Cockburn contends that men maintain privilege and power in a society primarily through their control of technology.<sup>11</sup> Jonze and Villeneuve engage with these ideas in their respective speculative fiction films; in presenting female characters who are literally constructed by technology, *Her* and *BR2049* explore how female subjectivity and normative social roles are destabilised and subsequently reconstructed by male-controlled technological change.

Villeneuve’s *BR2049* explicitly portrays technological and productive processes as extensions of male social power. In Ridley Scott’s original film *Blade Runner* (1982), futuristic Los Angeles is under the control of the imperious Eldon Tyrell, a man who pioneered the large-scale production of highly realistic androids known as replicants and thereby drastically altered the physical and social landscape of the city. The Los Angeles of Villeneuve’s 2017 sequel is controlled by Niander Wallace, a similarly autocratic figure who, after making his fortune in synthetic farming, bought the declining Tyrell Corporation and assumed control over its production of replicants. This transferral of power

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<sup>5</sup> Diana Cordea, ‘Two Approaches on the Philosophy of Separate Spheres in Mid-Victorian England: John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill’. *Procedia: Social and Behavioural Sciences* 71 (2013): 116.

<sup>6</sup> Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 86.

<sup>7</sup> The extent to which women actually resembled the ideal ‘Angel in the House’ image is subject to debate – see Mildred Jeanne Peterson, *Family, Love, and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Peterson claims that ‘we have mistaken Victorian rhetoric for reality’ in historical studies of upper-class Victorian women.

<sup>8</sup> Vanessa Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Gill Kirkup, ‘Introduction’, in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. Gill Kirkup et al (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men and Technical Know-How* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), 6–9, 33–4.

from one corporate, patriarchal regime to another is reminiscent of the British aristocratic practice of primogeniture, in which property and capital were consolidated within families through strictly male-line inheritance, precluding women's ownership over place. Like a great house of the Victorian era, then, the city of *BR2049* can be seen as a masculine dynastic space, in which women are removed from power.

In accordance with Cockburn's theory, Wallace's command over technology also facilitates his influence over dynamics of gender. His laconic proclamation to his assistant Luv, 'we make angels', can be interpreted as referring not only to his literal production of replicants but also to his ability to construct and alter gendered subject positions, especially regarding women. When Wallace examines his latest model of replicant, the naked woman slides out of plastic wrapping hanging from the ceiling and falls at Wallace's feet, symbolising Wallace's power to mould a new image of ideal womanhood. It is significant, therefore, that the Wallace Corporation is also responsible for the development of the Joi program, an iteration of which constitutes the film's primary female character. A colourful female-presenting hologram, Joi offers an attractive illusion of companionship and gratification against a backdrop of grey metropolitan dystopia – she is, to use Wallace's own term, engineered to be an 'angel' of the domestic space. Every time Joi is deactivated by her male owner and 'partner' K, the film's protagonist, her body-space is replaced by the Wallace Industries insignia. This effectively communicates how her containment within masculine power structures and her diminished corporeality – in short, her alignment with Victorian ideals of womanhood – are due to male-controlled technology.

While *BR2049* presents Niander Wallace as a key figure behind technological change, the narrative of Spike Jonze's *Her* is tightly focalised on its protagonist Theodore, and thus does not offer explicit insight into broader processes of technological production. That being said, the advertisement for the OS1<sup>12</sup> witnessed by Theodore in the railway station is voiced by a man, implying the off-screen male domination of software production. Moreover, this brief advertisement scene emphasises how Samantha is ultimately a product whose characteristics, including her ability to partake in a heterosexual relationship, are configured by presumably male software engineers. As Andrea Virginas argues, 'Theodore's spontaneous reaction in *Her* configuring his operating system as female suggests that AIs are brought into existence by humans' (male scientists') intellectual curiosity and emotional needs regulated by a heteronormative framework.'<sup>13</sup> Samantha and Joi are both literal products in masculinised, neoliberal marketplaces, and are hence engineered to perform an idealised form of womanhood. Advertised as an 'intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you',

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<sup>12</sup> The OS1 is the world's first artificially intelligent operating system, of which Samantha is a version.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Virginas, 'Gendered Transmediation of the Digital from *SimOne* to *Ex Machina*: "Visual Pleasure" Reloaded?' *European Journal of English Studies* 21, no. 3 (2017): 298.

Samantha is, as Troy Bordun notes, ‘the ideal woman for unrealistic male fantasies’.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, fluorescent advertisements for Joi in *BR2049* promise the anonymous (male, heterosexual) consumer ‘everything [they] want’. The digital women of *Her* and *BR2049* can thus be seen as occupying a comparable position to the Victorian Angel in the House in that they too represent an idealised conception of womanhood constructed by men, within the context of rapid technological development. In a further parallel with Victorian gender norms, a significant characteristic of this engineered ideal womanhood is that it is dependent upon masculine structures and confined to the sheltered domestic space.

## Containment within masculine structures

The digital women in *Her* and *BR2049* further reflect the Victorian Angel in the House image in that they are contained, due to their programming, within masculine structures of power. As Diana Cordea has explained in her comparative study of John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill, the Angel in the House figure reflected and was supported by contemporary Victorian conceptions of separate social spheres based on supposed biological gender difference.<sup>15</sup> Separate spheres ideology, as espoused by prominent social thinker John Ruskin in an 1864 speech, held that man, as the ‘doer, the creator, the discoverer and the defender’, naturally belonged within the public and productive sphere of society.<sup>16</sup> Women, on the other hand, possessed an intellect naturally disposed towards ‘sweet ordering, arrangement and decision’, and thus belonged within the private, domestic sphere.<sup>17</sup> Such notions of public and private separation confined women to an ‘ancillary circle of housewifely and philanthropic activity’, while men moved laterally, the transformers and producers of the material world.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to her rhetorical containment to the domestic sphere, the Victorian woman was in a more literal sense contained within masculinised physical structures due to property laws. Prior to the passage of the second Married Woman’s Property Act in 1882, the legal doctrine of coverture held that a British woman’s personal property, and any property she might subsequently acquire, legally passed to her husband upon her marriage.<sup>19</sup> It was thought that allowing married women equivalent property rights to men would cause, in the words of House of Commons member Philip Muntz, ‘great

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<sup>14</sup> Troy Bordun, ‘On the Off-Screen Voice: Sound and Vision in Spike Jonze’s *Her*’. *Cineaction* 98 (2016): 59.

<sup>15</sup> Cordea, ‘Two Approaches’, 118.

<sup>16</sup> John Ruskin quoted in Kate Millet, ‘The Debate Over Women: Ruskin vs Mill’, in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 126.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Millet, ‘The Debate Over Women’, 134.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Griffin, ‘Class, Gender, and Liberalism in Parliament, 1868–1882: The Case of the Married Women’s Property Acts’, *Historical Review* 46, no. 1 (2003): 62.

difficulties in all the domestic arrangements of life'.<sup>20</sup> Such an objection reveals that separate spheres ideology rested on not only the idea of natural female command over the domestic sphere, but also on the idea that women's occupation of this sphere must be circumscribed by resolutely masculine power.

This idea is particularly explored in *BR2049*; Joi reflects idealised Victorian femininity in that she is literally contained within a masculine space, and relies upon that space for survival. In a clear allusion to contained female domesticity, Joi first materialises out of a projector fixed to the ceiling of K's apartment; her range of movement is constrained by the limited reach of the projector's arm, and as such, her holographic form cannot move beyond his living room. When Joi tells K that she is 'getting cabin fever' due to these conditions, she echoes the voice of the Victorian woman restricted by male rhetoric to a separate female sphere; the woman who was, 'by her office and place ... protected from all [the] danger and temptation' of the outside world.<sup>21</sup>

Joi's complaint is supposedly alleviated by K's purchase of an 'emanator', a small, supplementary technological device sold by Wallace Industries which allows Joi's body to coalesce without a fixed light source; she may now go, as K tells her, 'anywhere [she] want[s] in the world now'. Yet the emanator, held within K's pocket, is itself a masculinised space, one which contains Joi until K chooses to summon her into existence. When the emanator is vindictively crushed by Luv in the closing stages of the film, Joi permanently vanishes; her concurrent 'death' with the destruction of the emanator reinforces her lack of independent subjectivity in the material world, and her reliance on male structures of power for existence. Joi's containment within the male-coded walls of K's apartment parallels the image of protection and containment inherent in the Angel in the House ideal. This suggests an iterated pattern of ideal womanhood as contained, protected and removed from productive societal spheres.

## A diminished corporeality

In her ostensibly natural command over the domestic sphere, the ideal Victorian woman was perceived as possessing a diminished corporeality. Removed from productive modes and insuperably distant from the material conditions of life, the Victorian woman became, in public consciousness, 'equivocal, ambiguous, marginal, ghostly'.<sup>22</sup> This sympathy between women and ghosts is significant given the emergent interest in spiritualism in the Victorian era, a trend which developed alongside and in opposition to the growing 'masculine' fields of science and technology. In their ostensible

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Muntz quoted in Griffin, 'Class, Gender and Liberalism in Parliament', 62.

<sup>21</sup> Ruskin quoted in Millet, 'The Debate Over Women', 126.

<sup>22</sup> Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts*, 4–5.

possession of ‘finer instincts’<sup>23</sup> and their natural authority in the fields of emotion and morality, women were perceived as possessing an inherent sympathy with the immaterial, supernatural realm. Literature of the time, written by both men and women, reflected the alignment of womanhood and the ethereal in British popular consciousness. Coventry Patmore’s 1864 narrative poem ‘The Angel in the House’, after which the ideal Victorian woman is named, offers one example of this alignment: Patmore describes his wife as possessing a ‘countenance angelical’, which produces ‘phantasms as absurd and sweet’; he claims her beauty ‘haunts him all the night’; and reflects that ‘everywhere I seem’d to meet/The haunting fairness of her face’.<sup>24</sup> Patmore’s ‘Angel’ possesses substantial influence within the domestic space, yet this influence is crucially divorced from her physical form.

While male writers presented women as spectral and ethereal as part of an idealised vision of feminine domesticity, women did so as a means to ‘create public discourse for voicing feminine concerns’.<sup>25</sup> As Vanessa Dickerson notes in *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide*, female writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Vernon Lee and Christina Rossetti frequently adopted motifs of the supernatural and the ghostly in their work so as to self-reflexively explore affinities between ghosts and the female condition, such as their shared removal from productive and social power.<sup>26</sup> Christina Rossetti’s 1864 poem ‘After Death’ can be read as one such work; featuring a female narrative voice speaking from beyond the grave, the poem embodies the liminality of the Victorian woman positioned between the physical and immaterial, or spiritual, worlds:

He leaned above me, thinking that I slept  
And could not hear him; but I heard him say,  
‘Poor child, poor child’: and as he turned away  
Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept ...<sup>27</sup>

Of particular note in this poem is the ambiguous and pervasive power of its subject; while the woman is denied physical power due to her lack of ‘body’, Rossetti ascribes a pervasive perceptive ability to her bodiless form; the female spirit ‘hears’ the man, and ‘knows’ that he weeps. In this way, Rossetti’s poem reflects the quasi-supernatural powers ostensibly wielded by the married Victorian woman. In her diminished corporeality, the Angel in the House was seen as occupying a perceptive, near-omniscient presence within the domestic sphere. As one popular 1861 guide to household management stated, ‘[a woman’s] spirit will be seen through the whole establishment’, suggesting the

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<sup>23</sup> Millet, ‘The Debate Over Women’, 136.

<sup>24</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: Cassel & Company, 1891), 39, 38, 32, 38, Project Gutenberg.

<sup>25</sup> Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–8.

<sup>27</sup> Christina Rossetti, ‘After Death’, in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1865), 59.

need for a wife to be figuratively bodiless in order for her to have a thorough command over her household.<sup>28</sup>

*Her* and *BR2049* translate the ostensibly diminished corporeality of the Victorian wife into a literal spectrality. Wholly comprised of digital software, Samantha and Joi themselves resemble ghosts in their inability to interact with and manipulate the physical world. In her highly influential theory regarding the female body in cinema, Laura Mulvey argued that women assume an ‘exhibitionist role’ in mainstream films, in that the female body is positioned so as to be ‘simultaneously looked at and displayed’.<sup>29</sup> In the context of this theory, it is interesting to note how both Jonze and Villeneuve use cinematic techniques to highlight Samantha and Joi’s *lack* of solid body.<sup>30</sup> Joi, for example, is first introduced into the narrative of *BR2049* via a disembodied, off-screen voice; we hear her call out to K upon his return from work, ‘I didn’t hear you come in. You’re early.’ The camera proceeds to follow K around the claustrophobic spaces of his apartment as he continues to converse with the off-screen voice. As film theorist Mary Ann Doane notes, the efficacy of the off-screen voice in narrative cinema ‘rests on the knowledge that the character can easily be made visible by a slight reframing which would reunite the voice and its source.’<sup>31</sup> Villeneuve manipulates this tension between voice and source by presenting a series of ‘reframings’ within K’s apartment which do not reunite the feminine voice with a body, thereby creating an uncanny sense of a liminal, pervasive presence. When Joi’s ‘body’ does eventually appear, it flickers out of the ceiling projector into the middle of the frame, conveying Joi as a fundamentally bodiless being, her holographic form a mere façade.

The use of the off-screen voice to create a sense of spectrality is even more pronounced in Jonze’s *Her*. Like Joi, Samantha is first introduced into the film via a disembodied voice, in a private, domestic setting. In Theodore’s first encounter with Samantha, after he loads the OS1 program into his computer, Jonze deliberately eschews the conventional shot-reverse-shot rhythm used in the earlier dialogue between Theodore and his blind date. Instead, the camera remains on a mid-shot of Theodore throughout the conversation; when Samantha is speaking, the camera does not reverse to the computer and thereby locate her ‘being’ inside of it. Although she tells the four-year-old Jocelyn that she ‘live[s] in a computer’, Samantha does not interact with or exist within the material realm at all; as Donna Kornhaber puts it, Samantha ‘inhabits systems of data architecture and is contained within

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<sup>28</sup> Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management* (London: Jonathan Cape Limited, 1861), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 9.

<sup>30</sup> The implications of Mulvey’s theory in regards to the filmic representation of digitised, bodiless women is discussed by Andrea Virgínas in her article ‘Gendered Transmediation of the Digital from *SlmOne* to *Ex Machina*: “Visual Pleasure” Reloaded?’, in which she argues for the ‘ongoing validity of Laura Mulvey’s concept of “visual pleasure” in spite of the apparently highly progressive medial re-codings [of female characters] in a digital environment’.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Ann Doane, ‘The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space’ in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* ed. Philip Rosen, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), 340.



them the way, we might say, a fish inhabits and is contained within the sea; which does not make those systems themselves her body'.<sup>32</sup> Samantha's ghostliness is reinforced in the revelation that she has been conversing with Alan Watts, a deceased philosopher whose consciousness was replicated as an artificial intelligence by group of OSES.

Samantha's ability to raise and speak with the dead further aligns her with the uncanny and the supernatural, suggesting that, like the heroine of Rossetti's poem, she occupies an ambiguous, liminal position between the material and spiritual worlds. Samantha and Joi's ghostliness and incorporeality parallels the limited material power of the Victorian woman removed by male rhetoric and technological development from the public and productive sphere. Moreover, the dispersed consciousness of these digital women reflects Victorian conceptions of the ideal wife as exuding a pervasive, ameliorative influence within the domestic space.

## A reformatory moral influence

The corporeality of the wife in Victorian Britain was de-emphasised as part of a growing perception of women as the stabilising moral centre of the home. In her natural propensity for emotion and feeling, it was seen as the woman's duty to render the hearth a sacred, calm space, and thereby civilise and ameliorate the emotional state of her husband. The idea that women performed a vital moral duty for men was propounded by John Ruskin, who even suggested that women were 'answerable' for past warfare, 'not in that [they] have provoked, but in that [they] have not hindered' conflict between men.<sup>33</sup> The reformatory capacity of women was also reflected in literature: in 'The Angel in the House', Patmore likens his wife to an angelic visitor with transformative, almost godly capabilities; he writes that he is 'by her gentleness made great', and that 'she seem'd expressly sent below/To teach our erring minds to see'.<sup>34</sup> The reformatory powers of the Angel in Patmore's poem, as well as broader conceptions of women's moral superiority in Victorian society, were inextricably connected to her diminished corporeality. Symbolising her personal physical and sexual desires, as well as her capacity for activity instead of passivity, a woman's active body was a disruptive incursion within the sacred domestic space. Conceptions of the ideal Victorian woman as the natural 'stabiliser of the home' therefore required that she '[disappear] into the woodwork ... by becoming a ghost'.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the suppression of her physical form, however, her role as stabilising centre of the home also required the suppression of her personal desires and self-development.

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<sup>32</sup> Donna Kornhaber, 'From Posthuman to Postcinema: Crises of Subjecthood and Representation in Her'. *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 4 (2017): 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ruskin, quoted in Millet, 'The Debate Over Women', 138.

<sup>34</sup> Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, 25, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts*, 5.

Samantha and Joi both exemplify the idealised self-denial of the Victorian ‘Angel’ in that their *raison d’être* is the assistance and reformation of their respective male partners. As suggested in the epithet ‘Angel’ itself, the ideal Victorian woman was innately self-denying, perpetually subordinating her personal desires to the needs of her husband and family. It was a widely held conception in Victorian society that while men worked to satisfy both public and self-interest, women’s labour was always for others; as Elaine Showalter notes, ‘work, in the sense of self-development, was in direct conflict with the subordination and repression inherent in the feminine ideal’.<sup>36</sup> Joi, in particular, is shown to possess little individual subjectivity outside of her relationship to K. Silently and invisibly contained within the emanator, Joi’s existence is wholly tied to and reliant upon K’s being, as reflected in her rooftop profession: ‘I’m so happy when I’m with you.’ While *Her*’s Samantha exhibits a greater degree of self-awareness and independence than Joi, her relationship with Theodore is nevertheless considerably unbalanced owing to the inherent incongruities in their bodily and cognitive forms. When Samantha tells Theodore that she is ‘gonna be really lonely when [he] sleep[s],’ she, like Joi, presents her own personhood as dependent on his presence. Samantha and Joi thus reflect the idealised Victorian image of the self-sacrificing woman in that their primary function and purpose lies in ancillary work for their ‘husbands’.

In their programmed self-denial, both Joi and Samantha devote themselves to providing emotional stability and support to their respective male partners, and fostering the men’s personal and social development. Theodore in particular is presented as wholly ‘underdeveloped’ prior to his purchase of Samantha – he is likened to ‘a little puppy dog’ by his blind date, and seems to struggle with forming romantic connections following his divorce.<sup>37</sup> The OS1 program therefore appeals to Theodore in its promise of personal development and regeneration: the advertisement in the train station rhetorically asks, ‘Who are you? What can you be? Where are you going? ... What are the possibilities?’ Theodore’s purchase of Samantha offers him the regeneration he has been seeking; she not only stabilises his life through her secretarial assistance, but also reforms his character on a deeper level by providing him an opportunity to vocalise and work through his internal emotional conflict. As Matt Aibel argues, Samantha’s ‘mirroring and validation ... gradually help [Theodore] consolidate his previously isolated or fragmented self states’.<sup>38</sup>

Samantha’s invisible, salutary presence also continually recreates for Theodore the comforts of the domestic space. Like the ‘Angel’ of Patmore’s poem, Samantha’s reformative influence is intimately connected to her lack of body: a constant external conscience, she watches over Theodore while he

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<sup>36</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. (London: Virago, 1977), 22.

<sup>37</sup> Matt Aibel, ‘From Provisioning to Reciprocity: Logging in to Spike Jonze’s *Her*’. *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 34, no. 3 (2017): 369.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 369.

sleeps, accompanies him to all his social outings, and is available to talk with him whenever he desires. John Ruskin's 1864 declaration that 'wherever a true wife comes, [the] home is always round her' is thus exemplified in Samantha, who in her constant, bodiless companionship of Theodore exudes the comforting energy of a stable, sacred hearth.<sup>39</sup>

Joi similarly embodies the reformative powers of the Victorian 'Angel' in that her spectral presence facilitates K's emerging sense of individual selfhood. Like the perpetual companionship Samantha offers Theodore, K is able to summon Joi into existence any time he requires guidance or support. She appears, for example, as he tries to interpret the biological database, and as he sets out on his perilous flight to the orphanage. Even more so than Theodore, K possesses an underdeveloped sense of individual subjectivity and selfhood. A replicant officer in the Los Angeles Police Department, K is referred to by the moniker 'Officer K6-3.7', and it is apparent from his first entry into the narrative that he has internalised the soulless spirit of mass production embodied in such a generic name. Like the ideal, supportive wife in the emerging industrial market of the Victorian era, Joi encourages K to see himself as extraordinary; she tells him he is 'special' and 'a real boy', and, most significantly, offers him a new name, Joe. As the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued, to name someone is to 'accredit objectivity, self-identity, positivity, [and] plenitude'.<sup>40</sup> As such, when Joi tells K, 'you're too important for K. Your mother would have named you Joe', it indicates her crucial role as a reformative and constructive moral influence.

In naming K herself, Joi assumes the mantle of the absent mother, reflecting the dual role of the Angel in the House as both wife and mother, tasked with the moral education of her children as well as the amelioration of her husband's emotional state. Like Samantha, then, Joi provides K with a 'crucially needed self-object experience' through her constant reformative presence.<sup>41</sup> Overall, the digital women of *Her* and *BR2049* reflect an idealised image of womanhood which locates female purpose in the provision of ancillary, reformative domestic support to men. Furthermore, in their programmed self-denial and their contained omnipresence, Joi and Samantha appeal to an idealised perception of women as static and therefore stabilising presences within the domestic sphere, especially amidst rapid and unstable technological change in the public sphere.

## Conclusion

Comparing the Victorian image of the Angel in the House with the digital women in *Her* and *Blade Runner 2049* suggests an iterated pattern in constructions of ideal womanhood associated with

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<sup>39</sup> Ruskin quoted in Millet, 'The Debate Over Women', 131.

<sup>40</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A Lingus (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1968), 162.

<sup>41</sup> Aibel, 'Logging in to *Her*', 369.

technological development. In both the Victorian era and the futuristic societies of these speculative fiction films, rapid technological and social development, driven by men, has destabilised the female subject position. The ideal woman which emerges in both Victorian Britain and the societies of *Her* and *BR2049* is contained within patriarchal structures of power and is removed from the productive and material world. This ideal woman also possesses an ambiguous and insubstantial corporeality, which allows her to imbue the domestic sphere with a pervasive feminine influence. As part of this influence, she subordinates her own self-development and desires to a higher purpose, namely, the reformation of her male partner. The parallels between these two spatially and temporally distant constructions of ideal womanhood discourage conceptions of a linear progression of gender relations or gendered subject positions. Rather, they speak to a broader iterative pattern of female experience that exists regardless of time and space.

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