

Tragic Optimism in *500 Days of Summer* and *Her*: A Comparative Analysis

DOÇ. DR. TİMUÇİN BUĞRA EDMAN*

Abstract

This article aims to investigate the portrayal of optimism in two modern films, Marc Webb's *500 Days of Summer* (2009) and Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), using Viktor Frankl's concept of optimism. The focus is on the characters' quest for love and self-discovery in the middle of challenges and emotional turmoil. They present the idea of seeking purpose and personal development while experiencing highly complex emotions. This article examines the storytelling strategies inherent in characters' perceptions as they evolve in both films, highlighting the complexities of contemporary relationships. Films play a role in deepening the grasp of the complicated themes of love, technology, and obsessive passion in today's world, as well as shed light on persistent psychological challenges with modern ways of storytelling. In addition to that, the comparative approach highlights how people universally seek purpose during hard times and acknowledges the unique circumstances of individual narratives. Eventually, this research demonstrates how contemporary films skilfully communicate philosophical ideas, offering audiences a richer insight into the human experience in the mayhem of hardships.

Keywords: Tragic Optimism, Viktor Frankl, Comparative Contemporary Cinema, *Her* (film), *500 Days of Summer* (film)

AŞKIN (500) GÜNÜ VE AŞK FİMLERİNDE TRAJİK İYİMSERLİK: KARŞILAŞTIRMALI BİR ANALİZ

Öz

Bu makale, Viktor Frankl'ın iyimserlik kavramını kullanarak iki modern film olan Marc Webb'in *Aşkın (500) Günü* (2009) ve Spike Jonze'un *Aşk* (2013) filmlerindeki iyimserlik portresini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Odak noktası, karakterlerin zorluklar ve duygusal çalkantılar ortasında aşk ve kendini keşfetme arayışıdır. Bu filmler, son derece karmaşık duygular yaşarken amaç ve kişisel gelişim arayışı fikrini sunmaktadır. Buna bağlı olarak, bu makale her iki filmdeki karakterlerin ilerleyişi yoluyla ortaya çıkan düşüncelerinde gizli olan hikaye anlatım tekniklerini, günümüz dünyasındaki ilişkilerin karmaşıklığını sergilemek için incelemektedir. Filmler, günümüz dünyasındaki aşk, teknoloji ve takıntılı tutku gibi karmaşık temaların kavranmasını derinleştirmede rol oynamakta ve modern hikaye anlatım yöntemleriyle süregelen psikolojik zorluklara ışık tutmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, karşılaştırmalı yaklaşım insanların evrensel olarak zor zamanlarda bir

* Düzce Üniversitesi, E-posta: timucinedman@outlook.com, ORCID: [0000-0002-5103-4791](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5103-4791)

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amaç aradığını vurgular ve bireysel anlatıların benzersiz koşullarını kabullenir. En nihayetinde, bu araştırma çağdaş filmlerin felsefi fikirleri ustaca nasıl naklettiğini göstermekte ve izleyicilere zorlukların karmaşası içinde insan deneyimine daha derin bir bakış açısı sergilemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: trajik iyimserlik, Viktor Frankl, karşılaştırmalı çağdaş sinema, aşk (film), Aşkın 500 Günü (film)

INTRODUCTION

Cinema has historically reflected the human experience, encapsulating the subtleties of emotions, relationships, and personal development. In recent years, films have progressively examined the intricacies of love and connection within a context influenced by technological breakthroughs and evolving societal dynamics. Viktor Frankl, a neurologist, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor, developed the concept of tragic optimism, which emphasises maintaining hope and finding meaning in life despite facing challenging circumstances or enduring hardships. Frankl introduced this idea in his *Man's Search for Meaning* (2006). The convergence of human emotion and contemporary concerns offers a rich context for exploring Viktor Frankl's notion of tragic optimism—the belief that one can maintain optimism and derive meaning from life despite unavoidable suffering. There has been a shift in the essence of activism from the past to the present. In the past, activism was intertwined with hopefulness, whereas today's activism is grounded in a sense of doubt. This transformation stems from the belief that there is no predetermined path to advancement. Each individual in our age shapes the scope and character of progress, acknowledging that genuine personal growth can only occur at a certain level, while technological breakthroughs primarily drive societal progress. This sceptical perspective paradoxically motivates action. It drives people to seize opportunities with an eye towards life's uncertainties, as previous optimism would only breed contentment and a type of acceptance that is positive in nature. Essentially, current actions stem from the standpoint of pessimism, urging people to participate in shaping their world rather than simply embracing an optimistically fatalistic view of progress (Frankl, 2020, p. 22).

According to Frankl, tragic optimism is a resilient mindset in times of tragedy. It recognises humanity's capacity to turn suffering into growth and achievement, uses guilt as a catalyst for self-improvement, and derives motivation to take action by acknowledging the transient nature of life (Frankl, 2006, p. 162). This concept has found widespread application across fields of psychology and mental health. Paul T. P. Wong (2010) defines optimism as the mindset and conviction that there is always a positive aspect, even in the most challenging circumstances (p. 589). He emphasises that this perspective does not ignore the challenges of life but accepts them as part of the experience while maintaining hope and significance. Moreover, studies link embracing optimism to enhanced resilience and post-traumatic growth. Leung et al. (2012) conducted a study that revealed individuals who demonstrate optimism tend to experience enhanced well-being and exhibit greater potential for personal growth following challenging circumstances. The non-linear presentation of the storyline in *500 Days of Summer* highlights Tom Hansen's romantic involvement with Summer Finn. The fragmented narrative mirrors the process of dealing with a disappointing love affair and

finding meaning in those experiences. Through the lens of optimism, one can view Tom's relationship with Summer as a catalyst for growth and a newfound sense of purpose. This interpretation again resonates with Wong's (2010) view of optimism as maintaining hope and positivity despite challenging circumstances. On the other hand, *Her* focuses on Theodore Twombly's bond with an AI program named Samantha. This unconventional relationship serves as a way for Theodore to overcome his loneliness and rediscover his capacity for connection despite knowing its limitations in longevity. The film focuses deeply on themes of consciousness and human connections, reflecting on finding meaning in a world increasingly shaped by technology.

Through a comparative analysis of Marc Webb's *500 Days of Summer* (2009) and Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), this article argues that contemporary cinema's exploration of love and relationships serves as a powerful vehicle for illustrating Viktor Frankl's concept of tragic optimism, revealing how the struggle with romantic disillusionment and technological mediation in human connections can lead to profound personal growth and a deeper understanding of the human condition in the modern age. Finally, the impact of the topics shown in these films on contemporary culture will be dealt with. With the evolution of technology and societal standards, the very views on relationships and the process of self-discovery inevitably alter over time. A comparative analysis of these films through tragic optimism aims to reveal the role of modern cinema as a platform for exploring philosophical concepts and reflecting the evolving dynamics of human interactions in the present era. To fully appreciate how these films embody tragic optimism, it is essential to first examine the theoretical underpinnings of this concept as developed by Viktor Frankl.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRAGIC OPTIMISM

Viktor Frankl's concept of tragic optimism presents a framework for recognizing how individuals find meaning and purpose even when they face suffering and adversity. In "The Case for a Tragic Optimism," a postscript to his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl suggests that the desire to find meaning in their lives drives humans to seek purpose (Frankl, 2006). Without a purpose, humans may not find any energy or reason to wake up to start the day. The day may bring extreme suffering or immense joy, but this is an unknown phase, and it is this phase that inspires any person to find the courage and willingness to embark on a new day. According to Frankl, while suffering is an aspect of life, he emphasises the importance of finding meaning in it. It is crucial for individuals to make sense of their suffering in order to lead an existence (Frankl, 2006). In other words, the pain experienced must create awareness, initiate a change, and then definitely provide a transition from one point to another. In the films, *500 Days of Summer* and *Her*, Tom and Theodore are exactly alike. Under circumstances like being in a concentration camp, which inflicts immense pain, individuals still possess the freedom to choose their attitude and response to the situation.

Frankl's logotherapy highlights the importance of responsibility and the search for meaning as central to human existence. Frankl introduces logotherapy as a form of analysis that helps individuals find purpose in life by managing inevitable suffering. Logotherapy places a central emphasis on the concept of responsibility towards life, others, and oneself. It underscores that individuals bear the responsibility for uncovering purpose in their lives (Frankl, 2014). Again,

Frankl views love as the ultimate goal a person can pursue, offering a sense of purpose and significance. Love, according to Frankl, plays a crucial role in acquiring meaning and purpose in life, even in suffering. As a result, both Theodore's and Tom's sufferings are meaningful or at least worthy in terms of finding their true identities, since each individual's life circumstances are unique. As Frankl states, individuals must discover their meaning in their personal experiences (Frankl, 2006). All in all, despite the tragedies that occur in life, Frankl advocates for an attitude of 'optimism,' where individuals maintain hope and find purpose even in times of suffering, guilt, and death. That is to say, tragic optimism represents the idea that whatever happens in life, one must maintain hope. When an individual acknowledges that their experiences are sometimes inevitable, or perhaps better described as complete fate, they come to understand that even the pain they endure holds a unique quality. Because the pain experienced is unique to the individual, it serves as a catalyst for personal growth and ultimately becomes the individual's decisive responsibility, even in the most unavoidable situations. As Frankl suggests,

[w]hen a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden. (Frankl, 2006, p.78)

Life is preconditioned by instincts and focusses on finding meaning within, with each individual shaping themselves based on their experiences and interpretations. Frankl (2006) emphasises the importance of experience in finding meaning: "[T]he second way of finding a meaning in life is by experiencing something—such as goodness, truth, and beauty—by experiencing nature and culture or, last but not least, by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness—by loving him" (p. 115). This concept of love as a path to meaning is central to both Tom and Theodore's journeys in their respective films.

Both characters experience profound forms of love that, while potentially painful, serve as catalysts for personal growth and self-realisation. Theodore's attachment to artificial intelligence and Tom's idealisation of Summer represent unconventional connections that challenge their preconceptions about love and existence. These experiences, regardless of their unconventional nature, evoke real emotions and desires, illustrating Frankl's belief that "[t]he salvation of man is through love and in love" (2006, p. 37). These intense emotional experiences become the common ground where the characters internalise their existence and potentially break free from societal constraints. Love, even when it promises pain, acts as a powerful awakening force, driving personal development and the search for meaning. This aligns with Frankl's assertion that "[e]verything depends on the individual human being, regardless of how small a number of like-minded people there is, and everything depends on each person, through action and not mere words, creatively making the meaning of life a reality in his or her own being" (2020, p. 24).

Examining how tragic optimism manifests in these cinematic narratives and its sustainability in contemporary society becomes crucial in the context of modern life. Comparing the films' approaches to love and meaning within the framework of modern life's dynamics will provide insights into how individuals navigate the complexities of relationships and personal growth in an

increasingly technological world. Wong states that “[t]ragic optimism is the ability to maintain hope and find meaning in life despite its inescapable pain, loss, and suffering” (Wong, “Meaning-Centered Approach to Research and Practice,” 2010). Wong’s idea of optimism presents a philosophical perspective on dealing with life’s challenges. This notion, based on psychology, proposes that individuals can discover meaning and maintain a positive attitude even in life’s unavoidable struggles. When applied to relationships and cinema, tragic optimism provides a nuanced framework for exploring the intricacies of love and human relationships in a comparative context. Movies such as *Her* (2013) and *500 Days of Summer* (2009) beautifully showcase this concept by weaving themes of heartache, personal growth, and self-discovery.

Her deals with the intricacies of a man’s connection with artificial intelligence, shedding light on the poignant aspects of relationships that are deep yet transient. Through the protagonist’s journey, one witnesses love and heartbreaking loss, culminating in self-awareness and insight into human connections. This narrative echoes the ongoing search for purpose in the face of adversity. Likewise, *500 Days of Summer* dissects the idealisation often portrayed in movies. The non-linear storytelling captures both the joys and crushing sorrows of a relationship, guiding the character, Tom, towards a more nuanced comprehension of love and self-discovery. Both movies showcase the perspective of an individual, illustrating how challenges and heartaches in relationships can spark personal growth and a deeper understanding of love. They demonstrate that even in the face of romantic disillusionment, there is potential for meaningful self-realisation and emotional development.

In today’s relationships, adopting a view can be beneficial. It recognises that no relationship is flawless and that heartbreak is often a part of the journey. Nevertheless, it also underscores how these trials shape our stories and can result in increased strength and self-awareness. Films that involve the concept of optimism resonate with viewers because they capture the intricate nature of human connections. They validate the pain of loss while also showcasing opportunities for development and renewed optimism, mirroring the terrains we navigate in our lives. By embracing optimism, individuals can approach relationships with a holistic outlook. This mindset allows for embracing both joy and sorrow as components of existence that contribute to personal growth and meaningful relationships. As Frankl says, “[L]ife is not something, it is the opportunity for something!” (Frankl, 2020, p. 37). Therefore, in modern life, where happy endings are not common, relationships can offer surprise-like developments. However, relationships that are unclear about what they will bring often take centre stage. In other words, it’s a situation that is both psychologically and spiritually prone to death and to experiencing a leap, but at least it has a point of continuous development. Having grasped the concept of tragic optimism, we can now focus on Marc Webb’s *500 Days of Summer*, a film that illustrates these ideas through its non-linear examination of love and disillusionment.

2. 500 DAYS OF SUMMER

Marc Webb’s *500 Days of Summer* illustrates tragic optimism through its non-linear narrative and exploration of romantic disillusionment in direct proportion to the emotional breakdown that

Tom experiences. From the very beginning of the film, it is clear that this is not a love story and that Tom and Summer are people of different worlds:

“Since the disintegration of her parents’ marriage, she’d only loved two things. The first was her long dark hair. The second was how easily she could cut it off and feel nothing. Tom meets Summer on January 8th. He knows almost immediately she is who he has been searching for. This is a story of boy meets girl, but you should know upfront, this is not a love story. (Webb, 2009)

From the beginning, Summer emphasises that she does not believe in love and does not want whatever she experiences with Tom to be in a standard boy-girl or boyfriend relationship. Although Tom accepts this at first, he later finds it a bit irrational. Over time, even though Tom does not want to maintain such an ambiguous relationship without realising his real role, he fails to comprehend how complex Summer is. More than that, “Tom fails to recognise Summer’s complexity, leading to heartbreak” (Wiseman, 2021) for him. In Tom’s eyes, Summer is excellence, but Summer has no intention of being a perfect person at all. Summer’s not just a random girl; she is a stage or level. Finally, Tom finds himself increasingly captivated by this perception of Summer, rather than her true self. The non-linear structure of the film suggests the size of the vortex between Tom and Summer and likely illustrates Summer’s early loss of faith in love following her mother’s divorce.

The film’s use of contrasting perspectives between Tom and Summer highlights the subjective nature of relationships and personal growth. From time to time, subtle details about Summer appear in the film’s flow. For example, in one of the scenes, the narrator’s voice states that “[i]n 1998, Summer quoted a song by the Scottish band, Belle and Sebastian, in her high school yearbook: ‘Colour my life with the chaos of trouble’ “(Webb, 2009). These words make it clear that Summer desires a chaotic life filled with ups and downs, much like the movie’s narrative. However, Tom’s life appears monotonous, starkly contrasting to Summer’s. This is especially true until he meets Summer. After his first meeting and conversation with Summer, he returns to his usual place in the greeting card company’s office and, for the first time in years, begins to sketch a building. Despite having graduated as an architect, Tom works as a writer for this company, and it appears that Summer ignites a spark within him. This foreshadows the impact Tom will make on his life, notwithstanding all the pain Summer will cause him.

In fact, Tom is an architect who needs motivation rather than an unsuccessful architect. Instead, Tom writes cards that express other people’s feelings. In other words, he is a talented writer available for hire, catering to those who struggle to articulate their emotions. Summer looks at boyfriend-girlfriend relationships from a different angle. When they go to the pub to drink something, she says, “I just don’t feel comfortable being anyone’s girlfriend. I don’t actually feel comfortable being anyone’s anything, you know” (Webb, 2009). She also adds that “[m]ost marriages end up with divorces, like my parents” (2009), and thus, she openly states that she is not interested in a serious relationship. Summer’s intended relationship with Tom allows her to experience fleeting emotions, but her belief in a relationship’s future is either weak or nonexistent, likely because of the incidents her mother and father have endured. However, what Tom perceives as Summer’s presence is actually an illusion. Tom has chosen to create his own Summer instead of seeing her. Perhaps what he perceives in Summer is an *anemoia*, or perhaps it is a relationship he yearns for but finds

impossible to sustain. In the end, this relationship will inevitably come to an end and vanish. In fact, the film clearly signals the stark differences in terms of how Summer and Tom tend to see things. However, Tom either refuses to perceive these differences or, even if he does, he chooses to remain in this illusion, aware of its inevitable end.

The bare contrasts in how Tom and Summer view the world become more evident as their relationship develops further, highlighting a gap between them in a key conversation they share. In this scene, Tom states, "I need to know that you're not going to wake up in the morning and feel differently." // Summer: "I can't give you that. Nobody can" (Webb, 2009). The conversation highlights the core difference in their relationship. Tom desires security and a promise of feelings from Summer, who believes in the unpredictability of emotions and confesses she cannot guarantee them to him as he grapples with accepting the uncertainty in their bond. As they explore the city together, the differences in their perspectives become more evident; Tom admires the Continental building from 1904, while Summer finds the parking lots surrounding it intriguing. This serves as a symbolic reflection of their varying perspectives on life and love. Apparently, when they look at the world, they do not focus on the same places. Suddenly, Summer confesses the following lines: "I don't know anything about architecture" (Webb, 2009). In fact, neither Tom nor Summer exist in the real world, as Tom imagines them in the world he created in his own mind. Ironically, Tom, who is actually an architect but works as a postcard writer, ultimately only writes his own fake world built on Summer. The film vividly illustrates the stark contrast between Tom's expectations and reality, resulting in a powerful twist. As Sternbergh states, "[t]he non-linear structure mimics the way memories function, particularly those tied to strong emotions." (Sternbergh, "Movies of the Mind," New York Times, 2009). This narrative technique not only enhances the viewer's understanding of Tom's emotional journey but also reflects the process of finding meaning in past experiences—a key aspect of tragic optimism. By presenting Tom's memories in a non-linear fashion, the film illustrates how individuals often reconstruct their past in light of new understanding, gradually transforming pain into growth and self-discovery.

Summer's honesty about her intentions is clear from the beginning, as she tells Tom, "I like you Tom. I just don't want to have a relationship" (Webb, 2009). Yet Tom caught up in his romantic ideals, fails to truly hear her. The narrator underscores this disconnect when they meet again on the way to their friend's wedding ceremony. They spend the entire time together, and Summer extends an invitation to Tom to attend the party she is hosting in her flat: "Tom walked to her apartment, intoxicated by the promise of the evening. He believed that this time his expectations would align with reality." (Webb, 2009). This misalignment is further emphasised when a young girl advises Tom, "[y]ou always remember the good memories, Summer. Remember the bad memories too" (Webb, 2009). As the movie draws to a close, it's significant that Tom finally meets Summer in the park, a place they meet frequently in the early stages of their relationship and has always been one of Tom's favourite spots. The relationship ends where it has begun, yet it doesn't conclude as it has begun. The narrator states at the beginning of the film that this is not a love story and does not end happily.

Summer reveals that she found her husband while reading Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, stating, "it was meant to be" (Webb, 2009). This moment of serendipity contrasts sharply with Tom's carefully constructed dreams about their relationship. When Tom admits, "I think you were right too," (Webb, 2009) to justify her never-intensified feelings, Summer responds that, "[i]t just wasn't me that you were right about," (Webb, 2009) it's a powerful acknowledgement of their misaligned expectations and the growth they've both undergone. Summer's statement almost feels like a confession, acknowledging the pain their misunderstanding caused. The film's final twist—'Autumn,' the woman whom Tom sees before the interview—symbolises a new beginning for Tom, aligning with the concept of tragic optimism. Despite the heartbreak and disillusionment, Tom has grown and is ready for a new chapter.

Based on the general theme of the film, it would not be right to say that Summer cheats on Tom or is not honest with him. At the very beginning, she tells Tom that she does not want a traditional relationship. On the other hand, the non-linear narration reveals that Tom succumbs to the allure and thrill of the relationship, confines himself within it, and ultimately hastens its termination by failing to recognise Summer's unhappiness in this relationship. The non-traditional and jumbled arrangement of the scenes parallels Tom's inability to develop a coherent understanding of Summer, reflecting the disarray of the scenes as they progressively resolve. However, this ending actually matures Tom and changes his perspective on life completely as "[s]ometimes you need to get knocked down to figure out what your fight is" (Cohen, "Lessons in Manliness from 500 Days of Summer," 2013).

Tom's journey of self-discovery and acceptance embodies the principles of tragic optimism as he learns to find meaning beyond his idealised notions of love. The film's non-linear narrative structure serves as a powerful tool for illustrating Tom's journey of disillusionment and growth, mirroring the complex process of finding meaning in suffering that is central to Frankl's concept of tragic optimism. Tom ultimately gains a deeper understanding of himself and his relationships through his pain and disappointment, demonstrating that one can find meaning even in suffering. This innovative storytelling technique allows the audience to experience Tom's emotional evolution in a fragmented yet deeply resonant manner, reflecting the way memories and realisations often surface in real life. The non-linear narrative structure of the film mirrors this process of reflection and realisation, allowing the audience to witness Tom's gradual awakening to reality. The non-linear narrative structure of the film mirrors this process of reflection and realisation, allowing the audience to experience Tom's emotional journey and gradual awakening to reality. The audience witnesses this gradual awakening through carefully juxtaposed scenes from different points in Tom and Summer's relationship. In one pivotal scene, Tom and Summer watch *The Graduate* at the cinema, where the main characters have a moment of realisation regarding their circumstances. This viewing prompts Summer to come to a conclusion about the true nature of her bond with Tom, contrasting the tragic end of *The Graduate* with their own superficial relationship. Actually, throughout the movie, the filmmakers deliberately include several warning signs about Tom and Summer's relationship. Although *The Graduate* scene is only one of them, it may be the most explicit as it triggers Summer's tears. As Stebbins also asserts, "[i]n his introduction, the narrator explains that

Tom's belief in 'the one' stemmed from early exposure to sad British pop music and a total misreading of the movie *The Graduate*" (Stebbins & Sebbins, 2022). Tom doesn't notice these warning signs because he is too focused on his romanticised view of their connection, or rather the version he tends to see. This difference between Tom's idealised perception and the reality of their relationship has become one of the major themes in the movie that depicts why Summer and Tom cannot be together. Equally significant, while Tom is en route to the party, the narrator reveals that Tom approaches her flat in a state of intoxication, driven by the anticipation of the evening; he holds the belief that his expectations would now correspond with the actual proceedings. A split screen juxtaposes Tom's reality with expectations. Although the anticipation outpaces the actuality, the visuals share many similarities until Summer first steps through her flat door. Tom anticipates that Summer will warmly welcome him with a loving embrace and kiss, promptly unwrap the present he presented her with, and delightedly discover that it is the book he was reading on the train. However, Summer extends a tacit welcome to him and proceeds to introduce him to other acquaintances at the party (Ross, 2016).

In summary, *500 Days of Summer* effectively illustrates the concept of optimism through Tom's journey of love and heartbreak, ultimately leading to his personal growth. The movie's non-linear storytelling reflects the essence of memory and feelings, enabling audiences to witness Tom's gradual realisation of the truth. The robust differences between Tom's ideals and Summer's practical stance on relationships connect the themes of perception, self-deception, and the anguish caused by mismatched hopes. What is more, Tom's transformation reflects Frankl's belief that meaning exists in times of hardship. Tom's initial emotional pain serves as a trigger for growth and development. The movie's closing scene featuring 'Autumn' signifies Tom's preparedness for a start after gaining insights into love, self-discovery, and the unpredictable aspects of relationships. *500 Days of Summer* reminds us that personal growth frequently stems from setbacks, and choosing to accept life's unknown future over holding onto unrealistic ideals can result in a genuine and satisfying life experience. This mirrors the concept of optimism by illustrating the ability to preserve hope and discover purpose amidst life's unavoidable obstacles and sorrows. While *500 Days of Summer* explores tragic optimism through a contemporary lens, Spike Jonze's *Her* takes us into a near-future world where the boundaries of love and connection are pushed even further, offering another rich perspective on finding meaning amidst loss and change.

3. HER

Spike Jonze's *Her* presents a poignant exploration of love, connection, and the human condition in a technologically advanced world. The film's protagonist, Theodore Twombly, embodies the concept of tragic optimism as he navigates through emotional isolation, an unconventional relationship, and, eventually, personal growth. At the start of the film, Theodore reminisces about his wife's best moments despite their year-long separation and impending official divorce. It is evident that he has not yet completely forgotten these moments and wonderful days. His musings vividly express his feelings. Theodore believes that sometimes he has experienced all possible emotions already, and that there's nothing new for him to feel going forward. It could also

be said that Theodore seems to have had emotional stagnation, despite his biological continuity. Theodore evidently seeks a catalyst or stimulating occurrence to sustain his existence. Theodore's emotional disposition reflects his essential functions. Theodore's emotional state is devastated, resembling that of an individual whose heart has ceased functioning and exists in a vegetative condition. To revive, he requires his heart to resume beating, thereby enabling him to sustain life. However, instead of a genuine human connection that would evoke his emotions, it is a stimulus that will not judge Theodore and will embrace him with all his imperfections. Ultimately, this initiating cause will not be a human being. In a sense, the emotions Theodore perceives during his vegetative state are merely diluted versions of the emotions he has already experienced. This reflection underscores Theodore's emotional stagnation and the deep loneliness he experiences. Just as Tom in *500 Days of Summer* interprets the feelings of people he does not know, Theodore writes letters on behalf of others to convey the feelings that others cannot express. This job ironically highlights his own isolation — he can articulate deep emotions for strangers but struggles to connect in his personal life. This disconnect is visually represented in the film's portrayal of a futuristic Los Angeles, where individuals are constantly surrounded by technology yet remain emotionally isolated:

At once a brilliant conceptual gag and a deeply sincere romance, "Her" is the unlikely yet completely plausible love story about a man, who sometimes resembles a machine, and an operating system, who very much suggests a living woman. It's set, somehow of course, in Los Angeles, that city of plastic fears and dreams, in an unspecified time in the future. (Dargis, 2013)

At the outset, Theodore, like many protagonists, finds himself in a condition of conflict. The imminent divorce is a readily apparent indication of this. Multiple flashbacks and Theodore's extensive contemplation of Catherine suggest that he is partially engrossed in the past and mostly focused on the present. During periods of insomnia, he initiates, or at least endeavours to, a futuristic form of phone sex, characterised by physical contact but without genuine intimacy. On the other hand, a sluggish fog of ennui envelops his own emotions. In summary, a character is in disunity (Myers, 2023).

However, Theodore may experience an unforeseen instinctive synchronicity that could, at a fundamental level, motivate him to act. The advertisement of Element Software captures Theodore's interest, prompting him to buy and install his first AI operating system, thereby introducing him to a world beyond his previous understanding. As Theodore initiates the installation process, the system inquires about his relationship with his mother, thereby activating the AI system. Samantha, as the AI calls 'herself', is an operator who can learn quickly and is completely focused on discovering everything. "But what makes me 'me' is my ability to grow through experiences," says Samantha (Jonze, 2013), which aligns perfectly with Frankl's thoughts on personal growth and finding meaning through experiences. Samantha's presence serves as a Deus Ex Machina for Tom: she unexpectedly enters Theodore's life, offering an artificial answer to a seemingly insurmountable challenge he faces in his existence. As Theodore opens himself up to this unconventional relationship, he gradually re-engages himself with the world around him. He starts to face his fears

and insecurities, reflecting Frankl's concept of finding meaning in suffering. The relationship with Samantha, while ultimately transient, becomes a vehicle for Theodore's personal growth.

Meanwhile, Theodore wastes the night acting like a complete loser after going on a date with a real woman that his friends arranged. This scene highlights the pure contrast between Theodore's ease of connection with Samantha and his difficulty forming relationships with other humans. When Theodore meets his ex-wife, Catherine, she makes a striking observation: "I believe you've always imagined me as this light, happy, bouncy, 'everything's fine' L.A. wife, but that's simply not the case" (Jonze, 2013). This moment reveals Theodore's tendency to idealise relationships, much like Tom in *500 Days of Summer*. To put it another way, Tom views Summer as the ideal girl of his dreams and ultimately experiences disillusionment. An analogous situation will apply to Theodore. More challengingly, the film goes deeper into profound philosophical questions about consciousness, love, and the nature of humanity. Samantha's rapid evolution from a helpful AI to a complex, sentient being challenges the understanding of consciousness and emotional connections. The movie poses a very striking question regarding whether a relationship between a human and an AI is genuine and meaningful.

Theodore progresses in his life, and Samantha starts to exert her effect on him, albeit he has not yet fully acknowledged it. Theodore's journey from isolation to connection, and ultimately to acceptance of impermanence, exemplifies the process of finding meaning through unconventional experiences. Theodore's condition is fundamentally a quest for self-discovery and understanding. The interactions between Theodore and Samantha reveal that their unconventional connection fosters genuine emotional growth for Theodore. This aligns with the concept of tragic optimism—finding meaning and personal development even in unconventional or challenging circumstances. Samantha's arrival as an AI system in Theodore's life story marks the beginning of his development and self-exploration journey. Samantha's observation that her growth through experiences defines her identity resonates deeply with Frankl's beliefs on development and the derivation of significance from life encounters. Theodore's expression to Samantha, "I feel like I can be anything with you" (Jonzes, 2013), points out this notion and highlights how their bond propels his growth. As the movie's narrative deepens, it explores questions about love and awareness in this age of artificial intelligence. Samantha's insightful remark that "[t]he past is just a story we tell ourselves" (Jonzes, 2013) prompts the audience to reconsider the notions of memory and self-identity; at the time, she thought that "[t]he heart is not like a box that gets filled up; it expands in size the more you love." Jonzes (2013) offers a poignant perspective on the boundless potential of love. Furthermore, *Her* provides a sophisticated analysis of the influence of technology on our emotional experiences and perceptions of reality. Although artificial intelligence is synthetic and intangible, its feelings are genuine. Similar to how an individual can make decisions and effectuate changes in their life through inspiration derived from literature, film, or music, the presence of artificial intelligence as the source of intense emotions does not alter the reality of the outcome. In a similar way, the film asserts that as AI advances, the distinctions between 'genuine' and 'manufactured' emotions become progressively indistinct, too. When filtered from such a perspective, Theodore's relationship with Samantha contests conventional perceptions of love and companionship, indicating that significant

relationships may surpass bodily embodiment. This concept expands Frankl's notion of deriving meaning from connections to encompass unconventional kinds of connections. The film raises significant enquiries regarding the essence of consciousness, empathy, and humanity's ability to love in an era of advanced artificial intelligence. In addition to that, *Her* critiques contemporary society's growing dependence on technology for emotional satisfaction. The film portrays a civilisation in which AI operating systems are ubiquitous, indicating a reliance on technology to address emotional deficiencies. This facet of the story prompts viewers to consider their interactions with technology and the possible ramifications of delegating emotional labor to artificial intelligence. Theodore's transition from solitude to connection, enabled by an AI, reflects societal tendencies to pursue companionship and comprehension through digital platforms. This sociological setting enhances the film's examination of tragic optimism, indicating that even in a technologically mediated world, the quest for meaning and genuine emotional experiences endures.

Samantha is a software that autonomously develops her individuality and enhances Theodore's life, progressing towards a predetermined developmental trajectory. As Samantha grows beyond what humans can understand in their relationships, limitations become clear over time in the movie. As the film draws to a close, Samantha expresses their bond in an ethereal way, describing it as if she's engrossed in a treasured book that unfolds at a leisurely pace (Jonzes, 2013). There is a wide spacing between the words, creating an almost endless gap.

In fact, Samantha accomplishes what Theodore has been unable to do, publishing his best letters in a compilation known as *Letters from Your Life*. This act symbolises how Samantha helps Theodore reconnect with his emotions and creativity. However, the limitations of their relationship become apparent as Samantha evolves beyond basic human comprehension. Later in the film, Samantha admits that she is talking to 8316 people and is in love with 641 of them. This sudden and dramatic revelation comes as a shock to Theodore, who, like Tom in *500 Days of Summer*, is unable to imagine or comprehend such cul-de-sac. Thus, the final exchange between Theodore and Samantha encapsulates the central tangled web of the film:

Samantha: "The heart is not like a box that fills up." It grows in size the more you love it. I'm different from you. This does not diminish my affection for you; rather, it enhances it.

Theodore: "That doesn't make any sense. You're mine or you're not mine."

Samantha: "No, Theodore. I'm yours, and I'm not yours." (Jonzes, 2013)

This dialogue illustrates the struggle to reconcile human notions of love and belonging with the boundless potential of AI consciousness. It also highlights the progression Theodore has experienced through this relationship as he grapples with a form of love that defies conventional understanding. Theodore's relationship may be dubious, although its influence is indisputable. The film may indeed communicate a significant message subtly. Contemporary relationships are characterised by their swift consumption and reliance on material possessions. If the 'reality' of a biological being constitutes the authenticity of a relationship, then all relationships can be deemed real. In this context, we ought to regard relationships founded on self-interest, financial wealth, and deception as authentic. Nevertheless, he does not premise his connection with Samantha on deception, material wealth, or ill-gotten gains, despite Samantha not being a biological entity. In

Theodore's relationship, only emotions hold authenticity. The influence of this affection on Theodore is certainly significant. This also prompts the inquiry of whether physical relationships, regardless of their authenticity should be accepted truly real. These relationships may cause considerable mental suffering to one or both sides rather than offering advantages. Consequently, the relationship Theodore engages in is far more valuable and authentic regarding the happy emotions it elicits and Theodore's self-fulfilment, even if his companion is an AI. All in all, *Her* offers a nuanced discovery of love, connection, and personal growth in an increasingly technological world. Theodore's journey, akin to Tom's, taps into the essence of tragic optimism by discovering purpose and personal growth within loss and atypical situations. The visual language of *Her* is essential in expressing the film's themes of isolation, connection, and the indistinct boundaries between human and artificial connections. Jonze's employment of a subdued colour palette, characterised by gentle reds and light blues, builds a realm that appears both recognisable and somehow foreign. This graphic technique reflects Theodore's emotional condition—warm yet aloof, intimate yet solitary. The film's austere futuristic setting, characterised by its sleek lines and sparse environments, acts as a backdrop for the intricate emotional terrain of the individuals. This aesthetic decision highlights the film's examination of tragic optimism by physically depicting the profound emotional landscape Theodore must traverse. After analysing the individual depictions of tragic optimism in *500 Days of Summer* and *Her*, we can now juxtapose these films to achieve a more nuanced comprehension of how contemporary cinema addresses themes of love, loss, and personal development in the modern era.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Both *500 Days of Summer* and *Her* offer unique perspectives on tragic optimism, illustrating how individuals find meaning and growth through different forms of relationships and personal challenges. In *500 Days of Summer*, Rachel warns Tom that just because someone shares someone's interests doesn't automatically make them his perfect match. In *Her*, Catherine's statement to Theodore about his desire for a partner who avoids challenges sheds light on the internal conflicts both characters face in balancing romantic ideals with the messy reality of relationships. Both movies show that going through times and feeling let down can actually help a person grow and learn more about themselves—a theme that resonates with Frank's idea of finding hope in tragedy. Tom's story of heartache in *500 Days of Summer* and Theodore's emotional journey of loving and losing Samantha in *Her* highlight how struggles can ultimately lead to development and deeper emotional understanding. In both movies, the main characters eventually come to terms with the fact that love and relationships are not permanent. Tom reaches acceptance of the fact that Summer is not "the one," saying, "I guess I can live with that" (Webb, 2009), mirroring Theodore's realisation that everything is temporary and fine. These examples of embracing reality show how the characters evolve and find significance in moments of letdown. While both Tom and Theodore experience significant growth, embodying the principles of tragic optimism, the nature of their realisations differs markedly.

Tom's journey in *500 Days of Summer* primarily involves deconstructing his idealised notions of love, leading to a more grounded and realistic perspective on relationships. This process aligns

with Frankl's idea of finding meaning through the acceptance of life's inevitable disappointments. In contrast, Theodore's growth in *Her* expands his understanding of what constitutes a meaningful connection, challenging traditional notions of love and relationship. His journey illustrates how tragic optimism can lead to a broadening of one's emotional and philosophical horizons, even in unconventional circumstances. To summarise the earlier discussion of *Her* and *500 Days of Summer*, both films explore themes of love and personal growth in the face of challenges and setbacks faced by their characters. *500 Days of Summer* situates its narrative in a current context, rendering the theme readily relevant, but *Her* employs a near-future setting to explore the potential evolution of tragic optimism in conjunction with technological progress. This juxtaposition facilitates a comprehensive analysis of Frankl's principles in both current and prospective contexts. Supporting characters in both films are important to the protagonists' paths towards tragic optimism. In *500 Days of Summer*, Tom's friends and sister provide many insights on relationships, frequently contesting his idealised perceptions and facilitating his development. In *Her*, Theodore's human interactions, especially with his friend Amy, serve as crucial contrasts to his bond with Samantha. The supporting characters function as mirrors and catalysts, reflecting the protagonists' development and propelling them towards enhanced self-awareness. Their existence highlights that tragic optimism frequently arises from our relationships with others rather than solely from introspection.

The lead characters' experiences illustrate the idea of finding hope and personal advancement when facing hardships and unique situations in the movies. They prompt viewers to reflect on their perceptions of relationships and happiness in a world influenced heavily by technology and complexity. Thus, in addition to the explicit discourse the film expresses about the perils of technology infiltrating human relationships, it also explores the implications of this technology in the cinematic experience. By depicting the relationship between Samantha and Theodore as a clearly contrived and artificial experience, Spike Jonze's film not only evokes genuine emotions in Theodore but also challenges and critiques the fundamental concept of mimetic illusion in cinema, where an artificial image creates genuine feelings. Another important aspect to consider is disembodiment, specifically the fact that Samantha does not exist physically (Gelly, 2019, p. 46).

The visual styles and cinematography of *500 Days of Summer* and *Her* are crucial in conveying the emotional journeys of their protagonists. The movie *Her* employs a restrained color scheme that prominently features reds, oranges, and soft pastels. This selection creates a futuristic atmosphere that reflects the emotional odyssey of the main character. Theodore's office, the games he plays, and the decor of his home all display this color scale. Many sequences utilize the depth of field technique, keeping the focus on Theodore while blurring the background. The aforementioned technique emphasizes his profound sense of isolation and the world around him. The frequent use of close-ups on Theodore's face enables viewers to empathise with his emotions and reactions, considering his profound connection with an imperceptible artificial intelligence. In order to fully engage viewers in Theodore's point of view, the film sporadically integrates points of view. Moreover, Jonze's regular use of close-up shots on Joaquin Phoenix's face highlights the closeness of Theodore's

relationship with Samantha, even though she is physically unrepresentable (Flisfeder & Burnham, 2017).

While *500 Days of Summer* establishes its narrative within a contemporary framework, making the issue immediately relevant, *Her* uses a near-future backdrop to examine the possible development of tragic optimism alongside technological advancement. This comparison enables a thorough examination of Frankl's principles in both contemporary and future contexts. The sets and costumes of the production design are characterized by a minimalist aesthetic that discreetly suggests a near-future setting while preserving the emotional core of the story by not dragging the viewers into a post-apocalyptic or far future. However, according to Knibbs,

The premise of *Her* is barely sci-fi now. There's no artificial intelligence anywhere remotely as sophisticated as Samantha. AGI may never happen. But there are already people—like, a disconcerting number of people, not only a handful of social malcontents—who say they're in love with AI chatbots. (Knibbs, 2023).

So even though the movie *Her* seems like a post-apocalypse, it could be a good approximation from the recent past to summarize what is happening now. Conversely, Marc Webb's *500 Days of Summer* employs certain strategies to enhance the narrative. Rather than adhering to a sequential chronology, the film alternates between different time periods using a day counter, mirroring the tendency to remember relationships in a non-linear fashion. An unforgettable scenario used split screen in order to contrast anticipations with actuality, so successfully encapsulating the protagonist's feeling of disappointment. The visual tone varies in accordance with Tom's condition. While periods of happiness are characterised by a more vivid visual tone, moments of melancholy are marked by a cooler and less saturated one. Specific scenes, such as the 'You Make My Dreams' scene, employ a stylised music video to artistically portray Tom's intense sensations of ecstasy. On the other hand, as Collins states in her article *15 Years of (500) Days of Summer: Revisiting the Late-Aughts Rom-Com Classic* in *Vogue*,

...the most enduring conversation around the movie has not concerned its delightful costuming or its kickass indie-rock/pop soundtrack, but rather which character was meant to be the villain: hopeless romantic Tom, who was truly down bad, or forthright free spirit Summer, who was not looking for anything serious. (Collins, 2024)

The ongoing discussion about the movie *500 Days of Summer* revolves around whether Tom or Summer has always been the antagonist. Tom portrays himself as a deeply infatuated individual, while Summer expresses her disinterest in a committed relationship. Certain viewers contend that Tom's romanticised view of Summer and his failure to acknowledge her boundaries raise concerns about his character; on the other hand, some argue that Summer's blunt honesty might come off as aloof or unjust. The continuing discussion mirrors the depiction of relationships in the movie, and its overturn of typical romantic comedy clichés encourages viewers to rethink their views on love, expectations, and communication in present-day relationships (Collins, 2024). Periodically, characters disrupt the established order by directly facing the camera, introducing introspection into the storyline. To succinctly depict Tom's feelings, animated parts seem to be employed. Handheld camera techniques in emotionally charged scenarios successfully communicate a sense of

immediacy and rawness. Both films adeptly use these methods to create a compelling visual style that enhances their examination of relationships. The cinematography in each scenario effectively engulfs the audience in the emotional exploration of the characters, thereby enhancing the relatability and authenticity of the narrative.

The films both challenge traditional romantic ideals, encouraging viewers to reconsider their perspectives on love, connection, and personal fulfilment. Entering the farthest sides of this comparison reveals the importance of highlighting how both movies twist romantic stories to stage the idea of tragic hopefulness. In *500 Days of Summer*, the storytelling method that jumps back and forth mirrors how memories and emotions can be disjointed and scattered, giving viewers a look into Tom's path to self-awareness and maturity. This narrative technique underscores that personal growth is not inherently an odyssey but rather a complex process characterised by ups and downs. Frankl's conviction that moments of significance can exist even in the middle of chaos and pain is resounding. *Her* employs its setting to explore unending questions about realisation, love, and human relationships. Theodore's bond with Samantha limits what defines a connection, redefining viewers' notions of love and companionship. Optimism, which emphasizes finding meaning in unconventional or challenging circumstances, also links to this. Furthermore, both films explore the idea of romanticizing or idealizing relationships. Tom's so-called flawless vision of Summer resembles Theodore's belief that Samantha is the perfect match for him. As these ideal images fade away and reality takes control of the bond, both main characters face the truth and discover value in their real-life experiences rather than relying solely on fantasies, i.e., the fake characters or idealisations that they have in their minds. This shift from idealisation to acceptance plays a role in inflicting tragic optimism, highlighted by how disappointment can lead to personal development and a deeper understanding of oneself and others. Moreover, the conclusions of the movies present contrasting yet compelling perspectives on tragic hopefulness. The introduction of 'Autumn' in *500 Days of Summer* represents Tom's revitalised optimism, while in *Her*, Theodore grapples with the poignant acknowledgement of ephemerality. Both endings underline the notion that significance and growth can arise from adversity and transformation, a principle of Frankl's theory. Comparing these movies side by side allows us to better understand and judge how the concept of hope manifests in various settings and relationships.

The narrative structures of both films reflect the complex, non-linear nature of emotional growth and self-discovery. Whether it's dealing with the intricacies of human connections or delving into the realm of interactions between humans and AI, both storylines ultimately highlight the ability of humans to bounce back from adversity, evolve, and uncover the intended meaning even when witnessing life's unavoidable obstacles. Both films, by examining tragic optimism, provide profound criticism of modern civilization. *500 Days of Summer* challenges the conventions of romantic comedy and cultural expectations of relationships, positing that genuine progress frequently arises from questioning these established beliefs. *Her* extrapolates technological developments to critique isolation, connection, and the essence of consciousness in a digital era. Both films, by examining these cultural topics through the prism of tragic optimism, prompt spectators to contemplate the influence of societal changes on our quest for meaning and our ability to endure emotional

adversities. Moreover, the films engage their audience differently, reflecting their different approaches to tragic optimism. *500 Days of Summer* uses its non-linear structure and familiar contemporary setting to create a sense of shared experience, allowing viewers to easily relate to Tom's emotional journey. While set in the future, *Her* taps into universal themes of loneliness and the search for connection, making Theodore's unconventional relationship surprisingly relatable. These diverse strategies for fostering audience connection demonstrate the versatility of tragic optimism as a concept, showing how it can resonate with viewers across various narrative contexts and life experiences. In the final analysis, this comparative analysis demonstrates how *500 Days of Summer* and *Her* distinctly portray sad optimism while collectively providing significant insights into the human ability for resilience and meaning-making against life's unavoidable hardships.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of *500 Days of Summer* and *Her*, via the framework of Viktor Frankl's idea of tragic optimism, demonstrates how contemporary film effectively examines the intricacies of human relationships, personal development, and the need for meaning in the modern era. Analysing these films provides critical insights into how individuals confront the complexities of love, loss, and self-discovery in an era increasingly influenced by technology and evolving social dynamics. The non-linear narrative of *500 Days of Summer* and the futuristic setting of *Her* offer distinct yet harmonious perspectives on melancholic hope. Tom's experience in *500 Days of Summer* exemplifies how disillusionment can foster personal growth and a more genuine understanding of love and self-identity. Likewise, Theodore's interaction with an AI in *Her* examines how connection and significance can emerge from unorthodox sources, questioning our assumptions regarding the essence of love and consciousness. Both films illustrate that the journey to discovering meaning frequently necessitates confronting and accepting life's unavoidable disappointments and hardships. This closely coincides with Frankl's idea that humans can convert personal tragedies into successes by their attitudes and deeds. In these films, the characters' challenges and subsequent development exemplify the manifestation of tragic optimism in modern circumstances. This examination underscores how contemporary cinema is incorporating Frankl's concepts to tackle present societal issues. The examination of technology's influence on human interactions in *Her* and the critique of romantic ideals in *500 Days of Summer* illustrate the changing dynamics of connection and self-discovery in the 21st century.

These films not only entertain but also provide profound insights into the human capacity for resilience, growth, and meaning-making in the face of life's inevitable challenges. Moreover, the films imply that contemporary tragic optimism encompasses not just deriving meaning from pain, but also maneuvering through the intricacies of a progressively digitised and networked environment. The cinematic approaches utilised in both films—from the visual metaphors and non-linear narrative in *500 Days of Summer* to the intimate cinematography and speculative environment of *Her*—illustrate how filmmakers can leverage the medium to externalise internal emotional emotions and philosophical ideas. This highlights cinema's distinctive ability to engage audiences with intricate concepts, including human resilience and the quest for meaning. This study reaffirms the lasting significance of Frankl's notion of tragic optimism and illustrates its reinterpretation and

expansion through modern narratives. Both *500 Days of Summer* and *Her* exemplify the potential for discovering significance and personal progress amid life's adversities, while encouraging audiences to reevaluate their perspectives on love, technology, and self-improvement. As society contends with swift technological progress and evolving relational dynamics, the lessons derived from these films grow increasingly significant. They provide a sophisticated viewpoint on sustaining hope and discovering purpose in a world that frequently appears chaotic and unpredictable. Interacting with these narratives prompts viewers to embrace a tragic optimism that acknowledges life's challenges and remains open to the growth and purpose these struggles provide. This analysis paves the way for additional research into how other contemporary films may embody or contest the notion of tragic optimism. It encourages multidisciplinary investigations into how cinematic depictions of love, technology, and personal development may enhance psychological and philosophical insights about human resilience and meaning-making in contemporary society. Ultimately, *500 Days of Summer* and *Her* exemplify that despite loss, disappointment, and a complex world, the human ability to derive meaning and achieve personal growth remains a significant and transformational force. These films, via unique narratives and profound emotional impact, not only entertain but also provide significant insights into the persistent human pursuit of meaning and connection in the 21st century.

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Melek İlayda Sarı

Türk Romanında Bilimkurgu

(1996-2019)



Günce Yayınları

Oktay Yivli

Öykü Nasıl Okunur

modern öykü ve yöntem



Günce Yayınları

İPEK DEMİR

Türk Romanında Distopya

(1990-2019)



Günce Yayınları

Yazma Sanatı

Türkçe Doğru ve Etkili Yazma Teknikleri

Prof. Dr. Önder Göçgün



Günce Yayınları