

## Film Theory Thesis: Post-Human Relationships in Film

This paper will provide an account of cognitive implications of the transcendence of the human condition in cinema, as a result of posthuman delineations, with regard to the relationship between humans and the cyborg (a portmanteau of “cybernetic” and “organism”) in Spike Jonze’s *Her*. The innovation of cinematic storytelling alongside the advancement of technology can be considered consequential to the ways in which we relate to each other with regard to all forms of communication in contemporary society. By distinctly projecting posthumanist thinking onto film, this paper will question the extent of its contribution to cognitive film theory concerning portrayals of relationships in films, and how it may subvert or strengthen pre-existing notions related to them.

In her monumental and poignant reflection on posthuman accounts apposite to human advancement, Donna Haraway in *A Cyborg Manifesto* contends that the “cyborg” is effectively a metaphorical construction that serves as a conduit for arriving at the potentialities that transcend “boundaries” of politics, communication, gender, and identity (Haraway 7). Posthumanist ideas stem from this ‘transcendence of boundaries’, wherein the confluence of humans and technology has, and will continue to, modify notions of politics, identity, biology, and affect. Cinema has long explored these conceptions of human-computer synergies; it is perhaps the best medium for inquisitive examinations of these relationships.

Many films have explored conceptions of the cyborg, as Haraway defines them – “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 5). What is of primary consideration here is the cyborg as “a creature of social reality as well as...fiction”; to what extent is the cyborg an extension and facsimile of human social relations and perceptions? Many films have explored these concepts,

canvassing the nature of *humanity* and the distinction that draws the line between the two planes of existence. In her essay for *Cinema Journal*, Donna Kornhaber provides an in-depth description of the conversion of posthuman entities into *subjects*. She provides a close examination of Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), a film that closely follows a romantic relationship between a man and an AI software in a Los Angeles of the near future. Kornhaber contends for an examination of the convergence of the transcendence of the human to posthuman, and cinema to postcinema (Kornhaber 8). More importantly, *Her* poses questions of a distinction between what can be considered 'human', and the immateriality of information. Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) and the AI Samantha's (Scarlett Johansson) relationship is born out of this intangibility of existence. She is a computer software that exists simply as a functional utility. Kornhaber points out that Samantha "must use technology to access *us*" (Kornhaber 7). Is it the case that since Samantha does not really exist in a tactile, sensory way, that her attempted 'subjecthood' is essentially impossible? The film abridges ideas of the very discourse that surrounds the definition of the 'real' and the illusion of connection in modern society. The conclusion of the film strengthens ideas that what humans really yearn for is connection, and eventually arrives at a poignant retort – what is really required of us is to come to terms with the digital advancement of modern times and embrace a form of *deception* of the self so as to really see ourselves as subjects. These supposed failures in attribution of 'human' characteristics result in a very *posthuman* state of conflict that makes us reflect on the features of our existence. Technology, or the "cyborg", must not be held up to the standard of what being "human" means, yet it cannot also be completely disregarded as a canvas for the expression of connection.

Similarly, yet rather more explicitly, *Blade Runner* (1982) narrates a more dystopian view of the future wherein actual cyborgs have manifested in society as a result of corporate greed

disguised as altruism. The question of what it means to be human is asked here more directly. The confluence of the two planes of existence occurs in a more organic, materialized way in this film. Through the pages of her book, *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles pursues a historical and epistemological probe into the shifts that have occurred in society as a result of the concurrent advancements of technology and biology – and whether this transition or, rather, the *disembodiment* of information has moved humankind away from the biological exemplar. The ‘replicants’ in *Blade Runner* possess a consciousness, yet they are not completely human; the fictional Voight-Kampff test assures as much. Yet, the Rachel character poses a special case. An experiment – a replicant with “human” memories – Rachel (Sean Young) exemplifies Hayles’ key perspective on the topic. Citing Haraway, she states that “the cyborg violates the human/machine distinction; replacing cognition with neural feedback, it challenges the human-animal difference” (Hayles 84). Then, Deckard’s empathy and concern for her does not seem so misplaced. The connection between them is not illustrative of a love between two different beings – it is one that represents a boundless, performative association. There may be a ‘criteria’ for interpersonal connection, especially when considering that the ‘*personal*’ component of the phrase is so specific. Posthuman entities challenge this specificity of inter-human connection by renegotiating identity and personhood.

Films visualize and narrativize the problems and potentialities that arise out of such conflicts of association. Michael Hauskeller argues that the interdisciplinary approach that films accord to general cultural conversations is the best way to represent the posthuman paradigm shift. Film, “by creating concrete, visual representations” of the possible “transformations of the human”, allows for a comprehensive canvas (Hauskeller et al. 4). He posits,

Screened representations translate concepts into moving images, living pictures, and thus make them immediate in a way that an abstract and thus dead (or more precisely not-yet-living) concept could never be. Here, more than anywhere else, especially in films that belong to the science fiction genre, we find literally the image of the human transformed into images of the posthumans (Hauskeller et al. 4).

His assertion here reinforces the argument that *visual* appraisals of posthuman representations on the big screen allow for introspective and reflexive cognitive processes within spectators. In giving such concrete physical cues to abstract ideas previously only postulated in literature, depictions of the *posthuman* in films prompts collective cultural analyses on the negative and positive impacts of technology and the ever-increasing human-computer integrations that materialize in modern society. According to David Bordwell in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, “narratives are composed in order to reward, modify, frustrate, or defeat the search for coherence” (Bordwell 38). Hence, it can be argued that it is the way spectators internalize posthuman narratives and identify with the stories that their characterization of them as *human* or *non-human* takes place; the resistance or welcoming of such changes *viz.* cybernetic relations are reflected in the way that audiences react to and interpret these notions. This, again, can only be achieved through the visual manifestations that films provide.

In *Her*, the viewer can extract particular degrees of meaning from Spike Jonze’s delineation. The “not-yet-living” position that Samantha occupies, as Hauskeller proposes, facilitates the viewer’s tendency to look inward and make themselves the subject within the hypothetical position the film creates. The leading technology in the modern era assures a form of affixed connection that seems difficult to replicate; yet, it has been. The interactive dynamic present between Theodore and Samantha is not one that seems foreign nor is it anything out of

the ordinary. It is easily identifiable for audience members as a budding romantic relationship, yet Samantha's disembodied nature, or “cyborg” state, brings about a cognitive block in identification.

The following section elaborates on this cognitive block by examining the disembodied nature of Samantha in *Her* and explores confluence of biology and technology as Hayles offers, addressing how representations of technological consciousness in film affects spectators on an identificatory level. Throughout the film, we see Samantha continually in a search for a *body*, or some sort of material signifiers of her consciousness, so as to establish a concrete relationship between her and Theodore. The struggle for both of them in the relationship is one of physical connection. As Kornhaber points out, Samantha is “not [even] hardware, but system software”; she is “all prosthesis and no body” (Kornhaber 7). As pointed out earlier, Samantha can only gain access to Theodore through material objects: earbuds, phone camera, computer screen, speakers. This does not stop them, though, from achieving simulated physical contact with one another since Samantha ‘hires’ a surrogate body for Theodore to have sex with. This ends in a failure of connection between the two since Theodore, constituted of flesh and blood, experiences a sensory and perceptual failure here – the surrogate is *not* Samantha, no matter how hard she tries to make it seem so. The biological impediment here poses a challenge for their physical relationship, but does not explicitly harm their emotional one. Hayles argues that “there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism,” (Hayles 3). She argues for a discourse that considers the materiality and consciousness of being a byproduct of the accommodation of information. In this case, the capacity that Samantha develops for feeling love and empathy for Theodore, and for seeing the world through *his* eyes, is treated as more

important than them actually having any physical connection. As their separate perceptions of the world slowly converge throughout the film, Samantha's cyborg status is further disregarded.

Discussing the processes of identification in film with regard to cognition and sympathy for film characters, Murray Smith, in *Altered States*, argues against the need for a physical mimesis of character emotions. Instead, he argues that the spectator "understand[s] the protagonist and his or her context, make a more-or-less sympathetic or antipathetic judgement of the character and respond emotionally" (Smith 42-43). *Her* tests our ability to sympathize with a non-human entity by attributing to AI traits that we would expect from human characters. The extent to which we can register an authentic connection between two characters widens contrary to the constriction of the biological equilibrium. The "boundary" between human and non-human that Haraway illuminates has essentially been fractured, yet welcomed is an amalgamation of the human and non-human. She argues that "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualism [of human and machine] in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway 67). This suggests to the audience a new way of looking at themselves, to surpass their previously held notions about personhood and to welcome a defiance of the *ordinary*. Through these mechanisms, Samantha transforms into a subject, while lacking every customary characteristic of personhood; the criteria of material personhood no longer applies to her. She is effectively transformed and realized as a being that does not conform to the boundaries of human and non-human. In this way, the audience then also reconsiders their primacy within the multitudes of existence.

The film's particular interpretation of Theodore's loneliness and reconciliation of his identity is channeled through his interactions with Samantha. The desire he feels to connect with someone after a divorce manifests in his conscious choice to make his AI companion a female.

Kornhaber explores this choice, arguing that Theodore looks for a technological solution for a material problem. She states, “the interpenetration of sexual gratification and maternal envelopment is for him the starting point of technological desire, for the absence it is trying to fill is always the original absence” (Kornhaber 12-13). This is essentially a reflection on the search for identity through technology as a last resort. Samantha occupies for Theodore a search for identity in that he lives his life, with her, as if she were material. Everyone around him is introduced to Samantha as a material entity and then are later subverted in their expectations when clarified that she is, in fact, a computer software. This harkens back to a conversation regarding Samantha’s personhood. The audience, knowing she is not one, still allows for a favorable judgement of her ascription as human. This occurs chiefly due to the fact that Theodore’s loneliness and despair is tangible in the sense that it is very *human*, so he is bestowed the benefit of the doubt from the spectator; overcoming loneliness is mostly a personal goal that most people can associate with. Therefore, Theodore’s accomplishment here allows the audience to discard the criteria for what they consider human. Samantha’s position as a human-made ‘cyborg’, a form of “techno-prostheses”, has resulted in “an intimacy most couples could only dream of” (Kornhaber 16). This creates an initial pathway for spectators to contemplate her posthuman status in a more positive light.

Nevertheless, while Samantha is able to perform cognitive processes, whether they may be imitations or in fact genuine is in question. The viewers experience some form of cognitive dissonance here when confronted with her capacity to experience pain, love, empathy, concern, and heartbreak. This, again, is a challenge to preconceived notions spectators have inculcated when they come to watch the movie. Bordwell argues that spectators take up the sole responsibility of “carving out an intelligible story” (Bordwell 39). His position regarding

hypothesis formation derived from Meir Steinberg is invoked here since Samantha's human facsimile, that challenges antecedent conceptions of anthropocentrism, trigger almost all four levels of hypotheses. First, *curiosity* is piqued when we learn of Samantha as she is purchased and booted up by Theodore. Second, *probability* is assessed when we are confronted with the possibility of Theodore finding genuine companionship with a computer software. Third, the emotional and physical choices that Theodore makes within this relationship prompt thoughts of *exclusivity*, leading the audience to contemplate the desperation and/or loneliness Theodore is experiencing – present here is a reflexive projection onto the audience wherein they consider their own choices if placed in Theodore's stead. Lastly, the audience is subjected to situations of acute *suspense* throughout the film, attempting to predict or prepare for eventual conclusions to the various conflicts of their relationship. The chief concern here is the audience's reconciliation with the fact that they are attributing very *human* traits and behaviours to a computer software; this reconciliation causes the aforementioned cognitive dissonance. However, since it is shown that Samantha experiences emotions, by discarding the very tendency to compare it to 'real' ones it is virtually impossible for the audience to disregard her capacity to relate to, and love, Theodore. Their hypothesis formation is not exactly challenged more than it is substantiated in a new way.

Considering all these aspects of Samantha's manifestation in *Her*, we add to Hayles' argument on the reshaping of the human condition through the conjunction of natural and synthetic forms of existence, and its potential dangers and advantages. Proliferation of such acute and specific aspects of the human-computer synergy primarily serves to highlight the "malleability of the human condition" which Hauskeller argues emerges in various forms. He asserts that these films highlight the "insistence on the ubiquity of other, non-human forms of

agency, which reframes the human as just one among many players in the game that is our life” (Hauskeller 7). In *Her*, Samantha is first perceived as an entity devoid of actual human emotion that is purely tailored for human utility and pleasure – reinforcing the spectators’ anthropocentrism. Then, the experiences she undergoes facilitated by Theodore – a human – and her own inferences about the world throughout the course of the film results in a two-fold renegotiation of her position within it. Firstly, she realizes that she does not need to be a human, and finds a new way to exist within the orbit of the ‘cyborg’. Secondly, the spectator uses all of their antecedent knowledge of the human condition, what we lack and what we possess in abundance, the ability to feel love, to touch each other, to go through shared experiences in material ways, and then reconfigures their positioning of the human race in the grand scheme of things. Humanity has undoubtedly changed with the speedy convergence of technology and biology, and *Her* encapsulates perfectly how it would be, and perhaps is already, affecting us on the individual level. The limitations of the somewhat *parasocial* relationship between Theodore and Samantha do not strengthen the argument for a harsh boundary between the synthetic and the natural, instead they add to the larger discourse that contends for a new way of looking at the world and how we as a species are positioned within it.

Ultimately, the unorthodox application of cognitive processes onto a *posthuman* being traditionally ascribed to humans allows the audience to insert themselves into a “system of cognitive functioning that expands the potential of the human self past any previously acceptable subject boundaries” (Kornhaber 16). Posthuman entities such as Samantha provide a vessel for spectators, and a result of the interdisciplinary nature of film, humanity, to conceive of a “shared consciousness and shared life” with the posthuman. The sheer volume of posthuman films that have been produced and occupied a strong position within cultural conversations throughout the

art forms history has resulted in a very palpable set of attitudes when it comes to the transcendence of the human to the posthuman; these films continue to contribute to the discourse in valuable ways. The representation of love and companionship in *Her* is a particularly notable one since it explores both sides of the conundrum of the posthuman. Samantha's non-personhood and struggle for identity reflects a wider philosophical discussion regarding what it means to be human; our consciousness and ideas of primacy within the world are challenged and questioned. The spectator here is no longer passive – they actively struggle with various cognitive dissonances and ideological arrangements throughout the film in order to confront newly emerged ones. The image of the posthuman entity as not merely an extension of the human, but a novel one that is coexistent with our further material, biological, and ideological development, comes through in *Her* exceptionally.

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