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“Never Alone: The Replacement of Human Interactions with Technology seen in the film *Her*”

Relationships can be hard. They can be filled with heartbreak, dread, mistrust, and deception. It’s things like these that drive a lot of people to stay away from relationships in modern society. Whether it’s the fear of this happening to someone for the first time or the fear of going through that sort of situation again, people are becoming more hesitant to let themselves be vulnerable and share feelings with other human beings. This is where people turn to different technologies. The modern era provides many ways that we can still be social to a certain extent without putting too much of themselves out in front of everyone to be judged and potentially hurt. Society retreats to their technological devices to escape from the stress of the real world. These devices are made to make their lives easier. On their devices, they can have a tailored experience based on their interests and behaviors. They can get content that is only relevant to that specific user and not worry about other’s feelings or views. In a way, society has created a safe, personal bubble that one can fall back to with minimal risks. But could technology be used to completely replace human interaction? Could it be used to get the same emotional connection that is usually only shared between human people but with an extra sense of security? The plot of Spike Jonze’s 2013 film, *Her*, explores this possibility. The protagonist, Theodore Twombly played by Joaquin Phoenix, has a hard time being social since he and his wife split up. He spends all his time at work and uses technology to distract himself from the people trying to make him feel better. He purchases a new intriguing AI program advertising the OS as a “consciousness”. Theodore answers the OS’s setup questions to make an AI tailored to his personality. This AI names itself Samantha, voiced by Scarlet Johansson, and learns based off of Theodore’s personality, reactions, and answers. The two start to share a stronger bond that turns into a love story. *Her*’s plot shows that human relationships can be replaced by a machine as a result of technological addiction, control, and sounds.

Technological addiction is becoming more widespread as new technologies come out. How many times a day do you check your phone or computer? Are you worried that you might miss something important? Are you using your devices to distract you from your responsibilities? These can cause you to rely more and more on your devices and be more enveloped by them. In *Her*, people are so reliant on their devices that everyone has their own earpiece, similar to today’s invention of Apple Air Pods, that helps them with their day to day tasks such as reading and sending emails and playing music. Near the beginning of the movie, Theodore is very observant of others while they are using their devices and makes guesses at what their lives are like. He is very perceptive. But as the film goes on, he starts to use his own devices like Samantha and becomes a part of the crowd that he used to observe. Even Theodore’s job is an example on how reliant people are on technology to help them. Theodore works at “beautifulhandwrittenletters.com”, where he makes “handwritten” letters for people, pretending to be someone else (Alpert). In Theodore’s society, people are so preoccupied with other things that they have to hire a company to make a fake letter posing as them to send to a significant other. Theodore has written letters for his clients for so long that he actually knows a lot of little details about them, making the letters all the more believable. Through these letters, “commodified emotions have become almost impossible to disentangle from the real thing” (Bell 20-25). Technology is such a distraction; it makes it hard to identify what emotions are true and which are fake. During the film, Theodore also uses a video game that he plays in his apartment as a way to distract himself from the hardships of his life and drowns out the world by listening to “melancholy” music. The video game that he plays features a little alien character that Theodore asks for help. He asks the alien boy “Do you know how to get out of here? I need to find my ship to get off this planet”. This can be seen as a form of Theodore’s addiction to the “safety” of the technology. He plays this game to escape real life, but it is ironic that he is also trying to escape the game in a way as that is the goal of the game. But the biggest distraction, was the introduction of Samantha. The entire reason that Theodore purchased the OS One was to give him a distraction from the world and to give him answers to the questions the OS advertised such as “Who are you? What can you be? Where are you going?”. Throughout the movie, we see him start to break out of his shell of depression as Samantha brings a new light to his life. But this new “light” is still a device, created to help him and he is addicted to the OS because it brings him happiness and helps him overcome some of his problems. With Samantha, why would he ever need a relationship with another human being when he has technology?

The safety that technology provides for people can give people a sense of power and control even if they don’t know it. One of the reasons that Theodore falls in love with Samantha so easily is because she was tailored to him. He was in control when he was setting her up even if he didn’t know it. His answers to the setup questions to set up Samantha’s gender and personality. All these lead to how she is presented to Theodore as a “playful, friendly, flirtatious, hesitant, and naïve” companion (Carew 122-128). If he had chosen a male voice, the personality could have been completely different. If Theodore had said that he was anti-social instead of social and that he had no issues with his mother, the OS would have behaved in a completely different way. If for some reason he got mad at Samantha, he could have uninstalled her from his computer and returned the product. Even Theodore’s ex-wife, Catherine, thinks that he is in control because he chose an AI over a human. He chose to avoid “someone who will be picky, prickly, contrary, combative; someone who won’t just obey his commands”. She even comments: “You always wanted to have a wife without the challenges of dealing with anything real”. Theodore was in control when Samantha was created, but as the movie progresses, Samantha starts to take control of herself. She starts talking to different AIs and even admits that she is in love with 600+ other people. Having this AI personally crafted for him would result in less conflict and an easier, safer relationship until this point. He gave up real human interaction for control of his relationship.

Sound is a very important aspect of this film. Specifically, the voice of Samantha. Her voice conveys a certain authenticity that makes her sound more like a natural human being as opposed to some computer program. She sounds “sweet, gentle, and curious” which makes you listen to her as if she is a real person (Bordun 57-64). You can hear the different emotions that she is feeling though her voice. Samantha’s voice at times gives off “sadness, melancholy, desire, and joy”. To top it off, she even takes breaths, pauses, and has varying ranges and pitches in her voice. Her voice is conveyed to Theodore through an ear peace, but the audience always hears her as if she is another character on screen to increase her realism. It is like she is physically in the room, talking with Theodore as if she had a body. The choice of having Scarlet Johansson as the voice also makes the audience imagine Samantha looking like her. Being able to imagine the AI as being attractive along with the sound of her voice can make people feel more attached to something even if they know that it is not actually her. Because of these aspects, it is easy to understand how Theodore fell in love even though Samantha is an AI. If the AI didn’t have Johansson’s voice and instead had a bland or even unattractive sounding voice, Theodore would have felt differently about her. If the AI didn’t sound human or didn’t mimic human emotion, then nobody would feel attached to it. Theodore only fell in love because he believed that Samantha had real emotions that sounded authentic.

It seems like modern society is moving closer and closer to becoming the plot of *Her*. With everyone always on a device and technology always evolving to be even more present in people’s lives, the thought of people falling in love with their machines does not sound too farfetched. Obviously, there is not a super AI as complex and believable as OS One yet, but eventually there will be. People are already addicted to their phones, computers, and apps and society will only continue to grow into an individualized state. With the ease of having an experience tailored to a certain person, it becomes easier to ignore the real world and get lost in your own world. A world in which the individual controls. As AIs become more advanced, it is scary to think that the Amazon Echo’s Alexa or Apple’s Siri could become more and more lifelike. That they could potentially mimic a real human being and convey real emotions through their voices to make them seem real. The plot of *Her* depicts a world where this is possible. A world where people can truly be replaced by machines in every aspect humanly possible, even relationships.

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