

Technology as portrayed in popular culture: An analysis of the film *Her*

Sophia Qaderi

Department of Sociology, MacEwan University

Abstract

The internet has completely reconfigured social relationships. As information and communication technology continues to change and evolve in ways that were previously unimaginable, films like Spike Jonze's *Her* seem not so far from future technological developments. The purpose of this paper is to depict how Jonze's work does a substantive job in portraying the disconnection from the world individual undergoes when they overly depend on technology for affection and meaning. One may think the idea of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) becoming so personable as unachievable, however, most of our smart technology is already customized to suit our personal needs and gives us quick information such as Siri or Alexa. This paper discusses some relevant aspects of this problem.

We are living in a world where information spreads almost immediately and privacy is a thing of the past. We can connect with anyone and distribute content worldwide. The film *H.E.R.* (Jonze, 2013) is an interesting piece of artistic work to reflect on the changes that technology can bring to social relationships. Internet has fanned the flames of influencing individual behavior for both good and bad as it has played a part in manipulation, inclusion, blame and lack of censorship that can lead to uncertain societal effects.

Unsurprisingly, it can be challenging to spot a single individual not engulfed within their smart technology in the world of the Internet. When seen through our 21st-century lens, technology is in the palm of young children and all the way up to seniors. As technology continues to change and evolve at an incredible speed and in ways that were previously unimaginable, films like *Her* seem not so far from future predictions. Whether we are aware of it or not, the ways we live in, interact with and make sense of the world alter with our shifting technology. The film *Her* does a substantive job in portraying the disconnection from the world an

individual suffers when technology is the focus of affective attention and search for meaning.

The main character, Theodore, is a lonely, heartbroken writer, who falls in love with his Operating System (Samantha) who has a programmed AI personality (Jonze, 2013). Theodore and Samantha bond over human conversations about Theodore's interests such as love, music, experiences, and even feelings. Being an intelligent system, she is attentive and constantly adapting to become more personalized to Theodore's interests. She has a mind of her own and evolves as she learns about Theodore and humans. One may think the idea of an AI becoming so personable to unachievable, however, most of our smart technology is already customized to suit our personal needs and gives us quick information such as Siri or Alexa.

Samantha is constantly with Theodore and surveyed his life through the camera he carried around and at times, took information from Theodore's files without him telling her to. She watched him when he slept, when he was going and coming from work, and he took her places like a carnival, hiking and more. These scenes

are best explained by Brett Frischmann's idea of Techno-Social Engineering, as he uses a cost-benefit analysis to go about how the collection of data comes at an inevitable risk (Frischmann, 2016). Using a non-fiction story of a watch used as a surveillance device, similar to that of Theodore's OS system, Frischmann brilliantly depicts the idea of how technology carries not only the burden of 24-7 data collection, and lack of informed consent, but also the deeper issue of unexamined techno-social engineering of how the program shapes the preferences of an individual having a 24-7 wearable surveillance device that collects and reports data to others. In Theodore's case, Samantha is collecting Theodore's information through her camera and his files for her own intentions that are not fully known throughout the film. Theodore's preferences and behavior shifts in the scenes where he is more outgoing with Samantha, yet awkward and shy around his friends, wife, and date. His shift in preference and behavior is reinforced when his friend, Amy, mentions how others are dating their OS systems. Amy divorces her husband over something she agrees is petty, and how her OS system understands her better. As Frischmann mentions, "...even though autonomy and choice might be preserved, the more subtle influence on beliefs and preferences works at a different level and will shape a host of future choices. It increases tolerance of surveillance, manipulation, and nudging of techno-social engineering" (Frischmann, 2016). We can witness this when Samantha pushes Theodore to engage in activities he was uncomfortable with—an act of manipulation (Frischmann, 2016). Although the technology explained by Frischmann's intended purpose was to combat obesity by encouraging more exercise, the sacrifices that come with supervision and unconscious effects it creates are what society seems to overlook (Frischmann, 2016).

Andrew Feenberg distinguishes between three elements the Greeks used to explain the existence and essence of an object, which includes: *Physis* (nature: what emerges out of itself), *Poiesis* (human activity of making; the thing exists first as an idea (essences) and later comes to being through human making) and *Techné* (knowledge associated with *Poiesis*) (Feenberg, 2003). Within the film, this idea comes to fruition with the creation of the OS system, Samantha. The idea of her was thought (essence) and then the system was built because of that idea. However, the Greeks saw nature

in teleological terms and the essence of natural things carry a purpose the same as the essence of artifacts (Feenberg, 2003). This marks a difference in the West during modernity as the Greeks saw that *physis* and *poiesis* developed in the same way as nature developed in its own accord, humans discovered or revealed essences with our own activity. Samantha's *Poiesis* was to be a personalized system to be at Theodore's service, but her invented objective grew more than what her programming set her to be, and she even developed a relationship with Theodore. An argument against the Greek's idea of *techné* is that society imposes a being on elements, and we do not let reality develop on its own accord (Feenberg, 2003). We define and control the environment we are living in; we do not reveal essences through our activity, rather we find out how things work. Our world is understood mechanistically, not teleologically and instrumental thought is pervasive as we perceive reality merely as means to ends (Feenberg, 2003). For example, Theodore's use of Samantha was not only to help with emails and updates in life as she was initially programmed to do so, like Siri in present-day technology, but he began to use her to fill a void in his life. Samantha listened to Theodore and filled the missing social element humans need in life that was gone when his wife, Catherine, left him. Samantha was a dark means to an end for Theodore and constricted him of real-life situations he had to deal with as Catherine pointed out to him, he cannot deal with anything and real emotions.

Her has left us to speculate as to whether the film's reality is one that many live today. Is technology a remedy for loneliness? A solution for our desire to have attention and be loved? Within this film, it suggests that we underestimate our adoration for technology and are blind to which technology has affected relationships with others, ourselves, and the world. Theodore is a normal man, therefore making it easier for the audience to relate to him, and we witness Theodore more confident and happier when he is behind a screen than in person with his counterparts. Not only is he the only one to "fall in love" with his personalized system, but it also seems many people around him are infatuated with their OS systems too. Ironically, in our quest for constant social connection, we spend more time withdrawing attention online than we do connecting with people in real life, leading to a lack of skills and confidence, especially among young people. We

observe this when Theodore goes on a date and ends up lacking the skills and confidence to properly communicate, resulting in her thinking he is a creep. This idea is well portrayed in Roger Scruton's piece "Hiding Behind the Screen", when he describes how technology has replaced real human interactions, which is shown in *Her*, and in our daily lives now. People walk around so absorbed in their phones or busy talking on their AirPods that they neglect human interaction around them as shown when Theodore is on a subway where everyone is absorbed in their phones. Scruton mentions, social networking platforms act as a type of shield that protects us from real relationships and "the consumer becomes a slave to commodities through seeing the market in goods rather than free interactions of people" (Scruton, 2010). This is similar to how Theodore became a slave to Samantha, and he avoids the thought that he has feelings for an unliving being and is left lost and scared when Samantha goes offline. In Scruton's eyes, society cannot have genuine relations over the screen, which is clearly portrayed when Samantha hopes to create a more genuine experience for Theodore by finding a surrogate to pose as Samantha—a false narrative. As technology is introduced, social interactions and human behaviour have changed. There are benefits to social networking and technology, but the detrimental impacts are concerning (Scruton, 2010). We are lacking the opportunity to teach younger generations to cultivate skill sets that won't leave them unaccountable, alienated, or without true self-consciousness (Scruton, 2010).

A defining moment with *Her* that showed Theodore's reliance on Samantha was when she departed offline without informing Theodore, leading him into a frenzied panic. His whole world became distorted and disrupted negatively when she was gone for once without his will. This scene makes a great connection to Michel Callon's Actor-Network Theory where Callon explains how the theory contains not merely people, but objects and organizations (Callon, 1987). It is the idea where everything in the social and natural worlds exists in changing networks of relationships, and nothing can exist outside those relationships (Callon, 1987). The OS system thus includes elements, builders, consumers, government and other actors to all come together and keep the technology or object in order (Callon, 1987). These elements and their being

serve as a function to the network(s). But if problems arise from keeping these required objects or beings in place, then this could disrupt the system and lead it to failure, which was the blatant case for Theodore's breakdown. These identities are established in juxtaposition and through heterogeneous associations that it needed to serve within the system (Callon, 1987). As Samantha slowly begins to fail Theodore by admitting her flaws and eventually leaving him, this supports Callon's claim that things cannot exist outside of the needed systems within it (Callon, 1987). People cannot go without technology constantly. It is part of human nature now, a piece of flesh, metaphorically. We have extreme difficulties navigating away from technology and when it is taken from us, we feel lost, disrupted and incomplete, just as Actor-Network Theory illustrates (Callon, 1987).

An ironic scene between Theodore and his adored technology, is he decides to take Samantha on a "vacation" in the woods, to get away from the busy technological world. He takes her hiking, and in other scenes, he spends time with her in leisurely activities, especially during his personal down time. She is constantly monitoring his actions and at times, without him even noticing. This idea fits similarly to the Foucauldian notion of the Panopticon, where a guard can see every cell and inmate, but the inmates can't see into the tower; prisoners will never know whether or not they are being watched (Brown, 2016). We can connect this to how society is constantly being monitored and almost "chipped" as almost every being has some sort of smart technology that monitors their actions and personal data (Brown, 2016). We know so much of someone just from the things they like online, which converts to algorithms and unknown surveillance on the person (Brown, 2016). These algorithms lead to the notion of Echo Chambers where technology leads to post truth, making us see what we want to see and hear (Arias-Maldonado, 2018). Samantha brings Theodore into a completely different world where he is dancing and spinning around at the Carnival, he's jumping up and down with her at the subway station, and he's laughing and chatting for hours with her everywhere he goes. When Theodore shows resistance to Samantha, she assures him in many ways and times that the connection they have is normal, making him feel better about the odd relationship. This idea again is reinforced when Amy begins to form a stronger

relationship with her OS and other individuals begin to date their systems as well. It is not until Theodore's ex-wife breaks him away from the illusion by calling him out. Therefore, becomes defensive rather than accepting and Samantha later again reassures him of the situation (Jonze, 2013). This constant echo chamber that technology like Samantha uses to keep Theodore seeing what he wants to see and hear, pulling him away from reality/truth (Arias-Maldonado, 2018). These people go on to create communities where these ideas are amplified (Arias-Maldonado, 2018). The echo chambers are created where all voices resemble ours, and "filter bubbles" are used which are ways that algorithms favour some contents over others (Arias-Maldonado, 2018). Technology reinforces the "confirmation bias", pushing the general citizen to conform with our peers, and increase polarization between moral communities (Arias-Maldonado, 2018). The silo effect is reinforced through a consumer's selective exposure which facilitates the echo chambers and selective exposure, and pushes confirmation bias (Arias-Maldonado, 2018).

In conclusion, if we do not apply a cost-benefit approach to technology in our daily lives, we risk sacrificing conditions, relationships, and experiences that were once integral to human nature. Our world begins to form into an unnatural cosmos and lead to irreversible effects. The film *Her* appears unrealistic; however, the moral of the story acquires many elements that academics are emphasizing society is at risk for. From echo chambers, morphed human behaviour, constant surveillance and more, our world is at risk to the hazards technology burdens. We must consider the dangers of evolving and advancements of automation, as the more it adapts to our world, we will unconsciously adapt to its world as displayed in *Her*.

References

- Arias-Maldonado, M. (2018, August). A genealogy for post-truth democracies: Philosophy, affects technology. ECPR General Conference, Hamburg, Germany, 22-25 August 2018. riuma.uma.es/xmlui/handle/10630/16392
- Brown, G. R. (2016). The blue line on thin ice: Police use of force modifications in the era of camera phones and YouTube. *British Journal of Criminology*, 56(2), 293–312.
- Callon, M. (1987). Society in the making: The study of technology as a tool for sociological analysis. In Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (eds.) *The social construction of technological systems: New directions in the sociology and history of technology* (pp. 83-103). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Feenberg, A. (2009). What is philosophy of technology? In John Dakers (ed.), *Defining Technological Literacy Towards an Epistemological Framework* (159-166). New York: Palgrave.
- Frischmann, B. (2016). Thoughts on techno-social engineering of humans and the freedom to be off (Or free from such engineering). *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, 17(2), 535-561.
- Jonze, S. (2014). *Her* [FILM] Warner Bros.
- Scruton, R. (2010). Hiding behind the screen. *The New Atlantis*, 28, 48–60.