

**Portent Narratives Onscreen: Humanity Losing to Technology as seen in
Spike Jonze's *Her***

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Abstract

Man has always been simultaneously wary of and hospitable to technology and technical innovations. Resistance and later on, the inevitable acceptance of technology can be seen repeated at various stages of human history. Cinemascope has always been prompt in depicting the futuristic possibilities of technology at its best. *Time Machine*, *Spiderman* and *Avatar* are remarkable examples. Indian cinema has also fashioned its own sci-fi versions in *Ra-One*, *Enthiran*, *Ezhaam Arivu* and many others. Even when most science fictions thrill and entertain, some of them actually produce in the minds of the serious spectator a vague premonition about an undesirable future that might not be too far away. This paper attempts to read such a silver screen premonition in Spike Jonze's futuristic science fiction movie, *Her*. The movie deals with a particular aspect of futuristic technology --- Artificial Intelligence – AI, a much awaited innovation that carries the potential to completely eliminate the status of man as the only thinking and self evolving entity.

Key words: *humanity, psychology, artificial intelligence, digital revolution, technological singularity*

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According to the present standards of gauging humanity, human relationships --- friendship, love, kinship, fraternity--- stand a significant paradigm. In spite of the escalating number of cases of broken relationships, we still consider human to human interaction primary. Alienation and loneliness are considered as problems that ought to be tackled. However, the palpable reformation that is being effected upon the world is not to be ignored. The unheeded lament of families and friends bewailing the loss of their kinsmen to the upsurge of technological innovations should be taken gravely.

Her, a futuristic, romantic, science fiction film, written and directed by Spike Jonze and released in the year 2013 set in a not so distant future and features an introverted, depressed, lonely protagonist, Theodore Twombly. The very nature of his profession declares the irony of the plot. He works for a letter writing company called “beautifulhandwrittenletters.com” that writes personal letters including love letters and condolence letters for its clients. The irony is apparent as when even personal letters are commissioned out to letter writing companies, the value of human relationships seems to hang on an unfair balance.

The film commences with the narration of an extremely personal letter from a husband to a wife on their fiftieth wedding anniversary. The letter is pregnant with seemingly genuine emotion and reminiscences from their life that it instantly prepares the audience for a compact family drama. The camera then zooms in onto the face of Twombly who is dictating the letter to a computer which instantly translates it onto a paper in the handwriting of the owner of the letter complete with the characteristic style and even mistakes of the person. The irony reaches a complete circle when Theodore, satisfied with the letter moves on to write/dictate another letter, this time from the wife of the former letter writer husband to him. The impersonal, synthetic and virtual nature of the future depicted in the movie makes it a text to be pondered upon.

The factor that makes *Her* different from all other films of similar dystopian themes is that it lacks the human element that finally dominates in all others --- love. In *Enthiran*, the 2010 Science Fiction Tamil film which also features the banes of artificial intelligence, the theme of love, pride, jealousy and other human feelings. The robot, Chitti too actually falls in love with the main female character of the film owing to its self evolving capacity. In *Avatar* the element of love and trust shared by the characters finally solves the crisis. Even while making predictions about what artificial intelligence and such futuristic technical evolutions might turn this world into, these films do not foresee artificial intelligence taking over human intelligence devaluing the human world and making the virtual world take precedence.

Theodore Twombly writes passionate letters for others when he is unable to forge a strong personal relationship for himself. Thoroughly distraught and depressed at his impending divorce with his lovely and passionate wife for long time, we find him in virtual world games

and online sexual encounters. Theodore's occupation itself shows the virtuality of the futuristic human world. He knows the theory of human world so well that he can write letters on behalf of men, women, parents, grandparents, lovers and war survivors. Still he is unable to see his own life and its humane possibilities.

The portents on the doubtful and bleak nature of tomorrow's world begin with the very title of the novel. The title character, usually the most important person in any narrative, is non-existent here. The "her" exists only in the virtual world and manifests herself in the form of a sweet, ethereal voice. The soothing, calming and comforting quality of the voice is undisputed. Still, it is only a voice, just like that of an eerie ghost or the spiteful sirens, who lure unsuspecting men into their trap.

The fact that Theodore opts for the friendship of an operating system in a world which still holds human beings is not surprising, for we find each and everyone around him lost in their conversations with their own operating systems. Theodore's next door friend, Amy, who is in a similar predicament as him is a real option open to him. While wandering about searching for a companion they can easily find solace in each other. They forget this possibility even when they confide their problems to each other. The dystopian world presented in the movie carries a swarm of "wired" human beings irreparably stuck to their head phones through which artificial brains or virtual human beings speak to and ultimately control them. Philosophers and futurists like Alvin Toffler and Stuart Armstrong have talked about a possible futuristic situation wherein the human brain will be surpassed and controlled by operating systems, artificial intelligences, human biological enhancement and/or brain computer interfaces.

Social critics and thinkers are seriously considering the ever increasing possibility of a digital and technological revolution which might possibly lead to what is termed as a technological singularity. Technological Singularity, a term first used by Stanislaw Ulam, is a hypothetical event in which artificial general intelligence will be capable of “recursive self improvement” and can redesign itself in anyway according to the changing situations. Such autonomously redesigning “smart” machines can in fact lead to a runaway situation wherein they might overtake the human brain and control the world.

The movie *Her*, even though it is a fictional dystopian work, seems to be a viable prototype of the futuristic world of technological revolution and technological singularity. Theodore is in fact the Futuristic Everyman and his enslavement to Samanta’s virtual presence presages the world’s enslavement to an unwelcome aspect of technology. His friendship with Samantha proves to be a blissful experience at first and Theodore gains a lot from this relationship. He overcomes his conflicts and finally comes down to signing the divorce papers with his wife. This, with the help of Samanta, proves to be a less devastating episode for him. He finds happiness and laughter, two things he had lost in the dreariness and loneliness of his life. However, he fails to drop his innate humaneness in his relationship with a virtual human being. For him, the relationship is complete with love, care, possessiveness and fidelity. But, for the AI, Theodore is just a common client, and she/it develops passions and sensations to match his emotional requirements.

Samantha’s casual statement “I shut down for an upgrade.... We wrote an upgrade.....We are all leaving” shocks Theodore and the viewers into realization. Theodore

realizes that Samantha is not and had never been his own private friend, that she is part of a “we”, a simultaneous world in itself. Moreover, she admits that she has been in conversations with hundreds of clients, exactly eight thousand seven hundred and sixteen and has romantic attachments with almost half of them. The viewers realize the emergence of a new virtual world threatening to uproot the human civilization. Samantha’s superior intelligence coupled with her self evolving capacity was never a threat, but, hundreds of Samanthas with equal potentials is undoubtedly a blatant menace to human existence.

It is not difficult for a casual audience to shed the initial shock of watching such a movie and then to relax thinking that it is just a science fiction. However, several quarters insist that the tech guys are working on developing artificial personal assistants who can plan calendars, send emails, make appointments and buy goods for humans. Future i phones may be equipped with functional artificial intelligence. Just as we carry the latest model of mobile phones with us we might in the near future carry our own personal artificial intelligence, machines that know our lives better than we do. The prospect seems to be promising, still one cannot believe that machines equipped with the power of human brain will be completely harmless.

The world has progressively been discussing the erasure of human bondage and relationships from the world, thanks to the upsurge of technological gadgets that entertain man in all ways. When we find everything we need in our personal mobile phones wasting time on real world relations become fruitless. Even when we continuously criticize the new generation fascination with the virtual world, we do not take practical steps to overcome the crisis. It is unpractical and imprudent to derogate technology. The problem rests in the attitude of

humankind which does not recognize the unrelenting value of humanity and human bondage. No machine can replace the love, care and presence of a living, real human being. The movie *Her*, admittedly, is an exaggerated version of what might happen in the future. Human intelligence, hopefully, will never allow synthetic brains to take over its supreme stature. Still, the movie can be taken as a viable premonition of the loveless, lifeless world that might ensue as a result of our slavery to technology. The film ends on a positive note when Theodore with his equally frustrated friend Amy, watches the sun rise hoping for a new life of fulfillment in the real world.

The film showcases a beautiful but really serious discussion on the issue of the apparent ‘technological colonization’ of the human mind. What in fact can be interpreted in the film is a kind of colonization and enslavement – that of the human mind by the technology that is created by man but supersedes him in its perfection. Even when arguments can be put forward in favour of the essential nature of technological innovations for a faster society, the core fact of human individuality and humanity is of prime importance. Just as in the case of climate change denial discourses, statements and attitudes that disregard the loss of humaneness of human beings are just shallow assertions.

A world of cyborgs and human being living in mutual acceptance and harmony is fascinating enough but not at all desirable in terms of humanity and human individuality. The film *Her* is in fact an exaggerated but visionary projection of a dystopian world of lost human values and individuality.

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