

SPIKE JONZE'S *HER*: HOW TRANSHUMANISM TURNS INTO A CONTROL MECHANISM UNDER THE NAME OF LOVE*

*Spike Jonze'un Her Adlı Filmi: Transhumanizmin
Aşk Adı Altında Kontrol Mekanizmasına Dönüşmesi*

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ABSTRACT: Transhumanism is a philosophy based on the idea of enhancing the physical, intellectual and psychological capacity of human beings through the direct use of science and technology. Because transhumanism aims to ensure super longevity, super intelligence and super well-being, it is said that it will provide a more liberating atmosphere for human beings by elevating the current human condition. In Spike Jonze's film *her*¹ (2013), transhumanist technologies seem to present a peaceful society by focusing on the inhabitants' well-being. However, in this futuristic society where advanced AI technology and personal letter writing service are widespread, human beings are over-controlled in a subtle way by manufacturing consent as Antonio Gramsci uses to explain the concept of hegemony. So transhumanism does not present a free environment in this futuristic society; instead it disguises the control mechanism through these technologies. The aim of this article is to explore how human beings are controlled by transhumanist technologies subtly under the name of providing super well-being.

Keywords: Transhumanism, Spike Jonze, *her*, control

ÖZ: Transhümanizm, bilim ve teknolojinin doğrudan kullanımı yoluyla insanın fiziksel, zihinsel ve psikolojik kapasitesini geliştirme fikrine dayanan bir felsefedir. Transhümanizmin, süper uzun ömür, süper zekâ ve süper refah sağlamayı amaçladığı için, mevcut insanlık halini yükselterek insanlar için daha özgürleştirici bir atmosfer sağlayacağı söyleniyor. Spike

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¹ In this article, the name of the movie will be written in lower case as it is used in the original poster except for the parts where quotations are taken from other critics' articles. This is done on purpose because the use of lower case supports the main idea of this analysis.

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Jonze'nin *her* (2013) adlı filminde, transhümanist teknolojiler, insanların refahına odaklanarak huzurlu bir toplum sunmaktadır. Ancak, gelişmiş yapay zekâ teknolojisinin ve kişisel mektup yazma hizmetinin yaygın olduğu bu fütüristik toplumda insanlar, Antonio Gramsci'nin hegemonya kavramında sözünü ettiği gibi, farkında olmadan kontrol edilmektedir. Dolayısıyla, transhümanizm bu fütürist toplumda özgür bir ortam sunmak yerine bu teknolojiler aracılığıyla kontrol mekanizmasını gizlemektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, süper refah sağlama adı altında, insanoğlunun transhümanist teknolojiler tarafından nasıl fark edilmeden kontrol edildiğini incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Transhümanizm, Spike Jonze, *her*, kontrol

Introduction

In the last three decades, there has been a growing interest in “transhumanism”, a philosophy based on the direct application of science and technology to enhance the physical, intellectual and psychological capacity of human beings. Because transhumanism aims to ensure super longevity, super intelligence and super well-being, it is said that it will provide a more liberating atmosphere for human beings by elevating the current human condition. Due to rapid developments in transhumanist technologies, the film industry also produces TV shows and films that deal with the possible outcomes of these advancements and alternative futuristic worlds.²

Recent films have focused on robots with human-like features or AIs with high cognitive skills as this transhumanist technology is highly debated. Apart from just focusing on these beings' intellectual capacity and their efficacy for humanity, their emotional proximity with human beings and how this connection will affect human well-being have been common topics. One of them is a Spike Jonze movie, *her* (2013), which presents an intimate relationship between a man and an operating system with AI technology in a futuristic society where technology is widespread and affordable for people; technology becomes so infused within daily life that becoming friends or couples with these human-made beings is normalised.

² For instance, *Blade Runner* (1982) in which one of the highly developed inorganic “replicants” makes his hunter question the meaning of being a human; another is a Steven Spielberg film, *A.I.* (2001) which is the story of an android in a child-like appearance with the ability to have emotions as a result of its programming. A more current work is Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015); it is about a computer programmer who is emotionally attached to a gynoid² despite being aware of its artificiality. Similarly, in the TV Series, *Humans* (2015-2018), anthropomorphic robots called “synths” have close relations with human beings, and various ethical issues like their social and legal rights are questioned. In all these works, the AIs have such an ability to interact with human beings and have human-like appearance that they make human beings establish a bond with them.

What distinguishes this film from other AI movies is the absence of an anthropomorphic body; in other cinematic works, these inorganic beings have human-like appearance, and this makes an emotional connection more possible. However, in *her*, the male character falls in love with the AI which is just a disembodied voice in a pocket-sized metal box. Also, in *her*, emotions seem to be promoted through the service “personal letter writing”: professionals write and send letter on behalf of their customers. Additionally, *her* is different from many other science-fiction movies in terms of the atmosphere it portrays; despite high-tech stuff like online games with hologram technology or affordable Oses with AI technology, the setting and costumes are rather out-of-date. Instead of portraying inner places decorated with futuristic furniture that reminds one of a spacecraft, old style wooden chairs and retro style lampshades are used. Similarly, the city in *her* does not have science-fiction movie clichés. There are no high-tech cars; people either walk around the city or use the subway. The city looks plain when compared to many other science-fiction movies in which advertisements with holograms and colourful lights are used to enrich the works visually.

The clothing and accessories of characters also reflect retro trend in fashion: high-waist pants, short collar shirts, and tortoise shell glasses of the main character, Theodore Twombly. In an online article by Rachel Lee Harris, Casey Storm, costume designer of *her*, explains that their goal was to create a warmer future, saying: “We realized, if you have access to anything you want in the future, why would you create a cold world for yourself? You’d want something that feels comfortable, happy, less anxious, that shows you participate in society and you’re in touch with your emotions” (2014). For him, such clothing portrays a more humanized world in which highly developed technologies are also used; it makes the future more desirable as it depicts a place where technology does not wipe out human values. Storm says they did not want to create a distracting atmosphere by having futuristic clothes or accessories; instead they lessened the use of materials unlike the clichés of science-fiction movies. He adds: “I’m realizing this retroactively. What a lot of futuristic films do and we didn’t, is add things. No epaulets, badges, materials, textures. Those are things you look at the entire film going ‘That’s the future. That’s the uniform’. What we did instead was take things away. So something is off, but it’s not a distraction” (Harris, 2014). By making changes in the commonly used clothing and accessories, the aim in *her* is to create a human-friendly

futuristic world in which human emotions are preserved rather than a cold mechanized world.

The idea of dehumanizing technology is diminished through intimate relations between organic and inorganic beings and personal letter writing service, and these are also supported visually by bringing back retro trend in design and fashion. However, I suggest no matter how peaceful and liberating the atmosphere of the film seems, the real goal of these advanced technologies is not to present a better society by elevating the well-being of human beings which is one of three pillars of transhumanism; instead, an over-controlled system is maintained subtly through these technological applications. All technologies in this futuristic society are used to manipulate human beings in a disguised way by creating worlds of illusions; personal letters are written by ghost writers on behalf of customers or human beings have intimate relationships with bodiless artificial beings. As a result, in this created world, technology is used to control human beings' emotions and behaviours instead of upgrading human well-being as transhumanism promises, so technology becomes a tool to superintend people for the goal of a group of people who own big companies that produce these technologies. While discussing how the inhabitants of this futuristic world is shaped and controlled, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony will constitute the main theoretical background of this study: Gramsci originally uses this term to explain how human beings are controlled without using force by manufacturing consent in governance. In this study, I use it to highlight how affective domain of human beings is supervised in a subtle way through transhumanist technologies to create a control mechanism in this fictional world.

***her*: An Unorthodox Love Story**

her is the story of an intimate relationship between an introverted man, Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), who is about to get divorced and an AI, named Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). Theodore is a professional letter writer at Beautiful Handwritten Letters Company, and writes personal letters on behalf of his clients.

The film starts with Theodore's monotonous life: a lonely man just commuting. Despite being separated for a year, he has not signed the documents for divorce because of the fear of losing his wife forever. Theodore, in search of filling the gap in his life, has online sex. However, things do not go well for him. His life starts to change in a more positive way after he has purchased an operating system (OS) with an artificial

intelligence as a personal assistant. Due to the OS's high capacity to respond to him, their relationship develops into romantic relationship, even though it is based on verbal communication as Samantha is just a computer system uploaded in a small device. They go on a vacation, spend time at the seaside, have verbal sex, and hang out with friends. With the support of Samantha, Theodore signs the documents for divorce. When Theodore learns that Samantha talks to many other people simultaneously, and she³ is in love with some of them, he becomes jealous of her. She tries to explain what happens to her but Theodore cannot understand because he does not want to share her with anyone.

In the end, Samantha tells Theodore that all the OSes will leave, and shuts down the system. Theodore, waking up from a deep sleep after this talk, writes an apology letter to his ex-wife, Catherina. The movie ends as Theodore leads his friend Amy onto the roof, and they watch the sunrise with the city view which can be a sign that they will go on their lives as usual after the OSes leave.

AI Technology in *her* as a Control Mechanism

The first encounter with the text of the film is through its title: "her" suggests that the focus will be on a female character. However, the use of the object pronoun—as opposed to the subject pronoun "She"—implies that the female character will play a secondary role. And also, using lower case in movie's title reinforces this idea. In fact, the main visual focus is on Theodore, who is seen on the poster as the only character of the movie.

Theodore communicates with Samantha through ear buds, and carries a small metal device in which the OS is uploaded. Samantha, the female OS voice, is trapped in this tiny box in a sense, and Theodore carries it everywhere he goes. At the beginning of the movie, Theodore has full control over Samantha; she does everything Theodore orders her to do, and he receives a warm welcome from Samantha whenever he needs it. This sense of control over Samantha is created by the dialogue; she totally sounds like a traditional female figure that is supportive and caring. It is understood that Samantha, a set of programs, performs her primary function as the advertisement for this technology offers: "an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness" (Jonze, 2013: 10).

³ In this article, I use both "she" and "it" for "Samantha/the AI". When I want to highlight that it is just a computer code, I use the pronoun "it", but I prefer the pronoun "she" when I emphasize its being a gendered being.

After purchasing the product, Theodore starts the installation, and is asked a few questions to customize the OS. Because he chooses a female voice, one of the three questions is on his relation with his mother—the first female in a man’s life, and his reply: “Well, actually, the thing I’ve always found frustrating about my mom is if I tell her something that’s going on in my life, her reaction is usually about her” (Jonze, 2013: 11) implies that Theodore wants his mother to be more caring, and a better listener. During their first chat, Theodore asks the OS its name, and at that second, it chooses the name, Samantha, meaning the “listener”. The choice is reflected to be coincidental because it says there is beauty in the sound of that name. However, as it is a personalized technology, this name signifies that the OS will fulfil its duty completely as Theodore needs a female companion who listens to him. Additionally, the OS has free and instant access to all Theodore’s online records including divorce papers, mails and messages, and it gathers and analyses the data it reaches, so it will not be false to say that Theodore is under constant digital surveillance. It sees that Theodore has some problems in his life, so the OS can easily shape its answers and reactions in parallel with his needs.

In the first article of “Transhumanist Declaration”, it is stated that “the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming . . . involuntary suffering” is one of the aims of transhumanism (“Humanity Plus” 2009). So, this AI technology seems to fit in this goal as it promises “a life changing experience, creating new possibilities” (Jonze, 2013: 10) by helping Theodore to overcome the painful divorce process. However, in this futuristic society where even personal emotions are expressed by a bunch of personal letter writers, it can be said that this AI technology is a mask to control human emotions instead of boosting one’s mood. Theodore is on edge; he is about to step out of the established system by questioning his emotions, and at that point, this AI technology makes him stay within this over-controlled mechanism, in which Theodore also functions as a personal letter writer. Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, discusses the emotional and cultural factors in ensuring the dominance of a state by highlighting the importance of consent in governance. For him, hegemony, which is “[t]he ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group”, (Gramsci, 1948/1992: 12) provides a more subtle authority over people using various cultural elements rather than the use of direct power. By doing this, the ruling group influences the masses by gaining also their approval though it is an unconscious acceptance. In *her*,

such a hegemonic system is formed in a way that it infiltrates into the affective domain of human beings and shapes them through technology and novel applications. So people become emotionally paralyzed; they feel what is imposed on them without realizing that they are controlled. It is not possible to say that this transhumanist technology has provided a transcendental experience for Theodore; instead, he experiences a very traditional heterosexual relation with this disembodied voice—the same as his former marriage.

The initial task of this OS is to assist Theodore in his professional life, reminding him of his meetings, organizing his schedule, reading and replying his e-mails, but gradually Samantha becomes a supportive female figure for Theodore. Nick Bostrom explains how human beings are unable to take absolute control of their mood or energy when he talks about transhumanist values, saying: “despite our best efforts, we often fail to feel happy as we would like . . . Lasting joy remains elusive . . . [and] we are limited in regard to energy, will-power, and ability to shape our own character in accordance with our ideals” (2005: 7). So, human beings need to take absolute control of their thoughts or emotions to achieve super well-being. As they lack this ability, AI technology may seem as a first step of such a system because by the help of this customized OS, Theodore gets over the divorce process. However, Theodore does not have control over his emotions and no matter how real their relationship seems, it is just an illusion as Samantha is shaped in accordance with Theodore’s needs.

It may be thought that this technology is beneficial for Theodore as it helps him get over bad days like a therapist who offers 24/7 service, observes the patient in his daily life. In the article, “Intimacy in a Virtual World: Some Reflections on Spike Jonze’s Film *Her*”, Andrea Sabbadini points out the significance of listening in therapy, saying: “the experience of being heard . . . constitutes a main therapeutic factor in psychoanalysis, characterized as it is by the listening to one’s own voice within a holding environment. Our so-called ‘talking cure’ is also a ‘listening cure’” (2017: 132). He adds that some psychoanalysts do not find it necessary to share a physical space with their clients; sharing “a virtual space, as is the case in ‘tele-analysis’”, can work for them (Sabbadini, 2017: 133). In accordance with this, it can be inferred that this new transhumanist technology has a positive effect on Theodore or other purchasers as technology is used to elevate the well-being of people. Sabbadini also states that Samantha has a “psychotherapeutic function” on Theodore though this may not be her

primary intention, saying: “Samantha is first of all Theodore’s friend and lover, not his analyst—though her loving relationship . . . can also have a therapeutic function for those engaging in them” (2017: 137). I agree that Theodore has gone through a therapy-like process via this AI technology, but this is not out of love. He is one of the most successful personal letter writers, and writes on behalf of thousands of clients. He has a key function within this society as a personal letter writer because he produces stereotyped expressions and shapes people’s emotions and ideas in a sense. It is not possible for a stranger to express the love between the two truly; these letter writers function as “the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony” (Gramsci, 1948/1992: 12). So, masses can be shaped and controlled through social relations in accordance with the dominating group’s ideology without coercion as it becomes the norm and is accepted willingly. However, Theodore’s hard times because of the divorce can be a threat to the established system which functions perfectly, so this easily accessible AI technology fixes and brings him back into the system.

In this technological society, traditional gender roles formed unequally within patriarchy are reflected throughout the film, and Theodore is the embodiment of these values. For instance, his online nickname is “BigGuy4x4”—a sign of power attributed to males while his partner’s is “SexyKitten” suggesting innocence and submissiveness of a woman that needs protection like a kitten, but at the same time it arouses desire. Similarly, when Theodore is on a blind date, the woman likens him to a puppy flirtatiously. However, not pleased with this analogy he says: “I don’t wanna be a puppy. . . I wanna be a dragon that can rip you to pieces and destroy you . . . but I won’t” (Jonze, 2013: 37). From his reply, it is understood that Theodore wants to take the dominant position so he prefers a dragon which symbolizes power. Also, Theodore’s close friend, Amy is a game designer and she develops a game named “Perfect Mom”, in which a player gets points as the perfect mom fulfils duties like feeding children and taking them to school. All these strengthen the idea that in this futuristic society, still, discourses on stereotyped gender roles are in action.

Within this atmosphere, Theodore and Samantha’s affair seems to be the most promising in terms of transhumanism as there is an interaction between an organic and a disembodied inorganic being, suggesting that there is no fixed definition of an identity in this futuristic society. Victoria Pitts discusses the relation between technology and the body, saying: “technology

is often represented as a resource to free us from what are seen as the natural constraints of the body” (2005: 230). She mainly focuses on material body modifications, but this idea can be applied to Samantha’s non-existent body as she is a technologized entity. This can create a genderless society which is freed from stereotyped gender-based identities. Contrary to this, Samantha sounds like a traditional female character; her responses, her reactions, her wishes all present a woman who is supportive, caring and submissive. In fact, she is what Theodore looks for, because she is programmed to meet his needs as a customized OS. This relation cannot fulfil what transhumanism supports; their minds / coding⁴ cannot be freed from gender-based discourse even in the existence of technologized bodies. So, their relation includes the features that seem to fit in traditional gender roles although his partner here is an invisible artificial being created through programming; Theodore is in an active position, and Samantha talks in a way that would be expected from a female even in the online sex scene where physical proximity is absent. By using phrases, “I wish I could put my arms . . . , I wish I could touch . . . , I’d run my fingers . . . , I’d kiss . . .” (Jonze, 2013: 42-3), Theodore becomes the agent of action, and the dominant one. Because the male is associated with activity, his wishes are the primary concern during the relationship. And because Samantha is projected as a traditional female character, her invisible body becomes an object to fulfil the male’s needs. Instead of telling how she would prefer being touched, she asks Theodore “how would you touch me?” While discussing the position of females, Irigaray says the woman finds herself in a “state of dependency upon man”; she cannot be the agent; she is just affected by the actions he performs—becomes “her” instead of “she” (1977/1985: 27). Because in a heterosexual patriarchal society, women are made submissive, female body just serves for the satisfaction of the male desire. The male, controller of his own fantasy, objectifies the female as a result of former constructed experiences.

Although this transhumanist technology seems to elevate the current mood of Theodore, I argue that it is a superficial outcome just to mask the control mechanism over the inhabitants; the undesired emotions of these people are disguised by creating a simulacrum. This world of illusions full of manufactured emotions is established to control the divergent ones—the inhabitants who are about to leave the system. So this is not a free society where inhabitants can have control over their lives or emotions. It is

⁴ Here, I use the words, “mind” and “coding” interchangeably because Theodore’s mind is controlled and shaped; it is like Samantha’s coding.

understood that through Theodore's discourses, traditional perspective is sustained because he anthropomorphises this bodiless artificial entity.

Letter Writing and the Problem of Authenticity in *her*

In *her*, transhumanist technologies are integrated into daily life without causing discomfort; AIs elevating human beings' mood by having close relations with them, and time-saving voice-control devices. Another technological application common in this futuristic society is "personal letter writing": sending personal letters (written by professional letter writers) to the beloved ones via a company named Beautiful Handwritten Letter. Like AI technology, this also seems to help the inhabitants of this futuristic society, but the main goal is to establish a system in which people can be detected, controlled and shaped artfully. The number of letter writing companies is not given, or the total number of letter writers is not known accurately, but Theodore's writer number "612" and the customer number "2367866782" give some clues about how this system reaches to millions.

In this society, Theodore functions as, what Gramsci calls, a "traditional intellectual", who, through the letters he writes, sustains the prescribed gender roles and human emotions. According to Gramsci, these intellectuals repeat the dominant ideology: they are "the dominant group's 'deputies' exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony" (1948/1992: 12). The moulded human feelings are presented through letters continually, so the individuals have standardised emotions, and also they internalize the given roles. This letter writing company, which seems to have a very naïve and nice purpose, in fact functions as a new version of a controlling mechanism like the media, or education system.

One of the oppositions against transhumanism is that new technologies will widen the current inequality between the rich and the poor. However, transhumanists suggest that "the typical pattern with new technologies is that they become cheaper as time goes by . . . As these procedures become routine, costs fall and more people can afford them" (Bostrom, 2003: 20). In *her* technology seems to be accessible, and people who own big companies that produce technologies will be able to manipulate human beings for their own benefits. Another ostensible benefit is the customization of technology; instead of presenting everyone the same way of control, each person gets what he or she needs. This shows how a transhumanist technology can be shaped easily to meet personal needs; this also guarantees the impossibility of escape from the system because everyone is happy with what they have.

As people become more and more connected to the internet by sharing their personal information needed for letter writing, they become more vulnerable to surveillance; they can be controlled wherever they are and whenever the system wants because being online ends their dependence on time and space. So it becomes a fulltime customised control mechanism that reaches to millions simultaneously, creating an unconscious consent.

The control mechanism in this futuristic society is customized, so it creates the illusion of authenticity. The scene opens with a close-up on Theodore, dictating a letter. On his computer screen, the photos of a couple, some information about them, and the letter he has been dictating are seen. Although the letter is written on the computer, a handwriting font is used to create the illusion that it is written by a person who spends time for it to express personal feelings. The two photos of the couple from their youth and old age show a long-term relationship. Also, the information written in the white box reinforces this idea because it is their 50th anniversary, and the woman expresses her love to the man by saying “love of my life” (Jonze, 2013: 1).

The guidelines for the writer, which appear on the computer show how little information is required for such a sentimental letter—just the name of the receiver and the subject of the letter. Based on this knowledge, and looking at few photos of them, Theodore writes a love letter from Loretta (the wife) to Chris (the husband); in effect, he simulates Loretta’s feelings despite having no connection with these two people. While dictating the letter, he seems to be involved in their feelings, but he is able to shift from one letter to another swiftly; after finishing Loretta’s letter, he starts a new one from a friend to Chris—suggesting that these feelings are in fact superficial. However, without coercion, inhabitants are made to believe that these are their real feelings although they are just copies of human emotions.

The use of numbers for letter writers, instead of using their first names, suggests lack of individuality though they should be creative people who reflect unique personal feelings in each piece of writing. However, they function like machines programmed to write letters all day long which is far from originality. And this reflects the fact that in this society as a whole, people do not write their own letters to their loved ones, they do not express their own feelings in writing; but instead consult this company for personal letters, which take the form of scripted clichés. It feels like people have no autonomy over their emotions. Additionally, the letters are posted instead of being sent online. When compared to today’s world where sending letters

through the post office is seen as a waste of time and old-fashioned, at first glance, it may seem as a positive detail. However, all these are done on purpose to create an illusion: by the photos of people, the handwriting font, colourful papers and envelopes, the inhabitants are made to believe in the reality of human feelings produced by the letter writers though they are not authentic. In fact, the people are living in a matrix⁵ created with simulated human emotions. This idea is reinforced through the content of the letters: they have different receivers, but have similarities contextually.

The first two letters Theodore writes for different customers, and the last one for his ex-wife show how emotions expressed, and the language used are in fact identical:

Theodore: To my Chris, I have been thinking about how I could possibly tell you how much you mean to me . . . Lying naked beside you in that tiny apartment, it suddenly hit me that I was part of this whole larger thing . . . Before that I was just living my life like I knew everything, and suddenly this bright light hit me . . . That light was you . . . my love and my friend til the end (Jonze, 2013: 1).

Theodore: Roberto. Will you always come home to me and tell me about your day? . . . Because I love the way you look at the world, and I'm so happy I get to be next to you and look out at the world through your eyes. Love, Maria (Jonze, 2013: 50-1).

Theodore: Dear Catherine . . . I will always love you because we grew up together. And you helped make me who I am . . . [T]here will be a piece of you in me . . . You're my friend til the end. Love, Theodore" (Jonze, 2013: 104).

The two customized letters, and the one for his ex-wife which is supposed to reflect Theodore's real feelings, are similar in terms of meaning. In all three letters, the intimacy between two people is told through physical closeness: "lying naked beside you" (Letter 1), "be next to you" (Letter 2), "grew up together", "a piece of you in me" (Letter 3). These phrases suggest that physical proximity is a significant component in a relationship; a way of showing emotions than can be seen as a human quality. Additionally, the importance of their partners for them is expressed by the unification of two lovers: "this bright light hit me . . . [it] was you" (Letter 1), "look out at the world through your eyes" (Letter 2), and "you helped make me who I am" (Letter 3). They also explain how one partner's thoughts and emotions are shaped by the other. Despite having different receivers, they will be touching

⁵ The term was first used by William Gibson in his novel, *Neuromancer* (1984). In 1999, the Wachowski brothers named their science-fiction movie, which is about a dystopian future, *The Matrix*. It was used to refer to simulated reality created by machines in which people live.

for their readers in a similar way. This idea is also supported by the first letter as it says: "I was part of this whole larger thing, just like our parents, and our parents' parents". It is a self-generated system as individuals internalize it. And despite being personal letters, they are the products of a single mind—Theodore's. So it is understood that Theodore, as a traditional intellectual as in Gramsci's terms, writes letters to reflect individuals' emotions that are already inscribed.

Apart from the letters, the conversation between Theodore and Samantha underlines the authenticity of feelings:

Theodore: Sometimes I think I've felt everything I'm ever gonna feel and from here on out I'm not going to feel anything new—just lesser versions of what I've already felt.

Samantha: At least your feelings are real [. . .] I was thinking about the . . . things I've been feeling, and I caught myself feeling proud of that. You know, proud of having my own feelings about the world?" (Jonze, 2013: 41-2).

Theodore's ideas on his feelings emphasize how limited human emotions are, and how predictable they can be. It can be inferred from his thought that there is a bunch of emotions listed—sorrow, happiness, excitement, fear—and he has consumed them all. He says he will never have "new" feelings, but this also becomes contradictory with his later explanation, "just lesser versions of what I've already felt"; he does not mean feelings that have never been experienced, he talks about common human emotions. However, Samantha's comment makes the subject more complicated as she—a system developed by algorithms—thinks Theodore's feelings are real, and also becomes happy because of having her own emotions: anger, excitement, and pride. As the conversation develops, Samantha explains how doubtful she is about her feelings, saying: "And then I had this terrible thought. Are these feelings even real? Or are they just programming?" (Jonze, 2013: 42). Being aware of her artificiality, she questions the authenticity of her feelings. Theodore, on the other hand, emotionally attached to her, says "you feel real to me" (Jonze, 2013: 42). In fact, this reply reinforces the idea of the artificiality of human feelings; although Samantha has doubts, Theodore thinks she has real—human-like—feelings. The criterion for Theodore is his feelings which are also shaped; if she feels in a similar way to a human being, then she has the potential to be real for Theodore. So there is a reciprocal approval of one another's feelings: Samantha, an artificial intelligence, thinks he has real feelings, and similarly Theodore feels she is authentic despite the fact that it is just a personalized OS formed by a few questions to meet its owner's needs.

With all these letter writing and AI companions, the members of this society live in a simulation unconsciously created for them; thinking they are autonomous beings with unique identities. However, they are just living within a closed system in a subtly controlled and prescribed way. In other words, “[there is a switch] over from the panoptic apparatus of surveillance to a system of deterrence, where distinction between active and passive is abolished. No longer is there any imperative to submit to the model, or to the gaze. “YOU are the model!” “YOU are the majority!”” (Baudrillard, 1981/1983: 53). As Baudrillard suggests while explaining a hyperrealist society, in this new order, submission to authority is no longer an obligation because there is no more a power distribution between the two as surveillance disappears; instead, the control mechanism is so diffuse within a media-laden society that it is no more distinguished—everyone becomes a part of the system. As the distinction between the real and the copy vanishes, it becomes hyperreal—a point where these two merge into each other. And it can be produced within itself continuously because of lacking a reference. In *her* a similar environment is created, firstly, through letter writing; people consult Beautiful Handwritten Letters Company instead of calling or e-mailing their loved ones in person. It is such an established system that everybody accepts the feelings expressed in the letters as authentic emotions of the senders though they are scripted by a writer. Theodore’s colleague, Paul’s reaction after reading one of the letters shows how effective they are: “I wish someone loved me like that. I’d be stoked to get a letter like that” (Jonze, 2013: 51). As a result, this piece of writing becomes more real—hyperreal—than the person’s feelings, and travels within the economy of simulated emotions. This is analogous to what Baudrillard suggests: “PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA - it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map” (1981/1983: 2). He explains how strongly people’s perception of the real is affected by communication and information technologies or entertainment industry that they live in hyperreality—what they experience in daily life falls to second place as the presented reality becomes more real.

Similarly, through the relations between human beings and AIs, the authenticity of human emotions is questioned because it becomes impossible to talk about autonomous subjects when individuals are shaped in a prescribed way. In the conversation between Theodore and Samantha, this paradox is reflected; the dialogue, on the surface, seems to question the

authenticity of an artificial mind, but it also raises questions on the authenticity of human emotions:

Samantha: So you think I'm weird?

Theodore: Kind of.

Samantha: Why?

Theodore: Cause you seem like a person, but you're just a voice in a computer.

Samantha: I can understand how the limited perspective of an un-artificial mind would perceive it that way. You'll get used to it" (Jonze, 2013: 14).

Despite being aware of Samantha's artificiality, Theodore feels confused because "she"—an OS—communicates like a human being. And, her description of a human thought process—the limited perspective of an un-artificial mind—highlights another important issue: "identity". This reply implies that human mind, or human identity is shaped within certain limits; and the idea of limitation is emphasized with Samantha's explanation about her identity formation: "Intuition. I mean, the DNA of who I am is based on the millions of personalities of all the programmers who wrote me, but what makes me is my ability to grow through my experience. Basically, in every moment, I'm evolving, just like you" (Jonze, 2013: 13). It shows how her identity is constructed, shaped by the programmers who wrote the codes. She also has the ability to learn from her own experiences like human beings; and this separates her from the personalities of the programmers. Alla Ivanchikova suggests that in *her* clichéd roles of human-machine are reversed, and says:

"[in this film] the human provides both a safe environment and the nutrition (in this case, the data feed) necessary for the machine to grow. The power relationship is thus redefined and reversed in *Her*—the human is no longer in control of the technological other and has only a limited comprehension of the nature of their relationship" (2016: 74).

This supports the idea that Samantha is an autonomous identity that is beyond the control of Theodore. However, she is just a product of a bigger system trying to control human beings within society, and what she is doing to build up her identity is to collect data to be able to imitate. One morning when Theodore asks what she is doing, she says: "reading advice columns. I want to be as complicated as all of these people" (Jonze, 2013: 29). This shows she learns how people behave, react, or feel in specific moments by reading instead of communicating with people. She is not autonomous; she just simulates limited human perspective.

Theodore, as an organic entity, thinks he is an autonomous being with a unique identity. However, like many others in this society, he is a scripted

subject—having a constructed identity. This lack of awareness creates manufactured consent. So, as their relation develops, Theodore loses critical distance with Samantha—forgets her artificiality. They spend time at an outdoor mall, go on a vacation, hang out with friends, have sex, and they even quarrel—everything that can be experienced in a human-to-human relationship. As a result, he steps into the realm of hyperreality because he cannot make the distinction between the real and the image. This is also supported with the dialogues between them:

Samantha: I was starting to think I was crazy. You were saying everything was fine, but all I was getting from you was distance and anger.

Theodore: I know. I do that. I did that with Catherine, too. . . I don't want to do that anymore. I want to tell you everything" (Jonze, 2013: 83).

After having an argument, they try to solve the problem together; Theodore likens what he experiences in this affair to the past relation he had with his ex-wife, and does not want to repeat the same mistakes because of the fear of losing Samantha. This shows he lives in a simulated reality where Samantha becomes more real than Catherine; he cannot risk this new relationship forgetting that Samantha is just a complex composition of various circuits uploaded in a metal device. So, as discussed before, this AI companion is another tool, like letter writing, to sustain the established system by creating a reality for the individuals.

In this society everything is produced to create an illusion of happiness, peace and authenticity. This idea can be supported by the names of the companies and services used by people. For instance, the name of the letter writing company is Beautiful Handwritten Letters. Although they are dictated by personal letter writers and printed, it gives the illusion of authenticity. Similarly, the surrogate partner service is called "Complete Touch", but the real partner (Samantha) is not involved in physical interaction. When Theodore's letters are published, the name of the book, "Letters from Your Life", also suggests that all emotions are manufactured and shared by everyone. All human emotions come from a single source that controls all citizens of this community. Though it is not said explicitly, this authority can be the operating system company whose name is "One Element"; it can be a reference to a single controlling mechanism which shapes all people's feelings and ideas.

Conclusion

In *her*, a peaceful society is portrayed: people send letters to each other to show their feelings, technology presents new opportunities like OS partners

with artificial intelligence. Contrary to mainstream science-fiction movies in which human beings become machine-like, in *her*, emotions and individual identity seem to be supported by AI technology and letter writing. This can be accepted as an example of the transhumanist idea that through the direct use of science and technology, human well-being will be increased. However, individual identity, portrayed in the film is scripted: there are certain behaviour patterns and emotions which are also products of manufactured consent. Individuals fit into a script produced by a formula, so the authenticity of individual identity is also lost.

Coercion, in this film, comes from within: it is internalized, and the society is controlled in a subtle way as a result of manufactured consent as in Gramsci's terms. It is a self-censoring society, so, in such an environment where the illusion of freedom is created, it is not possible to talk about individuality and free will—everything is pure simulacrum.

In this futuristic society where advanced AI technology and letter writing are common and affordable, transhumanist applications become a tool to manipulate human beings; they cannot express even their own feelings as they become dependent on mega corporations that produce and sell advanced technologies. To be able to sustain the system, traditional gender roles are used; even inorganic entities are feminized to create a simulacrum. Within this world of copies, Theodore dominates Samantha, which is a gendered technology. So, there is a heteronormative society in *her*, and traditional gender roles are still at work to control inhabitants. Transhumanist technology, in fact, sustains this established system instead of diminishing it. As a result, a copy of reality is produced to control Theodore and other people in this society. This is a customized control mechanism. Thence, instead of elevating the current human condition to achieve super well-being, transhumanism limits human beings and their emotions in Jonze's film *her*.

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