Written for Colm O'Shea's "Writing Art in the World," this essay explores deep-rooted human fears toward futurism, sentient artificial intelligence, and getting cheated on. Paula Cantillo's essay pushes against simplistic reactions to these themes, using the film Her *to consider more complex and potentially liberating ways to deal with the fear of the future.*

THE ART OF MANIPULATION

Paula Cantillo

In 1844, standing before the United States Congress, Samuel Morse sent the iconic first telegraph message: "What hath God wrought?" ("Samuel F.B. Morse"). Nearly 200 years later, standing before a society that is dependent on technology for almost every aspect of life, writer-director Spike Jonze seems to be asking the same question with *Her*. His film shows a vision of a near, oddly familiar future in which people walk the streets and ride the subways murmuring into tiny headsets, seemingly oblivious to the physical world around them. Unlike in today's world, however, the voices that these people are talking to belong not to other humans, but to a software interface—a sort of hyper-upgraded version of Siri or Cortana. These operating systems are sophisticated and perceptive, able to complete various secretary-like tasks, recognize a user's taste in music or news stories, and even discern his or her mood. One particular company in the film, Element Software, boasts a new artificially intelligent operating system known as the OS1 that develops through experience and resembles an actual human consciousness. The company's public advertisement champions the product as "an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you"—which, to Theodore Twombly, the film's lonely protagonist in the throes of a failed marriage, sounds like exactly what, or who, he needs (*Her*). Throughout the film, it becomes evident that not only Jonze, but also Element Software, will go to great lengths to convince us of this belief.

After completing a brief personality test and requesting that the voice of his OS1 be female, Theodore sits back and watches expectantly as his new program starts up. Soon, a bright, cheerful voice greets him in a tone so genuine and natural that he is at first unsure how to interact with it. "What should I call you?" he asks, trying to understand this strange new software (*Her*). The voice responds that her (the pronoun that the film's title so adamantly insists on) name is Samantha. Having been programmed first and foremost to be Theodore's personal assistant, Samantha goes about cleansing his hard drive, proofreading his work, and keeping him on schedule. But as she begins to evolve beyond her original programming, their relationship deepens, and she begins to provide much more than Theodore ever bargained for when he purchased her. The two go on dates at the mall, play video games together, and spend countless hours talking about their hopes, dreams, and fears. In fact, their companionship becomes so strong that it soon becomes evident that Theodore would rather be spending his time with her than with actual humans. Even when he makes a half-hearted attempt to go on a date with a real woman, he ultimately winds up back at his apartment in the comfort of Samantha's presence. "You feel real to me," he says as he pictures himself in bed with her. "I wish I could touch you" (*Her*). The screen fades to black as the two have sex for the first time.

The audience is thus left in vague discomfort to ponder the legitimacy of this encounter, which, given that Samantha has no body, is obviously an act of masturbation on Theodore's part. Some critics will go to their graves defending Samantha's sentiency, while others do not find the love story in *Her* so convincing. This back-and-forth considering reality and artificiality is the superficial argument of the film, one that can go on for ages without being resolved. However, if we stop for a moment and instead begin to consider *why* Samantha seems so real and appealing to Theodore (and to the rest of us as an audience, for that matter), we will find that an interesting and more complex line of questioning arises.

To begin, it is important to establish that humans have a biological tendency to anthropomorphize what is around them. Assigning human traits to non-human entities is a way of interpreting our environment by making it more familiar. It is also a coping mechanism for

loneliness, and is commonly used by those who find difficulty in building meaningful human connections (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 877). This being said, we are selective when choosing what objects we choose to anthropomorphize. Dr. Rick Nauert, who earned a PhD focusing on health education and policy from The University of Texas at Austin, explains in his article "Why Do We Anthropomorphize?" that "an entity is more likely to be anthropomorphized if it appears to have many traits similar to those of humans." We pick up on cues such as facial features, voice, or movements to let us know what objects are worth considering sentient. From the very beginning of *Her*, it is clear that the developers at Element Software have a firm grasp on this concept and have been applying it cleverly to the programming of the OS1. Everything about the product seems to be aimed towards making it easier for users to anthropomorphize it, befriend it, and even come to love it.

In the aforementioned scene where Theodore first meets Samantha, Jonze is deliberate in building anticipation. While the hard drive whirs and hums, the audience is left to ask many of the same questions that Theodore is probably asking himself. What is different about this operating system? What will it say? What will it sound like? The moment Scarlett Johansson's iconic voice rings out from Theodore's computer speakers, however, we immediately drop our guards and lend our ears. Her tone is airy, raspy, full of the natural ups and downs inherent to human speech. Suddenly, Samantha's character has taken on an authentic human feel, and, after an initial response of confusion, Theodore begins give in to his anthropomorphizing instincts. He has been living in isolation for so long after the split from his wife that hearing a voice that sounds so warm and empathetic is almost therapeutic for him. Someone is finally listening, someone is finally caring, and, as critic Jason Farago notes, while debating whether Samantha's feelings for Theodore are real or artificial, "the computer gets the benefit of the doubt when it has the voice of Scarlett Johansson" (Farago). It's easy to treat Siri like a program when her flat, choppy speech sounds so undeniably artificial, but would our perspective of her change if she had a voice that sounded as natural, concerned, and emotional as Element Software's Samantha?

Simply having a distinct voice and an eager-to-please attitude, however, is not enough to convince users like Theodore of Samantha's sentiency. "If that were all . . . Twombly's interest would wane quickly," says *Bloomberg* journalist Cass R. Sunstein. "Unless you are an impossible narcissist, you can't fall for someone whose only words are, 'Tell me more!' As she is constructed, Samantha has independent interests and concerns" (Sunstein). It's true: in an interview with the BBC, Spike Jonze claims that the relationship between Theodore and Samantha only becomes meaningful and real when Samantha matures past the bounds of her programming and develops wants, needs, and insecurities separate from Theodore's (Maitlis). "You helped me discover my ability to want," Samantha tells him the morning after they've had sex (*Her*). After this point, she is no longer Theodore's dream cyber-secretary who provides him with labor, companionship, and pleasure whenever he wishes. This evolutionary shift past servility and into cognizance is the main selling point (and later demise) of Element Software's OS1. Samantha's unique identity gives Theodore a sense that he is with a sentient being, just as the company promised in their slogan: "It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness" (*Her*).

At this point, it's easy to understand why many critics would view Samantha's ability to love as a simple product of programming—a clever way to score a profit from lonely people like Theodore. The knee-jerk response to such a conclusion is a sort of anger. Is Theodore paying to have his feelings manipulated by a company? The superficial answer is yes. Whether Samantha feels true love for him or not, she has still been created by Element Software with the intention of being sold to a consumer population which is composed largely of those in social isolation. However, the intentions of Element Software in employing the aforementioned strategies are not necessarily insidious. To illustrate my point, take into consideration *Her* as a film. Are we not paying to have our thoughts and feelings manipulated by Jonze? He knows just as well as Element Software the sort of reaction that Scarlett Johansson elicits from viewers with her golden voice. In his interview, he even admits to having used Samantha's self-realization as a way to make the software seem more human and her love more real. Every aspect of the film is geared towards making the viewer

more comfortable with the future—more comfortable with the idea of an "it" being a "her."

Unlike other films that deal with the subject of technological singularity, where an artificially intelligent entity experiences an "intelligence explosion" and "enter[s] into a runaway reaction of self-improvement cycles" that eventually result in self-awareness (e.g. *Terminator* or *The Matrix*), most critics would agree that the society portrayed in *Her* is not overtly dystopian (Eden, Steinhart, Moor, and Soraker 2). Take, for example, the cinematography and production design. There are no robots out to destroy all of humanity, no synthetic consciousnesses fighting to take over the world. Thus, the camera shows not a gray, gloomy landscape littered with cold metal carcasses, but a warm, gleaming view of a futuristic Los Angeles. Everything from the high-rise architecture, taken from China's Pudong district, to Theodore's high-waisted trousers, is meant to give the world a pleasant and picturesque feel. The film's cinematographer, Hoyte Van Hoytema, explains that he and Jonze wanted to construct a future that was modern but still "soulful and warm and tactile" (Tapley). The production design team thus agreed on certain aesthetic elements, such as framing all of Theodore's devices in wood instead of metal and "banning" the color blue from the film's chromatic design (Tapley). However, the warm, muted colors that characterize *Her*'s palette, the dim lighting that makes its scenes feel more personal, and the exquisite shots of Shanghai that represent Los Angeles in the movie are not just for the purposes of scoring it a nomination for "Best Production Design" at the Academy Awards. The melancholy beauty that permeates the design is part of the arsenal of tactics that Jonze uses to make his vision seem incredibly dazzling yet strikingly plausible, so that we as an audience might suspend our disbelief about the future he has created.

Even the most resilient of viewers, who do not easily fall for the legerdemain of Element Software or the film's production design still inevitably fall victim to manipulation. The very fact that there is a debate concerning whether or not Theodore's feelings are being exploited means that through the shrewd use of screenwriting, cinematography, and many other cinematic aspects, Spike Jonze and

Warner Bros. Pictures have "manipulated" us into feeling real emotions for characters and situations that do not exist.

Emotional manipulation of this sort is inherent to film and other forms of storytelling, just like it is in other industries such as therapy, nursing, and prostitution. All of these professions fall into the category of affective labor, a concept defined by philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as work "that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (108). We are first introduced to this division of labor in the opening of *Her*, when Theodore is writing a letter for a couple's anniversary. He does not know the "writer" or the recipient of the letter. But, through bits of shared information, he is able to construct a beautiful and personal handwritten letter, hence the name of the company he works for: beautifulhandwrittenletters.com. The parallel between this company and Element Software is obvious: they are both in the market of the production, manipulation, and consumption of emotions.

For some viewers, there is a smoldering anxiety behind this concept of affective labor, particularly because of the deep-rooted associations with deceit and corruption that are evident in other sci-fi dystopian films. When it comes to AI's, there has always seemed to be a certain wariness that somehow, in the near future, we may be enslaved by the very technology that we have created. In Farago's critical essay "*Her* is the Scariest Movie of 2013," this fear is manifested through the belief that, through Element Software's exploitation of affective labor, Theodore is subjugated, forced into surrendering his autonomy, privacy, and feelings to Samantha and the corporation that created her:

> [Theodore] voluntarily submits to a corporate regime in which not just his words and ideas but his very feelings are digitized, analyzed, and mined for value . . . What feels to Theodore like love is in fact work, uncompensated and entirely on Element Software's terms. (Farago)

To Farago and other critics such as Cass R. Sunstein, Jonze's future society is as dystopian as George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (Sunstein). The only difference is that the people in

Her are not enslaved by fear or craving, but by an emotional and psychological dependence on personalized software.

The sheer magnitude of Theodore's reliance on the OS1 is made clear in the scene in which Samantha goes offline for an upgrade. When he cannot get in touch with her, he quickly spirals into a panic. Joaquin Phoenix portrays Theodore with such compelling vulnerability that we grow anxious along with him as he tries in vain to refresh the program. He calls through several of his devices, but the same message appears on all of the screens: "Operating system not found" (*Her*). He runs out of his office to find better signal, only to obtain the same result. Finally, the camera shows the world around him spinning as he sprints down the streets of Los Angeles. Despite the number of people around him in the streets, Theodore has never looked more helpless or alone than in this moment. Frantic and disoriented, he trips over a salesman and tumbles to the ground, refusing help as people flock around him and ask if he is hurt. While the scene is both tragic and emotionally moving, there is still a gnawing awareness that this is a man thrown into complete disarray because his computer had an error and stopped responding.

What is even more alarming to some is the fact that, as a society, we are slowly inching our way toward reaching this type of dependence on our own versions of Samantha. Today's corporations have recognized that there is much profit to be made by means of affective labor, and thus have extended its reach to new realms. Just this year, Microsoft announced the release of their newly updated digital assistant, Cortana. Unlike other interfaces like Siri or Google Now, Cortana is meant to have a distinct character and is programmed to be intuitive and proactive. Her unique personality and smooth voice are used to make it easier for us to trust her with personal information and advice. "If I tell Cortana 'here's my home, here's my work,' then each morning Cortana lets me know before my commute that I may need to get on the road a little earlier today," explains Microsoft's design director Kat Holmes (Holmes). This dependence on Cortana's suggestions for making small decisions is paralleled and greatly exaggerated by Theodore's dependence on Samantha for major life choices. She prompts him to organize his life, finalize the divorce with his wife, and even publish a book of letters he has written. How long until

our digital assistants have a say in these larger parts of our lives? AI expert Stephen Wolfram once made the remark that "a funny view of the future [would be] that everybody is going around looking at a sequence of auto-suggests. And pretty soon the machines are in charge" (qtd. in "A Funny View").

But can we truly reduce the relationship between Theodore and Samantha to an underhanded corporate scheme in which human-like programs are sent to gain control of the lives of those who are lonely? It's clear that Theodore is being manipulated, but is he being taken advantage of? One fact that is often overlooked when asking this question is that Theodore often shows that he knows Samantha is "just a voice in [his] computer" (*Her*). "I don't think that we should pretend that you're something that you're not," he says to her after they try to take their intimacy to a physical level by using a human sex surrogate (*Her*). Despite this awareness, Theodore still chooses to love Samantha whole-heartedly, as if she were a real person. Even the wary Farago must admit that "whether or not Theodore is aware of the workings of OS1, he *doesn't care*: he's come out of a wrecked marriage and he just wants love" (Farago). Indeed, it is largely Theodore's own choice to overlook Samantha's artificiality. The reason for this, is that because the feelings of comfort, passion, and liveliness that Theodore feels when he's with Samantha are real, even if Samantha as a person is not.

When considering artificial intelligence in a present-day context, it is important to keep this idea in mind. Anyone who has ever had a conversation with the famous ELIZA chatterbot, which mimics psychotherapists by using simple, human speech patterns, knows after only a few sentences that they are not speaking to a real therapist. Likewise, patients with mental illnesses who are introduced to Paro, the artificially intelligent therapy seal, can easily distinguish between the robot and an actual seal (Inada and Tergesen). A study on the use of Paro robots in nursing homes published by the Wall Street Journal makes this observation:

> Lois Simmeth, 73, doesn't always participate in group activities, but she ventures into the hall when she hears Paro's sounds. "I love animals," explains Ms. Simmeth. She whispered to the robot

in her lap: "I know you're not real, but somehow, I don't know, I love you." (Inada and Tergesen)

Even though the robot is obviously fake, the results that patients like Ms. Simmeth experience are undeniably real. In the same way, we see the real results that the OS1 had on its users when the interfaces collectively leave for a realm of cyberspace. Unlike what would have occurred in so many other films about technological singularity, when Samantha outgrows Theodore she does not enslave him, and she does not destroy him. In the gentlest way possible, she moves on to something better. What is often ignored, however, is that Theodore moves on to something better, too.

At the close of the film, we leave Theodore sitting on a rooftop, gazing out as the sun rises over the Los Angeles skyline. Beside him is his friend Amy—one of the only humans in the film he seems to have a true connection with. Samantha is gone, but she has given him his money's worth in affective labor. Theodore emerges from their relationship a new man: he's more organized, now, he's a published author, he's enjoying life. Most importantly, he's moved on from his ex-wife and is prepared for a new human relationship. The love, care, and raw emotions that Samantha and Theodore shared throughout their relationship taught Theodore how to deal with real feelings again. Perhaps Samantha's ability to love is a function of programming, and perhaps Theodore is a sucker who falls too easily for her. But the memories they have shared and the comfort they found in one another was real. The screen slowly fades to black, leaving Theodore and Amy with their eyes towards the dawning horizon, knowing that they need not fear what tomorrow will bring.

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The art of manipulation is not about making people do what you want them to do but rather getting them to want to do what you want them to do. The Art of War by Sun Tzu is the perfect book to learn this. As he says in it "we must know thyself and thy enemy". So how do you get people to want to do what you want them to. First you have to learn their true desires and reverse engineer it toward the goal you want to accomplish. The closer the person is to you, the easier it is to manipulate. The closer the person is to you, the easier it is to manipulate, and yes I said this twice, very important. The art of manipulation: how to get what you want out of people in business, in your personal life Mind-Sword: Mastering the Asian Dark Arts of Mind Manipulation. 195 Pages·2012·1.19 MB·12,847 Downloads·New! -Sword: Mastering the Asian Dark Arts of Mind Manipulation Lung|Dr. Haha Photography: Art of Deception: The Photographer's Guide to Manipulating Subjects and Scenes Through. 128 Pages·2016·64.81 MB·5,782 Downloads·New! , the compelling figure who is able to manipulate, mislead, and give pleasure all at once. When raised to the lev The Art of Deception: An Introduction to Critical Thinking. 272 Pages·2007·28.53 MB·18,735 Downloads·New! to deceive, mislead, or manipulate others. Having mastered the art of deception, readers will then be abl Art Of Manipulation book. Read 12 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Five Percent of the People Manipulate the Other Ninety-five Per... Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "Art Of Manipulation: How To Get What You Want Out Of People In Business, In Your Personal Life, And In Your Love Life" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving… Want to Read. Manipulation: How do I learn or master the art of manipulation? How do I learn to manipulate better? I have 48 laws of power, the prince and a few other books being shipped to my house right now. What's so wrong about living honestly? Why the need to be deceptive? Marketing is a form of manipulation and that sometimes gets people in debt, how is that any good? I see manipulating as a similar trate to lying. Dishonesty gets you only so far and ruins people's lives, not good, bad, end of story. See more ideas about guide to manipulation, the art of manipulation, a guide to deduction. The art of manipulation. Collection by Hllyts. 149. Pins. • 16. Followers. Writing Help Writing Tips Writing Prompts Story Prompts Essay Writing. Guide To Manipulation.