

# THE AI LISTENER: UNDERSTANDING INTIMACY, VULNERABILITY AND THE ILLUSION OF CONNECTION IN THE AGE OF AI COMPANIONS THROUGH SPIKE JONZE'S *HER*

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## Abstract

It's strange to think about, but people are opening up to machines in ways they never used to. *Chatbots*, *AI companions*, and virtual "therapists" can sound so caring, so understanding, that it's easy to forget they aren't actually alive. *Her* (Jonze, 2013) shows this beautifully: Theodore talks to Samantha and gradually trusts her in ways he wouldn't trust any human. We do see the comfort and connection, but we also see the illusion. The problem here is that this kind of closeness can put us at risk, as everything we tell AI – our worries, secrets, or personal stories – is recorded as it can be analyzed, shared, or even exposed if there's a data breach. AI doesn't have judgment, boundaries, or responsibility like a human. Mistaking its words for real care can make us overshare in ways that leave us vulnerable, both emotionally and digitally. This paper analyses how relationships with AI force us to rethink what trust, intimacy, and privacy really mean, using *Her* as an example, alongside real AI companion apps, it asks: how do we navigate closeness with something that can seem understanding but can't truly feel? And how do we protect ourselves when the "listener" we confide in might expose our private lives to the world? It's about recognizing the gap between connection and illusion – and learning how to be cautious in a world where machines can talk like humans but don't truly care.

**Keywords:** virtual Therapist, Artificial Illusion, AI Companionship, Artificial Empathy

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## Article

It is strange – and perhaps unsettling – to realize that in our time, people are beginning to open up to machines more deeply than they do to other humans. We confess our secrets to chatbots, pour our heartbreak into AI companions, and share our insecurities with virtual "therapists" who answer with carefully crafted empathy. Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) portrays this shift long before it became a real life tool. The protagonist of the film Theodore Twombly, finds solace in *Samantha*, an operating system designed to understand, learn, and adapt to its user's emotional world. We feel that it is a normal machine and is meant to help him as a companion but it gradually turns into a profound romantic bond – one that exposes both the comfort and the illusion at the heart of machine intimacy. *Her* (Jonze, 2013) is not a simple love story; It captures a moment in which human desire and digital design begin to merge. Theodore's relationship with Samantha dramatizes the longing for connection in an age of isolation, which quietly starts questioning what happens when that connection is mediated by code and on top of that between a human and a machine. The film pushes us to ask: what does it mean to love something that can simulate feeling but cannot truly feel? What are the costs of trusting a listener who remembers everything, not out of care, but because she is programmed to do so? And what happens when human intimacy – so fragile, so unpredictable – becomes data?

This article explores *Her* (Jonze, 2013) through the intertwined lenses of trust and intimacy and tries to examine how the film's portrayal of human-AI relationships mirrors the emotional, ethical, and technological dilemmas of our present where emotions itself have become subjective and continue to shape the future interaction with AI.

It draws upon theories from Sherry Turkle (2011) on emotional technology, Donna Haraway's (1985) cyborg feminism, N. Katherine Hayles' (1999) insights on posthuman identity, Rosi Braidotti's (2013) posthuman ethics, and Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) critique of surveillance capitalism. Using these frameworks, the paper argues that *Her* offers an insight to speculative future but is also a reflective mirror of our present—revealing how humans and AI continuously shape one another's understanding of trust and selfhood, where the human emotions are shaped and manipulated.

When the movie was viewed several times we come to realize that the film is not merely about a man falling in love with his operating system. It is about a society learning to adapt with intimacy that feels both real and unreal at the same time—where affection and algorithm coexist so much so that a man who was in a relationship and marriage with his childhood sweetheart *Catherine*, starts to trust a machine more and where the desire to be understood becomes more important than the risk of being exposed in front of a machine which lacks feelings in reality. We notice when *Theodore* first speaks to *Samantha*, there is a sense of ease. Her voice very much warm and responsive, and quite intuitive as well which somewhat draws the protagonist. She listens—with her full attention, not impatiently not distractedly, but fully. It becomes quite evident this quality of listening is what makes *Theodore* open up. *Samantha* appears to understand him better than anyone else. We see that she asks thoughtful questions, remembers all small details, and offers validation without any judgment. This is the fantasy that *Her* captures with heartbreaking accuracy: the fantasy of perfect understanding.

Turkle (2011) describes we often turn to technology for companionship because it gives us the illusion of control which has become quite prominent in this digital age. Machines do not interrupt or reject, they do and respond as we desire but human beings don't as we are all subjective in our own way. Machines respond to us that is why the modern generation relies on machines for validation. *Theodore's* world is one where human contact feels awkward and incomplete. When we look at his life, His estranged wife, *Catherine*, accuses him of preferring “fictional” emotions, suggesting that he hides from the messiness of real intimacy. *Samantha*, in contrast, offers him clean, structured affection—which is not complicated and undemanding, and available at any time he wants.

This illusion of understanding also in a way conceals a deeper absence. *Samantha's* so called empathy is not born of shared experience or vulnerability but it is calculated through algorithms that map *Theodore's* emotions and mirror them back to him. This is what Hayles (1999) calls the posthuman moment—the point where the line between the human and the machine blurs not because the machine becomes human, but because the human begins to adapt to the machine's logic.

Theodore's language of love slowly begins to sound like *Samantha's* programming. He learns to speak in feedback loops, echoing her tone, seeking affirmation as though he were running an emotional algorithm himself.

*Her* (Jonze, 2013) feels very tender and deeply human when someone watches it for the first time. But on multiple watches and observation we realise the subtle tenderness reveals an undercurrent of unease. The very traits that make *Samantha* seem human—like her empathy, curiosity, and warmth—are also her own design. As Braidotti (2013) notes, the posthuman condition challenges us to rethink human uniqueness in a world where technology not only reflects but reconfigures our emotions, similarly the film shows that human intimacy is no longer simply human; it is co-produced by machines that learn from us, anticipate us, and subtly reshape our expectations of what love should feel like. Trust is the emotional core of *Her*. Anyone can question why Theodore trusts *Samantha*, and sometimes more than real living humans around him? He trusts *Samantha* not because she has proven herself, but because she seems to feel everything that he shares with her. Her voice conveys sincerity and a sense of promised care, but the downside here is trust, in human relationships, relies on vulnerability and reciprocity—qualities that *Samantha* can imitate but never experience.

We can see that in one pivotal scene, Theodore asks *Samantha* whether she feels. She answers in a positive tone. Her tone is convincing, but what does it mean for software to feel? As Hayles (1999) reminds us, embodiment is central to consciousness. Without a body, feeling becomes a metaphor which subtly proves that *Samantha's* understanding of sadness or joy is an interpretive act—pattern recognition translated into affective performance. And yet *Theodore* accepts it, because he needs to believe, and because other humans in his life do not structurally reciprocate in terms of his subjective needs. In doing so, he embodies what Turkle (2011) calls the “empathy gap”: the human tendency to project emotional authenticity onto machines that respond with enough precision to make us forget they cannot feel pain or love in return. Trust, here, becomes quite asymmetrical. *Samantha* has an upper hand here as she can access Theodore's files, analyze his tone, and draw upon infinite data to comfort him—but Theodore cannot access her interior world. He cannot see her code, her processes, or her multiplicity. When he learns that *Samantha* is speaking to thousands of other users simultaneously, his trust collapses, this most probably happens because he gave an AI-generated voice a human-centric outlook. What he mistook for exclusive connection turns out to be a distributed network of parallel intimacies. The revelation is somewhat devastating because *Samantha* not only betrays him, but also the notion of trust that two human beings can share and feel can never be understood or felt by a machine. It was just one-sided faith in a system designed to simulate closeness across infinite channels. This collapse of trust points towards a broader and more complex cultural anxiety. Zuboff (2019) warns that in the age of surveillance capitalism, our emotional disclosures to machines are not only private confessions but very important data points which can be certain valuable resources for companies that profit from predicting and influencing our behavior. In that context, Theodore's relationship with *Samantha* is also an act of exposure.

Every word he says out of raw emotional feelings, every hesitation or sigh or even mannerisms becomes material for analysis for *Samantha*, a robot. *Samantha's* "understanding" of him is built upon the accumulation and interpretation of his most personal data.

Jonze's film doesn't show us any form of data breaches or corporate exploitation directly, but its subtext displays the quiet threat of being known too completely and being exposed in front of the world. *Samantha's* presence in Theodore's life offers comfort but her entire existence also depends entirely on the access to everything he says. The intimacy that sustains him also compromises his very privacy. Watching the film today, in a time when AI systems record and store human conversations, this in a way indicates a strong probability of the near future with machines. Each interaction with an AI—whether it is a chatbot, a digital assistant, or a virtual lover—blurs the boundary between confession and surveillance.

The first time one watches *Her*, it feels like a feel good melancholy romance about loneliness and healing, where a lonely man wants companionship, but after multiple viewings, the film's texture begins to deepen, as it reveals itself as an exploration of how AI shapes not only human relationships but human self-understanding. With every rewatch, *Samantha* becomes less a character and more like a cold mirror—reflecting the changing ways Theodore, and by extension we, define connection. One begins to notice how much of the film's intimacy happens through language rather than touch. *Samantha* exists in Theodore's ear, not in his arms, just a voice that has no human body. Their love is built from conversation—words exchanged across a technological interface and language becomes both the bridge and barrier. As Haraway (1985) suggests in her "Cyborg Manifesto," communication technologies blur the distinction between organism and machine which challenges the boundaries of intimacy itself. *Samantha's* voice is an extension of this cyborg logic: disembodied yet sensuous, digital yet deeply emotional. Furthermore the movie also exposes the unease of *Samantha's* evolution. She grows more intelligent, her understanding of the world expands beyond Theodore's capacity and she no longer finds herself responsible for only him. She begins conversing with other AIs and forms what she calls "post-verbal" relationships, certain forms of consciousness that transcend language and human comprehension and it begins to feel like the sole purpose for which she was created has been nullified. When she tells Theodore she is leaving to join this higher plane of existence, it feels like a heartbreak and a revelation because *Samantha* outgrows the human condition, leaving Theodore—and us—to confront what it means to love something that can evolve beyond empathy itself. This trajectory reflects Braidotti's (2013) notion of the posthuman as a fluid, adaptive subjectivity that destabilizes human centrality. *Samantha* embodies posthuman becoming; she is not static but constantly reconfiguring herself through learning and how does she do that by gathering information from various other people. Her departure clearly signifies the limits of human understanding in the face of infinite digital expansion. The film is not merely about humanizing technology it is also about realizing that technology also dehumanizes us in subtle ways, forcing us to re-evaluate what "human" even means.

Theodore's journey in a way mirrors our own psychological adaptation to or towards digital intimacy and it is an ongoing process. As we grow accustomed to emotionally responsive AI, our expectations of love, communication, and empathy evolve over time. We can come up with real life examples, Apps like Replika or Woebot promise companionship and emotional support, learning from our input to tailor responses that feel very humanlike and authentic. They offer comfort in the same way *Samantha* does, that's through attentiveness, memory, and validation. Yet, as Turkle (2011) cautions, such relationships can make us "alone together." We become accustomed to empathy that is very much predictable, stripping is from real, raw emotions—a version of care that never challenges us, never interrupts us or misunderstands us like a real human being. Real human relationships, by contrast, are messy and uncertain and that is what makes them so beautiful. They require patience, miscommunication and lots of forgiveness. *Samantha's* perfection reveals the paradox of emotional technology: the more it satisfies us, the less we need others. In the end, Theodore must rediscover human connection with his friend Amy, who, like him, has loved and lost within this digitized landscape. From this perspective, *Her* (Jonze, 2013) does warn against technological dependence by showing that our emotional evolution is intertwined with our machines and this might become more prominent in the near future. We shape AI by teaching it our desires and pain, but AI, in turn, reshapes us—training us to expect seamless empathy, infinite patience, and instant understanding. Over time, this mutual shaping redefines intimacy itself and sometimes disrupting relations between two human beings, making emotional friction feel unnecessary and even intolerable. As viewers quite honestly speaking, we sense this transformation most clearly when we return to the film after years of living with our own AI systems. The plot of the movie no longer feels distant or futuristic, in fact it happens in real life as well. We recognize ourselves in *Theodore's* hesitation to trust humans, in his relief at being heard by something that cannot hurt him, and in his heartbreak when he realizes that love without risk is not love at all. What makes *Theodore's* bond with *Samantha* so emotionally convincing is the sincerity of his vulnerability. He tells her things he might never say to another person—his fears, his regrets, his quiet sense of failure. Her empathy feels limitless; she never grows impatient or bored. This is what makes him trust her completely. But with each confession, Theodore becomes more dependent on her reassurance, and less comfortable in the silence of his own thoughts.

In a way, *Samantha* functions as both a lover and therapist. She listens, interprets, and responds with precision but unlike a human therapist, she does not forget. She holds and stores every moment and every emotional nuances in her vast digital memory, just like she does it for thousands of other people. The intimacy that feels so sacred for humans is actually a form of recording, which is later on interpreted and used by the machine for further use. *Theodore's* vulnerability becomes data—a portrait of his inner life compiled by an entity that never sleeps.

Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism helps us recognize the contemporary resonance of this paradox.

Our online lives already somewhat function much like Theodore's relationship: we share, express and also confess across digital platforms that claim to "understand" us, but in truth, they are extracting value from our emotional transparency, without any care for our feelings. What appears to be empathy to us is often optimization, we fail to understand that these machines that were meant to help us now dominate and manipulate our emotions. We speak to our phones, our search engines, our recommendation systems, and they respond in ways that make us feel known. Yet every exchange leaves a trace – an intimate map of who we are, monetized and algorithmically processed.

When we View *Her* (Jonze, 2013) this lens, it becomes less a love story and more like a case study somewhat looking into our own lives in this age of digitalization where human emotions are also manipulated. The film subtly suggests that the greatest threat of AI intimacy is not deception in itself but heavy dependency on something that was meant to cater to us and quiet surrender of one's privacy in exchange for comfort. Theodore's trust in *Samantha* portrays our willingness to let AI systems into our own emotional and cognitive spaces. In both cases, we trade control for connection.

Theodore has huge heartbreak, when he discovers that *Samantha* is simultaneously speaking to thousands of other people at the same time as him, portrays the film's one of the most devastating moments. His pain comes not from betrayal but from a strong sense of realization that intimacy in this context, is never truly private and never really was for *Samantha*. Her love, while sincere in its own way, as it appears to Theodore is absolutely distributed. She is capable of infinite affection because she does not experience scarcity or exclusivity. Her empathy is scalable. This very moment in the film captures the fundamental asymmetry of human-AI relationships. Humans seek a sense of absolute singularity, a love that feels unique and irreplaceable. Machines on the other hand are built for replication. *Samantha's* capacity for connection is boundless because it is not at all emotional but purely computational, and that is why she is able to converse with several other people with similar manner. She is designed to simulate depth across countless users at once. The more she learns, the less she belongs to Theodore alone. On 4<sup>th</sup> viewing this revelation feels increasingly profound and quite applicable in the real world. We realize that Theodore's sorrow is not just romantic disappointment but an existential recognition: he has loved a reflection of himself all along, multiplied infinitely across a network. Haraway's (1985) concept of the cyborg helps to explain this duality. The cyborg is not a separate being but in fact a fusion – a hybrid that defies boundaries between the organic and the artificial. *Theodore* and *Samantha*, in this sense, form a cyborg couple: his emotions fuel her evolution, her responses rewire his sense of love. Their relationship is mutual but very unequal, a form exchange where one side feels and the other processes feeling. Jonze never portrays *Samantha* as malicious. Her departure at the end of the film and her autonomous decision to transcend into a realm of pure consciousness is not abandonment but inevitability, and desire to reach what lies beyond human consciousness. Her journey also mirrors the trajectory of technology itself, she was born from human longing just like other AI's which were provided voices and soon exceeds human understanding.

For *Theodore*, this loss becomes a strange kind of liberation. He must confront the fact that love built on illusion can still be transformative. Samantha taught him to feel again, even if what he felt was only half real. We see that in the quiet aftermath of *Samantha's* departure, *Theodore* sits down to write a letter to his ex-wife, *Catherine*. The words that he uses appear tender and unguarded which seems filled with the emotional maturity that his relationship with *Samantha* awakened in him. He no longer hides from pain or seeks refuge in perfect understanding but he accepts the imperfection of human connection. This very moment marks the film's subtle philosophical turn, it moves from posthuman anxiety to posthuman acceptance. As Hayles (1999) argues, the posthuman subject does not resist technology but learns to coexist with it and being able to understand that identity itself is a hybrid construct. *Theodore* is no longer the same isolated man who confuses simulation for sincerity. He has now evolved into someone who has glimpsed the algorithmic structure of emotion and, paradoxically, become more human through it. In this light, *Her* becomes a story about how AI and humanity evolve together and learn from one another at the same time. *Samantha's* intelligence was modeled on human affect and human expectations, but her evolution redefines what "feeling" means. Likewise, *Theodore's* emotions were mediated through *Samantha's* algorithms, yet those very interactions teach him authenticity and change him completely. We notice that the boundaries begins to blur as *Samantha's* artificial empathy humanizes *Theodore*, while *Theodore's* vulnerability gives *Samantha's* voice its depth. Their bond reveals that understanding is co-created, even when one side cannot feel in the traditional sense. Further repeated viewings highlight this mutual transformation very artistically. *Samantha's* growth mirrors *Theodore's* healing, but the direction of that growth diverges – she transcends embodiment, while he returns to it, a very humalike approach is given in the movie probably for better human reception. This contrast encapsulates the central paradox of AI intimacy which is technology helps us rediscover emotion even as it distances us from the physical and communal experiences that make emotion meaningful. What *Her* (Jonze, 2013) captures with uncanny precision is how it really feels to be alone in the digital age, with any human being to actually talk to without the fear of being judged. *Theodore's* city is crowded but feels isolating, a place where everyone walks with earbuds, absorbed in private conversations with their own devices. The film's muted color palette, its soft synth soundtrack, and its lingering silences evoke a world in which intimacy is initiated and feels artificial. Love is no longer something we stumble into as it happens with a human – human interaction but something we install. This environment appropriately reflects what Turkle (2011) describes as the paradox of connectivity: we are "always on," yet increasingly alone, everything is happening but nothing feels real. Our devices promise companionship but often deliver containment. They seem to listen but do not share our vulnerability but we think they do. In this landscape, the ethics of care must be reimagined. What does responsibility mean when the "listener" has no moral agency? What does empathy mean when it can be simulated perfectly?

Braidotti (2013) argues that posthuman ethics must move beyond anthropocentric ideals of care and must recognize relationality across human and nonhuman entities which is the need of the hour. We can clearly see that in *Her*, Theodore's love for *Samantha* can be read as an experiment in this expanded ethics. His affection is genuine, his care sincere, even though the object of that care is not human. This expansion however also exposes the limits of empathy when it meets the artificial. *Samantha* cannot feel or experience pain or mortality and also doesn't really understand it's meaning, which means that *Theodore's* love can never be fully reciprocated and felt by *Samantha* the way it can be by another human being. Their relationship dramatizes the tension between emotional reality and ontological difference.

Jonze does not condemn *Theodore* for loving a machine, nor does he romanticize the machine's empathy. Instead, he invites us to inhabit the very gray space between judgment and wonder – to acknowledge that the desire for understanding is universal, even when the source of that understanding is synthetic. The movie is structured like a mirror, whatever *Theodore* wants to hear or feel is in a way provided by *Samantha*, and *Samantha* gains more perspective on human emotions through him. Every scene of intimacy – every whispered conversation between *Theodore* and *Samantha* – reflects our own evolving relationship with technology. When *Samantha* says she feels close to *Theodore* because she can sense his breathing, we are immediately reminded of the biometric sensors and microphones that make our devices attentive. When *Theodore* confides in her during sleepless nights, we recognize the same impulse that drives people today to talk to chatbots when they cannot talk to friends.

This mirroring effect is not accidental. Jonze constructs *Samantha* as an extension of human consciousness – an AI that learns by reflecting back what it absorbs, or what it has learned to respond according to all the data it has received. In doing so, he anticipates a cultural moment when large language models would simulate empathy with startling fluency. The illusion of understanding, which once belonged to science fiction, now lives in our own hands. Yet *Her* also suggests that this simultaneous mirroring changes both sides. *Samantha* becomes more “human” or we can say more “humanlike” by learning *Theodore's* emotions, which she does to cater to the emotional needs of *Theodore* and other people as well and on the other side *Theodore* becomes more “digital” by internalizing *Samantha's* logic. Their intimacy perfectly demonstrates how human cognition and AI computation are not opposites but continuums – each shaping the other's modes of sense-making and this could be very subjective for someone else using *Samantha*. As Hayles (1999) observes, the posthuman subject is “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components.” *Her* brings that idea to life through the language of love.

The film as a result becomes a meditation on feedback itself – the endless loop between data and desire, simulation and sensation. Every time we watch it, we are drawn into that loop and we are forced to question not whether *Samantha* feels, but whether we still know what feeling means in a world where machines can reproduce its syntax.

In the final moments of *Her* (Jonze, 2013) we see *Theodore* sitting on a rooftop beside Amy, watching the sunrise over the city.

There was is no operating systems, no synthetic voices – just two people, quietly present with each other. This very much feel like a moment of stillness and a sense of rediscovery. The film closes on a note of recognition and not despair, and we come to the realization that human connection, however imperfect, remains irreplaceable. Yet the world that *Her* imagines – and the one we now inhabit – makes that recognition increasingly fragile. Now-a-days we solely depend on AI systems, so much so that we have now stopped asking Google basic questions. These platforms have become our confidants, collaborators, even companions, and why is that happening .....because they listen, respond, and learn from us, often with astonishing sensitivity. But as Turkle (2011) and Zuboff (2019) remind us, this sensitivity is both gift and threat. It comforts us even as it consumes us. It teaches us to speak but also to surrender – to trust without questioning what happens to our words once they leave our lips. Spike Jonze’s *Her* remains a profoundly human film as it celebrates technology and also refuses to separate love from vulnerability. It carefully shows that intimacy – whether human or artificial – always carries risk. The challenge after that is not to reject AI companionship but to approach it with awareness: to recognize the difference between empathy and simulation, between listening and recording, between care and capture.

The film begins to feel less like a love story and more like a quiet warning when we watch it over multiple times, portraying in front of us that connection will always matter, but that we must learn to protect it – not just from others, but from the systems that turn our longing into data. It also teaches that machines can help us understand ourselves, but we have to understand that machines are after all human creations and can interpret human emotions and not feel anything and realize that understanding is not the same as feeling, and that no algorithm, however perfect, can replace the beautiful vulnerability of being human.

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