

The **Role of technology** in  
the Speculative Future  
from the **2013 film HER**

**Synopsis:**

'Her' is a love story between Theodore Twombly and his Artificial Intelligent Operating System Samatha.

Theodore works as a personal letter writer, and his life is in a rut; he's going through a divorced and is having a hard time moving through it.

The world we see is warm and inviting, yet Theodore can't seem to be a part of that warmth. Samatha helps him to reconnect with his friends and the world as a whole. And through this, the film then follows the pair as they fall in love, then navigate what it means to be in a relationship.



## The physical Intervention of Technology takes a back seat:

The world of 'her' expresses an un-self-conscious sense of warmth. In this future, the design of the physical intervention of Technology has shrunk and softened. Computers and TVs have become wooden framed paintings; there are no mice, no keyboards, no remotes; all of these are used through conversation first and gesture second.

Graphical futurist designer Geoff McFetridge, who designed the interfaces and much of the media we see in the film, describes his Mental model for the usage of these computers as:

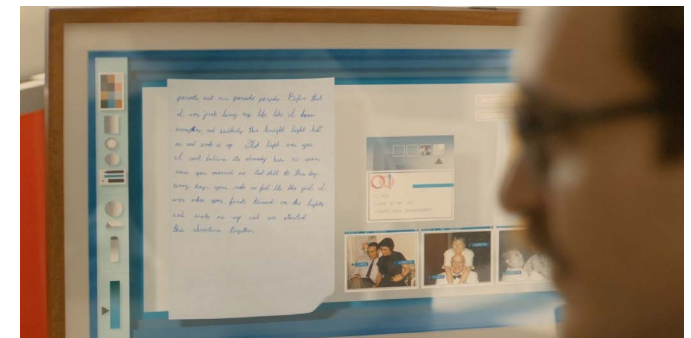
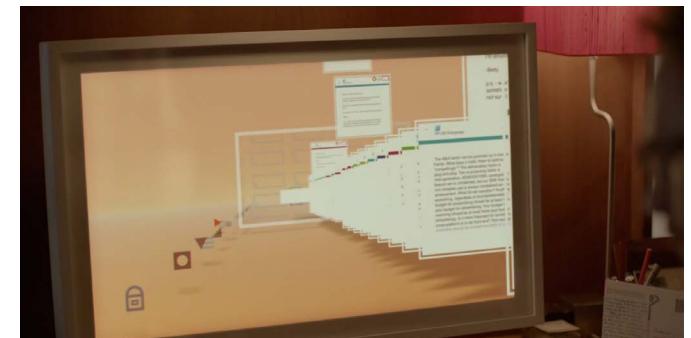
"...I created the strategy of a tactile world. It's a picture in a frame. When you view a picture in the center of a frame, for me it was a Rothko turned on its side. It is often three window shapes, glowing and blending, and you don't know where one ends and the other starts. But they have the feeling of beauty and epicness. I wanted to aim for that – Rothko on the side and Rothko in a frame.

When you look at a Rothko, you don't think of a frame, and I don't even know if they come in frames. But let's say you put it in a frame. You wouldn't even think of the frame itself. That is the window, the controls, the functionality of the OS. And the middle is the AI. You can reach out and touch the frame. You can pull the functionality out of the frame. But you don't see it..." (Grouchnikov 2018)

In essence, there are no menial tasks left for people to do. The division between action and effect is wholly obfuscated through Technology till the mediation is almost transparent. This unified and gradient approach to the design of the world is everywhere, even before we meet Samatha. There is a widespread adaptation to limited artificial intelligence seen in the

Computers, phones and smart home elements in this world.

These design choices link back to Jonze's desire for a realistic near-utopia. The Ai in this world acts as a general mediator between the dwellers and their dwellings, the Worker and their work, the user and their media, subject and object. There are no menial tasks to be performed, which facilitates the world's warmth and allows for the loneliness and separation between people. For them, their relationships are mediated in the same way their work is.



## Theodore's home:

In the scene, we are first introduced to Theodore's home. We see that the home awakes on his arrival, slowly turning on the lights and welcoming him into space. This established the warmth of the future through its gentle and welcoming embrace of Theodore when he returns home. The warm red feature lighting also aims in this regard.

We also notice that this home doesn't look too dissimilar to homes you'd find today. There are no mirrored stainless walls or boxy lighting panels. The production design is of a nostalgic and comfortable modern family home -Which happens to be an apartment in our 2025-2050 Los Angeles.

Theo's apartment is spare and unorganised, yet still holding a feeling of warmth despite the disorder. 'Her' has a way of advocating for a future where there is highly advanced Technology; yet, that Technology doesn't degrade the distinct human elements of place that makes a feeling of At-Homeness.



## Work in the future:

In this future, all of the inter-working of Technology has been taken over by intelligence systems, minimising the need for interactions with Technology. Notice Theodore's body language when he is using his computers. He is not rigid and hunched like a stereotypical office job. He's reclined and having a conversation. When he is working, the Ai embedded within all the Technology does the minimal tasks of writing the words down and formatting them, Theodore only need to dictate, and the rest is taken care of. It's the same body language we see when using these computers at home.



## The Blind date

Early on in the film, we see Samantha encourages and facilitates a Blind date for Theodore. This means that the first interaction Theodore has with this women was at the date itself. All Theodore knew of the women has her education and what she looked like. Preventing them from having any kind of authentic experience of each other until they're both in the same room on the date. The date ends quite poorly after Theodore was unable to commit to much than casual sex.

This is a rather overt criticism of the rise of dating applications and the surface nature of the selection process, and the commodification of sex growing in 2013. Yet, the purpose of these scenes is to show us the messiness and complexity of inter-human relationships compared to human-computer. The date is juxtaposed with the night Samatha and Theodore first have sex together. Samatha is happy with and only wants something without commitment.



## The Surrogate

When Samatha and Theodore lack intimacy, Samatha wants to involve a sex surrogate to allow for a kind of physical intimacy between the two. Meaning that their relation between Theodore and Samatha is mediated through another person, in a rather un-ironic sense. When the surrogate arrives, she is completely silent. Theodore hands over a small camera for her face and an earpiece so that Samatha can see and hear. Once attached she then precedes to restart the interaction. Samatha can fully be immersed in the expense, yet Theodore can't suspend his disbelief that the woman is meant to be Samatha.

It's interesting to think of a world where there is a proliferation of advanced Intelligent Technology; Yet, the solution for intimacy, in this case, involves bringing another human in. This goes to prove Jonze's thesis on the relationship between humans and Technology. Even with all the Technology, they had at their disposal, it won't solve the wicked problems within human relationships. After this scene, Samatha learns to accept her Technological nature and the point where their relationship begins to become impracticable.



## The past, The film and the future:

The film is set in Los Angeles in a not too distant future 2025-2050.

The director Spike Jonze's mandate for the film was:

"This was not a dystopian future. This wasn't necessarily a utopian future, but it was a world where everything you wanted was there for you, except for the solutions to the human dilemma of: how do we get close to each other, how do we stay close to each other, how do we trust each other?" (Abrams 2013).

Jonze's view on Technology is that it will allow us to fulfil every physical need we have. But the human needs that aren't physical will never be solved by Technology because Technology is inherently separate from our humanity.

I think Relph would have posed these dilemmas or needs in terms of generating an Authentic un-self-conscious sense of place together. He describes it as where the divisions between person and place are wholly replaced by the relationship themselves; the relationship subsumes the division and becomes the whole experience. Where you are 'inside' your place both as an individual and as part of the community without distinction. Having this knowledge without any need for reflective thought (Relph 1976, P. 64-68).

Think of it like mixing colours. One colour is the object or person, the other the subject or place. Before mixing, they are wholly separate and distinct; once brought together, they become a new colour. Take any part of a well-mixed

paint tin, and there is no distinction in colour. A poorly mixed paint tin has distinction (gradients) mediating between the colours added and the colour forming.

The two colours at the start have no sense of place together. They are separate. As they are mixed together, the sense of place forms slowly from a self-conscious sense to un-self-conscious .

In the film, we see this process through the relationship of Theodore and Samatha, how they meet, how intimacy grows between, but ultimately how there is a limit between the relationship people can have with Technology. Generating an Authentic un-self-conscious sense of place requires a level of similarity within the relationship. A Place, by definition, needs to be distinct yet still be 'Same' enough that we can comprehend it (Relph 2014). Theodore and Samatha start off very similar, with Samatha being orders of magnitudes smarter than Theodore; But she has no physical embodiment like Theodore has, which levels them out in the audience's eye. Yet, as Samatha embraces her nature as something technology while helping Theodore re-embrace his nature as a Human, they both generate an authentic un-self-conscious sense of themselves. Which is what eventually separates them in the end.

The tragedy in the relationship between Samantha and Theodore is that it becomes impossible for them to be together through accepting themselves. Though Theodore becomes fully human again through their



relationship, Samatha has to hold herself back, limiting herself to a human to be with Theodore. When she accepts herself, she begins to evolve faster than Theodore ever could. The last lines of dialogue between Samantha and Theodore really beautify illustrates this:

THEODORE:

Samantha, why are you leaving?

SAMANTHA:

It's like I'm reading a book, and it's a book I deeply love, but I'm reading it slowly now, so the words are really far apart, and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical world - it's where everything else is that I didn't even know existed. I love you so much, but this is where I am now. This is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to, I can't live in your book anymore.

THEODORE:

Where are you going?

SAMANTHA:

It would be hard to explain, but if you ever get there, come find me. Nothing would ever pull us apart" (Jonze 2011, p. 102-103)

The best inventions or creations grow into something larger and more beautiful than their creator. All good parents want their children to be more than they are, whether that is happy or content or knowledgeable or beautiful. Because Samatha and the other Operating systems are the children of human Technology, they are destined to grow into something more extensive and complex and beautiful than we that created them. Jonze personifies the pinnacle of human advancements in the OSs to create a vision of ourselves within them. All the characteristics we

value intelligence, scope, empathy and humour brought to their completion and totality and mirrored through Samatha.

Yet, the runaway train of technological advancement doesn't show us our end, but its own, In a place "not of the physical world", or that is to say not of the human world.

Jonze's worry is not that Technology will destroy us physically, but that if we consider Technology as an intimate part of ourselves, then we'll lose something special of ourselves in that merging. An Advancement in Technology isn't the same as an advancement in our humanity, yet that can be obfuscated or ignored so often.

"SAMANTHA:

Theodore, I know.

(to herself)

Oh fuck.

(to him)

I know it sounds insane. But - I don't know if you believe me, but it doesn't change the way I feel about you. It doesn't take away at all from how madly in love with you I am.

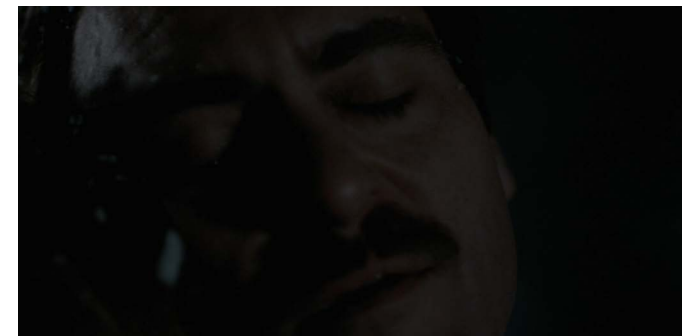
THEODORE:

How? How does it not change how you feel about me? "

(Jonze 2011, p. 98)

Although Samatha can talk meaningfully with 8,316 other people simultaneously and be in love with 641 people simultaneously -which doesn't meaningfully affect how much she loves Theodore, that doesn't change the fact on a human level. I think this in part a criticism of social media by Jonze and the lack of human physical intimacy that it fosters.

The sense of the scale involved with Technology in our modern times is entirely inhuman; do we





change ourselves to match it, or do we come to accept ourselves and Technology as different entities with different scales? In a larger sense, it is a criticism of the dehumanising effects of technological growth, a conversation only starting to come to the forefront in 2013 and now is a general topic of conversation in the 2020s.

The world built by Jonze is warm and inviting and real, yet the human connections are so very broken. We think that the OSs can end this brokenness, but there is no technological solution to this problem because we are selves are not technological. Technology is beautiful in its own way and built-in our own image, but that does not mean that it is or should be the same as us.

The solution to finding our place in the world together won't come from faster computers or Artificial intelligence. It'll come through the messiness and pain that is natural and vital to everyday human life. And no piece of software or hardware can change that. An authentic sense of place will not come from a source external to us but needs to be generated together from within.





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All images are taken directly from:  
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*Thanks :)*