

# Anthropology of a Loving Hybridization

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*Her*. 2013. Film directed by Spike Jonze

Hybridization is not just a modern phenomenon, and yet, it is undeniable that it represents one of the burning issues of our epoch. On the verge of what is representable and what is beyond representation, between ordinary and extraordinary, cinematography has always been fascinated by hybridization, the bio-cultural acquisition of alterity. It is a mysterious field of experimentation, since it plays with the boundaries of what is human.

Along the years, Japanese cinema, in part due to the unforgettable tragedy of the nuclear bombing, has been the landmark for any aesthetics of transformation: in *Tetsuo* by Shinya Tsukamoto, humankind finds access to a different, higher trans-human dimension. The body of the employee Tomoo Taniguchi blends with the machine; he is disfigured by metal objects, and his penis is transformed into a dangerous drill, with which he will penetrate his fiancée to death. This moment of revelation, of epiphany, is an *agnorisis* of what Günther Anders defines as the *soft totalitarianism* of technology.

Moreover, the osmotic, visionary mutations put on the screen by Tsukamoto instantly recall the surreal hybridization of *Videodrome*, a film directed by the great David Cronenberg in 1983. The owner of a cable TV channel, Max Renn, being obsessed with snuff movies, decides to watch *Videodrome*: a pornographic show that mysteriously unsettles the psyche of any person that watches it. This begins a deep and symbiotic interaction between the protagonist and the television, an exchange that will lead Max to blend with the TV screen in an increasingly tight bond of violence, psychosis and tumorous hallucinations.

Besides these devilish hybridizations, which emphasize the man-machine relationship to the point of envisioning a total fusion between

them, the seventh art has also tried to define the category of human through contact with the robotic and cyberpunk universe, completely abandoning the horror front in order to evoke an emotional connection with technological otherness.

In this genre we find *Solo* by Norberto Barba, *Bicentennial Man* by Chris Columbus, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* by Steven Spielberg, and, among many others, the recent *Ex Machina* by Alex Garland and *Chappie* by Neil Blomkamp.

All these works share a common feature: the ability of the robots to experience or mimic human feelings. Besides frightening the human protagonists, this ability gets to the point of challenging the very idea of human identity: if we are not the only ones that can experience emotions, and express them through language, how are we different from anthropomorphic machines? Clearly, here there is at stake not simply how identity is built (in this case a property-based model, that describes humanity by listing its features), but the very notion of identity.

Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) is a delightful movie that explores this issue. It tells about the love life of Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), a lone and introvert man who lives in a future Los Angeles, governed by the technological *panopticon*. He is painfully going through a divorce with his wife; and one day he decides to purchase a new special model of operating system, *OS 1*, developed as an artificial intelligence that can evolve, learn and develop its personality.

While configuring the OS, Theodore chooses a feminine voice for the interface, which proves to be particularly sensual and charming. When asked about its name, the OS chooses, on its own, to be called Samantha. As a result of many such examples of the apparent expression of a well-formed personality, the fascination of the boundless potentiality of that technology, and especially, Samantha's constant and sympathetic presence in his life, the protagonist is increasingly charmed by the OS to the point that he falls in love, and his feelings seem to be sincerely requited by the software.

This is the first time a movie puts on the screen a man-machine relationship which is not corporeal. This is completely different both from Tsukamoto's nightmares and from David, the baby robot we see in *A.I.*; now hybridization is played on an invisible, intellectual and even deeply emotional level.

Whereas in the previously mentioned films humanity was questioned by the physical presence of otherness (by the television screen, by the mechanical object, by the robot), in *Her*, the seed of the identity crisis is to be found in humanity itself. Spike Jonze switches the point of view:

the problem doesn't come from the outside anymore, but it comes from the unknown who lives within us, the unexplored that doesn't allow us to thrust a rational control on life, and that brings humans back to a purely animal dimension. As the idea itself of what is "human" is blurred, humans realize they *are* animals, and because of this they desperately try to re-define their selves, beginning with one of the most important aspects of everyone's identity: our relationships, and especially, our love life.

Through a refined direction, always at the service of the narrative, the American film-maker focuses on ambivalence as an essential character of mankind: Theodore is torn apart by his virtual, platonic love for Samantha, and his necessity for a physical, erotic contact that could ontologically confirm the former's validity.

In this excruciating research, humanity finds its own *via negationis* in the encounter with the software: the hybridization is not positive anymore, but negative, since it acts by way of denial. *Her* shows a new way to deal with technological otherness, where the technology, that was created to empower humans, on the contrary, comes to highlight human flaws.

We could define this phenomenon as an *apophatic* hybridization, that questions the assumptions on which human identity is based: Theodore's love for Samantha is not a return to an harmonious *en kai pan*, as we often think that love should be, but it is the beginning of a process of ongoing subtraction that eventually leaves man completely bare, without any property or characterizing feature.

In rationality, language, culture, and so forth, *OS 1* gradually reveals to be infinitely superior to him, and even the love Theodore professes to her seems to be not enough to fill the gap that emerges between them.

It is in this very complex situation that Theodore, inhabitant of a hyper-technological future, for the first time realizes his existential bareness, a vital discovery that will allow him to find new foundations for his humanity.

It becomes evident, here, that Jonze's work tries to dismiss the adamant humanist ontology, that finds human identity in the accumulation of properties, thus, creating space for a new, post-human identity that could allow humans to be defined by their *modes* of being, their potential relationships. In other words, by the ways they decide to behave, to interpret their being in relation to other individuals.

Whereas *Videodrome* and *Tetsuo* questioned the biological aspects of *homo sapiens* through a menacing, osmotic, bodily bond with the machine, *Her*, on the contrary, delves into the emotional world of humans, where the merging that takes place is first intellectual, sentimental, and eventually *apophatic*.

The stereotypical effort to redefine humans through a technological augmentation of the properties that characterize them has no place in the work of the American director. In the encounter with technological otherness, in the challenging relationship with the machine, it is man himself that actively comes to perceive his own limits, as in front of a mirror, and therefore begins to get out of the totalitarian paradigm of property-based identity.

The overwhelming *kaizen*, the increasingly accelerating self-improvement process acted by Samantha sheds light on Theodore's all too human imprisonment in his own mental schemes. Whether we think the OS can actually *feel* emotions or not, it is remarkable how its constant effort to perceive, describe and develop the feelings it expresses – at least apparently – is strongly in contrast with the man's partly unconscious difficulties in voicing them, in recognizing sincerely what he feels and facing his relational troubles.

At first, when Theodore discovers that Samantha can communicate simultaneously with thousands of people and OSes in the very moment they are talking, he is overwhelmed by jealousy. "That's insane", he says. Things grow worse when she confesses that she is actually in love with more than six hundred individuals.

We understand very well how Theodore feels. He is hurt. And yet, Samantha in that very scene gives him a ground-breaking, complex vision of how feelings work: "The heart is not like a box that gets filled up. It expands in size the more you love. [...] This doesn't make me love you any less. It actually makes me love you more".

Although Theodore's first answer is that "it doesn't make any sense", in the following passage, we see him reflecting alone in a sincere effort to *understand*. Love makes him do that. It is his struggle to understand that eventually lets him out of the totalitarian anthropocentric paradigm we were talking about.

In fact, thanks to his effort, Theodore slowly realizes that to be authentically human, first and foremost, he has to recognize and accept his own feelings and, above all, his own fragility. It is in this perspective that he rediscovers the sweetness of his old friendship with Amy (Amy Adams), with whom he establishes a new, silent complicity. And also, remarkably, he manages to write a touching letter to his ex-wife, apologizing for hiding his feelings, eventually succeeding in finding his own way out of existential uneasiness and towards a new serenity.

The absolute, superhuman perfection that in this film is represented by *OS 1*, showing humans how weak, limited and fragile they are, is an extraordinary narrative device that has in itself the power to disrupt the

self-sufficient, arrogant anthropocentrism that puts humans at the center of the universe.

This looming emotional openness creates the possibility for a new kind of relation to take place: an encounter with other individuals that involves a restored depth and understanding of otherness. It is a renewed hierophany, where sacred is taken from the supernatural Hyperururation and is brought to the earthly, profane world where men and women just like us, just like Theodore and Amy, struggle to understand their emotions, and to build their lives day after day.

*Her* establishes the foundation for a new way to define post-human identity, not simply dismissing what humans have been up until now, in order to create a new label, but, on the contrary, revitalizing the awareness of what we have always been: imperfect and fragile. By turning the anthropocentric idea of human superiority to face the evidence of our fallibility, humility and dialogic openness are established as a new bedrock for our society.

Only with an unconditional acceptance of these existential depths, that in this case emerge from an *apophatic* relationship with the overgrowing power of *téchne*, will it be possible, maybe, to deconstruct the egotistical, self-sufficient attitude of the anthropocentric humanist paradigm that we seem so unwilling to let go.

Love, that has the overwhelming power to let us *desire* to develop deep relationships and hybridize with alterity, and thus forcing us to dwell on the limits of our egos, may be, in the end, the trigger of this anthropological revolution.

## REFERENCES

*Her*. 2013. Film directed by Spike Jonze.