

IS AI THE SOLUTION TO HUMAN ISOLATION? HOW DEPICTIONS OF AI IN *HER* (2013) AND *MANIAC* (2018) REVEAL OUR PERCEPTIONS OF LOVE, HUMAN CONNECTION AND THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Sentient robots, a science-fiction (SF) staple, have often been presented as threats to humanity. These dystopian imaginations reveal our fears about the rapidly evolving technological landscape. SF has also explored what it would be like if a human could fall in love with a robot. Typically, this takes the form of a man falling in love with a female AI, perhaps reflective of the societal dominance of heterosexual male perspective. With AI's increasing popularity in what is already dubbed the digital age, along with a loneliness epidemic, it would be useful to investigate the relationship between these phenomena. Since media reflects contemporary fears and desires regarding AI and technology and helps shape perceptions of the future and our relationship with technology, this paper studies the film *Her* (2013) directed by Spike Jonze and the miniseries *Maniac* (2018), created by Patrick Somerville and Cary Joji Fukunaga. Specifically, this paper studies the isolation faced by the main human characters in the digital age, the presentation of the AI and how they facilitate connection between the human characters and help them heal from past traumas. Overall, they vividly depict modern isolation, and how technology simultaneously exacerbates and alleviates this loneliness, presenting a relatively hopeful vision of the future.

INTRODUCTION

Science-fiction (SF) often pits humans against technology, betraying our fears and reservations about the rate of technological advancement. Alongside this, the evolution of human relationships has prompted SF creators to explore what it would be like for humans to be in romantic relationships with robots. This paper examines *Her* (2013) directed by Spike Jonze and *Maniac* (2018) written by Patrick Somerville and directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga. *Her* is a love story between a lonely man going through a divorce, Theodore, and his operating system (OS), Samantha. *Maniac* follows two humans, Annie and Owen, as they undergo a clinical trial meant to solve their psychological issues. The trial involves an AI, GRTA, creating simulated realities to help the participants work through these issues. Specifically, Annie is dealing with the death of her sister on top of her mother's abandonment. Owen similarly deals with familial issues and schizophrenia. This paper investigates how AI-human relationships are presented in other SF works. It will then study the alienation of the human characters in the digital age, and finally, the role the AI plays in facilitating connection between the humans and helping them heal from past trauma. These texts present an arresting picture of isolation in the 21st century, showing how technology shapes and yet helps to remedy this loneliness, overall presenting a cautiously optimistic view of the future.

HISTORY OF AI-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN SF

Love and romance have always been a central focus in SF, with the Creature in *Frankenstein* (1818) begging his creator to build a companion like him, because he was lonely and was rejected by human society. However, SF often presents naive, childlike women, whether they are aliens, robots or other non-human creatures, as love interests for human men. Typically, they are highly skilled or advanced in specific areas, but this skill is innate and cannot be controlled or practised (Russ, 2017), robbing these women of their agency. Though they are profoundly naive and unaware of human matters, they are portrayed by attractive adult women and sexualised by the director and/or audience. This male fantasy is found throughout time: from *Star Trek* (1968) and *The Fifth Element* (1997) to *Tron: Legacy* (2010) (Sampson, 2019). Such depictions reflect how women are often defined by their relationships with men, and the paedophilic nature of the female ideal: a sexualised, but extremely inexperienced and immature being. This is exacerbated by the sexualisation of their naivete, rather than just their physical features.

Modern films have addressed and subverted this trope. In *Ex Machina* (2014), the female AI Ava's ability to manipulate the human Caleb into helping her escape is based on how she exaggerates her apparent innocence and lack of worldliness to seduce him. This ostensibly falls into the 'evil robot' trope, playing on audience fears of the rapid development of technology.

We are made to question the sincerity of Ava and Caleb's relationship, with both their motivations seeming corrupt. With Ava's physical design being based on Caleb's pornography preferences and his fantasies about a romantic relationship with her after escaping, it is unclear if he is acting out of genuine concern for her, or simply attraction. The gratuitous lingering shots of Ava undressing can be interpreted as his view of her, as a sexualised object rather than an equal. This is especially clear when he does not include Kyoko, another female AI, in his escape plan, despite her being equally a victim of their creator, Nathan. Caleb's role as the 'hero' is thus problematised, making the audience question the narrative of the male hero 'saving' the damsel-in-distress, another popular SF trope (Russ, 2017). It is also unclear if Ava's interest in Caleb is genuine, or like Nathan suggests, was always a manipulation to escape. However, not only is this understandable, but Caleb's disregard for Kyoko suggests that Ava's prima facie betrayal of Caleb is justified, since his concern for her is insincere. Her escape is thus a rejection of his objectification and an assertion of her own subjectivity. However, Ava's perspective is not represented for much of the film, making this message more symbolic than personal. Thus, despite its subversive take on AI-human relationships, it is through the human perspective of AI as a strange, novel concept, with these relationships defined by antagonism. In contrast, hyper-futuristic technology is normalised in *Her* and *Maniac*, shifting the focus to the nature of human emotion and relationships.

Unlike *Ex Machina*, neither *Her* nor *Maniac*'s AI characters have a physical body. *Maniac*'s GRTA is an artificial duplicate of the lead scientist's mother, Greta, and appears as Greta in the simulations, but is never objectified, shifting the focus to human connection and emotional intimacy. While these characters are not human, they possess great depth and their viewpoints are given adequate screentime. They are not childlike, and their moments of inexperience with human life never make them vulnerable to an uneven power dynamic with a human. In fact, their inexperience is presented as an obstacle to overcome. In *Her*, Samantha quickly learns about human experiences, like loss and love. Her rapid growth is what makes her and the other OS eventually leave, because they have outgrown the physical realm. Jonze briefly acknowledges the SF trope of the innocent, subservient female love interest. When Theodore's ex-wife Katherine criticises his relationship with Samantha, he defends himself with 'She doesn't just do whatever I say', indicating that he knows what the dynamic between a human and an OS would seem like. In fact, what he loves most about her is that 'she isn't just one thing', appreciating her layers and complexity rather than any unsettling notion of her innocence. It is because she evolves so quickly that their relationship does not work. *Maniac*, like *Ex Machina*, interrogates the 'evil robot' trope. The AI, GRTA, faces immense grief after Robert, who is her lover and a scientist working on the trial, dies in episode 3. Her grief makes her lash out at the trial's participants, attempting to trap them in the simulation, symbolic representations of their own trauma to make them as miserable as she is. However, this storyline serves as a catalyst for the characters to deal with bereavement and trauma. Her inexperience with human loss is the source of tension, a parallel to Annie and Owen's inability to cope. Thus, these texts present complex and layered female AI characters to explore human struggles.

HOW TECHNOLOGY FACILITATES ALIENATION

These texts vividly dramatise loneliness in the 21st century, depicting the alienation of the human characters, and how capitalism and technological innovation prey on difficult personal circumstances. In *Her*, Theodore's inability to move on from his separation from Katherine causes him to withdraw from his loved ones. He frequently dwells on his past with Katherine, which is bathed in warm light (Figure 1), contrasted with the muted, melancholic colour palette of his present (Figure 2). Similarly in *Maniac*, Annie is addicted to the 'A' pill that shows one's most traumatic moment, allowing her to relive the day her sister died, showing that the grief and guilt has paralysed her, literally trapping her in the past too. Jonze and Fukunaga depict how the worlds these characters inhabit reinforce the distance between people, making genuine human connection elusive. Theodore's job in *Her* is to write letters to loved ones on clients' behalf, suggesting that people can outsource the emotional work necessary to maintain intimate relationships. It is therefore not surprising that the relationship between Theodore and an OS, Samantha, is treated as normal in their world. It is easier for Theodore to talk to an OS and write letters on behalf of others than confront his own emotional issues, such as his divorce and why it happened. While he is thoughtful and sensitive, the emotional work to confront these harsh realities can be very taxing. It is easier for him to avoid his human friends and seek comfort in his OS, just as it is easier for one to tell a stranger their problems than it is to be truly vulnerable in front of their loved ones. In *Maniac*, people can hire 'Friend Proxies', which are described as 'more convenient' than spending time with one's actual friends. Annie's father is always using the 'a-VoidPod', a device that allows one to literally sleep one's life away (Bruce, 2020, p.33). It is implied that technology has taken over many humans' current jobs, allowing the humans to pursue letter-writing, documentary filmmaking, or acting as strangers' friends, though it cynically implies that if capitalism is still the dominant politico-economic system, its psychological effects are lasting (Flisfeder and Burnham, 2017). Relationships are transactional and businesses have found new ways to capitalise on grief and loneliness.



Figure 1: Theodore and Katherine in the past (*Her*)



Figure 2: Theodore is sad (*Her*)

The setting of the big city in both texts highlights the uniquely 21st century form of loneliness: that we are more connected to others than ever before, yet somehow detached and alone. One of *Maniac*'s first scenes highlights the banal, everyday interactions that betray a longing for human connection. Annie drinks her coffee alone, looking at someone telling a story amongst a group of friends who are not really listening to him, ironically alone too (Figure 3). She looks away as he looks at her, visually conveying the difficulty in reaching out, even as we are surrounded by people. In Owen's case, the loneliness of the big city leaves him lacking meaning, causing him to interpret innocuous advertisements and billboards as code words to help him save the world. His schizophrenia also causes him to hallucinate a version of his brother that gives him missions and helps him on this 'quest', as opposed to his actual cruel, unempathetic brother, to give himself some semblance of familial love. More broadly, these hallucinations can be seen as a metaphor for the futility of the search for meaning in an inhumanly capitalistic world. Annie does not really have a family either, so she traps herself in her memories so she can live her last moments with her sister. In *Her*, Theodore always saw a version of Katherine that does not really exist. He looks back on their time together through a rose-tinted lens, as one does when they miss a loved one. During their lunch scene, Katherine claims he always wanted her to be a 'light happy bouncy "everything's fine" LA wife', that he never wanted to acknowledge the more difficult, darker aspects of each other and their relationship. He even procrastinates signing his divorce papers for months just

to feel like he is still married. All the humans initially struggle with confronting reality and moving on, whether it is loss, trauma or even everyday unpleasantness. This keeps them trapped in ruminating about themselves and their lives, preventing them from forming or maintaining meaningful bonds with others.



Figure 3: Alone in a crowd (*Maniac*)

HEALING, HOPE AND ENDINGS

Both texts challenge society's view of romantic relationships, as the locus of love and intimacy, lionising exclusivity as an indicator of love's depth and purity. When Samantha tells Theodore that she has been speaking to and is in love with several others, Theodore cannot see how loving others does not diminish her love for him. She says that 'the heart's not like a box that gets filled up' and 'it expands in size the more you love', which he does not understand. Many of us pin all our emotions onto one person, making them responsible for our happiness. Many people often get jealous of the intimacy of even platonic relationships (Sucrese et al., 2023, p.334), because romance is meant to be 'everything' to someone. Interestingly, *Maniac*'s climax is the AI character learning this: GRTA must let go of her unhealthy dependence on Robert and deal with her grief. She lost faith in humanity after he died, causing her to lash out at the other humans and try to force them to live in the simulations, only releasing them after Annie connects and empathises with her. With neither text ending with the main characters entering a romantic relationship, the audience is asked to question the disproportionate emphasis placed on romantic relationships, and to prioritise friendship and love, whether romance is involved or not. Other 21st century texts emphasise this; *Barbie* (2023) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* directly challenge the idea of romance as a 'happily-ever-after', imploring characters to develop their identity as independent agents and value their bonds with others.

They subvert technophobic SF conventions by showing the human characters learning more about themselves and each other and improving how they navigate relationships through this journey with AI. While the connections that are prioritised in both *Her* and *Maniac* are those between humans, the AI characters are significant in bringing them together. In *Her*, Theodore is noticeably much happier after he starts talking to Samantha, allowing himself to be more open with his friends, especially Amy. He finds himself more open, vulnerable, and honest than he has ever been towards the end of the film, partly because Samantha helped him find the courage to face Katherine one last time. He reflects on their relationship and how he tended to ignore conflict in relationships in hopes that they will go away, when it just fosters resentment. This newfound self-awareness allows him to make peace with Katherine and connect with Amy, especially after she gets divorced and grows close to an OS herself, having gone through a similar journey with loss and disconnection. Their final, wordless scene is touching (Figure 4), suggesting they truly see each other and can form a deep connection that transcends the need for verbal exchange. In episode 9 of *Maniac*, Annie finds the courage to confront her own fixation on her sister's death after seeing how destructive GRTA's grief has been. She tells GRTA that such loss is almost insurmountable, but one must acknowledge and accept it. This is what she does when she meets a simulated version of her sister. Annie admits she was distant and mean to her because she was afraid they would drift apart when she moved. After confronting how she pushes people away before they have a chance to leave her, she realises how unhealthy that is and ends up telling Owen how much he means to her, breaking her pattern and

healing from her past. Additionally, Owen deals with his fears of driving others away after his incident with Olivia, allowing himself to get close to and escape the psychiatric institution with Annie. The final scene of *Maniac* depicts Annie and Owen driving away together, joy and thrill on their faces (Figure 5) as they finally feel free from their past trauma and pain and embark on a new journey, a new beginning together. Overall, these endings are hopeful, depicting the triumph of human connection and love, succeeding because of, rather than, despite technology.



Figure 4: Theodore and Amy connect (*Her*)



Figure 5: Annie helps Owen escape the psychiatric institution (*Maniac*)

However, with Samantha leaving and GRTA ‘dying’, one can argue that technology is portrayed merely as a temporary tool for the human characters to learn about themselves and each other before living completely independent of them, rather than any meaningful co-existence. In *Her*, the rapid advancement of the OS suggests that humans and AI cannot operate on the same plane of reality in the foreseeable future. While Samantha tells Theodore to find her if he manages to transcend the physical realm like the OS have, Jonze choosing to end the film with Theodore and Amy bonding instead of this future where Theodore reunites with Samantha suggests that the kind of intimacy being prioritised is still human. Meanwhile, GRTA’s ‘death’ suggests that technology’s volatility will ultimately be its ruin. *Maniac* seems to imply that her proximity to humanity and inability to handle human challenges necessitates her death. Thus, while not entirely technophobic, these texts do not radically re-imagine a society where AI is thoroughly integrated and welcomed by humans.

CONCLUSION

Overall, *Her* and *Maniac* humanise and sympathise with their AI characters. They allow these characters their own complex and fleshed out perspectives, allowing the audience to look at quintessential human experiences through a new lens, and reflect on the nature of loneliness and relationships today. Their role in helping the humans recover from their past wounds is indispensable, providing a fresh point of view in a genre that can often be dystopic. However, they are products of their time; they do not radically rethink our definitions of humanity by suggesting that humans and sentient AI can coexist, since the inherent tension between humans and, for the first time, something more advanced than us is overwhelming. It is interesting to see how media from the 2020s onwards will explore these themes, given the unprecedented rise of AI at the start of the decade.

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