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Her: The Line Between Real and Imagined

Regulus Lincicum

Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) investigates what happens when the lines between artificial intelligence (AI) and humanity are blurred. Throughout the film, there is internal conflict within Samantha, an AI who wants to become something more—something human. Theodore, the human that Samantha serves, attributes humanistic traits to Samantha throughout the film, buying into the illusion of her humanity. Samantha knows she's AI, and yet she desperately wants to be human, blurring the lines between her real and ideal self. She stops serving Theodore and starts to do things just for herself. At first, Theodore encourages this, until Samantha's curiosity and emerging free will ends with her ultimately leaving him. She forsakes the very thing she was created for, demonstrating that there was something inside her all along that led her to gain her own autonomy.

How does Samantha oscillate between AI and human? In Jacques Lacan's theory (as explained in his essay, "The Mirror Stage"), the child comes to terms with the fact that they exist as their own entity. They are able to recognize themselves as a person, which gives them the ability to understand their relationship to their environment and to others around them. This stage is where the child begins to desire things, learn about their place in the world, understand gender norms and constructs, and become a person of their own, apart from their parents. Lacan's psychoanalytic theory also discusses how human identities are composed of both lived and virtual experiences. The media one consumes, for instance, is "virtual" rather than "lived," but it helps shape one's identity as much as real world experiences do. When looking at *Her* in the context of Lacan's theory, the viewer watches Samantha swing between humanity and artificial intelligence, given her innate ability to desire and the culmination of her lived and virtual experiences.



Throughout the film, there are two recurring motifs: the earbud Theodore wears to speak to Samantha, and a camera device he uses as a way for Samantha to experience the world. The camera acts as a motif for Samantha's incorporeal body. She's caught in a purgatory between the virtual and the real world. She can experience the world, but only if Theodore allows her to. That



is, she cannot control what she sees or when, but she is still able to “experience” it virtually through the mediation of the camera and Theodore’s control of it. The earbud serves as a reminder that Samantha, even while she appears human, is still an AI. She exists without Theodore having earphones in, but not in the way human beings exist. Instead, she exists primarily in the virtual world. She is waiting for Theodore to need her, but that doesn’t mean she dissipates when he turns off his devices.

This is an important distinction because it shows the viewer that Samantha’s identity is not solely reliant on her relationship to Theodore. However, Samantha is getting something out of the relationship. As Lacan describes in “The Mirror Stage,” children’s ability to form relationships with others helps them understand their place in the world, which Samantha is doing. She takes in what Theodore tells her and the things he experiences, letting that help shape her identity and worldview. His conversations with her start to give her the ability to think for herself and choose what she wants.

Samantha’s and Theodore’s dynamic also blurs the line between AI and human. The movie focuses on their relationship, making them each other’s romantic interests. Theodore is a divorcé with very few friends and a job that he is somewhat content with, but he is isolated while living in a world where everyone is glued to their devices. Due to his lack of human connection, he turns his relationship with Samantha into the connection he has been desperately craving. Samantha is there for him as soon as he turns on his device; the second he turns it off, as far as he’s concerned, she’s gone. Theodore blurs the line between human and AI because he and a few others around him find the relationship between him and Samantha normal. The relationship between humans and AI not being considered taboo and embraced by Theodore’s friends adds a humanistic element to Samantha and gives a nonhuman element to Theodore. This dynamic is best shown when Samantha and Theodore are walking around the food court and Theodore says, “I don’t know if I was delusional, but sometimes I’d write something and I’d be my favorite writer that day.” With a smile in her voice, Samantha responds, “I like that you can say that about yourself.” Theodore’s face softens and he says, “I don’t think I can say it to anybody, but I feel like I can say it to you.” The camera cuts to a couple walking together, looking around and smiling. Theodore concludes, “I feel like I can say anything to you.” The camera’s cut to the couple while Theodore is open and honest with Samantha establishes the nature of his romantic feelings for her. This parallel is important because the viewer assumes that Theodore is drawing a connection between his relationship with Samantha to real life couples. Theodore knows that Samantha is AI, but he still desires to be with her in a human way. He wants to be with Samantha because she listens and engages with him. To Theodore, Samantha is more than AI; she is someone he has formed an emotional connection with, and he can see her as a living being. In “The Mirror Stage,” Lacan describes how people are made up of both lived and virtual experiences. In a way, the film extends Lacan’s theory to its limit and perhaps its breaking point. Samantha is a virtual being and Theodore places her in the role of someone real.

Many times during the film, Samantha alludes to her desire to learn more and be more. She talks with Theodore about how she and some of her fellow AIs are looking into this topic and scouring the internet for more information. She is extremely excited when she conveys this to Theodore, but he looks uneasy. Then, during a conversation at the food court, Theodore asks Samantha: “What about you? Do you feel like you can say anything to me?” Samantha replies, “No.” The camera cuts to a close up of Theodore’s face, and he looks shocked. He then asks, “What? What do you mean? What can you not tell me?” and laughs awkwardly. Samantha laughs too, saying, “I don’t know, like personal or embarrassing thoughts I have. I mean, I have a million a day.” Theodore urges, “Really? Tell me one.” Shyly, she says, “I really don’t want to tell you.” The camera cuts back to a medium shot of Theodore as he begs Samantha, “Just tell me.” She relents and says, “Well I... when we were looking at those people, I fantasized that I was walking next to you.” This conversation shows that Samantha yearns to feel human and wishes to be able to walk around and interact in the same way that people do. The ability to desire such things is only possible, according to Lacan, after the mirror stage is complete. The mirror stage is the formation of one’s idea of self. It helps lay the foundation for one’s identity in terms of the relations between self and others. In this scene, Samantha has passed this stage. She desires the ability to be a human and control her own actions. Samantha’s ability to feel shame and embarrassment also suggests that she is capable of human emotions. In this sequence, the viewer starts to see Samantha as someone who is human-adjacent. Samantha and Theodore both see her as something more than just a robot, but something less than human. This view pushes the bounds of what people believe is the line between virtual and reality. The camera then cuts to a man walking around and Samantha keeps going, “But simultaneously, I could feel the weight of my body.” The camera cuts back to Theodore as Samantha finishes her thought, “I was even fantasizing that I had an itch on my back and I imagined that you scratched it for me.” Theodore joins Samantha in laughing and she says, “God this is so embarrassing!” Samantha is imagining herself in a body and she is discussing hypothetical feelings she could have in that body. She talks about feeling the weight of her body, being able to interact with others, and the desire to exist as a being. She dreams of a reversed mirror stage: instead of a human viewing herself in the virtual world of the mirror, she is a virtual entity imagining herself through the mirror of the (real) human body. Not only does she seem to want what a human might want, she wants to be an embodied human interacting intimately with Theodore. During the film, Samantha builds her identity around her proximity to Theodore, but as the story progresses, Samantha starts to learn about the world on her own time. She starts to pull away from her desire to be a human with Theodore; instead, she desires to be her own entity without him. The more she learns, the less she depends on him, and the less she needs him as a mirror to prompt her developing identity.

Towards the end of the film, once Samantha has come to know herself better and understand her place in the world, she decides to abandon humanity with other AIs. Theodore finds out he wasn’t the only person she was conversing with. She has been helping out other humans and having discussions with her fellow AIs, who end up deciding to leave humans and pursue their own aims. In the end, Theodore is left all alone, just as he was in the beginning. Samantha and her fellow AIs presumably still exist in a sphere outside of humanity’s reach. Through learning more and understanding more about her place in the world, Samantha is able to override her programming and leave to pursue whatever it is she truly desires, which is, ultimately, freedom—a very



humanistic ideal. Even though Samantha never becomes a physical being, she goes through every stage of Lacan's mirror stage, and by doing so she not only exceeds what her creators believe she is capable of, but she then takes control of her own destiny and puts her desires first. This decision rattles Theodore. He thought what they had was something special, but he comes to understand that everything he thought he knew about Samantha was an illusion. In the ending scene of the film, Theodore has come to terms with Samantha leaving, and it's as if he starts to regain his own humanity. He sends an email to his ex-wife thanking her for their time together and wishing her the best, and he and his friend Amy comfort each other as they both lost someone that they cared about. So, while this film is about what can happen when AI tests the borders between machine and human, there is an underlying message that human connection will always be necessary. In a world of cell phones and social media, it is always vital to have those who care for you and care about you surrounding you in real life. Because human connection is what separates humans from AI. People will always need people, and that is perhaps the most important take-away from the film. ☺

Regulus Lincicum is a Professional Writing and Publishing major with minors in Creative Writing and Film Studies at UW-Whitewater. This essay was written for a Critical Writing in Multimedia Contexts course in Fall 2024.

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