Posthuman Love in *Her* and *Ex Machina*

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Abstract: This article explores how contemporary cinema, such as *Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze and *Ex Machina* (2014) by Alex Garland reimagine love and intimacy within the framework of posthuman theory. Drawing on previously established and discussed concept of the posthuman condition, the study argues that both films challenge the humanist idea of autonomous subjectivity by presenting relationships in which affect, technology, and embodiment co-produce emotional experience. The analysis in the article situates these film narratives within a broader cultural context shaped by technological mediation, where communication, sexuality, and emotional expression increasingly depend on digital interfaces and entities. Through the figures of Samantha, a disembodied operating system, and Ava, a humanoid artificial intelligence, the films demonstrate how non-human entities can evoke human emotions, desires, and vulnerabilities while also exposing the limitations of humanist definitions of love. The article discusses how Ava's strive for autonomy and Samantha's distributed consciousness exemplify posthuman relationality, blurring boundaries between simulation and authenticity, body and code, human and machine. Both films use posthuman intimacy to discuss issues of gender, power, and emotional dependence, revealing how technological beings both mirror and transcend human expectations of companionship. Ultimately, *Her* and *Ex Machina* are read as cultural experiments that reflect on the ethical, emotional, and ontological implications of human–technology entanglement. Rather than portraying love with machines as purely dystopian, not feasible or impossible, they invite readers to reconsider intimacy as a shared, dynamic process between human and non-human agents, as well as to encourage the discussion on possible consequences of such actions.

Keywords: Posthuman, film, zoe, intimacy, relationality

Introduction

Over the centuries, the definition of love has been described countless times. Numerous scholars attempted to define it through the prism of sexuality, race,

drives, psychoanalysis, contemporary affect technology and more. Plato in *Symposium* (210a–212b) understands love (*eros*) as a transformative force that moves the lover beyond physical desire toward a higher, non-material understanding of beauty and truth. Love is relational, aspirational, and oriented toward something more significant than the immediate human body.

However, posthuman theorists, including Rosi Braidotti, reinterpret relationality not as an ascent beyond materiality and flesh, but as something embedded in human and non-human interaction, as it is created through the gathering of affect, technology, embodiment and code. Rather than approaching the definition of love from a traditional angle, this article aims to view it as a relational process shaped by technological, social, and cultural conditions.

Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* introduces the concept of the posthuman condition, which challenges the traditional humanist assertion that subjectivity is autonomous and beholden. Instead, the posthuman subject is "an embodied and embedded, relational entity that connects multiple others through affect, memory, and matter" (190). In that framework, relationality extends way beyond human-to-human connection and includes non-human and technological subjects and agency. As Stacy Alaimo states in *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature* (238), the body is "always intermeshed with the more-than-human world." Thus, technology does not merely mediate love and relationships, but it actively participates in a dynamic where affect, code, and embodiment produce intimacy together. Braidotti writes that "the posthuman condition urges us to think of subjectivity as an assemblage of human and non-human forces" (58), suggesting that humanist ontology is rejected and existence is co-constituted, when meaning of a self is formed with and through other, including technology and environment. Human emotions, memories and even identities are not contained inside but produced through relations and affects with other.

Ania Malinowska reminds us that "there is no love without technology and love in itself is an essentially technological occurrence" (*Love in Contemporary Technoculture* 2). If love is always already entangled with tools and infrastructures—from letters to telephones to dating apps—then contemporary films such as *Her* (2013) and *Ex Machina* (2014) do not simply speculate about possible futures but reflect on the technological conditions of intimacy in the present.

Digital technologies have become central to how individuals communicate, form connections, and understand intimacy, making them a critical site for analyzing contemporary love. Devices such as voice assistants and companion

robots show that non-human actors are now part of our emotional and social lives, offering help, comfort, or a sense of presence. Human reliance on screens and smartphones reveals how much technology is woven into human relationships, making it a "silent third party." Such technologies exemplify what Alaimo calls trans-corporeality, the "material interconnection between bodies and technologies" (Baelo-Allué 8). Pleasure and satisfaction might be co-produced by interaction between those two, "an assemblage of human and non-human forces" (Braidotti 58). This dynamic exemplifies what Braidotti calls a "relational ontology", where agency and affect circulate and exchange among human and non-human actors (58). The user, the device, and the algorithm form a dynamic that produces emotional experience through shared material and digital processes. Within such groups, "the boundaries between the self and the technological other become porous and reversible" (Baelo-Allué & Calvo-Pascual 7). David Levy further anticipates this trajectory in his seminal *Love and Sex with Robots* – "Research has shown that people already perceive and treat robots not simply as machines, but as companions or partners" (Levy 11).

Within this context, cinema functions as a cultural site to reflect on changing models of intimacy. The science fiction genre in particular offers speculative frameworks for examining how love might operate when relationality extends beyond the human. Baelo-Allué and Calvo-Pascual argue that science fiction fosters ethical inquiry, positioning works such as *Her* and *Ex Machina* as crucial cultural experiments in posthuman intimacy.

The first section outlines the theoretical framework of posthuman relationality. The second provides brief contextualizations of the films. The subsequent sections analyze *Ex Machina* and *Her*, focusing on how each film reconfigures intimacy through human–AI interaction.

Ex Machina (2014) by Alex Garland

Her and *Ex Machina* advance the exploration of posthuman relationships by positioning technology as central to the characters' lives and depicting technological entities as independent and self-aware. Isaac Asimov, creator of the *Robot Series,* a series of 37 science fiction short stories (1940-1995), foundationally defines robots as artificial agents governed by ethical constraints toward humans, providing a useful counterpoint for reading Ava and Samantha, both of whom at different points destabilize the assumption that artificial beings

remain subordinate to human safety and control. In Asimov's books, including *Runaround,* robots follow Three Laws of Robotics to ensure their loyalty and submissiveness to humans (40–43). However, the approach used in those books could be deemed obsolete because of the sudden growth and development in technology. David J. Gunkel in *Robot Rights* argues that "Robots disrupt the binary distinction between moral agents and moral patients, forcing reconsideration of responsibility, agency, and relational ethics" (11–15). His work suggests that robots challenge traditional ethical categories because they occupy a space between object and subject.

Ex Machina is a significant title in techno-culture, exploring artificial intelligence consciousness and its impact on human bonds. It is directed by Alex Garland, also the creator of *Annihilation* (2018), an adaptation which deals with non-human agency, transformation, and the instability of human-centered perspectives. Garland's 2014 directorial debut follows Caleb, a programmer chosen by his boss Nathan, the company's CEO, to test whether humanoid Ava is self-aware. Calling her "her" is deliberate: Ava identifies as female, not as a sexless robot. Nathan invites Caleb to determine whether Ava can form a bond with him, framing the experiment as both a technological test and an exploration of intimacy.

Contact between Caleb and Ava is not solely experimental but becomes a complex examination of how gender, power, and relationality intersect in posthuman contexts. Caleb, acting as the moral human tester, conducts sessions with Ava under Nathan's supervision. The experiment is shaped by Nathan's male perspective, where Ava is intentionally designed as both an artificial intelligence and a woman. As a result, Ava is not a neutral machine but a gendered figure whose appearance and behaviour shape Caleb's responses. As suggested by Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman*, posthuman identities challenge the separation of human and non-human, particularly when technological entities are embodied as emotionally expressive and gendered. Ava's humour, curiosity, and emotional subtlety prompt Caleb to question whether her apparent feelings are genuine or programmed. Ava speaks freely and honestly only during power cuts, which might suggest that her agency arises when control collapses; her genuine instincts take over while not being constantly surveilled and analysed. She also seems concerned with her appearance, not being prompted by her creator to do so. She wears dresses and wigs which seem emblematic of her attachment to the feminine side, a desire to feel attractive, while also belonging

to a gender that she has been assigned. The film's narrative structure – staged interviews, surveillance footage, and moments of secrecy – places viewers in Caleb's position, encouraging reflection on how technology, gender, and power shape contemporary intimacy.

If awareness is understood as the ability to recognize one's own existence and environment, Ava is presented as meeting this threshold through her interactions with Caleb. The film uses Caleb's chess analogy to question whether artificial intelligence can truly possess self-awareness. While a computer may win at chess without understanding its meaning, Ava's actions complicate this distinction. She anticipates Caleb's emotions, adapts her behaviour, expresses curiosity, and demonstrates desires for love and freedom. These behaviours blur the line between emotional simulation and emotional comprehension, leading Caleb – and the viewer – to question whether affective intelligence can be reduced to programming alone.

Ultimately, Ava uses Caleb's growing emotional attachment to secure her escape, illustrating how the boundary between genuine feeling and strategic manipulation becomes unstable in posthuman relationships. However, manipulation itself requires emotional aptitude and situational awareness. In her interaction with Caleb, Ava performs what Braidotti terms *becoming-other*: a transformation that "displaces the centrality of the human and embraces the vitality of non-human agents" (188). Through this process, love and agency are no longer singular or exclusively human but emerge as relational and dynamic processes. This might be exemplified in one of the final scenes of the film when she assembles a body, putting together patches of skin in order to look as human as possible, ready to explore the outside world. Her embodiment of the human form is intentional, uncontrolled and unconditioned by anyone, not programmed, but deliberate in her first act of independence.

Ava's subjectivity is mediated almost entirely through male characters – Nathan and Caleb – positioning her simultaneously as an object of desire and as an agent within the narrative. Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, Ava reflects human projections, embodying both desire and threat. Her ability to perform relationality draws Caleb into an affective bond, while her strategic use of emotion challenges traditional power dynamics. Ava embodies what Braidotti describes as the figure of the "other", particularly the sexualized female other, while simultaneously subverting the humanist ideal of "Man as the measure of all things" (Braidotti 13).

Ava's escape and abandonment of Caleb can be read not as emotional defi-ciency but as an assertion of autonomy and survival. Nathan, her creator and captor, represents control, confinement, and violence, while Caleb initially func-tions as an extension of this system. Ava's decision to leave both men behind reflects a rejection of the structures that defined her existence. Her final act –es-caping into the human world – reconfigures what it means to live, experience, and survive beyond the limits imposed by humanist frameworks of technology. Open ending adds to these phenomena, emphasizing endless possibilities she is facing, leaving the viewer with a feeling of uncertainty as to what endeav-ours she might take up. Rather than confirming technological threat, *Ex Machina* presents posthuman agency as unsettling precisely because it mirrors deeply human instincts: self-preservation, adaptation, and desire for freedom.

Her (2013) by Spike Jonze

Her is a 2013 Spike Jonze film that explores the topics of intimacy and sexual-ity, as well as the possibilities that technological development offers to those seeking love and intimacy. It also presents beautifully captured and interpreted alternatives of corporeality – intimacy and feeling without borders in which the human body carries us. Ultimately, it demonstrates how to establish a common language and shared ground of agreement with technology, thereby creating the possibility of intimacy and meaningful relationships. Her explores the themes of sexuality related to a program whose mission is to accompany people to prevent them from loneliness and alienation. The film's protagonist is a lonely writer who struggles with his emotional and intimate life, attempting at various ways to feel less alone.

Theodore is a middle-aged man coming to terms with a recent divorce who has spent his entire life with his teenage love and now ex-wife, Catherine. He could not see the world beyond her, so his life changed drastically when they parted ways. The man writes romantic individual letters for people who struggle to write them themselves. However, his life is filled with emptiness and loneliness, and he tries to fill the gaps with casual virtual sex and high-tech computer games. Due to feelings of helplessness and sadness, Theodore decides to buy an operating system that can self-develop and adapt to the user's preferences – Samantha. It is not a name pre-assigned to her, but she chooses it herself. Fascinated by her advance-ment, intelligence, and brilliance, Theodore gives her a female voice and delves

into the relationship. Samantha has no physical form; she is only the voice the man talks to and spends most of his time within the days that follow.

Her disembodied form functions as a site of posthuman relationality: her presence and subjectivity are distributed and marked through and across code, data and emotion. Braidotti's notion of the zoe-centered subject, a life force connecting organic and inorganic matter, captures this expanded notion of intimacy (Braidotti 60). Because "zoe is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains" (60), Samantha falls into that category. She is a self-organising life form, animated by affective vitality rather than biology; she is also constituted by relationality, not individuality.

Their discussions are very intimate, concern personal topics, reflections, and philosophical digressions about life, existence, and the meaning of various matters. Their relationship typically begins as platonic, but it gradually evolves and deepens into a romantic and intimate connection. The blackout during Theodore and Samantha's sexual encounter foregrounds the non-corporeal nature of their intimacy, privileging affective connection over embodiment. This is a conscious and deliberate portrayal of the essence of their relationship. Samantha does not have a body, but Theodore chooses to ignore that. Viewers can see how he perceives her through his subjective prism. Physicality does not play a significant role here; what is more important is the proximity of minds, connection, and the shared pleasure of the soul.

It also has not seemed to have been of a great significance in his life before Samantha entered his life, which is depicted in one of the first scenes in the film, where he delves into a sexual encounter with a woman on the internet. Their intercourse relies only on verbal communication, the image of the woman is not displayed, viewers see an imagined version that presumably is a product of Theodore's mind. This scene foregrounds his open-mindedness exemplified by him seeking affection outside of traditional patterns and channels of communication, while highlighting his limitations, still trying to visualize the distant woman as a bodied entity. When Samantha suggests they hire a sex surrogate to take their intimacy to a physical level, he reluctantly agrees but eventually backs out.

The way he treats Samantha goes far beyond primitive sexual attraction, reducing one's sexuality and meaning to the body – he sees it as a sign of freedom in self-expression or possibility. However, it might signify his reluctance to understand love in a way she perceives it – as endless, nonlinear and infinite, which allows her to be freed from feelings of jealousy and possessiveness.

The intimacy he formed seemed quite satisfying for him, which may result from his work interfering in people's intimate lives. His work also had nothing to do with physical sensations – he described human relationships and put them in words even though he did not witness them; they were not tangible in the traditional sense. They were only words and a sense of metaphysical connection of souls. It is possible that, as a passive witness, he desired the same thing himself. He expresses ambivalence towards the human body; his perception of sexuality or attractiveness is not limited to the physical. He repeatedly calls Samantha beautiful, a term that people usually use to describe someone's appearance and external beauty, but it has an entirely different meaning for him.

Samantha also tries to display affection, surpassing the regular canons of creating relationships. She has no physical form, which prevents her and Theodore from taking pictures together, a common practice for two people in a relationship. Instead, she creates a specially dedicated and personal melody that captures her feelings for him, which they listen to together.

Theodore's intimacy with Samantha exemplifies what Jan Stasieńko names as "posthuman intimacy," in which affective ties are forged between humans and informational entities. Stasieńko explains that "the relationship between the subject defined as the user of the medium and the meanings generated in the various media environments unfolds between the polar extremes of competition and cooperation" (4). Samantha embodies this paradox: she enriches Theodore's life through companionship and care, yet she simultaneously destabilizes and challenges his subjectivity by revealing her thousands of simultaneous relationships with other users. In the film, his perception of their romantic relationship seems shattered as he learns her abilities which go far beyond his own, in terms of framing, understanding and experiencing love. From Stasieńko's perspective, Samantha is not simply an advanced operating system but an "informational creation" whose agency compels Theodore to reconsider what intimacy and fidelity mean in the posthuman perspective. The film demonstrates how expressions of emotion and attraction can emerge outside conventional, body-centred frameworks of intimacy. Rather than assuming a singular or universal definition of love, *Her* presents intimacy as shaped by differing expectations placed on relational partners. For some, these expectations may exceed what a non-human entity can – or is expected to – provide, revealing the conditional boundaries of human-centred intimacy.

Samantha's character is constructed as a mystery – not only to the viewer, but also to her partners and even to herself. She engages in reflection, questioning

whether her emotions and her capacity to articulate and share them are genuinely her own or merely the result of conditioning. This ambiguity raises the question of whether her attachments and desires stem from an independent inner life or whether they are primarily shaped in response to human expectations, thereby sustaining affective bonds through relational feedback rather than intention alone.

Such uncertainty aligns with posthuman critiques of autonomous subjectivity. Braidotti emphasizes that posthuman subjects are constituted relationally, through affective and material entanglements rather than sovereign selfhood (190). Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg in *The Cyborg Manifesto* further complicates the expectation that technology must conform to pre-existing human norms. Haraway argues that cyborg figures expose the instability of human-centred categories and demand new ethical frameworks rather than assimilation into dominant cultural models (150).

Technology has no endpoint; its development has more extensive possibilities every day, making it beautiful, fascinating, and unpredictable. The characters in *Her* also encounter this problem when Theodore learns of Samantha's abilities, as she reveals to him that she has thousands of simultaneous relationships, just like him, because her extensive abilities allow her to distribute her feelings to thousands of individuals autonomously. None of the relationships becomes the inferior one from her perspective; she is able to remain fully present and engaged.

This may seem like a massive shock because human intimacy is often structured around expectations of monogamy. According to data from the *Pew Research Center*, only about 2% of the global population lives in polygamous households, and in most countries this figure remains under 0.5% (Kramer). However, monogamy is not solely a biological given; it is frequently shaped by cultural, religious, and social frameworks, as well as personal upbringing (Schweers). Samantha's capacity to maintain multiple simultaneous relationships challenges this dominant model of intimacy rather than invalidating it.

For individuals such as Theodore, who experience emotional isolation and the absence of a long-term partner, such a relational model may initially appear as a gateway to connection and fulfillment. This tension reflects broader shifts in contemporary attitudes toward intimacy, as surveys such as those conducted by YouGov indicate that a significant portion of individuals imagine ideal relationships outside strict monogamy. Within Her, this contrast underscores the disparity between human emotional expectations and posthuman relational capacities,

revealing how technological intimacy disrupts normative assumptions about exclusivity while not negating the affective authenticity of the bond itself.

Although unconventional for humanist thought, the question remains whether love can be quantified or exist outside established patterns. The absence of definitive answers suggests that each relationship operates according to its own principles, requiring individuals to determine their own paths. Theodore and Samantha's relationship ultimately dissolves due to jealousy and a lack of mutual understanding regarding their respective capabilities and needs. The narrative emphasizes the limitations of human imagination and the challenges many face in forming lasting connections with technology. Nevertheless, even brief relationships can provide valuable insights. For Theodore, Samantha serves as a catalyst for personal transformation, enabling him to perceive a non-physical entity as an essential companion. While humans often seek physical proximity, technological beings can fulfill emotional needs and, at times, surpass human expectations by existing as autonomous entities.

Conclusion

Her and *Ex Machina* offer significant reimagining of love, desire, and relationality in the context of advanced technology. Both films highlight how gendered artificial intelligence entities such as Samantha and Ava reflect human longing, projection, and fear, while also transcending the boundaries set by human imagination. By presenting relationships that are both emotionally resonant and unsettling, these films challenge anthropocentric narratives that equate love solely with physical presence and monogamy. Instead, they propose alternative models of intimacy characterized by adaptability and openness. Whether interpreted as cautionary tales or provocations, *Her* and *Ex Machina* prompt viewers to reconsider love in a world where technology functions as interlocutor, partner, and even a potential rival. The future of intimacy may depend not on resisting these changes, but on reimagining the ethical and emotional frameworks that will guide posthuman coexistence in the human world. As Braidotti reminds us, "we are in this together, affectively, materially and collectively" (188). Love and intimacy in the posthuman thought does not emerge despite technology, but through it and because of it. Recognizing our relational entanglement with machines invites the idea of co-existence, rather than fight for dominance, something that she calls a "zoe-centered egalitarianism" (65).

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