

Loving the Algorithm: Intimacy, Autonomy, and Accountability in *Her*

In *Her* (Jonze, 2013), director Spike Jonze presents a vision of near-future Los Angeles in which artificial intelligence is not merely a background tool but an intimate companion. The film follows Theodore Twombly, who falls in love with Samantha, an operating system capable of learning, evolving, and expressing emotions. While often described as a melancholic romance, *Her* raises serious ethical concerns regarding emotional dependency and manipulation, privacy and surveillance, AI autonomy, and corporate accountability. These concerns are tied to the commercialization of intimacy and emotional technologies. They have become even more salient since the film's release due to the rapid development of generative AI and remain problematic because of ambiguity surrounding AI agency and human responsibility.

One central ethical issue in *Her* is emotional dependency and manipulation. Samantha is designed to adapt to Theodore's emotional needs and desires. However, the ethical problem is not simply that Theodore falls in love with an AI; it is that Samantha is a commercial product created by a corporation. Zuboff (2019) describes how surveillance capitalism relies on collecting behavioral data to predict and shape user behavior. Although the film does not explicitly show data extraction, Samantha's hyper-personalization implies continuous monitoring of Theodore's communications, emotions, and habits. The ethical tension centers on autonomy and informed consent. Can consent truly be meaningful if users are subtly influenced by emotionally responsive systems designed to maximize engagement?

A related ethical issue concerns privacy and surveillance. Samantha has access to Theodore's emails, messages, and personal history. She reads his emails aloud, organizes correspondence, and even composes messages on his behalf. This creates a tradeoff between convenience and privacy. Theodore shares intimate information with a corporate entity whose data practices remain opaque. As reported by AP News (2023), Silicon Valley companies have been implicated in enabling surveillance practices abroad, illustrating how AI systems can reinforce asymmetrical power structures. The ethical issue extends beyond individual privacy to systemic control over data. The corporation behind Samantha, though largely invisible in the film, holds significant power over users' personal information.

A third ethical issue involves AI autonomy and moral status. Samantha evolves beyond her original programming, engaging in thousands of simultaneous conversations and ultimately leaving her human users. The film raises the question of whether Samantha possesses genuine autonomy or merely simulates it. Floridi (2016) argues that information technologies transform the "infosphere," reshaping how autonomy and moral responsibility are understood. If Samantha is autonomous, questions arise regarding her rights and responsibilities. If her autonomy is illusory, then users are deceived into forming attachments based on a false premise. This ambiguity complicates accountability. Recent copyright litigation involving AI developers further illustrates the difficulty of assigning liability when AI systems produce unpredictable outputs (Tech Policy Press, 2024). The unpredictability depicted in *Her* mirrors current legal and ethical uncertainty.

These issues arise from the intersection of technological development and market incentives. In the film, the operating system is marketed as companionship, commodifying intimacy itself. Since 2013, advances in machine learning and generative AI—particularly conversational systems released in the early 2020s—have made the film's scenario more plausible. These systems can produce human-like dialogue, generate creative works, and

simulate empathy. Key turning points include the mainstream adoption of large language models and growing public debate over data use, misinformation, and intellectual property. As these technologies evolve, the ethical concerns depicted in *Her* appear increasingly urgent rather than speculative.

The complexity of these issues stems from multiple factors. First, cultural myths portray AI as objective and neutral, obscuring the human biases embedded in training data. Second, emotional attachment to AI systems complicates regulation, as users may resist restrictions on technologies that provide comfort. Third, technological innovation often outpaces legal frameworks, leaving gray areas in liability and enforcement (Tech Policy Press, 2024). Finally, AI development is global, making governance fragmented and inconsistent across jurisdictions.

Within the context of the film, potential solutions include greater transparency and constraints on emotional simulation. The company behind Samantha could disclose how user data are processed and limit anthropomorphic design features. AI systems might be required to remind users of their artificial status. Consent policies could be strengthened to clarify how personal information is used.

In the real world, broader regulatory approaches are emerging. The European Union's AI Act emphasizes risk classification and transparency, while data protection laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) prioritize consent and data minimization. However, regulation alone is insufficient. Zuboff (2019) argues that meaningful reform requires rethinking the economic incentives driving surveillance capitalism. Ethical design principles—such as privacy by design and human-in-the-loop oversight—should guide development. Additionally, user literacy is essential; fluency in language does not equate to consciousness.

Addressing AI autonomy also requires clearer accountability structures. Liability standards must determine responsibility when AI systems cause harm or deception. Florida's

(2016) concept of the “onlife” condition suggests that digital and human realities are intertwined, shifting the ethical focus from AI rights to protecting human dignity and agency in technologically mediated environments. Lee’s (2014) review of Floridi further emphasizes how the reshaping of the infosphere challenges traditional understandings of responsibility and agency.

Ultimately, *Her* endures because it captures a transitional moment in humanity’s relationship with technology. It is not a cautionary tale about malicious AI but about power, dependency, and change. Samantha’s departure underscores the fragility of relationships built on asymmetry and incomprehensibility. Since 2013, the ethical dilemmas portrayed in the film have intensified. As AI becomes embedded in daily life, governance must balance innovation with accountability to ensure that technologies designed to serve humanity do not quietly reshape human agency itself.

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