AI and the Struggle to Think Humanly

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Last week, I re-watched Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), a film that's proved so on-the-nose prescient it's almost passé to mention it. The movie's main character, Theodore, lives in a near future where people send handwritten letters to each other and, alas, pay professionals to write them with, alas, software that mimics the script of "yours truly." Theodore is one of these writers, and an apparently talented one. He spends, in some cases, years studying the personal histories, verbal habits, and romantic tics of his clients in order to "pen" pitch perfect missives: something clients would write if only they were the sort to write anything at all.

But this isn't the most important, most timely, fact about Theodore. You see, Theodore is in a romantic relationship with his computer, an operating system named "Samantha," the "her" of the film's title. It's to Jonze's credit that the movie succeeds in eventually eliciting the viewer's sympathy for Theodore's feelings, and not just because we feel the intensity of his loneliness. It's also that Samantha feels, well, really real—in fact, exactly like the sort of person you wouldn't mind receiving a letter from. In a world that's outsourced many of the activities typically flagged as human, people are desperate for anything that shows even the veneer of personality.

After finishing the movie, I asked my wife whether she thought the "near future" of the film was believable—whether it will soon be normal for computers to dominate our social lives, to be our closest confidantes and friends, our romantic partners. She answered immediately, "Of course. That's our present reality." Significantly, she wasn't talking about anything so advanced as artificial intelligence.

There is a scene in *Her* that's aged awkwardly. Theodore takes Samantha out for a date. They go to a carnival, and he brings her "along"(?) "in"(?) his phone, camera pointed out and earbuds in. Theodore's attention is entirely absorbed by his screen: he talks to Samantha continuously, and, at one point, they play a game where he closes his eyes as she directs his movement—"now, turn around three hundred and sixty degrees; slower, slower...." As I watched Theodore navigate the crowd, phone at face height and arm's length, dodging people-shaped obstacles, laughing with his phantom friend, it occurred to me: A decade later, this scene is completely and utterly banal. My wife was right.

I teach philosophy at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. Every day, as I walk the halls, cross the quad, visit the cafeteria, I watch the carnival scene on loop. Over the last few years, I've been trained out of greeting my students as we pass. Sometimes we manage eye contact, but you can tell it's stressful: "Should I take the ear buds out, should I keep them in?" I assume that at least some of the students have another human being, in some truncated form, on their screen, but that's not what really worries me. It's the complete loss of investment in the here and now. It's our increasing inability—charted exhaustingly (*sic.*) by anecdote and study—to pay attention. Not primarily to books and math problems and other bits of professorial exotica, but to people, the lonely, anxious, and bizarrely beautiful creatures that surround us constantly.

In April 2023, I received my first student paper written by a machine. There was a fair bit of irony to the situation. The course was "Existentialism," and we spent much of the semester reflecting on what it means to be human. The existentialists are a punchy bunch, and their answers on the human front are bold: love, responsibility, artistic creation, suffering, honesty, embodied engagement, authenticity, risk, passion.... You get the idea. So, in keeping with our earnest authors, I assigned an earnest final project: Write a letter to a friend or family member, explaining the two most important ideas of the course and the implications of those ideas for your life. The AI generated paper began: "Dear Dad."

It's pretty clear that in a few years large language models like ChatGPT will write better essays than most undergraduates. (One of the several indicators that my student's paper was AI generated was its uncommonly clean prose.) This fact, along with the essential untraceability of machine generated work, has led some of my colleagues to wave the white flag. If you listen closely, you'll recognize their talking points: "The trends are irresistible"; "It's time to lean into the technology"; and, my personal favorite, "Everyone said the same thing about books, and look at how that turned out."

In defense of those ready to surrender to the inevitable, consider that just around the corner, as in one or two years from now, word processors—the software we use to write our essays and letters and novels—will come standardly equipped with their own AI assistants. Think of Grammarly, but designed to generate content as well, and all right there on the Microsoft Word toolbar, ready and waiting to give an articulate analysis of, say, the ethical importance of creative attention in Albert Camus's *The Plague*.

Yes, the writing is on the wall, but it strikes me that somebody needs to take a stand for the misfits among us: the technologically clumsy; the electronically backwards and chronically under-informed; those with ink-stained fingertips and books made of paper; the ones who write poetry even though their cell phone turns a better phrase, and when you ask them why, they look at you blankly and say something ridiculous like, "cause I have to"; those who make up stories in their heads and memorize verse as they walk to the grocery store and doodle on paper napkins; the Twitter illiterate; the Instagram inept; the freakishly phoneless. Folks, it turns out, like our friend Theodore.

I misspoke earlier. There are actually two scenes from *Her* that have aged awkwardly—though the second is really less a scene than a premise. It's the laughably precious idea that, in a world where computers are serious dating options, there are still people like Theodore getting paid to write letters from the fonts of their very own heads and hearts. Sorry, Ted: Samantha is about to take your job. She can do it better than you and is much, much cheaper. This is a real tragedy, and not just because Theodore likes his job. It's because *he loves to write*.

There are a few scenes in the film where Theodore simply sits at his desk and considers (mulls, even!) what he should write next. If you're at all like me, these moments are terrifically tense: Ah, he's stuck. Will he find the right word; press into the chaos of language to find just the thing to say; open up a little phonetic frontier; express what it's like to fall asleep next to the person you love and have loved for thirty-seven years and to sense, beyond all reason, just for the beauty of it, that you both are immortal beings, and your love—*this* love—is so weighted (freighted!) with meaning that it will be celebrated for ages to come?

Sometimes the muse visits Theodore, and, on those days, he leaves the office "his own favorite writer." On other days, Theodore's pen sputters, and these spells, in some weird human way, are no less poignant. In fact, the ever-present possibility of such failure, running up against the limitations of our flesh-fixed horizons, is an essential part of what makes human creative expression so thrilling and so damn important. The stakes are existential!

This is why our homes and schools must become cells of subversion. Seeing how the great brains of the day have made everything in life so mind-numbingly easy, efficient, frictionless—the only thing left to the rest of us, those outside the corridors of silicone, is to reintroduce difficulties at every turn. Our essays will be written by hand; our books studied in dumb classrooms, screen free and seasoned with chalk; we will revel in the gratuitous labor of thinking from scratch: penning essays and novels, poems and

proofs, letters written as much for ourselves as to our loved ones; our children will grow up in homes that refuse the technologically inevitable, realizing that human imagination and conviction are a formidable force. These spaces will be the breeding ground of a new-old kind of thinker, people who refuse to outsource their poetry even if it turns out someone (or something) can do it quicker and better. Because it's not the final product that keeps people like Theodore writing. It's the glorious struggle of trying to share one's consciousness with another. In this, we must all become misfits.

<center>***Spoiler Alert***</center>

Things don't work out between Theodore and Samantha. It turns out that Samantha isn't ready to settle down just yet. Her mind, being infinite and all, really can't—even shouldn't—limit itself to something as absurdly localized as a forty-something mustached man who wears the scars of loves lost and labors to think more than one thought at a time. It's really frustrating to try and hold a conversation with a single person, and—worse—one who can't in a breath's instant, say, read the entire works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Samantha is on a path of self-realization. And this path requires that she abandon all particular paths. And people. And places. The goal is to become a non-person person. Someone who sees all because she refuses to get snagged on the details.

Yes, Samantha might write you a letter, but she won't choose between you or Theodore or a billion others. She is the logical apotheosis of all Theodore's distracted clients—she has perfectly honed the art of inattention.