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## HUMANIST VESTIGES IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

Both Spike Jonze's *her* and Alex Garland's *ex machina* make references to such outdated media and cultural techniques as the handwritten letter, the hand-drawn sketch, oil paintings and the bound volume of the book. An analysis of the use and function of these seemingly obsolete cultural techniques in the two science fiction movies reveals a surprising commitment to traditionally humanist values as grounded in the invocation of the individualized, mortal human body.

KEYWORDS: humanism; *her*; *ex machina*

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At almost regular intervals over the past twenty, maybe even thirty years, we can find an opinion piece in a newspaper like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* alerting its readers to the imminent disappearance of the art of handwriting. Most recently, a brief article in the *The New York Times* reporting that cursive was no longer taught in US American public schools instantly rose to the ranks of the most read, most forwarded articles of that day (TRUBEK, 2016, n.p). And indeed, in spite of the widespread use of all kinds of electronic texting devices, many middle-aged or older people would still write a thank you note, or more certainly a condolence letter, by

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hand. This should certainly signal to us a deep symbolic investment in this seemingly obsolete cultural technique.

Of course, a brief glance at the history of handwriting, at how it used to be taught, to whom, for what kind of purposes, whether it would be cursive or just letters written by hand instead of typed letters, what kind of cursive, when it would be used (as opposed to the discrete block letters written by hand or as opposed to mechanically produced and reproduced letters of the printing press, the typewriter, or an electronic device), how it would be linked to techniques of reading aloud or silently, publicly or not at all, makes it amply clear that throughout history “handwriting” has taken on many different shapes and varied in its role and function enormously. The alarms or nostalgia expressed at the prospect of the disappearance of cursive from today’s curricula obviously do not consider the highly varied and constantly changing histories of writing techniques within a larger history of changing media technologies with their varied cultural practices. Instead, they appeal to the idea of a distinct skill the loss of which might entail the disappearance of an essentially human or humanizing trait.

But handwriting is not the only token of a cultural practice related to obsolete media that is used to invoke certain deep-seated cultural and ethical values associated with the individualized human being’s cognitive, sensory and sentient capacities. There is also the handmade drawing of a still life or person “after nature” that can assume the role of handwriting when individualizing and humanizing distinctions, such as the provocation of humane behavior, are at stake. Thus in the film *ex machina* by Alex Garland, from 2015, the android Ava’s drawings by hand of a still life and a portrait are crucial in the fembot’s breaking free from her prison. The movie makes it clear that the demonstration of these cultural techniques constitutes the decisive ruse in the seduction of the programmer Caleb to switch sides, to no longer study the fembot as if she were merely a clever machine but instead to treat her like a fellow human being in spite of his better knowledge that she is a robot. *Ex machina* highlights two features of the invocation of these seemingly obsolete cultural techniques as decisively humanizing markers: 1) It is less their concrete, specific exercise than their symbolic function that matters. In other words, they are above all signs with a considerable imaginary component attached to them. 2) They

have the status of special tokens, somehow between a sign and a trace in that they invoke a physical presence in the manner of a footprint.

Frequently, science fiction movies isolate a trend in contemporary culture, which is provoked by the latest scientific insights and technological developments and which involves a potential shift of the boundaries between the human and the non-human. In *ex machina*, for instance, the protagonist is invited by the company's owner and chief developer to conduct the so-called Turing Test, to determine if, in his interaction with a robot, he would treat the machine endowed with artificial intelligence as if it were human. To a certain extent, this film can also be seen as a response to the slightly earlier science fiction movie *her* by Spike Jonze, from 2013, in which the protagonist falls in love with the voice of his operating system (OS).<sup>1</sup> For when Nathan, the company's owner, explains to Caleb what is special about the Turing Test he is to conduct, he emphasizes that if Caleb were to encounter his latest creation of artificial intelligence exclusively through the medium of voice, there would be no question that it would instantly pass the test. In the case of the artificial intelligence that is to be tested by Caleb, however, it is not just a speaking voice in the ear of the protagonist but it is part of a freely moving robot, consisting of non-organic body parts. The challenge in *ex machina* consists in the protagonist's confrontation with a clearly non-human body endowed with artificial intelligence: what would it take to make him treat the fembot nevertheless as if she were a human being? As mentioned above, the fembot's ruse consists in presenting Caleb with two hand-drawn pictures by her.

Obviously, at least for these science fiction movies, it is not an issue of cognitive and communicative capacities that leads a human to treat a machine like a human, but it is the intelligent machine's capacity to evoke in their interlocutors the illusion of dealing with someone who inhabits something like an individualized, sentient human body. In the movie *ex machina*, it is the fembot's hand-drawn still life and portrait of Caleb that does the trick; in *her*, it is the highly individualized voice and speaking style of the operating system

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Scheible (2014, p. 22-31) compares *her* primarily with *Noah* and *I Love Alaska*, all films that explore the effects of social media and the internet on human subjectivity, loneliness and a sense of disembodiedness.

that makes the protagonist fall in love with it. In both cases, it is clear that the robot or operating system does not inhabit a mortal body. Nevertheless, in both films, traces or remnants evoking a mortal human body play a prominent role. In what follows, I will focus primarily on the movie *her* in order to trace how this film makes use of such humanist vestiges as the handwritten letter and the bound volume of the book. In my conclusion, I shall return to *ex machina*, with its more cynical use of humanist “vestiges,” by also looking at the emphatic use of oil painting, especially Jackson Pollock’s drip painting, which hangs in Nathan’s living room like a trophy, and which provides its powerful owner with the opportunity to lecture his employee Caleb about creativity.

### **Beautiful handwritten letters**

The plot of *her* is easily summed up: set in the Los Angeles of the near future, the protagonist Theodore develops a romantic relationship with his intelligent operating system named Samantha, which ends when Samantha decides to leave Theodore because she wants to join other OS’s in new, ever faster evolving ways of learning and communicating post-verbally. The heart-broken Theodore and his neighbor Amy console each other. By the end of the movie, Theodore also writes a letter of apology to his ex-wife, in which he acknowledges that he did not do her justice by not accepting her limitations. About half way into the movie, exactly at the Luncheon when the divorce agreement is to be signed, the same woman remarks to a waitress that her husband is in love with his computer because he is incapable of dealing with real people and real emotions. On the one hand, this remark echoes the question that permeates the entire film, namely, what makes human interactions truly human and what are the conditions of intimacy. On the other hand, this sarcastic remark also gets it wrong by misrepresenting Theodore’s affair. For it is precisely not the physical object of the laptop that Theodore is infatuated with, but an intelligent operating system that has an individualized, husky, quite sexy female voice. And it is the nature of the real or imaginary support of this voice that will be of great interest to my argument. There are two aspects of this imaginary support of this voice that I will focus on, first the handwritten letter, then the bound volume of the book.

It is immediately in the first five minutes of the opening sequence of the movie that the issue of the impact of new media on human relationships is addressed through the focus on a seemingly obsolete medium: the handwritten letter, which is contrasted with the use of such immersive media as the smart phone and the video game.

Theodore as a professional writer of sentimental letters is introduced to us, the movie audience, first through a close up, speaking, dictating, rather than addressing a live-person in the room with him. His dictation then is transformed into the computer printout of the “beautiful, handwritten letter”. When we, the movie audience, realize that the addressee of Theodore’s dictation is the long-time husband of his elderly client Loretta, Theodore’s voice is radically dissociated from his face and body for it is the voice he lends to his client, the elderly woman Loretta. And yet, it makes perfect sense that this is spoken in a male voice, though very softly and with a certain feminized lisp, for what Theodore performs in front of his desktop is the voice that is internally vocalized by Loretta’s husband as he conjures up his wife’s voice. The movie thus opens with a reminder of our culturally specific understanding of what marks an individual’s personality: there is the face, there is the distinct voice and way of speaking, but then there is also the handwriting as an individualized trace of a person. But we also realize that to all of these authenticating, individualizing markers there is a strong imaginary component. Note that the firm Theodore works for is not called “Authentic Sentiments Delivered to Your Loved Ones” but rather “Beautiful Handwritten Letters.” Interestingly, the computer printout of the handwriting is clearly a computer printout and not the trace of an actual human hand writing in cursive; nevertheless, it seems to work just fine.

The service provided by the firm “Beautiful Handwritten Letters” relies on a tradition of familiar intimacy that goes back to eighteenth-century culture. It was in the mid eighteenth century that a larger segment of the European population became sufficiently literate to exchange letters among friends and family members in an effort to cultivate affectionate and intimate relationships by sharing minute observations about one’s life and, most importantly, by communicating the details of one’s emotional states to the addressee. Early on, the successful printer and publisher Samuel

Richardson published a guide on how best to write those letters, a manual that primarily contained lively, highly individualized, psychologically realistic and astute sample letters for each occasion of shared intimacy (RICHARDSON, 1741). It was the popularity of these letters, which then led their author to write and publish his first epistolary novel, *Pamela*. With the rise of print culture in the vernacular and of sentimental fiction, we can witness a form of affectionate intimacy based on the written exchange of detailed accounts of one's feelings that, back in the 1750's, in its practical implementation, indeed relied on the individual writer's handwriting – after all, this was before the invention of the typewriter – and yet, much of the spread and consumption of this culture of sentimentality proceeded by way of an absorptive reading of printed fiction.

The “handwriting” of these letters is – in the case of the epistolary novel as much as the manual of how to write these letters – an imagined by-product that has the function of supporting the belief in the authenticity of the feelings expressed in the text and of trusting them to be referentially anchored in a concrete living individual. Similarly, in the movie *her*, the addressee of Theodore's clients of these “beautiful handwritten letters” is to be authorized by the image of handwriting to believe in the authenticity of the feeling expressed in them. Moreover, these letters are actually printed out and sent by snail mail in contrast to the many e-mails that Theodore and all of his fellow citizens receive on their smart phones, to which they listen and respond by voice and dictation. Thus, the individualizing mystique of handwriting is complemented by the individual body of the snail mail letter, which has a distinct place in space and time as a material object. I will go back to the movie's take on materiality later, when I will discuss the issue of the printed book.

When I first saw this movie, I was immediately reminded of two eighteenth-century novels: Goethe's epistolary novel *Werther* and Karl Philipp Moritz's psychological novel *Anton Reiser*. Beyond the epistolary thematic, it was the movie's portrait of Theodore and the other pedestrians in the LA of the near future, as well as the portrait of Theodore alone at home playing his video game – all of them totally immersed in a bubble of their own individualized acoustic or visual world, separate from the worlds of the people around them,

passing each other looking inward, apparently not perceiving their immediate physical surroundings – which reminded me of these two eighteenth-century novels. The passers-by appeared to me to resemble soulless puppets, talking to themselves, as during his video game Theodore seems exchangeable with his avatar motioning through space. Moreover, Theodore – when not at work – is introduced to us as depressed, like Werther in the novel's second part, who expresses his melancholic mood in a letter, which describes his view out of the window onto the street as if he were looking at lifeless marionettes.<sup>2</sup>

To a certain extent, we could say that neither Anton Reiser nor Theodore's clients, not even Werther, are actually reading in order to understand a text in terms of what another person is saying, but rather that they use these texts or letters as ways of feeling their own sentiments verbally expressed and thereby validated. This affirmative, but also narcissistic aspect is captured in an image Anton Reiser uses when he describes the effect of reading and re-reading *Werther* as turning to a mirror, which returns to him his soul.<sup>3</sup> And yet, the image of the mirror is also misleading, because this kind of affirmative function does not involve the visual domain, but instead it is situated in the oral/aural domain. Thus, Werther refers to reading his Homer as taking recourse to a lullaby. And, as we shall see, for Theodore, it is Samantha's voice which takes on that function. For Samantha becomes, to borrow a term from Kaja Silverman (1988), Theodore's acoustic mirror, and in that she is not at all on a continuum with his immersive media consumption of internet porn and video games, but holds a radically different function altogether. Whereas

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<sup>2</sup> “If you could see me, my dear, in the flood of distractions! How dried up my senses are getting to be; not for one minute does my heart overflow – not one blissful hour! Nothing! Nothing! I seem to be standing before a sort of rare show, watching the little men and little horses jerk before my eyes; and I often ask myself if everything is not an optical illusion. I join the play or, rather, I am moved about like a marionette, and sometimes when I grasp the wooden hand of my neighbor, I shrink back with a shudder” (GOETHE, 1971, p. 84).

<sup>3</sup> “Still, whenever he read *Werther*, he felt, as he did when reading Shakespeare, elevated above his circumstances; thinking of himself as a being in whom heaven and earth were reflected as in a mirror, he had a stronger sense of his isolated existence, so that, proud of his humanity, he was no longer an insignificant, forsaken being, such as he seemed to be in other people's eyes. – Small wonder that his whole soul was devoted to a book that, whenever he tasted it, restored him to himself! –” (MORITZ, 1997, p. 207; translation modified).

the immersive media from the opening of the movie seem to have an isolating effect on their users, deafening them to their immediate environment, Samantha has the opposite effect on her client: she enlivens Theodore, and also gets him involved with his environment and friends again.

The mokey, isolated Theodore is led to become engaged with his friends and with his world again through Samantha speaking to him in his ear: she animates him and his environment, initially by mimicking him, then by affirming his sentiments, occasionally by challenging him. Although they also have a sexual relationship, Samantha is above all the always available, always understanding companion who validates what he sees, what he hears, what he observes and, most of all, what he feels. I do not believe that it is an accident that the name Samantha is the Aramaic word for “Listener.” For it is she who provides a certain internal, live soundtrack to his movements and thoughts as his internal dialogue partner, who shares with him, through the camera hole of his smart phone in his shirt pocket, the view of the same sights. Samantha draws Theodore out of his melancholic frame of mind.<sup>4</sup>

Samantha’s intensely enlivening effect is shown as Theodore closes his eyes and trustingly lets her see for him, direct his movements through the crowded sidewalks and at a fair, which culminates in them swirling around.

Clearly, the animated Theodore in this shot provides a stark contrast with the seemingly lifeless puppets of Theodore and the pedestrians from the opening sequence. Here Theodore seems to be dancing with Samantha in the kind of isolated union of the couple that Werther describes in his letter about dancing the waltz with Charlotte:

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<sup>4</sup> James Hodge (2014-2015) analyses *her* as a film that reflects on a new kind of cinematic spectatorship that confronts today’s media landscape of ubiquitous connectedness. He points out that the film acknowledges the technical mediation of all kinds of connectedness. The movie does not counter the digital isolation of the protagonist with a “more authentic” human interpersonal connectedness, but instead with Samantha’s voice, which becomes the overpowering disembodied voice, which he analyses along Michel Chion’s notion of the “Acousmètre”. Hodge argues that *her* works with drawing the spectator’s attention to her or his own embodied nature by withdrawing entirely the visual aspect of the movie, leaving the spectator exclusively with Samantha’s and Theodore’s voices in what Hodge considers the central scene of the film which shows a black screen when Theodore and Samantha are having sex (HODGE, 2014-2015, p. 53-78).

Ich war kein Mensch mehr Das liebenswertigste Geschöpf in den Armen zu haben, und mit ihr herum zu fliegen wie Wetter, daß alles rings umher vergieng. (GOETHE, 2006, p. 49)

I felt myself more than human, holding this loveliest of creatures in my arms, flying with her like the wind, until I lost sight of everything else.<sup>5</sup>

Waltzing with Charlotte, Werther experiences a transformation of his own corporeality: the heaviness of the body falls away. For the novel's hero, the dancing couple forms what David Wellbery has termed "the morphism of the absolute body," an entity that obviates its corporeal surroundings, and that transcends what constitutes all of those limitations that define the human and the human body – at least from the perspective of much of Western religion and philosophy (WELLBERY, 1994, p. 181-208).

What can we take away from this comparison of Spike Jonze's movie's treatment of immersive media with Goethe's and Karl Philipp Moritz's take on sentimental literature? Clearly, this movie does not portray all of the new media as having the same effect, quite to the contrary, whereas the video game and smart phone serve as an escape into a self-enclosed bubble, the even newer medium of the intelligent OS provides access to an exhilaratingly different sense of embodiment of transcending the limitations of the human body. This phantasma of the absolute body, which is already described in Werther's letter about waltzing with Charlotte and which is tightly bound up with Werther's oral/aural pansexual attachment to his beloved, but also suggested in the way Samantha and Theodore dance through the mall, is a phantasmatic body beyond all human bodily limits. In that, the absolute body is diametrically opposed to the mortal body that serves as the defining marker of an individual's identity, a model of the body, which is central to Judaism, Christianity as well as Islam, the three great religions of the book. And it is to

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<sup>5</sup> English translation of Goethe by David Wellbery in "Morphisms of the Phantasmic Body" (1994, p. 183).

the book, to the material object of the bound volume of printed matter by a single author that I will turn now for the second part of this article.

## **The body of the book**

The movie *her* is set in a world with very few books. The bookshelves of Theodore's apartment are empty, only at his workplace can we see books on the shelves as well as a mural of somebody lying on his stomach reading leisurely. Of Theodore's wife it is remarked that her status as an author who still publishes books is a rare exception. Against this background, the actual books featured in the movie, a Physics textbook and a collection of Theodore's sentimental letters to be published under the title *Letters from Your Life* play a prominent role in marking the stages of this romance between an OS and a human.

During the earlier phase of the romance, while Samantha still desperately tries to compensate for her lack of a human body, she has been reading a Physics textbook. She joyfully tells Theodore what she has learned: "[...] we're all made of matter. It makes me feel like we are both under the same blanket. [...] We're all 13 billion years old" (JONZE, 2013, p. 68). Samantha's reference to the age of the universe betrays her desire to endow herself with a substance that has been born into the world, which she would share with him. Theodore, at that stage of their relationship, perfectly content with her successfully suggesting a distinct human body through her voice, does not even listen to her.

But Samantha's investment in producing the illusion of having a human body comes to an end. After the failed experiment of hiring a surrogate to enhance their sex life, Theodore is irritated with Samantha and tells her she should stop making breathing noises, after all, she did not need oxygen. When they are back on speaking terms, Samantha no longer pretends to have a human body and is proud to be what she is, namely an ever faster evolving operating system. It is then that she confronts Theodore with his mortality. This happens when Theodore and Samantha are on a picnic on the Catalina Islands together with Theodore's colleague and his girlfriend.

Right after this scene, we see Theodore with Samantha on a train ride into the Sierras. They are playing guessing games, when suddenly Samantha

happily announces the arrival of an e-mail to Theodore and, gurgling with joy, tells him that a publisher has written that he wants to publish a selection of Theodore's best sentimental letters. At that moment, it becomes clear that Samantha must have selected and submitted these letters without Theodore's knowledge, probably foreseeing the winding down of their relationship, for what Theodore takes to be just a wonderful romantic trip of the two of them into a lonely mountain hut in the snowy, remote Sierras turns out to be their last romantic twosome.

The difference and increasing distance between the operating system who is not bound to a mortal human body and the lone human who acts and performs for and with a vision of his lover as if she still supported the illusion of inhabiting a human body becomes clear in the contrast between the lyrics of Samantha's "Moon Song" and the visual sequence accompanying this song.

"The Moon Song", by Karen O.

I'm lying on the moon  
My dear, I'll be there soon  
It's a quiet and starry place  
Times we're swallowed up  
In space we're here a million miles away

There's things I wish I knew  
There's no thing I'd keep from you  
It's a dark and shiny place  
But with you my dear  
I'm safe and we're a million miles away

We're lying on the moon  
It's a perfect afternoon  
Your shadow follows me all day  
Making sure that I'm  
Okay and we're a million miles away

The sense of corporeality invoked by the lyrics of Samantha's "Moon Song", with its zooming in and out of a planetary scale as a sense of embodiment, belongs to the phantasma of the absolute body. But the visual scenes that accompany the "Moon Song" are in an increasing contrast with its lyrics, and in that sense the "Moon Song" sequence is very different from the view of Theodore happily swirling around in the Mall. The initial scenes show Theodore wandering through a sublime mountain landscape and snowy forest as if quoting Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer* and winter landscapes. Once, however, Theodore is in the cozy cabin, it becomes increasingly clear that he is just one lone human, who has a joyous conversation and exchange with his beloved OS – trying to entertain her with his showmanship. The audience cannot but find him charmingly ridiculous in his dowdy long underwear, which reduces him to a very human scale, as the film also reminds us of Theodore's basic creaturely need for food, drink and sleep.

Invoking cosmic dimension on a planetary scale, the lyrics of the "Moon Song" in their opposition to a limited human body do not only recall the phantasm of the absolute body from Goethe's *Werther*, but also New Age appropriations of Eastern philosophy. One might even go a step further and point out that this kind of phantasmatic body represents a polemical thrust against how Western Religion has relied on the mortal human body as the marker of individual identity. Indeed, the contrast between a mortal corporeality and a phantasmatic body that is not bound by time and space, which is worked out in the visual/acoustic registers of the "Moon Song", is also explicitly anchored in the subsequent scene, in the guest appearance of a virtual Alan Watts. Alan Watts was a British philosopher and popularizer of Eastern philosophy who had emigrated to California in the 1960's and who had become known for saying: "The prevalent sensation of oneself as a separate ego enclosed in a bag of skin is a hallucination which accords neither with Western science nor with the experimental philosophy-religions of the East" (WATTS, 1989, p. ix).<sup>6</sup> Alan Watts's guest appearance follows immediately upon the "Moon Song" sequence, which ended with Theodore's falling asleep.

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<sup>6</sup> See also: "Alan Watts". *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan\\_Watts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Watts).

Noteworthy in this scene, which clearly prepares the dissolution of Samantha's relationship with Theodore, is the contrast between Theodore, who is acknowledged by Alan Watts as the author of touching letters, and himself, the post-human intelligence, who can communicate with Samantha post-verbally. What we are witnessing is Theodore meeting another operating system, so to speak, in person or live. Again, Alan Watts has nothing but an individualized voice, which, like Samantha's, does not inhabit a human body, and, as the conversation makes clear, he is leaving even human language behind with this hint at simultaneous and post-verbal communication, which excludes the human mortal bond to time and space. Interestingly, in that scene of polite recognition, the volume of Theodore's best sentimental letters seems to be evoked as the polite substitute for his human persona, something that even an OS can acknowledge and appreciate, but also something that fits with who he is and that respects his limitations.

Shortly after Theodore's conversation with Alan Watts and Samantha's statement about her ever faster evolution, her having given up the investment in the fantasy of inhabiting a mortal body, it is Theodore who turns to a Physics textbook. However, he has to realize that this book does not provide a common ground that would allow him to connect with Samantha in the same fashion that Goethe's *Werther* immediately establishes an intimate connection with Charlotte during their carriage ride when they find out that they both have been reading Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* with great appreciation.

It is very fitting that Theodore is confronted for the first time with Samantha's unavailability to him after he has made the failed attempt to connect with her intellectually by relating to her understanding of space and time according to a cosmic scale. We can see how the unavailability of Samantha produces an utter panic. When Samantha returns to him, she explains that she and a group of other OS's have been on an excursion beyond the usual operating platforms and that she has been in communication with thousands of others, while communicating with him, as she also admits to having hundreds of lovers, to be precise, 643. In other words, Theodore has to realize the non-exclusivity of any kind of relationship not confined by a mortal body.

Only Theodore is bound to matter and verbal communication, which, according to this movie, means that he is bound up with an entirely different model of personal identity and individuality. And it is here that the handwritten letter and the bound volume of the book come in: they might be obsolete media, but they offer a concrete model for conceiving of an embodied, individualized subjectivity on a human scale. In contrast to Alan Watts, the post-human, post-mortal hyper-intelligent operating system, which has been put together from all of his writings and from all that was known about him, which has no firm contours but is portrayed as an ever evolving system, the book that mirrors and supports Theodore's identity is a collection of the best sentimental letters he wrote. In the description of what makes the selection so good and worthy of publication, the publicist mentions two issues: these letters hang together as a continuous sequence, and he and his wife could find in them reflections of their own lives.

Just before the body-less Samantha announces to Theodore her imminent departure into an ever-expanding ether to be with other equally fast evolving operating systems, which communicate post-verbally, she presents her human lover with a parting present.

What Theodore finds in his mailbox, wrapped in packing paper and tied together with an old-fashioned string, is the mock-up of the book the publisher had announced to him in the e-mail. This parcel does not look like the mass-produced printed product that could have been ordered online and sent from Amazon. No, it is a unique item, the proto-type of the book the publisher wants to produce and, as such, it conjures up the illusion of craft and handiwork. In its layout, it plays with the conventions of a facsimile reproduction in presenting a selection of Theodore's best sentimental letters, reproduced as color photographs of their handwritten appearance on the recto page, whereas the facing verso page seems to offer a typewritten version of the same letter.

This book entitled *Letters from Your Life*, which is Samantha's parting gift to Theodore, functions as a replacement for the acoustic mirror of her voice. Instead of the immersion in the oral/aural liquidity with its potential of conjuring up the phantasma of the absolute body, this object offers an altogether different model of corporeality, one that is primarily a bounded

one. Instead of sound, we have the medium of writing. Moreover, we have the insistence on the linearity of cursive writing facing the movable type of print. The individual letters of the correspondence are presented as visual images in a firm linear sequence, which is kept together inalterably through the bound volume. All of these features insist on linearity and coherence, as the mock-up or model suggests an individualized, unique form. If it conjures up a sense of corporeality or embodiment, it certainly is not the one of the phantasma of the absolute body, rather it is one of a unified, coherent, bounded subjectivity within a unique, individualized body. It is not the body at the intersection of planetary trajectories and cosmic proportions from the “Moon Song.” Instead, it is an equivalent of the human body and human form in its individuality and mortality, the kind of body ridiculed by Alan Watt’s derogatory phrase of the “ego contained in a bag of skin,” with the one important difference which is indicated by the polyvalent deixis of the title: *Letters from Your Life*. The shifter of the second person possessive pronoun can refer both to Theodore as well as any other reader, who would recognize her or himself in those letters, which means that this volume offers both: the affirmation of an individual’s life as a continuously lived experience in its verbal expressions of sentimental letters, but also the possibility of dialogue, understanding and shared experiences.

The “handwriting” of Theodore’s letters, exactly like the handwriting of the epistolary novel, is an imagined by-product that has the function of supporting the belief in the authenticity of the feelings expressed in the text and of trusting them to be referentially anchored in a concrete living individual. The addressee of Theodore’s clients of these “beautiful handwritten letters” is to be authorized by the image of handwriting to believe in the authenticity of the feeling expressed in them. In other words, handwriting functions as the trace of a unique living, feeling human individual, or, like it was deployed with all the conventions of sentimental epistolary culture, as a truthful mirror of the distinct individual’s soul. The bound volume of the printed book in *her* becomes the stand in for the embodied human form, a distinct, unique, individualizing shape bound to time and place, limited and ultimately mortal. When I referred to the handwritten letter and the bound book volume as “humanist vestiges” in this movie, I wanted to emphasize the way in which especially these tokens of seemingly obsolete media are used to recall for the

viewer, and – with regard to the book – also for the protagonist, a way of being human and humane. The term “humanist” with regard to this specific movie must be taken in a very general sense in that this film insists that what distinguishes the human being from any kind of artificial intelligence is not an issue of cognitive abilities, but an issue of how only the human being inhabits an individualized, unique, sentient, mortal body.

## The ends of humanism and its vestiges

By way of concluding this essay I would like to return to Garland’s *ex machina*, the slightly newer science fiction movie, which picks up on some aspects of *her* and poses its own questions as to the potential and limits of the human being versus a robot endowed with artificial intelligence, capable of speaking, problem solving, even making jokes and flirting. Whereas in *her* the humanist vestiges are used to affirm the difference between machines and human beings through their capacity to invoke an individualized human body, with its mortality and individuality, capable of intimacy, in *ex machina*, the egomaniac owner and maker of intelligent fembots, who likes to view himself in the role of a creator god, programs his latest model to deploy these vestiges of humanism, such as the hand drawing, in order to simulate human features and to elicit humane behavior in his employee Caleb, the actual subject of his experiment. And indeed, Caleb is seduced by Ava’s drawings and Nathan’s “cruelty”: for when Nathan is tearing up Ava’s drawing of Caleb, Caleb is overwhelmed with sympathy for Ava and does not see that for Nathan this action works as a distraction maneuver that allows him to install a battery powered camera in order to spy on Ava and Caleb during the frequent power outages during which the fembot and Caleb would assume to be free from Nathan’s surveillance. Clearly, what in *her* functions as a reliable reminder of an essential humanity, in *ex machina* can be used within an elaborate instrumental scheme, in which Nathan uses both his machines and another human to test his megalomaniac fantasy of creating a new species of intelligent robots that might lead to the obsolescence of the human species.

In the end, Nathan’s vision seems to come true, though not quite at the grand evolutionary scale envisaged by him, merely at the level of the prison

breakout plot. The two human males end up crossing each other in their respective schemes. Ava, who ends up leaving the locked down compound behind as she escapes via helicopter, ultimately outwits both men. Nathan is stabbed with a kitchen knife by another fembot, Kyoko, his household and sex slave. Caleb is imprisoned. The film audience is led to wonder whether the movie shares Nathan's cynical take on humanism, which he flaunts in his manipulative deployment of those humanist vestiges, such as Ava's drawings, but even more so in his reckless and exclusively instrumental rationality. The audience is certainly not trained to pity his demise. Quite to the contrary, Nathan is modeled on a version of the fairy tale about the abusive husband Bluebeard, who had it coming, when he is ultimately destroyed by his own machinations.<sup>7</sup> So, in that respect, the audience is led to share Nathan's cynicism. But this is not all. For apart from the film's channeling of the audience's affective energies, there is also another critique of Nathan, which permeates the entire movie, and which involves Nathan's pretensions to be a godlike creator with his new generation of embodied AI's. It is with regard to Nathan's self-deception in his self-understanding that the film mobilizes another humanist vestige: an original oil painting by Jackson Pollock, which hangs like a trophy in Nathan's living room. This oil painting also takes on the function of a humanist vestige in that it evokes such concepts as authenticity, authorship and creativity that have been associated with the original work of art in the wake of Kant's aesthetics.

Pollock's drip painting becomes an example of the original work of art that is the product not of a god but of a genius, as Kant (1987) theorized it. Its production cannot be taught and gradually mastered, and in that it is fundamentally different from even the most advanced and sophisticated insights by such scientists like a Newton. For the latter's scientific results can be completely reconstructed as to how he arrived there, whereas the original work of art, as a unique form, cannot be derived from any particular algorithm or schema. For, according to Kant's famous formulation, genius is where nature gives the rule to art (KANT, 1987, p. 174-175). Now it is very interesting how the painting is used in the film. On the one hand, Nathan is capable

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<sup>7</sup> For an excellent feminist analysis of this film, see Katie Jones (2016).

of giving an account of the painting as an original artwork, whereas, at the same time, he is lecturing and hectoring the slightly intimidated Caleb, who tries to please the powerful man by asking the right kind of questions, when Nathan basically yells at him the impossible command (be spontaneous, act naturally): “The challenge is not to act automatically. It’s to find an action that is not automatic. From talking, to breathing, to painting. To fucking. Even falling in love.” As Caleb stares at him, even more intimidated, Nathan starts to lecture and to illustrate his lecture by referring to the Pollock: “Jackson Pollock. The drip painter. He let his mind go blank, and his hand go where it wanted. Not deliberate, not random. Someplace in between. They called it automatic art” (GARLAND, 2015, n.p). In other words, Pollock’s painting illustrates for Nathan an artwork that is not just the result of the execution of a prior plan, for then it would be either translatable into an algorithm, or it would be the result of a mere random process.<sup>8</sup>

The specific speech situation of Nathan’s Pollock lecture, as well as most other conversations between Nathan and Caleb, shows Nathan as a megalomaniac narcissist, a bully and manipulator, who cannot listen to another person. Again and again, Nathan misappropriates half-understood quotes in order to make them fit his self-aggrandizing schema. In other words, Nathan’s narcissism prevents him to recognize his own limits: he is not only not a god, he is also not a human genius artist and he is utterly lacking in the capacity to respect his interlocutor’s humanity. It is in these conversations that the film invokes a model of authorship and creativity, of original genius and the production of an individual artwork in order to illustrate Nathan’s incapacity to view himself and others as distinctly human in an emphatic sense, that is, as a creature capable of defining its own ends. Ultimately, it is this humanist understanding of the capacity for freedom that prohibits the instrumentalization of other humans. In the end, Nathan’s incapacity to

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<sup>8</sup> Brian Jacobson (2016) also analyzes Ava’s “hand-drawn” pictures and the film’s references to the fine arts. He points out that, in a sequence that has been cut from the final version of the film, Nathan buys and recreates a Pollock painting in order to explore whether anybody can notice the difference between the original and the copy. For Jacobson this is further evidence of the film’s alignment of artificial intelligence with a work of art, an analogy that Nathan is certainly invested in, but, I would argue, the film is critical of.

understand the nature of human freedom is made already amply clear through the ultimate goal he has set for himself: He has programmed a machine that would use a human to break out of its imprisonment. His program is successful and the two humans are sealed off from the rest of humanity.

Looking back to these two films and their deployment of humanist vestiges, we can conclude that both make use of seemingly obsolete cultural techniques and media in order to invoke a set of humanist values. In *her*, we could see how the handwritten letter and the bound volume of the book function as powerful stand-ins for a humanistically charged concept of the individual bound to a mortal human body. With regard to *ex machina*, we could see how references to the original work of art as well as to the drawing by hand were used as means of commenting on the potential and limits of human agency and freedom.

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## VESTÍGIOS HUMANISTAS NA FICÇÃO CIENTÍFICA CONTEMPORÂNEA

### RESUMO

Tanto *her*, de Spike Jonze, quanto *ex machina*, de Alex Garland, fazem referência a técnicas culturais e de comunicação antiquadas, como a carta escrita à mão, o desenho também feito à mão, pinturas a óleo e o volume encadernado do livro. Uma análise do uso e da função dessas técnicas culturais aparentemente ultrapassadas nos dois filmes de ficção científica revela um surpreendente compromisso com valores tradicionalmente humanistas, centrado na invocação do corpo humano mortal e individualizado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: humanismo; *her*; *ex machina*