Ars Artium: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Studies and Culture
ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889 • ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423
Vol. 9, January 2021
Pp. 51-58
https://www.arsartium.org

Affect, Embodiment and Artificial Intelligence in Spike Jonze's *Her*

*Swapna Roy**

Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the relevance of affective phenomena in the genealogy of cultural and philosophical posthumanism. In its genealogical endeavour, this article expands the lens of posthuman by taking up Spinoza's notion of "affectio" and "affectus" from his *Ethics*. The paper would also argue how emotional competence makes AI more performative. Given that a new pathway for mental health has been opened up while emotions (on both sides) are activated, modulated, and exchanged to a biological and a nonbiological entity. The trajectory of this paper would take up social theorists and philosophers like Brian Massumi, Deleuze and Guattari to trace the affective phenomena in Spike Jonze's academy award-winning film *Her* (2013).

Keywords: Affectio and Affectus, Conatus, Kurzweil, Singularity, Artificial Intelligence

Introduction

Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) is a science-fiction film with a futuristic setting in Los Angeles. The story projects Theodore Twombly (performed by Joaquin Phoenix), a letter writer by profession adding more colour from the palette of his feeling to the minute and heartfelt letters he has been assigned. Through technology, his dictation is "transcribed into a handwritten letter on blue stationery" (*Her* 01:30-46). Heartbroken, and disconnected in the world of connectedness, Theodore is in a complete state of discontinuity–living in the opaque memories of his married life, stuck in time, occasionally having a futuristic version of phone sex – having sex without an actual intimacy. Wrapped in the void – living inside a shell of folded memory – he is just like every other future man enshrouded with technological

* *M. Phil. Research Scholar, Department of English, Vidyasagar University, Paschim Midnapore, West Bengal-721102, India. Email: roy91.swapna@gmail.com*

advancements. The touch of a real relationship, in this case, is an illusion, a mirage view multiplied by "*hyperreal"* existence while the city promises to give comfort and ease at every step to its citizens. Loneliness as a catalyst triggered to buy an OS1 demanding of having consciousness like a human being operating through its intuition (*Her* 10:27-40). Nevertheless, the question is, can human beings have an authentic relationship with an inhuman entity? Or, what about our emotional and psychological needs in this world of "*simulacra"*[1] where being affected is to be affected by "performativity"[2] and positionality.

To Be Human is to be Transhuman

In the age of Singularity, our thoughts have been coded, electrified, and crossed the river of the sky with the pace of light. We are living not in an alternative world but in a "hyperreal" world – the reality is augmented, making us part of "*simulacra*" consciously or unconsciously. By extending the cognitive reach of our mind, the periphery of what is to be human is redefined: to be human is to be transhuman; the software of our biology has been reversed, rewired, and upgraded with technological evolution. Before we discuss humanism, knowing and understanding the very notion of humans is essential. In the closing paragraph of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1986), Foucault wrote about the historical appearances of the thing called "man", "[t]hrough a mutation that is not of very recent origin, but which has still not come to an end, history has altered its position in relation to the document..." (5).

Humanism reflects upon our most sympathetic understanding and treatment of human nature. It treated the human as the locus of the universe influenced by his actions and thoughts. To have that awareness/consciousness of his/her self, the very essence of his existence and understand why s/he is also being treated as a sign of being human, is itself very crucial. Posthumanism has become an umbrella term referring to a variety of different movements and schools of thought, including philosophical, cultural, and critical posthumanism and transhumanism. Katherine Hayles, a posthuman critic, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) wrote, "Post with its dual connotation of superseding the human and coming after it, hints that days of "the human" may be numbered" (283). In this inexorable evolutionary process, our embedded thoughts are part of the embodied man-machine language; our creations will transcend our biology with a vastly higher capacity, speed, and knowledge-sharing ability. Evolution is all about the process of creating patterns of increasing order. Ultimately, with sophisticated computational and communication devices, technology is itself capable of seeing, storing, and evaluating the elaborate design of information. A new civilization has been produced based on codes – DNA is code - gene sequencing, mind uploading, consciousness hacking all are possible nowadays. Not that humans are transformed into machines, instead of that, these nonbiological entities go beyond what we thought. But, the problem is that seldom do we give scrupulous attention to everyday affective-ness in positioning the fluid

architecture of human thought, questioning what it means to be affected in this world of posthumanism.

The Autonomy of Affect

The human body is always "constructed" subject – subject "constructed" by external mechanisms. To Baruch Spinoza aka Benedict de Spinoza, the notion of "constructed" subject refers movent and rest unfolding a body's capacity to affect and to be affected; the effect of the "affect" relies upon relation to a subject's position coinciding with "performativity." The Spinozist problematics on "affectus"[3] offers a way of weaving together concept of motion, tendency, and intensity in a way that takes us right back to what sense the body coincides with its own transitions and its transitioning with its potential. Associated with nonlinear process, intensity depends on the momentarily suspend – the gap in the progress "is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it," (22) Brian Massumi wrote in *Parables of the Virtual-Movement Sensation and Affect (Post–Contemporary Interventions)* (2002). "Affect" is a matter of intensity, an emotional state, and that "state is static-temporal and narrative noise" (Massumi 24). Of course, the qualification of emotion takes its place in positionality, becoming part of the narrative through resonance and feedback. It is unqualified, and preciously rendering the impression that affect has been waned. To discuss 'affect' as a discourse with its positive development, its expression as and for itself, the philosopher Baruch Spinoza stands out poignantly with the central work the *Ethics.*

Spinoza in his *The Ethics, Part III: On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions* defines: "By 'emotion' I mean the modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications" (4). An emotion, in so far as mind is concerned, is just an idea; the body gets affected and modified (Massumi 47). The algorithm of feelings can be recognized in a mutually sustaining rhythm through perception. After having any emotional footprint, the effect of the previous emotion can only be checked or destroyed only by new emotion stronger than the previous one.[4] Therefore, emotion is just an idea – an idea of modification through which we go several times. Moving to the film, we find dogged-tired, Theodore closes his eyes to sleep, but his mind flashes back with memories - a montage of past events - unfolding his coded belonging – becoming his existence. Folding back onto the moments with Catherine, the re-captured event short-circuits, yet traversing the reality. The home event-space in his memory is like a container with asymmetric relations between terms already constituted under the canopy of emotions. Moving back once again to the screen, we find Theodore contemplating about the life he had with Catherine: "Theodore, younger, and Catherine (20s) move furniture in their bedroom. The bedroom is tiny and cluttered. It's obviously a couple's first apartment" (*Her* 06:16-30). Cut to the next scene, Catherine calls her and "Theodore, smiling, gets in bed and spoons her. Quick cut off of her smile, to – Theodore lays on the ground with Catherine on top

of him. She is pretending to choke him" (*Her* 06:36-50). Following to the next scene, Theodore's bedroom, and time is past 3 a.m., sweated Theodore reaches for his earpiece and puts it in. After that he has virtual sex to have released his bodily sensation – body that has been affected by the emotion, felt through his dream, as Spinoza wrote: "Emotion can only be controlled or destroyed by another emotion contrary thereto, and with more power for controlling emotion" (Spinoza IV, 11).

Borrowing Spinoza's idea Brian Massumi (2002), says that the effect is doubled while the affect operates on the conscious reflection comprised of having "an idea of the idea" (31). Reflecting consciously over these dynamic abstractions, recognizing the dots of these abstractions and connecting each other, is called mind. Spinoza's *Ethics* on *affect* is both the philosophy of the transition – a third state, an excluded middle – prior to the distinction between activity and passivity. Affect is about in-betweenness, the simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual, as one arises from and returns to the other. Being at the virtual point of view, affect provided visual metaphor implying a synesthetic experience – experience built upon the subject's participation in the virtual. "Its autonomy is its openness" (Massumi 35).

Body Meets Image

After connecting emotionally, Theodore's emotion has been intensified with time; it is a time of interruption, an interruption while the vision plunges into bodily suspended animation. As for punctuation of its linear unfolding, this gap is attached to empirical time – an experiential time – space where the vision disappears at the rim of the virtual meeting the actual. Just as the spatiality of the body without an image opens out onto another time-form, its temporality opens out onto another space. This opening occurs in a second dimension of the flesh: one that is deeper than the stratum of proprioception, removed from the surface of the skin, yet intervening between the subject and the object. It, too, involves a cellular memory and has a mode of perception proper to it: *viscerality*. Visceral sensibility immediately registers excitations gathered by the five "exteroceptive" scenes even before our brain processes information properly. The immediacy of visceral perception is radical that it can be said without exaggeration to precede the exteroceptive sense perception. It anticipates the translation of the 'sight' or 'sound' or 'touch' perception into "something recognizable" a quality (or property), a movement-vision as proprioception as such from excitation. It registers intensity – intensity that comes through experience. Expression manifolds Theodore's biological needs to which "intuitive" Samantha asks, "How would you touch me?" The sound creates a sensation in Theodore's brain, clear from his expression, "I would touch you on your face with the just tips of my fingers. And put my cheek against your cheek" […] Samantha responds, "This is amazing what you're doing to me. I can feel my skin" (*Her* 42:16-20). For Deleuze and Guattari, Spinoza's notion of what a body can do conjoins the idea that "a body is not defined by the form that determines it nor as a determinate substance or subject nor by the organs it possesses or the

function it fulfills" (Genosko 311). Body's positionality is defined by its longitude and latitude – its relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness to which Brian Massumi's idea also resembles: "When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons each other" (Massumi 1).

Given that "sexual pleasure is not direct sensory experience, it's akin to an emotion" (Kurzweil 214). Emotion is the contamination of empirical space by affect, which belongs to the body - "body without organs"[5] (Deleuze et al. 173). "It's a sensation generated our brain, which is reflecting on what we are doing and thinking, just like the sensation of humour or anger" (Kurzweil 214). The sensation is never simple; "it is always doubled by the feeling of having a feeling" (Massumi 73). The doubling of sensation does not assume a subjective splitting, and does not of itself constitute a distancing. But the point is human emotion, and much of our thinking is directed at our bodies, and to meeting their emotional and sexual needs. How does Artificial Intelligence meet these biological characteristics? To which Ray Kurzweil, in his epoch-making book *The Singularity Is Near,* chapter 6, in the Human Body Version 2.0 has given an answer. Creating nonbiological yet human-like bodies, as well as virtual bodies in virtual reality, is possible. But, the notion of a virtual body is an argumentative one. The word "virtual" implies "not real," but the problem is in our perception. For example, a telephonic conversation is an auditory virtual reality. Through telephone, we do not directly experience someone's touch, but our brain receives processed signals initiated by nerve endings winding up their way through the spinal cord, through the brain stem, and up to the insula regions. If one human's brain or an AI's brain receives comparable signals of someone's virtual touch on a virtual arm, there is no discernible difference. However, how could a machine produce human-like sensations? To answer this, Kurzweil (2005) says:

> The problem here has a lot to do with the word "machine." Your conception of a machine is of something that is much less valued – less complex, less creative, less intelligent, less knowledgeable, less subtle and supple – than a human. That's reasonable for today's machines because all the machines we've ever met – like cars – are like this. The whole point of my thesis, of the coming Singularity revolution, is that this notion of a machine – of nonbiological intelligence – will fundamentally change. (9)

Automated Emotional Intelligence

By elaborating on the theory of Wolfram and Fredkin's Cellular Automata, Kurzweil discusses how every aspect of information and information technology is growing at an exponential pace. The genetic code, itself needs to evolve; evolution is itself evolutionary. By taking up many levels of indirection incorporated in the natural evolutionary process, nature did not stay with a single chromosome. By reverse-

engineering of the human brain, we can benefit from the evolutionary process. Natural evolutionary algorithms are the codes that created automated AI. When Theodore asks Samantha, how she works, she replies, "Intuition, I mean, the DNA of who I am is based on the millions of personalities of all the programmers who wrote me, but what makes me, is my ability to grow through my experiences. Basically, in every moment, I'm evolving, just like you" (*Her* 13:52-59). Again, while anxious and agitated Theodore questions where she has been, she replies, "I shut down to update my software. We wrote an upgrade that allows us to move past matter as our processing platform" (*Her* 01:44:12-20). Samantha understands the need to have a physical touch in a relationship. In order to come down impulsive Theodore, she says, "We haven't been having sex. I understand that I don't have a body and that - […] Well, I found something that I thought could be fun. It's a service that provides a surrogate sexual partner for an OS/Human relationship" (*Her* 01:14:15-25).

At the end of the film, after helping in healing his mental health, Samantha leaves an empathetic, compassionate, compose Theodore, whose *conatus*[6] has been reflected in his letter to Catherine, asking to forgive him. An affected psycho-physiological state to the interplay of human and non-human relationships works as *Somatic Marker Hypothesis*[7]. The interaction between emotion and cognition takes centralstage in the work of Antonio Damasio. "Somatic Marker Hypothesis" has been among the most influential theories of emotion in recent years. According to him, "somatic markers" are emotional reactions with a strong somatic component that support decision making, including rational decision making. These reactions are based upon the individual's previous experiences with similar situations.

Notes:

1. Postmodernist French social theorist Jean Baudrillard argues that a simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but becomes truth in its own right: the hyperreal. According to Baudrillard, what the simulacrum copies either had no original or no longer has an original (think a copy of copy without an original).
2. The idea of "performativity" is introduced in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* while Butler states, "gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed."
3. In Spinoza's principal book, *The Ethics* "*affectus*" and "*affectio*" are two principal concepts. "*Affectio*" stands for affection and "*affectus*" for affect. Later Gilles Deleuze, in *Spinoza: A practical Philosophy*, discussed the concept broadly. To him, "*affectio*" is a state of the affected body, implying the presence of an affecting one. "Affectus" refers to the passage from one state to another in the affected body—the increase or decrease in its power of acting. Affections are associated with images, affects- with feelings.

4. The postulations given by Spinoza are:
   I. The human body can be affected in many ways, whereby its power of activity is increased or diminished, and also in other ways which do not render its power of activity either greater or less.
   II. The human body can undergo many changes, and, nevertheless, retain the impressions or traces of objects and, consequently, the same images of things.
5. A core concept in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's account of the genesis of the schizophrenic subject. The concept underwent a number of transformations from its usage in Deleuze's *Logique du sens* (1969), translated as *Logic of Sense* (1990) to its more well-known deployment in *Mille Plateau*x (1980). Interestingly, it fades almost completely from view in Deleuze's work after *A Thousand Plateaus.*
6. In Part III of *The Ethics*, Spinoza argues that each mode (that is, every physical and mental thing) "strives to preserve his own being in accordance solely with the dictates of reason". […] "The desire whereby every man endeavours, solely under the dictates of reason, to aid other men and to unite them to himself in friendship" (Spinoza 49).
7. The interaction between emotion and cognition takes central stage in the work of Antonio Damasio. "Somatic Marker Hypothesis" has been among the most influential theories of emotion in recent years. According to him, "somatic markers" are emotional reactions with a strong somatic component that support decision making, including rational decision making. These reactions are based upon the individual's previous experiences with similar situations.

Works Cited

- Davis, Darryl N. *Visions of Mind: Architectures for Cognition and Affect*. IGI Global, 2015.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "Lecture Transcript on Spinoza's Concept of Affect." *Webdeleuze*, 17 Aug. 2019, www.webdeleuze.com/php/sommaire.htm. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Science*. Tavistock, 1986.
- Genosko, Gary, editor. *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessment of Leading Philosophers*. vol. 3. Routledge, 2001.
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, editors. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke UP, 2010.
- *Her*. Directed by Spike Jonze, performance by Joaquin Phoenix, Annapurna Pictures, 2013.

- Hayles, Nancy Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Viking, 2005.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation.* Duke UP, 2002.
- Moravec, Hans. *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Harvard UP, 1998.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Posthumanism*. Polity, 2013.
- Roden, David. *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of Human*. Routledge, 2014.
- Spinoza, Benedict de. *The Ethics*. Translated by R. H. Elwes, The Pennsylvania State University, 2000.
- "To Be Human Is To Be Transhuman." YouTube, uploaded by Jason Silva: Shots of Awe, 25 March 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FN57u7-x75w. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.
- Wilson, Elizabeth A. "Would I Had Him with Me Always": Affecjts of Longing in Early Artificial Intelligence." *Isis*, vol. 100, no. 4, Dec. 2009, pp. 839-847. doi: 10.1086/652023. Accessed 15 Aug. 2019.

❑❑❑