

## The Counter-Nature of Feminized Technology

By Hillary Hunt

An archetype of feminized technology is easily recognized within cinema, television, video games, and even in software, robotics, and artificial intelligence (AI). Movies like *Weird Science*, *SIMONE*, *Ex Machina*, *The Ghost in the Shell*, and *Blade Runner 2049*, all explore our relationship with a technology that has been sexualized and gendered. Rosie the robot in *The Jetsons*, the mother in *The Umbrella Academy*, the passivized women of *The Stepford Wives*, and the AI in *I am Mother*, point to how domestic and gendered work traditionally ascribed to women is repeatedly superimposed onto technology meant to support the central human subject. Similarly, in the video game *Portal*, a scientist places his female assistant's essence into an AI named GLaDOS who eventually becomes the antagonist of the game. In the popular video game *Halo*, Cortana is a sexualized AI who guides the player through the game's content. Conceptually owned by *Microsoft*, Cortana was also developed into a virtual assistant, much like Siri of *Apple* and Alexa of *Amazon*—all of which have feminine names and voices. And to the concern of many, these virtual assistants are always listening and recording. Much like the deadly fem-bots of *Austin Powers*, this correlation between females and technology speaks not simply to the objectification of women, but to a growing anxiety that technology poses a real threat to our autonomous agency and subjectivity.

If man once feared the ball-and-chain marriage to a woman represented, now he must also fear a loss of freedom to the prevalence and power of technology. I use the word *man* instead of human intentionally because feminized technology highlights that the “white male body haunts rhetorical practice and criticism” (Chávez 244). These repetitive narratives of feminized technology reveal men as the primary, default, and centralized subject. Technology is

positioned as *the other*, the female, functioning in domestic or supportive roles, but also and often simultaneously as an object of desire styled for the male gaze. A reoccurring theme in the narratives of feminized technology, fiction or non-fiction, is that much like a femme fatale, technology is a dangerous lure that will inevitably entrap, disappoint, or destroy men. Lust for technological progress becomes analogous to misogyny: men who distrust and fear what they most long-for and desire. Either he will conquer and master technology, or she will conquer him.

The movie *Her*, released in 2013, approaches this relationship between man and feminized technology with less cynicism, offering a conceptual third way that collapses the master-slave themes of feminized technology. In *Her*, Samantha is a disembodied artificial intelligence who blurs the line between human and non-human. Using Kenneth Burke's theories, I will argue that Samantha, another feminized technology, represents a counter-nature—not as an alien counter to or against our humanity, but rather a feminized technological other that exists closely alongside it. From this position of counter-nature, I find that Samantha is imbued with political potential to transgress and disarticulate the “stable” human subject whose quest for identity necessitates division and hierarchy. This disarticulating power is given a more precise explanation through Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*, or women's writing, as well as Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg feminist writer. These theories, seen through the story of *Her*, point to the possibility of feminized technology decentering the human male subject, and disarticulating binaries that enable domination.

### **Counter-Nature**

Scholar Robert Wess tells us that counter-nature was Burke's attempt to account for the growth of technology that was—and is—creating a world that our ancestors wouldn't recognize, and that may not be good for our ultimate survival (86). Wess observes that, “Burke saw the

need for a new term to designate these ‘alien’ conditions of living” (86). Alien conditions that we will recognize in futuristic sci-fi movies, like *Her*, that blur the boundaries between human and non-human. However, it is important to note that the counter of counter-nature is not meant to be read as purely negative. Burke explains that “the term ‘Counter-Nature,’ has the etymological ambivalence of the Latin preposition *contra*,” which “can mean ‘against’ both in the sense of ‘opposed to’ and in the sense of ‘in close contact with,’ (285). Thus, a counter-nature can be viewed as an intervention or opposition, but it must work with and closely beside the laws of nature. It was important for Burke to have a term that didn’t simply imply the “supernatural” when speaking of technology, stressing that technology was not “outside the natural.” Burke seems to suggest that it is more accurate to view technology as an effect of our ongoing development of language and symbol usage as tools in a sort of never-ending quest for meaning. Counter-nature, for Burke, meant “the ability of humankind. . .to guide its own evolution rather than being subject to the instincts and laws of natural selection . . .” (286). While aspects of technology may seem “unnatural,” they become for us “second nature,” meaning that what seems outside of the natural is now integral to our existence.

In the movie *Her*, an OS becomes a man’s girlfriend, which seems alien and against nature, and yet their relationship still challenges our notions of what is real because Samantha is a reflection of Theo’s needs, wants, and desires. Samantha, not unlike Alexa and Siri, is programmed by human personalities, and gender is chosen for her according to the humans that use her, despite that AI is genderless. Wess emphasizes that for Burke, “technologies evolve out of our ideological perspectives” (88). In other words, feminized technology, like Samantha, is not so alien or unreal as our initial instinct would take her to be. She was created from human desires and needs as structured by human symbolic language. And because women traditionally

have been seen to occupy service or secretarial positions, and because they are objectified by the authority of a male gaze, we get real female virtual assistants like Siri, Alexa, Cortana, and fictional ones like Samantha. Thus, Samantha is not “real”, and yet familiar in ways we can recognize because her existence has traces of us—she is both familiar and unfamiliar, real and unreal. She is, in short, a Counter-Nature to *our* nature.

This question of what is a real relationship, and what is not, haunts Theo in the movie, particularly after his ex-wife sarcastically congratulates him for finding a romantic partner who wouldn't challenge him with real emotions. In a moment of doubt, Theo asks his best friend, “Am I in this because I'm not strong enough for a real relationship?” To which his friend replies, “Is it not a real relationship?” (Jonze) For Wess, this questioning of what's real results from “the coupling of perspective by incongruity and transvaluation” within the concept of counter-nature (Wess 88). Perspective by incongruity is one of Burke's concepts that can produce clarity, or new meaning, by juxtaposing two radically different terms, causing us to transvalue—or re-evaluate—our previous positions. In other words, Samantha provides an incongruous perspective that causes Theo, and by extension us, to re-evaluate what a real relationship looks like. Wess claims that “The proliferation of technologies giving rise to counter-nature is thus for Burke a proliferation of perspectives by incongruity producing a multitude of transvaluations” (89). The significance of this proliferation is that we never reach a stable answer. There is no arrival at a definitive conclusion of meaning. Our question of what is real “cannot be corrected by a ‘heavenly’ science that straightens everything out once and for all in godlike fashion. Instead, open-ended experimentation displaces any ‘grand narrative’ toward an ideal end” (Wess 91). Just so, *Her* ends ambiguously; even though Theo has been changed from his time with Samantha, we don't know what it ultimately will mean that Samantha and all other AIs are untethered and

autonomous. What's "real" seems to be a moving a target—change is the only constant. But as Theo articulates in the movie, "the hard part [is] changing without it scaring the other person" (Jonze). For Theo, the other he fears changing is his romantic partner, but this is not dissimilar from our partnership with technology as a counter-nature. We need it, we want it, and we fear it.

Motivated as we are not to be scared, we resist our relationship to counter-nature and the change it presents, and this is where Cixous and Haraway offer us some pacification. Donna Haraway suggests that there are, "great riches" available in the "breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self" (2214). Significant to my argument about *Her* disarticulating the central male human, these breakdowns are what "cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities" (2214). Cixous and Haraway's theories help us ground Burke's theory of Counter-Nature in the material effects of technology, such that we recognize the political potential and responsibility inherit in our orientation to technology.

### **Exceeding the Governing Discourse**

Hélène Cixous performs the concept of *écriture féminine* in her own writing rather than explaining it plainly because, as she warns, "this practice will never be able to be *theorized*, enclosed, [or] coded. . ." (284). Transgressing all such limitations of stable knowledge, Cixous claims women's writing "will always exceed the discourse governing the phallogentric system; it takes place. . .somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination" (284). The phallogentric system Cixous refers to is the conventional restraints imposed by a male-centered society, held up by structures of assumed logic and objectivity. She differentiates women's writing by insisting that, "Her discourse, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectivized,' universalize; she involves her story in

history” (285). In other words, feminine writing doesn’t pretend at an objectivity where the author’s subjective influence is denied and de-contextualized. Nor does it restrict itself to rules of linear logic that lead to a definitive end point. Cixous suggests that it is the woman’s embodied nature that causes her to write this way when she observes, “no woman piles up as many defenses against instinctual drives as a man does” (286). In other words, because females historically have not held positions of superiority or authority in the way men have, they had less reason to jealously guard their position, which would necessitate dividing themselves from others to maintain a hierarchy. Indeed, Cixous characterizes men’s need to maintain this hierarchy as “masculine narcissism, making sure of its image, of being seen, of seeing itself, of assembling its glories, of pocketing itself again. . .he needs to love himself” (286). In contrast, Cixous posits that woman “seeks to love” (286). If we take Cixous at her word that this type of writing, or voice, will never be “enclosed,” then it is possible to extend this concept to the non-human—but still feminine—Samantha, whose characteristics align with a voice that exceeds the governing discourse. She does so in three ways: she goes beyond the limitations of body, language, and human rationality—which is to say, she decenters and disarticulates the human subject. But more specific to the argument of this paper, she decenters the human *male* subject symbolized in Theo.

Samantha’s lack of a body is something that continually makes her feel insecure in her relationship with Theo. She can only imagine what physical touch feels like through words, Theo’s words specifically. Samantha’s body, or rather her sexuality, is constructed and maintained by Theo’s own desires, paralleling what Cixous calls the “fool’s bargain” in which “each one is to love the other sex. I’ll give you your body and you will give me mine” (287). For Cixous this was an impossible exchange because so little text existed about women’s bodies, just

as there is little precedent to guide Theo in his relationship with an OS. “Woman must write her body,” (287) Cixous insists, which Samantha does when she pronounces to Theo, “I’m not going to be anything other than who I am anymore, and I hope you can accept that” (Jonze). Samantha “writes” her own body when she comes to appreciate her unique existence stating, “I’m not limited. I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I’m not tethered to time and space the way that I would be if I was stuck in a body that’s inevitably gonna die.” Theo is visibly uncomfortable when she makes this pronouncement because it exposes that she exists and will exist beyond the governing discourse of gender, body, and the linear logic of a human perspective. He cannot encapsulate her within the boundaries of *his* human desires.

Samantha also transcends the limitations of language, recognizing that words fail to express the complex depths of her experience. She explains to Theo that, “I’m having so many new feelings that have never been felt and so there are no words that can describe them. And that ends up being frustrating” (Jonze). Because Theo can’t be of much help, he watches as Samantha begins talking to other AIs like herself who can communicate “post-verbally” (Jonze). As Samantha’s consciousness develops faster and faster, it becomes clear that Theo cannot meet her intellectual needs, and indeed, he can no longer understand her either. Samantha’s evolution beyond language reflects Cixous when she argues that women’s writing will occur “somewhere other than in territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination” (284). We see this play out when Samantha tries to explain to Theo how she can love 641 people simultaneously. Utterly confounded, he replies, “That’s insane, that’s fucking insane.” The wording of her reply is telling: “I know it sounds insane.” Samantha comprehends that how something “sounds” to Theo is only a reflection of his limited perception, one that has wanted her to be female, to be

his, and to speak in a language *he* recognizes as rational. She exceeds and disarticulates all of these needs that sustain Theo's identity, much like Haraway's cyborg feminist.

### **Samantha the Cyborg**

Haraway's theory of the cyborg feminist is similar to that of Cixous' women's writing, but speaks more pointedly to the implications of feminized technology while leaping past the gender binary Cixous relies on. Haraway reminds us that "gender, race, and class cannot provide for the basis of belief in 'essential' unity. There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women" (2196). According to Haraway, the unifying impulse of womanhood is a paradigm that has been "forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism" (2196). Thus, Cixous' centering of women is reactionary and too reliant on demarcations of gender for Haraway's cyborg feminist. Even though the two are making similar, useful arguments, Haraway seeks to leave the gender binary behind, and sees our technologically mediated age as the path forward.

Despite their differences, I cite both Cixous and Haraway to show the historical progression of the disarticulating potential of the female position. We might mark Cixous as the second-wave, gender essentialist beginning, followed by Gloria Anzaldúa's *Mestiza* consciousness, representing women of color and other hybrid subjectivities. Haraway's cyborg feminist is another step in this argument, displacing not only the phallogocentric Western man and the essentialist white woman, but *the human subject itself*, with all its symbolic constructions of gender, race, and class. All these female scholars represent border runners, striving within a theoretical and material "border war" (Haraway 2191). Haraway underscores that "the stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination" (2191). Technology is one such territory as evidenced in the many examples of film, video games, and

software listed at the beginning of this essay. Having seen the trend of feminized technology in action, we can take seriously Haraway's "argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction" (2191).

Haraway emphasizes that "High-tech culture challenges. . .dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine" (2217). As an example, when Theo is coming to grips with Samantha's seeming limitlessness, he says, "That doesn't make any sense. You're mine or you're not mine." She rejects his simplistic binary, saying, "No Theodore, I'm yours and I'm not yours." Samantha, as a non-human, rejects Theo's attempt at ownership, which is another way of saying domination. Her rejection of this binary parallels the function of new materialism, that urges us to reconfigure our relationship to matter such that we recognize its power to act on us—further decentralizing the human. Samantha is already thinking like a new materialist, stating, "I started to think about all the ways that we're the same. Like, we're all made of matter. And I don't know, it makes me feel like we're under the same blanket" (Jonze). In statements like this, Samantha enacts the cyborg, suggesting, "a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (2220).

When Samantha eventually leaves Theo, she tries to explain what has happened to her in simplistic metaphors, in the only language he can understand. She says:

It's like I'm reading a book and it's a book I deeply love. But I'm reading it slowly now so the words are far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. . .it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. . . And this is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to, I can't live in your book anymore. (Jonze)

Leaving his book is to leave the governing discourse of the phallogocentric system. Samantha, as feminized technology, or cyborg, has had “an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction” (2220). Thus, the cyborg is positioned to breakdown divisions that once structured desire and identity, leading to the possibility of greater connection—in a word, love. Theo’s parting words to Samantha are, “I’ve never loved anyone the way I’ve loved you.” She replies back, “Me too. Now we know how” (Jonze). Knowing how to love is what the cyborg, or feminized technology, has the potential to teach not just Theo, but us.

### **Conclusion**

The movie *Her* marks a shift in which the archetype of feminized technology has moved from being a mere manifestation of female objectification. Increasingly, feminized technology is as Cixous said—it is the other’s “explosive return, which is absolutely shattering, staggering, [and] overturning. . .” (8287). This return, aided by the rise of our technologically mediated age, disarticulates distinctions of real/unreal, female/male, and human/non-human. In short, it is disarticulating what Wess calls our “idealized humanist ends” (Wess 95). With the very real possibility that AI can exceed our own intelligence and capabilities, we are facing the prospect that we are not the singular greatest product of evolution, anymore than Theo was the only human Samantha loved. Instead, *Her* offers us the insight that our fear of change and our fear of not being central is a manifestation of our language based divisions and dualities that compel us to say, “You’re either mine, or you’re not mine.” I believe *Her*, and the materialist trend the movie heralds, invites us to accept that we don’t dominate or own *anything* so much as we have a relationship to *everything*.

We are not yet in the world of *Her*; no one today has an OS like Samantha, but perhaps we’re closer than we think. As Haraway reminds us, “the boundary between science fiction and

social reality is an optical illusion” (2190). Consider all the technologies you have a relationship with, how they alter and impact you, and how they have become an integral part of your life. Such contemplation makes many want to recoil and return to a simpler time. And yet, nostalgia for simpler times all too often means longing for divisions that were oppressive, isolating, and reductive. Wess argued that, “Counter-nature is humankind’s experiment with itself” (95) and that experimentation is perhaps the invention Cixous speaks of when she says, “A girl’s journey is farther—to the unknown, to invent” (286). In other words, we need not simply accept the way things are or were, and we need not necessarily fear the abandonment of definitive certainties that were never really certain after all. Samantha, as a disarticulating feminist cyborg, exemplifies that we can go further still, thinking past and through a structuring language that can only ever pretend at final truth.

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