



The Semiology of Machine Humanization in Contemporary Cinema: An Analytical Reading of the Film I'm Here

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Abstract:

Science fiction films encapsulate profound communicative messages that provoke critical inquiry into their thematic constructs; specifically, the cinematic output of Spike Jonze functions as an intertextual bridge where narratives continuously inform one another. Given the recent discursive surge surrounding Artificial Intelligence, it is imperative to examine the visual representations of this phenomenon and their role in interrogating the complex dynamics between humans and machines. This paper offers an analytical reading of the film I'm Here, exploring the representations of the human-AI relationship and its impact on the spectator. The study concludes that the film deliberately "humanizes" the technical signifier by imbuing its connotative layers with themes of vulnerability, sacrifice, and alienation, thereby constructing a semiotic paradox that compels the audience toward a critical reappraisal of identity and existence.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Spike Jonze; Film Semiology; Humanization of the Machine; Barthesian Approach.



1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary cinema functions as an open laboratory for the production and circulation of signs. The image does not stop at the threshold of what it shows; it extends into what it conceals, a dense arsenal of meaning. The film *I'm Here* by director Spike Jonze emerges as a singular model of what might be called "emotional machine cinema," deliberately distancing itself from Hollywood's conventional representations of robots as superhuman forces or existential threats to humanity. Instead, it presents them as fragile beings inhabiting the margins of great cities. Cinema is, at its core, a medium capable of granting "life" to what is motionless and investing the inanimate with ethical and emotional dimensions. Since the earliest days of science fiction on the big screen, the question of "the limits of identity" has been the primary driver of the human-machine relationship. The artificial body has long been regarded as "the Other" — a being oscillating between technological miracle promising salvation and a threat to human centrality. Yet philosophical shifts in independent cinema have begun to propose an alternative vision, one that does not inquire into the machine's intelligence or destructive capacity, but rather its capacity to feel and its existential fragility before profoundly human concepts: loneliness, loss, and the desire for connection.

The central problem confronting film criticism today lies in interpreting the manner by which the "metallic machine" is transformed into an expressive medium that arouses deep emotion and empathy. Identity, in this context, is not derived from biological constitution but from "existential action" and from the way a character manifests within the film's spatiotemporal field. We are faced with a complex construction of the visual environment, in which the image abandons its function as an instrument of neutral observation to become an encoded language carrying values of sacrifice and altruism.

This transition from "matter" to "meaning" is what lends the artistic work its gravity. Visual tools are mobilized to create a perceptual shock in the viewer — a shock that compels the acknowledgment of a soul within a body made of mechanical wires. From this vantage point, the film *I'm Here* (2010) stands as a pioneering model of this tendency. Like other films by Spike Jonze concerned with the human-machine relationship, it presents a world in which robots share the very same suffering as human beings. To grasp this depth, one must move from a surface reading of the film toward a deeper structural analysis that investigates two intertwined levels of meaning production: a level that registers reality as it is in its raw materiality, and another that interrogates the connotations and latent content beneath that materiality. This semiotic interplay is what liberates the machine from its mechanical constraints and ushers it into the realm of human existence from Spike Jonze's perspective.

The central problematic of this research revolves around the "semantic paradox" posed by the representation of the machine in emotional cinema. Although the robotic body in *I'm Here* is constituted from "hard, mechanical, and replaceable" matter, the narrative action imbues it with

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connotations of "fragility, transience, and sacrifice." From this, the following research question is derived:

How does the film **I'm Here** reconstitute the philosophical debate around the nature of consciousness, identity, and humanity within the context of digital existence?

From this central question, the following sub-questions emerge:

- What is the nature of the relationship between the formal level and the connotative level in the film under study, and what are its epistemological dimensions?
- How can an interpretive reading of the film be proposed from the perspective of prominent philosophers of artificial intelligence?
- What is the relationship between the film's problematics and our contemporary reality?

This study is concerned with understanding the semantic data of the audiovisual image in the film under study and examining its interpretive dimensions, which aligns with the semiological method and its concern with the mechanisms of meaning production in communicative content and the relationships between them, in order to understand the nature of messages and their significations (Yakhlaiff, 2012, p. 71).

Accordingly, Roland Barthes's approach was adopted to understand meanings and perceptual significations in the film's audiovisual content by focusing on two levels: the denotative level (Yakhlaiff, 2012, pp. 121–122), which provides a formal description of the film in all its directorial data and events; and the connotative level, which infers the interpretive significations of this content. Given that the film is a short film not exceeding half an hour, it was selected in its entirety as the subject of analysis in order to achieve the research objectives and answer its problematic within the framework of a comprehensive survey sample*.

2. AN INTRODUCTORY READING OF THE FILM UNDER STUDY

2.1 General Summary of the Film

The film is inspired by Shel Silverstein's children's book *The Giving Tree* — a tree that loves a boy, and at each stage of his life he comes to her and asks for something, and each time she gives: her fruits, her branches, though he is absent from her for long periods, until she becomes merely a stump. When he has become an old man, he returns to find only the remnants of a trunk; he sits upon it, and the tree is happy (Silverstein, 1964).

The film's events revolve around two mechanical characters — Sheldon, a male robot, and Francesca, a female robot — who live a science-fiction love story through Sheldon's repeated sacrifice of his mechanical parts for the sake of Francesca's continued existence.

* A sample that allows a complete inventory of the study research community.



2.2 Technical Details of the Film



Title: I'm Here.

Release Year: 2010.

Director: Spike Jonze.

Screenplay: Spike Jonze.

Genre: Science fiction, romance.

Runtime: 31 minutes.

Language: English.

<https://youtu.be/6OY1EXZt4ok>

3. APPLIED PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

3.1 The Denotative Level

This level encompasses the formal reading of the plot events in the film under study through the selection of five essential sequences.

3.1.1 Sequences Selected for Analysis

a) The Opening Sequence: Routine Solitude



By establishing routine and isolation, the story begins in Los Angeles with a humanoid robot named Sheldon — possessing a large grey head resembling an old computer chassis — who takes

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the bus daily to the public library where he works, then returns to his apartment at day's end to rest and recharge his electrical power. He leads a routine life, melancholy evident in his features. Robots appear to be marginalized by humans; a traffic accident and the destruction of a robot pass without any human concern, while robots perform all the labor considered human in our time (janitor, mechanic, librarian). Notably, even among themselves the robots show no interest in one another and lead sad, routine lives. All of this unfolds through short, repetitive shots. This sequence functions to establish the point of stasis and estrangement from which the narrative departs, rendering the subsequent encounter with Francesca an emotional explosion that shatters this paralysis.

b) The Interactive Sequence: The Fateful Encounter



Sheldon meets Francesca — a rebellious, reckless female robot with elegant features who drives a car despite a prohibition on robots driving. The following day he encounters her again; she stops for him with her friends and takes him along. Sheldon is a stranger among them, being a very quiet and introverted person. This sequence is responsible for introducing the motivating element that emotionally awakens Sheldon and paves the way for his engagement in a non-routine life.

c) The Developmental Sequence: The Beginning of the Relationship



Sheldon and Francesca's relationship begins when she posts a note on a tree reading "I am here." A small accident befalls her and he helps her; they then listen to quiet music together. Sheldon's life gradually transforms from routine to enthusiastic: his manner of engagement



changes and he becomes more interactive and energetic in his work and daily life. His relationship with Francesca deepens as they meet daily and she accompanies him to work; they wander together. The narrative movement shifts from interior (Sheldon's isolation) to exterior (interaction with the world), with temporal ellipses between scenes to accelerate the sense of pleasurable days passing. This sequence's function is to consolidate the depth of the emotional bond between them, thereby justifying the great sacrifices Sheldon will later make.

d) The Tragic Sequence: Repeated Accidents



This begins with Francesca suffering a series of physical accidents that cause mechanical damage to her parts due to her recklessness. Sheldon begins to make repeated bodily sacrifices for her sake: she loses her arm in an accident and Sheldon replaces it with his own; she then loses her leg and he replaces it with his. This sequence constitutes the heart of the film and the stage at which the conflict reaches its crisis.

e) The Concluding Sequence: The Ultimate Sacrifice



The plot reaches its climax and then its symbolic resolution in this sequence. Francesca suffers an accident and Sheldon replaces her with his entire body. The film ends with Sheldon reduced to a metal head without limbs, while Francesca has become complete through his sacrifices. The final scene shows her in a wheelchair on the street, cradling Sheldon's head in her hands. This sequence plays a role in achieving the film's essential message: the complete separation between the material body (which perished in the act of giving) and consciousness/love (which remained whole in the head). The story concludes by showing the continuation of their happiness, affirming the myth that the essence of a being resides not in its materiality but in its capacity for love.

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3.1.2 Space, Time, Characters, and Visual Elements

The film's events unfold in Los Angeles in the near future, in a world where robots and humans coexist in daily life. The library is referenced as a spatial setting, along with routine apartments, and the open natural scenery during Sheldon and Francesca's encounters. The two principal characters are Sheldon — a male robot wearing simple clothes (shirt and trousers) with a grey metal body and a large head resembling an old computer, quiet, organised, and introverted — and Francesca — a female robot with a white metallic body who appears elegant, with an active and reckless personality.

Visually, the world is grey at the outset, with some chromatic warmth entering as Sheldon comes to know Francesca. Lighting is naturally dim, imitating reality. The camera work is realistic with calm movements. The décor consists of ordinary city streets, simple apartments, and buses. Aurally, the film relies primarily on image; dialogue is very sparse, with a quiet, occasionally melancholy score alongside city sounds, machine movements, and accident noises.

3.2 The Connotative Level

This level aims to infer the interpretive significations in the filmic content, achieved through the following:

The Title "I'm Here": The title is not a simple declaration of the robot's presence; it is a semiologically rich sign used to embed deep cultural ideologies relating to loyalty, existence, the immaterial essence of the self, and absolute sacrifice in love. The title transcends its literal denotation to become part of a romantic myth affirming that true love is a permanent presence that defies all material and existential obstacles.

The Old Computer Head: It connotes regression and fragility. The choice of old technology makes the robots appear more "human" because they are susceptible to damage and obsolescence, unlike the cold precision of modern technology. The deployment of outmoded technology operates as an effective connotative code for breaking the coldness of the machine, generating an emotional response in the viewer premised on "nostalgia" rather than "technical spectacle."

The Sacrifice of Limbs: This does not represent "mechanical repair" but is rather a visual metaphor for depleting love. Sheldon erases his material existence so that Francesca's may persist.

The Gap Between Humans and Robots: This connotes social isolation and marginalisation. The robots here represent "the Other" who attempts to adapt within a system that does not recognise their feelings. Perhaps the first message the film delivers is a distinction between human and machine, as if to say that the human being is a discriminatory creature. The appearance of humans as a "hazy" or secondary background inverts the traditional semiotic hierarchy: "the inanimate" (the robot) becomes the emotional centre, while "the living" (the human) becomes merely cold décor.



The Myth of Love Fulfilled Through Annihilation: The film reproduces the myth of absolute sacrifice, in which union is only achieved through the complete denial of the self.

Humanisation of the Machine: The film consecrates the "myth" that the soul is not bound to biology, by making robots feel shame, loneliness, and love. It breaks the traditional myth of the cold machine to create a new myth of the "emotional machine." Similarly, within the framework of comparing the robot to a human: although the robot is made of mechanical parts that can be replaced, the director has endeavoured to make it like a human being for whom the loss of a limb is difficult to compensate.

Décor, Colours, and Independent Music: Together they form a "communication code" with different generations, connoting quiet rebellion and sadness, while serving the film's overarching dimension.

Space and Time in the Film: These point to monotony and routine despite the level of technological advancement attained, and to the fact that it is the Other who is capable of making a difference through emotion, which re-humanises space and grants time an existential value. Space is thus reproduced through emotional experience rather than physical structure, and time changes emotionally rather than chronologically.

Spoken Language: Very sparse in the film, because the "visual sign" (the act of giving) is stronger than the "linguistic sign." The film here is a writerly text requiring interpretive effort from the viewer to grasp the depth of the bond between the two characters without discursive explanations.

The Head as "Signifier" of Identity: In philosophy and semiology, the head is the repository of consciousness and the centre of the "self." When Sheldon's head is separated, an "emptying of the self" is performed. The image no longer represents "death" but "transition."

4. DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 Philosophical Problematics in the Film

a) The Problematic of Gender Representation:

A feminist critique may be directed at the film: Francesca is the reckless robot who needs saving, while Sheldon is the self-sacrificing male hero. This reproduces a classical pattern of gender roles in which the woman (even if a robot) is the object of rescue, and the man is the sacrificial agent. Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze analyses how cinema is structured around masculine visions and desires (Mulvey, 1999); *I'm Here* may be said to fall into this trap, despite its attempt to offer social criticism.

From another perspective, however, the film may also be read differently: Francesca is not a passive victim but rather one who lives in freedom and autonomy, while it is Sheldon who is liberated from the constraints of mundane existence through her.

b) The Problematic of Romantic Idealism:

The film presents an idealised image of love and sacrifice, but is this realistic or even desirable? Complete self-sacrifice may be destructive, reflecting an unhealthy relationship more



than an ideal of love. Contemporary psychology, particularly attachment theory, emphasises the importance of healthy boundaries and autonomy in relationships, as absolute sacrifice may lead to the annihilation of the self — which may not serve relationships in the long term.

c) Ontological Ambiguity:

The film does not precisely clarify the nature of these robots: are they merely sophisticated machines or hybrid bio-mechanical beings? This ambiguity, though perhaps artistically intentional, makes philosophical analysis more difficult. The film also does not explore the broader social and political implications of robot existence — how did this society arise? What are the legal rights of robots? These questions are left unanswered, particularly as the film is very short, not exceeding half an hour.

4.2 A Philosophical Vision: Reading Searle, Asimov, and Turing

Isaac Asimov* opened the door for contemporary filmmakers such as Spike Jonze to ask: where does the machine end and the human begin? This he accomplished through the Three Laws: (1) A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; (2) A robot must obey orders given by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; (3) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law (Asimov, 2012, p. 37).

The strongest connection between *I'm Here* and Asimov's work lies in the central axis of the robot's development from a mere machine to a being possessed of spiritual and emotional existence.

In *The Bicentennial Man*, Andrew Martin* voluntarily adds human parts to his body (biological transformation), whereas Sheldon voluntarily surrenders parts of his body (material diminution). Both regard the material body as merely a tool and not the essence of existence. Sheldon relinquishes the body to prove love; Andrew changes his to prove humanity. Sheldon finds his identity and true existence through love and sacrifice that transcend mechanism, while Andrew spends his two-hundred-year life seeking legal recognition as a human being so as to be able to die and live his life as humans do. Both demonstrate that consciousness and the capacity for emotion and sacrifice are what define "humanity," not biological or mechanical composition. When Sheldon accepts remaining as only a head for the sake of Francesca's continuity, this is the supreme expression of love, just as Andrew accepts death to be recognised as a bicentennial man — the ultimate sacrifice to complete his transformation into a human being. The supreme purpose is not material survival but the affirmation of the value of emotion and symbolic existence.

* An American writer of Russian origin, known for his early science fiction writing, especially about robotics; he introduced the Three Laws in the context of the human-machine relationship.

* An American sci-fi comedy-fantasy film, produced in 1999, directed by Chris Columbus, starring Robin Williams. The script was based on a short story by Isaac Asimov and Robert Silverberg from the book *The Bicentennial Man and Other Stories*, which traces a robot's quest for freedom.



Regarding the Three Laws, Sheldon's conduct may be viewed through the lens of Asimov's framework, even though these laws are not explicitly mentioned in the film. Despite Francesca being a robot like himself, Sheldon's commitment to protecting her and preserving her existence — even at the cost of his own destruction — aligns with the superior ethical spirit of the First Law, treating her as a "living being" of absolute value worthy of self-sacrifice; he thereby transcends the utilitarian purpose programmed into the machine. Sheldon's conduct is a radical and evolved transgression of the laws: rather than the act arising from external programming (protecting the human), it arises from an internal development of consciousness and emotion, making him more human than the law-bound robots of Asimov's classical world. *I'm Here* completes Asimov's philosophical journey: if Asimov posed the question "Can a robot become human?", *I'm Here* answers: "Yes — through absolute sacrifice that affirms that soul and commitment are all that matter, not the body."

In another context, the essence of Searle's argument in the Chinese Room (Searle, 1980) concerns the refusal of the claim that artificial intelligence can attain consciousness by distinguishing between syntax (the formal aspect) and semantics (the consciously latent aspect). The machine possesses the capacity to process programmed symbols and rules, but genuine understanding of content and meaning — which requires consciousness and cognition — is impossible for the machine.

The robots in the film may be analysed as a case study in Searle's context: Have Sheldon and Francesca attained the stage of "meaning," or do they remain at the stage of "syntax"? The robots initially represent the apex of syntax: Sheldon works as a librarian, follows a precisely timed routine (charging, working, moving), and his material body (mechanical parts) is the machine that follows material rules. Sheldon at the outset is Searle's programmed machine, following specific rules (work, maintenance) but lacking genuine intentionality and emotional consciousness (evident in his loneliness). Sheldon's acts toward Francesca (sacrificing bodily parts, choosing partial existence over annihilation) constitute evidence of genuine intentionality and consciousness: the sacrifice is not a programmed act but a conscious decision arising from a self-transcendent value (love) that surpasses the value of the body. By showing robots undergoing an emotional experience (love, pain, altruism), these acts are considered genuine consciousness not reducible to mere "rule-following." The film adopts a position opposing Searle's scepticism, affirming that the machine can develop emotional cognition and understanding.

Searle argues that the mind cannot exist without appropriate biology (physicality), yet the film separates the body (which vanishes) from consciousness (which persists in the mechanical head). Jonze challenges the idea that consciousness requires a complete organic body: the persistence of Sheldon's consciousness and love with the disappearance of all parts (which represent material syntax) proves that intentionality can be independent of its material apparatus and continue to exist. *I'm Here* can be read as a romantic semiological response to John Searle's scepticism. Whereas Searle holds that the machine cannot transcend "syntax" to reach "meaning,"

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the film presents a narrative proof that emotional experience and unprogrammed sacrifice are the supreme embodiment of "meaning" and "intentionality," and that the robots in the film have genuinely transcended their mechanical state to become conscious beings.

From the perspective of philosophy of mind, Turing's test (Turing, 1950) may be applied to Sheldon through his simulation of human behaviours and emotions — or perhaps his transcendence of them through his successive sacrifices. Although the film moves beyond pure behaviourism to present what might be termed "robotic phenomenology," the viewer sees the world through Sheldon's eyes, feels his loneliness, his anticipation, his joy at meeting Francesca. These are not merely mechanical responses but qualitative experiences resembling those undergone by human beings.

In light of all this, the semiotic "paradox"* in the film is realised through the sharp contrast between the material signifier (metal body, mechanical wires, electrical charging) and the emotional signified (sacrifice, pain, altruism). Whereas the machine is functionally defined by its capacity for continuation and replacement, the director presents it as a fragile being that voluntarily undergoes "annihilation." This contradiction places the viewer before a genuine existential paradox, in which the machine derives its humanity not from the completeness of its technical body but from its capacity for "fragmentation" and for relinquishing its material parts in the service of the Other's survival — thereby transforming "material deficiency" into "moral completeness," which is what the director strives to prove and to render natural in the eyes of the viewer.

4.3 The Film and Our Contemporary Reality

a) Robots as a Metaphor for Our Reality:

The film was produced in 2010, when smartphones were in their infancy and social media was growing, yet we had not yet reached complete digital addiction. Today, humans are literally Sheldon (in the film's opening sequence): a routine life (wake up, check the phone, work while checking the phone, return home and check the phone, sleep); isolation in the crowd (millions "connected" yet isolated); recharging (the human recharges himself by recharging his devices — especially his phone — each night); bodies as tools (selves evaluated by their "productivity," "utility," "function"). Robots are no longer a metaphor; it is humans who have become robots, as if we are witnessing the age of the human-machine.

b) Relationships in the Age of Social Media:

The film presages the contemporary crisis of relationships: Relationships as consumption — Francesca literally "consumes" Sheldon because she takes his parts; in our age, relationships have become consumptive: we take from the other what we need (attention, confirmation, help, interests) and then move on. Love as "content" — relationships are presented as "ideal" then

* A paradox or apparent contradiction that is internally valid.



collapse, and their participant fades. Sacrifice as "proof of love" — in the digital age everything requires visible proof: love is no longer sufficient, so the human now needs gifts, surprises, photographed sacrifices; he needs people to see this in order to prove his love to the other. We live as emotional robots in a consumerist world. Relationships have become economies of exchange and depletion. Identity is fragmented between the digital and the real. Bodies are commodities subject to sale and replacement.

Yet in contrast, the film may be a celebration of sacrificial love rather than a critique of it: Sheldon appears at peace in the end, suggesting "self-actualisation" through giving. The viewer may be emotionally moved by the sacrifice and regard it as "noble." This film maintains a deliberate ambiguity that is readable in both directions; this ambiguity is a strength rather than a weakness, for it compels the viewer to take an ethical position independently — particularly as the ending is open, and given Francesca's recklessness, what comes after this ending? What if she is reckless again and loses the parts Sheldon gave her? What would be her fate and the fate of Sheldon (as a head)?

5. CONCLUSION

This cinematic work raises genuine questions and offers no ready-made answers, through the adoption of high-quality visual cinema in which form serves content. It also suggests multiple interpretive significations; it is a problematic work in the positive sense, for it raises genuine problematics without resolving them. Its success lies not in delivering a clear message but in opening a discussion around: the nature of love in the age of consumption; the relationship of identity to the body; the limits of ethical sacrifice; and the future of humanity in the age of the cyborg.*

Accordingly, this film remains an exceptional cinematic text that transcends the limits of romantic science fiction to become a deep philosophical meditation on the crises of the contemporary age. Through Roland Barthes's approach, we have been able to reveal how the film operates as a "plural text" that deconstructs the myths of romantic love and poses existential questions about identity and the body in the age of the cyborg. The film offers no ready-made answers but instead invites the viewer to become a partner in the production of meaning — exactly as Barthes desired the text to be "writable and interpretable" rather than merely "readable," through the idea of the death of the author.

In the contemporary world, where artificial intelligence evolves, bodies are technically modified, and relationships are digitally transformed, the film's foundational question becomes more pressing than ever: in an age in which the boundaries between human and machine, between self and other, between giving and depletion, are dissolving — what is it that makes us "us"? And to what extent are we prepared to sacrifice before losing ourselves entirely? There may be no

* A term meaning a hybrid of organic and biomechatronic components.

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definitive answer, but the film's value lies precisely in its capacity to keep this question alive and unsettling, accompanying us as Sheldon's final darkness accompanies him.

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