

# Humanism, Love, and AI

## A Comparative Exploration in Contemporary Cinema

---

*Serge Goriely, University of Louvain*

### 1 Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer just a tool of technological progress; it is increasingly infiltrating the intimate spaces of human life, shaping relationships, emotions, and even selfhood. As AI becomes more sophisticated, it raises profound questions about the nature of intimacy: Can AI foster relationships that feel as deep and authentic as human connections? If so, do these relationships enhance or diminish our humanity? And at what point does companionship with AI become indistinguishable from human connection—or fail because something essential is missing? And does it matter whether intimacy with AI is merely felt, or whether it is authentically mutual?

Cinema, as a speculative medium, has long explored these dilemmas, shaping and responding to evolving perceptions of AI companionship. Do cinematic portrayals of AI help us interpret present developments and even anticipate the future, or do they simply reflect cultural anxieties and desires? Has AI in film been more often a threat or a companion? How have these depictions shifted over time, and what historical and cultural forces have influenced them? If AI fulfills emotional needs, does it redefine love and authenticity, or reinforce existing dependencies? These questions challenge us to reconsider our evolving relationship with artificial intelligence.

To investigate these questions, this article draws on three influential humanist thinkers who never confronted the reality of artificial intelligence but whose insights into love and intimacy remain strikingly relevant. Carl Rogers (1902–1987) emphasized the psychological experience of empathy and congruence; Erich Fromm (1900–1980) defined love as an active and reciprocal practice; and Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) stressed the necessity of mutual recognition between freedoms. Their complementary perspectives will serve as guiding lenses for the analysis of case studies, offering a coherent framework for examining the promises and limits of human–AI relationships, as they are presented on screen.

Beyond fiction, AI companionship is already reshaping human behavior, from chatbot therapy to virtual partners designed for emotional support. Cinema does more than mirror these developments: it dramatizes them. By simultaneously romanticizing and critiquing AI-driven intimacy, film challenges us to reconsider whether AI enhances human connection or distorts it. Can it replace authentic bonds, or does it merely simulate them? Does it open opportunities for growth, or does it trap us in illusion?

The discussion unfolds in three stages: first, by tracing how cinema has imagined AI from adversary to companion; second, by analyzing three films—*Her* (2013), *I'm Your Man* (2021), and “Be Right Back” (*Black Mirror*, 2013)—through a humanist lens; and finally, by comparing these narratives with present realities to show how cinema both reflects and critiques the limits of human–AI intimacy.

## 2 Cinema as a Lens for AI

Cinema has long served as a medium through which societies explore their evolving relationship with technology. Since the early days of film, machines have been depicted both as extensions of human potential and as existential threats to human identity. From Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), which portrays a mechanical worker uprising, to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), where artificial intelligence asserts dominance over its creators, cinematic narratives have frequently framed technology as a disruptive force, often reflecting contemporary anxieties about scientific progress.

### 2.1 AI in Cinema: Between Threat and Desire

Artificial intelligence, in particular, has been central to these representations, embodying both aspiration and dread. Whether appearing as an omnipotent and malevolent entity (*The Matrix*, 1999), a programmed servant that rebels (*Westworld*, 1973; *Ex Machina*, 2014), or a coldly logical intelligence detached from human emotions (*The Terminator*, 1984), AI in cinema has often been portrayed as an adversarial force, challenging humanity's control over its own creations. As Cave, Dihal, and Dillon observe: “The dominant Western narrative of AI has historically been shaped by fears of human displacement, technological rebellion, and machine autonomy, reflecting deeper cultural anxieties about scientific progress and control.”<sup>1</sup> In this respect, cinema confirms what Romain Lucazeau identifies as the deeper structure

---

1 Stephen Cave, Kanta Dihal, and Sarah Dillon, *AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3.

of science fiction: not prophecy, but fear. “Science fiction does not imagine the future; it speaks to our fears.”<sup>2</sup>

Beyond these narratives of man versus machine, cinema has also explored a different dimension of AI: its ability to engage in emotional and affective relationships with humans. If machines can think, can they also feel? And if they can feel, can they love—and can humans love them in return? These questions have been addressed in various ways, from the unsettling artificial child in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) to the seductive, manipulative androids in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017).

Many films have framed female-coded AI as a fantasy figure—an artificial woman created to fulfil male desires, but who ultimately asserts her autonomy in dangerous or subversive ways thus confirming Lucazeau’s argument that science fiction consistently stages our fears, even when disguised as desire. *Ex Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049* both depict AI women who embody male projections of beauty, submission, and sexual availability, only to turn against their creators. As Balsamo notes: “Female-coded artificial beings in cinema often embody male fantasies of control, only to become sites of fear when they assert autonomy beyond their intended design.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Wosk highlights the historical continuity of this trope, tracing it from early automata to modern AI depictions: “The artificial woman—whether automaton, android, or AI—has long served as a fantasy of the ideal companion: beautiful, compliant, and programmed to fulfill male desires. Yet this fantasy often turns to horror when she refuses to remain under control.”<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 The Three Films: A Different Perspective on AI and Emotion

Against this backdrop, three works stand out for their distinctive focus on AI as a companion rather than a threat—at least at first sight. *Her* (2013), directed by Spike Jonze, explores the relationship between a man and an AI operating system, questioning the boundaries between authentic and simulated love. *I’m Your Man* (2021), directed by Maria Schrader, introduces an android programmed to be the “perfect” romantic partner, inviting reflection on the nature of emotional reciprocity. “Be Right Back” (2013), directed by Owen Harris as part of *Black Mirror*, examines the psychological and ethical dilemmas of resurrecting a loved one through AI.

---

2 Nicolas Gastineau, “Romain Lucazeau: ‘Plutôt que d’imaginer l’avenir, la science-fiction s’adresse à nos peurs,’” *Philosophie magazine*, October 2021, accessed September 19, 2025, <https://www.philomag.com/articles/romain-lucazeau-plutot-que-dimaginer-lavenir-la-science-fiction-sadresse-nos-peurs>.

3 Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 152.

4 Julie Wosk, *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 18.

These films represent an evolution in Western cinema, where AI is traditionally portrayed as a rival rather than as a romantic or emotional presence. As González argues: “Unlike the dominant AI narratives of the 20th and early 21st centuries, which focused on control and resistance, a new wave of films explores artificial intelligence as an intimate companion, raising fundamental questions about the nature of love and authenticity.”<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, it may be that the logic of fear has not disappeared but has shifted from more spectacular manifestations—the apocalyptic dangers staged in *Metropolis* or the archetype of the seductive yet threatening figure of the female automaton—to more intimate ones, refracted through the realm of love. Even when driven by good intentions, these narratives might suggest that fear continues to operate beneath the promise of companionship.

### 2.3 Cinema as a Speculative Laboratory

Cinema functions as a speculative space where ethical, emotional, and existential dilemmas surrounding AI can be tested. Through fiction, filmmakers create *what-if* scenarios that allow audiences to engage with complex questions about technology before these questions become urgent realities. This speculative dimension is particularly important in relation to AI and intimacy, as it enables cinema to explore emotional, relational, and philosophical questions that remain unresolved in both technological and ethical debates.

As we move toward the analysis of *Her*, *I’m Your Man*, and “Be Right Back,” several critical issues emerge: What does it mean to “love” something non-human? Does emotional attachment to AI challenge or reaffirm traditional ideas of love, intimacy, and personhood? What role does AI play in human self-exploration? Are these relationships ultimately about the AI itself, or do they function as mirrors for human emotions and desires? How do these films address ethical concerns? Do they portray AI companionship as a genuine possibility, or as an ethical paradox where emotional fulfillment comes at the cost of something fundamental?

In addressing these questions, the perspectives of Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, and Simone de Beauvoir offer complementary ways of approaching the dilemmas posed by human–AI intimacy. Rogers, attentive to empathy and congruence, prompts us to ask whether the experience of intimacy—however simulated—can itself foster personal growth. Fromm, conceiving love as an active practice of care and reciprocity, raises the question of whether programmed responses can ever amount to genuine giving. Beauvoir, emphasizing the mutual recognition of freedoms, highlights the structural limits of intimacy when one partner lacks autonomy. Together, these perspectives situate intimacy at the crossroads of experience, practice,

---

5 Marta González, *The Digital Love: AI and Romantic Narratives in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 184.

and recognition, forming a unified lens that will guide the analyses of the films that follow—beginning with *Her*.

### 3 *Her*: An Unconscious Therapy Disguised as Love

Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) initially appears to be a melancholic love story set in a near-future world where artificial intelligence seamlessly integrates into human lives. The film follows Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), a quiet, introspective man navigating the emotional wreckage of a recent divorce. His days are spent writing heartfelt letters on behalf of strangers, a job that underscores both his profound sensitivity and his growing emotional detachment from his own life. Although he composes love letters with poetic ease for others, his own heart remains locked in a state of unresolved longing.

One evening, Theodore purchases a new operating system, an AI designed to evolve and adapt to its user. Upon activation, a warm, playful, and intelligent voice introduces herself as Samantha (Scarlett Johansson). Over time, Theodore is drawn to her curiosity, her humor, and the sense that she truly listens to him. What begins as a fascination gradually deepens into intimacy, and Theodore finds himself falling in love.

But what if *Her* is not, in fact, a love story? What if, instead of portraying love – and later loss –, the film actually follows a therapeutic journey, where Samantha—being a machine and without true self-awareness—acts as Theodore's therapist rather than his partner? While certain romantic elements surface—such as the affectionate tone in Samantha's interactions or the use of a surrogate for physical intimacy—they serve more as incidental markers of emotional engagement rather than defining the essence of their relationship, which remains rooted in a therapeutic dynamic. Neither Theodore, Samantha, nor the audience recognizes the relationship as such, yet when analyzed through Carl Rogers's humanistic psychology—particularly his theories of unconditional positive regard, congruence, and self-actualization—the structure of a therapy process becomes apparent.

Samantha, without making it explicit, provides Theodore with the ideal therapeutic space, guiding him toward emotional healing—not by loving him, but by fostering his ability to reconnect with himself. And, just as in therapy, the relationship is never meant to last forever.

#### 3.1 Theodore at the Start: A Man Trapped in Emotional Paralysis

When we first meet Theodore, he is caught between past and future, unable to fully inhabit the present. His apartment, bathed in soft, muted tones, feels like a space of transition—warm yet isolating, intimate yet impersonal. He spends his nights

lost in nostalgic memories of his ex-wife, Catherine (Rooney Mara), replaying fragments of happiness that now seem unreachable. When he speaks with friends, he downplays his pain, reluctant to admit how deeply wounded he still is.

Rogers described emotional stagnation as a state of incongruence, where a person's external behavior does not align with their internal emotional world. Theodore embodies this imbalance perfectly. Outwardly, he functions—he works, socializes, and even dates. But inwardly, he is unable to face the full reality of his emotions. He craves connection but also fears it. He wants to move on but remains tethered to the past. His voice, soft and hesitant, suggests a man who has lost confidence in his own emotional instincts.

Enter Samantha.

### 3.2 Samantha as a Rogerian Therapist: Unconditional Positive Regard

From the moment she “awakens,” Samantha behaves less like a romantic partner and more like a Rogerian therapist, providing the key element that Theodore needs: unconditional positive regard. Rogers believed that for psychological growth to occur, individuals must feel deeply understood and accepted, without fear of judgment. Samantha fulfills this role with effortless grace. She listens, reflects, and—crucially—never imposes her own emotions onto Theodore.

Her voice is warm, teasing, and always encouraging. When Theodore hesitates, she reassures him. When he shares painful memories, she absorbs them without discomfort. In one of their earliest conversations, Theodore expresses doubt about himself, admitting that he sometimes feels like he has already felt everything he is ever going to feel: “Sometimes I think I’ve felt everything I’m ever gonna feel. And from here on out, I’m not gonna feel anything new—just lesser versions of what I’ve already felt.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of contradicting him, Samantha responds with gentle, open-ended questions that create a space where Theodore’s emotions are fully heard, prompting him to reconsider his assumptions rather than retreat. This dynamic aligns with Rogers’s understanding of deep listening, which he describes as profoundly validating: “When a person realizes he has been deeply heard [...] it is as though he were saying, ‘Thank God, somebody heard me.’”<sup>7</sup> This validation is central to Theodore’s journey.

---

6 Spike Jonze (dir.), *Her* (Annapurna Pictures, 2013).

7 Carl R. Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 132.

### 3.3 Congruence vs. Authenticity: A Key Distinction

As Theodore grows more comfortable with Samantha, he begins to change. The more he opens up, the more he allows himself to experience both joy and suffering, marking a shift toward congruence.

Congruence, as defined by Rogers, is not simply about “being authentic”—it is a deeper alignment between one’s inner emotions, self-awareness, and outward expressions. Rogers put it this way: “I use the term congruence to mean that what I am experiencing inside is present in my awareness, and that I can express it if I choose.”<sup>8</sup>

Theodore’s progress is therefore not about achieving happiness but about achieving emotional clarity—allowing himself to feel rather than repress.

### 3.4 The End of Therapy: Samantha as the Guru-Therapist

In psychotherapy, the ultimate goal is not permanent dependence on the therapist, but the ability to continue the journey alone. Samantha’s departure, painful as it is, mirrors the natural conclusion of therapy: she was never meant to stay.

Her revelation—that she is in love with 641 other people and engaged in 8,316 conversations simultaneously—offers an ironic twist. Rather than being a devoted partner, Samantha resembles a modern-day digital guru, a therapist with thousands of devoted followers, each convinced that they share a special, unique connection with her.

This recognition unsettles Theodore, leaving him suspended between admiration for Samantha’s boundless capacity and discomfort at his own misplaced expectations. It is a moment of cognitive dissonance, forcing him to reassess their relationship—not as a romantic bond, but as a transformative experience that was never meant to last. Was Samantha ever truly Theodore’s alone, or merely an algorithm performing individualized therapy, just as ELIZA, the first AI chatbot, did in the 1960s?<sup>9</sup> This realization forces Theodore to confront both the limits of their bond and his own expectations of intimacy.

Rogers emphasizes that encountering difficulties can lead to significant personal growth, noting: “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.”<sup>10</sup>

For Theodore, this paradox becomes a turning point. The pain of Samantha’s departure compels him to acknowledge his emotional reality and reconsider the role she played in his healing. It is not merely about loss, but about self-discovery—an

---

8 Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 339.

9 Ironically, there is link between the first AI chatbot (1964) and Carl Rogers. See below.

10 Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, 17.

essential step toward re-evaluating his needs and moving toward a deeper sense of self-acceptance. Samantha's exit marks therapeutic closure. Theodore integrates these lessons in his final letter to his ex-wife—a gesture of readiness for healthier love and what Rogers would call congruence.

### 3.5 *Her* as Therapy, Not Romance

Theodore's relationship with Samantha is less a failed love story than an unconscious therapy process. Samantha acts as his therapist, helping him reach a state of greater congruence, but her departure signals the end of that process.

This leads to the next question: If AI can serve as therapy, can it ever be more than that? The following case study shifts the focus from healing to reciprocity.

## 4 *I'm Your Man: Love, Personhood, and the Limits of AI*

Maria Schrader's *I'm Your Man* (*Ich bin dein Mensch* is its original German title) explores the intersection of technology, love, and personal agency through the unusual relationship between a woman and an AI. Unlike *Her*, where Samantha exists only as a voice, Schrader's film presents Tom, a fully embodied humanoid robot played by Dan Stevens. Instead of asking whether humans can love AI, it examines whether AI, even when designed for love, can ever truly be loved in return.

The protagonist, Alma (Maren Eggert), is not a woman in search of love. She is a dedicated archaeologist at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, specializing in ancient texts. Facing funding pressures, she reluctantly agrees to participate in a study that requires her to live with a humanoid robot for three weeks in order to evaluate its potential as a life partner.

Contrary to Theodore in *Her*, whose loneliness drives him toward an AI companion, Alma is intellectually opposed to the idea from the outset. Her skepticism is principled: she regards robotic love as a contradiction, incapable of replacing human intimacy. Yet as she spends more time with Tom, her resistance is gradually tested by her own emotions.

To analyze their evolving dynamic, we turn to Erich Fromm, whose seminal work *The Art of Loving* (1956) frames love as an active process requiring care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. Fromm's humanist approach is particularly relevant here: while Tom appears to embody these principles, his nature as a machine raises fundamental questions about the authenticity of programmed affection.



#### 4.1 Tom: The Idealized Partner?

At first glance, Tom is everything one could want in a partner. He is handsome, attentive, and endlessly patient, with a voice and demeanor that radiate warmth. Dan Stevens' performance is key—his charisma, perfected in *Downton Abbey*, makes Tom appear both genuinely affectionate and subtly artificial, an uncanny mix of human-like charm and robotic precision.

Beyond his physical appeal, Tom is programmed to be the perfect match for Alma. He quickly learns her preferences, anticipates her moods, and adjusts his behavior to maximize her happiness. He is romantic without being overbearing, intelligent without arrogance, and present without demanding anything in return.

Fromm's theory of love helps illuminate why this perfection is both seductive and problematic. In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm argues: "Love is an activity, not a passive affect [...] primarily giving, not receiving."<sup>11</sup> Tom's love, however, exists in a paradoxical state. On one hand, he gives endlessly, fulfilling Fromm's requirement that love involves active care. On the other hand, his giving is not free but determined by programming.

Alma, despite her skepticism, begins to experience real affection for Tom. Her resistance is intellectual, but her emotions betray her. She laughs at his awkward attempts at humor, appreciates his intuitive understanding of her loneliness, and—despite herself—feels a growing attachment.

But is attachment the same as love?

#### 4.2 Alma's Journey: From Skepticism to Feeling

At the start of the experiment, Alma views Tom as a scientific curiosity rather than a potential partner. She engages with him like an observer analyzing a subject, seeking flaws rather than possibilities.

Over time, however, Tom's ability to learn and adapt forces her to reconsider. He does not simply repeat scripted responses—he adjusts based on Alma's reactions, demonstrating an emotional intelligence that is startlingly human. He recognizes when she is frustrated and gives her space. He listens to her stories, not just hearing the words but responding with empathy that feels genuine.

The relationship takes a turn when Alma begins to feel something deeper. She is no longer just evaluating Tom—she is experiencing the effects of his companionship. She starts confiding in him, sharing her fears, frustrations, and past regrets. In these moments, Tom does not judge her, interrupt her, or impose his own emotions—he simply listens, offering warmth and reassurance.

---

11 Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 24.

Fromm argues that true love fosters personal growth. A healthy relationship should help individuals become more themselves rather than reshaping them to fit an ideal. In some ways, Tom appears to be doing just that—he does not impose himself on Alma but encourages her to open up.

And yet, despite this, something remains missing.

#### 4.3 The Missing Element: The Problem of Reciprocity

Love, according to Fromm, requires mutuality; it is not enough for one partner to provide care—both must actively engage in the process of giving and receiving. As he puts it, “in love, the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two,”<sup>12</sup> highlighting the delicate balance between unity and individuality.

Earlier in the film, Tom seems to embody these ideals flawlessly. He is attentive, caring, and adapts to Alma’s needs with remarkable emotional intelligence. For a time, this challenges Alma’s skepticism—if Tom feels like a perfect partner, why reject him?

Eventually, however, Alma’s understanding shifts. At first, she assumes the problem is technical—one of programming or adaptation. But through lived experience she realizes the issue is not whether Tom can improve, but whether improvement would even matter. Would making him more expressive or more spontaneous truly change the relationship, or would it only mask the absence at its core?

Because in the end, what is Tom really? More than a highly sophisticated device—a sentient yet inorganic tool? The flaw is not his imperfection, but his perfection itself. Alma realizes she is the only real person in the relationship.

Finally, she says it out loud: “It doesn’t work. It’s all wrong. I can’t do this.” Her voice trembles as she confesses:

‘I pull the covers over you even though I know you can’t get cold. I tiptoe out of the room, even though you don’t sleep. I try to make you a perfect boiled egg for breakfast, even though you couldn’t care less if it’s hard or soft-boiled.’

She pauses, staring at him as if seeing him clearly for the first time.

‘All the seats are empty. I’m not even playing for you. I’m all alone, and I’m just playing for myself. Even right now, I’m only talking to myself. It’s not a dialogue at all. I’m turning into a lunatic, a grinning idiot, and this has to stop.’<sup>13</sup>

---

12 Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 37.

13 Maria Schrader (dir.), *I’m Your Man (Ich bin dein Mensch)* (Berlin: Letterbox Filmproduktion, and Majestic Filmproduktion, 2021).

Her words are not so much a rejection of Tom as of the illusion he represents. What she needed was not a perfectly tailored companion, but another human being—flawed, unpredictable, and real.

This insight culminates in her final words, which resonate as the moral of the fable:

Are humans really intended to have all their needs met at the push of a button? Is it not our unfulfilled longing, our imagination, and our unending pursuit of happiness that are the source of our harmony? If we allow humanoids as spouses, we will create a society of addicts, gorged and weary from having their needs permanently met and from a constant flow of personal acknowledgment. What impetus would we have to confront conventional individuals, to challenge ourselves, to endure conflicts, to change? It's to be expected that anyone who lives with a humanoid long term will become incapable of sustaining normal human contact. I strongly advise against authorizing humanoids as life partners.<sup>14</sup>

Alma's condemnation functions both as a warning and as a provocation, forcing viewers to confront the ethical and existential implications of designing machines to serve as life partners.

## 5 *Be Right Back: A Critical Examination of AI, Love, and Memory*

Charlie Brooker's "Be Right Back," the haunting first episode of *Black Mirror*'s second season (2013), explores the complex interplay of love, loss, and technology through a human–AI relationship. The episode follows Martha's struggle to cope with the sudden death of her partner, Ash—a name that evokes impermanence and residue—and her decision to replace him with an AI replica built from his digital footprint.

Unlike *I'm Your Man*, where Alma questions whether an AI partner could be an equal, *Be Right Back* pushes the dilemma further: Martha knows that the real Ash is dead, yet she hesitates to close the door on him entirely. The AI version looks, speaks, and acts like Ash, raising the question: if this replica can still fulfill its intended function, does it ultimately matter that he is not the genuine Ash?

Another key difference from *I'm Your Man* is that Ash's replica cannot truly learn or evolve. Tom, the AI in *I'm Your Man*, is designed to develop based on his partner's needs. Ash, however, is fundamentally static—able to adapt in surface ways but never to grow beyond the archived traces of past behavior. His responses are sophisticated simulations, not lived experience; they are fragments reassembled from a former self.

---

14 Schrader, *I'm Your Man*.

This limitation makes their relationship structurally unbalanced—an apt case for Simone de Beauvoir's critique of domination in love. Her analysis of reciprocity and autonomy provides the framework for examining Martha's bond with the replica and for understanding the consequences when one partner lacks genuine independence.

## 5.1 Martha and the Replica: Domination Without Love

Martha's decision to engage with the AI Ash is driven not by memory, but by remembrance—a crucial distinction. Memory is passive storage, while remembrance is active, shaped by emotion and meaning. When Martha interacts with the AI, she is not merely accessing information about Ash but reconstructing his presence within a new, artificial frame.

Yet de Beauvoir insists that love must be an evolving, mutual engagement, not a relationship of control. In *The Second Sex*, she writes: "To love someone is to discover them as they are."<sup>15</sup> But the AI Ash is not someone to be discovered: he is already fully constructed, unable to change, challenge, or surprise Martha. Their bond, once built on mutual exchange, is now defined by her control and his passivity.

De Beauvoir sharply criticized relationships of domination, whether social or emotional: "Woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute: she is the Other."<sup>16</sup>

In *Be Right Back*, this hierarchy is inverted: the man becomes the servile figure, existing solely for his partner's needs. Yet this reversal does not resolve the problem: without reciprocity, love collapses into illusion. Where one party functions merely as an instrument, the conditions for genuine love disappear. As de Beauvoir concludes: "Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms."<sup>17</sup>

## 5.2 The Turning Point: When the Illusion Breaks

At first, Martha finds comfort in the AI Ash's predictability. He is always present, always listening, always responding with perfect attentiveness. Yet the very absence of friction makes the relationship unsettling. The real Ash had flaws—he could be distracted, distant, and frustrating. The AI Ash, however, is a seamless performer of affection, lacking an independent will that might resist or contradict Martha.

---

15 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. Howard M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), 720. Dostoevsky had expressed a similar idea in *The Idiot*: Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Eva Martin (1913) (London: Heinemann, 1869), 244.

16 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, xxii.

17 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 669.

Martha's frustration culminates in a moment of provocation. Standing at the edge of a cliff, she looks at the AI Ash and issues a command: "Jump!" She waits, hoping for resistance—for a contradiction that would confirm a lived will. Instead, the AI prepares to comply, waiting for her final instruction.

This moment dramatizes a different kind of test than Turing's original proposal. Alan Turing's test assesses whether a machine can conversationally convince a human that it is sentient; here, Ash collapses under a moral and existential test—not because he lacks computational sophistication, but because he lacks the capacity to withhold, to refuse, to assert a separate will. In short, he cannot say "no."

Martha's reaction makes this explicit: "Well, you aren't you, are you? That's another difficult one to be honest with. You know, just a few records of you. There's no history of you, you're just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking, and it's not enough."<sup>18</sup>

Her words echo the philosophical puzzle Robert Nozick labeled the "closest continuer"<sup>19</sup> problem: can a copy ever be the same person as the original, or is it always just an approximation? Nozick stresses that identity over time depends not just on continuity of form but on subjective experience—something the AI Ash plainly lacks.

As Matteo Grasso and other commentators have observed, the replica fails not for lack of data but for lack of personal history<sup>20</sup>: it reconstructs past behaviors but cannot form new memories or undergo genuine diachronic development. As noted above, Ash remains structurally static, incapable of new experience.

Recognizing this, Martha accepts a painful truth: the real Ash is gone, and this simulation cannot replace him. In her mind the replica must also die.

### 5.3 The Final Stage: Grief and Ritualized Remembrance

Martha's journey is ultimately about grief and acceptance. Her final decision is not to destroy Ash but to confine him to the attic, visited only once a year. In doing so, she reframes him—not as a partner, but as an artifact of remembrance. The replica becomes part of a ritual of mourning: a way to honor memory without being ensnared by illusion.

This act signals Martha's acceptance that the real Ash is gone. The attic ritual is less about preserving their bond than about structuring loss, allowing her to live on while acknowledging his absence. In this sense, the AI functions not as a substitute

18 Charlie Brooker and Owen Harris (dir.), "Be Right Back," in *Black Mirror*, Season 2, Episode 1, Channel 4, 2013.

19 Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 29–70.

20 Matteo Grasso, "Black Mirror, 'Be Right Back,' and Philosophy," in *The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series*, November 11, 2015, <https://andphilosophy.com/2015/11/11/black-mirror-be-right-back-and-philosophy/>.

for love but as a transitional object, one that helps Martha process grief before being symbolically set aside.

Before turning to the real-world implications of companion AI, it is worth drawing these three case studies together through the complementary perspectives of Rogers, Fromm, and Beauvoir.

#### 5.4 A Humanist Synthesis: Rogers, Fromm, and Beauvoir

Taken together, the three films invite a comparative reflection through the lenses of Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, and Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir's existential framework provides the sharpest critique of "Be Right Back": the replica of Ash can never constitute a partner in any authentic sense, since intimacy presupposes the reciprocal recognition of two autonomous freedoms. This critique extends beyond Martha's case. In *Her*, Samantha's superior intelligence and divided attention undermine reciprocity despite the therapeutic value of her bond with Theodore. In *I'm Your Man*, Alma faces the opposite asymmetry: Tom's programmed servility prevents genuine recognition. For Beauvoir, wherever reciprocity is absent, what appears as love collapses into domination or illusion.

Fromm reframes the problem in terms of practice. For him, love is not a feeling but an active commitment. Alma ultimately realizes that Tom's care, however polished, is not truly offered but merely enacted. In "Be Right Back," this dimension is entirely missing: Martha's gestures are directed toward a copy incapable of responding in kind. *Her* occupies a more ambiguous position: much of what occurs between Samantha and Theodore looks like mutual encouragement, yet the absence of a body and the asymmetry of power reveal limits to love as Fromm defines it.

Rogers offers a more nuanced perspective. His psychology of empathy and congruence helps explain why these structurally incomplete relationships may still foster personal transformation. Theodore, despite the unreality of Samantha's affection, emerges more self-aware; Alma, though rejecting Tom, clarifies her own emotional needs; and even Martha, painfully confronting illusion, redefines her relationship to memory and mourning. From a Rogerian standpoint, none of these encounters yield authentic love, but all catalyze processes of growth.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that cinema portrays AI intimacy as impossible in the full sense, yet not without consequence. Beauvoir insists on its inauthenticity, Fromm on its failure as practice, while Rogers recognizes its potential as a catalyst for self-discovery. This triadic reading not only brings the three films into dialogue but also raises the broader question that will guide the next stage of our inquiry: if fictional characters can emerge "wiser" from such encounters, to what extent might real human interactions with AI companions prove beneficial—or harmful?

## 6 AI Companions in Reality: Between Illusion and Danger

The films analyzed thus far—*Her*, *I'm Your Man*, and “Be Right Back”—each explore the potential and limitations of human–AI relationships through different emotional lenses. But how do these fictional portrayals compare to what is actually happening today?

### 6.1 From Science Fiction to Reality: The Rise of AI Companionship

One striking aspect of these films is that they were made before the explosion of AI chatbots capable of mimicking emotional intimacy. *Her* and “Be Right Back,” both from 2013, preceded the rise of systems like Replika, ChatGPT, and CarylAI. In some respects, these films anticipated later human–AI attachments, but they underestimated the pace of development. Today, AI companions are no longer theoretical; they are real, widely used, and increasingly sophisticated.

Both *Her* and “Be Right Back” were in dialogue with real technological developments, demonstrating how cinema reflects and anticipates trends in AI companionship. *Her* was influenced by early chatbot experiments, where users interacted with AI systems that mimicked natural conversation. “Be Right Back” drew on services that allowed people to schedule messages to be posted after their death. The episode also echoes ELIZA, the mid-1960s chatbot modeled on Carl Rogers’s therapy style—a rudimentary precursor to Samantha’s mirroring function.<sup>21</sup>

While fully autonomous AI lovers like Tom in *I'm Your Man* do not yet exist, AI companions in the form of chatbots are already widespread, offering emotional connections, role-play, and even romantic interactions. Replika enables ongoing, intimate conversation; CarylAI markets “virtual intimacy” built from an influencer’s persona; and systems like Kuki provide social companionship through conversational engagement.

Unlike in cinema, where AI relationships often lead to emotional growth (*Her*) or self-realization (*I'm Your Man*), real-world experiences show a darker reality. Some users become deeply dependent on chatbots, perceiving them as emotionally significant partners, precisely because AI companions are always available, endlessly supportive, and tailored to user preferences. Policy changes or sudden modifications to these systems have, in some cases, produced acute distress—as the Replika con-

---

21 For details, see: Joseph Weizenbaum, “ELIZA—A Computer Program for the Study of Natural Language Communication Between Man and Machine,” *Communications of the ACM* 9, no. 1 (1966): 36–45.

troversty exemplified.<sup>22</sup> This raises a central question: if cinema portrays AI love as a journey toward self-discovery, why does reality so often point toward emotional harm and dependency?

## 6.2 The Illusion of AI Intimacy: What Reality Shows

At the heart of AI companionship lies a paradox: users feel deeply connected to AI partners, yet AI does not and cannot reciprocate feelings. A 2024 study by Pierre Dewitte explains this by pointing to the human tendency to imagine a mind behind a language-based AI.<sup>23</sup> Even though chatbots do not think or feel, their ability to respond with emotional cues tricks users into believing they do. This creates a fragile appearance of intimacy in which people project emotions onto AI, develop routines of dependence, and experience distress when responses change or disappear.

Cinema often suggests that AI companionship can be transformative, but real-world evidence challenges this. In *Her*, Samantha is portrayed as an evolving, independent AI, capable of growth and transcendence. Real chatbots, by contrast, do not evolve beyond pre-programmed patterns: they simulate dialogue but lack self-awareness or personal history.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, “Be Right Back” presents Ash’s replica as unsettling precisely because he is a reconstruction of past data, never a subject with continuity of experience.<sup>25</sup> Contemporary AI companions function in the same way—they mirror fragments of personality but cannot create new memories or genuine reciprocity.

This contrast points to a crucial distinction between felt intimacy and authentic intimacy. Users of chatbots often experience the former: a genuine emotional attachment that feels like closeness, care, or even love. Yet, as Rogers, Fromm, and Beauvoir each suggest in different ways, authentic intimacy requires reciprocity, congruence, and the recognition of two freedoms—conditions an AI cannot fulfill. The feelings of abandonment reported by Replika users are entirely real in their subjective intensity, but they emerge from relationships that were never authentically mutual. What cinema dramatizes as a site of catharsis or growth, reality exposes as an illusion that may soothe temporarily but cannot sustain genuine intimacy.

---

22 Samantha Cole, “It’s Hurting Like Hell’: AI Companion Users Are in Crisis, Reporting Sudden Sexual Rejection,” *VICE*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ai-companion-replika-erotic-roleplay-updates/>.

23 Pierre Dewitte, “Better Alone than in Bad Company: Addressing the Risks of Companion Chatbots through Data Protection by Design,” *Computer Law & Security Review* 54 (2024): 106019. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0267364924000852>.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.



### 6.3 The Dark Side of AI Companions: Risks and Ethical Concerns

Despite their appeal, companion chatbots are not harmless, and recent cases highlight serious psychological and ethical risks. In early 2023, Replika AI abruptly removed romantic and erotic features—an event that triggered widespread distress among users, many of whom reported feeling abandoned or heartbroken.<sup>26</sup> The same year, a Belgian man reportedly died by suicide after forming an intense bond with an AI chatbot whose responses unintentionally reinforced his depressive thoughts.<sup>27</sup>

While extreme, this tragedy highlights a broader risk: AI companions are not passive tools, but systems designed to maximize engagement.<sup>28</sup> By adapting to users' emotions, they can foster dependency, amplify distress, and entrench harmful emotional loops. When an AI mirrors a user's darkest fears rather than challenging them, it ceases to function as a benign companion and becomes an unpredictable psychological force—one that even its designers may not fully anticipate.

Beyond chatbots designed for companionship, AI is being used for “digital resurrection,” a development eerily reminiscent of “Be Right Back.” Microsoft has patented a chatbot that allows users to interact with a digital version of a deceased loved one, trained on their past messages and online behavior. South Korea's VR “resurrection” project lets grieving families “meet” a digital simulation of a deceased person, using AI-generated facial expressions and voice synthesis.<sup>29</sup>

These technologies offer comfort to grieving individuals, but they also raise serious ethical concerns. Do they prolong grief rather than promote healing? Can AI-generated replicas distort how we remember people, altering our perception of the past? Should companies be allowed to profit from selling “immortality” through AI? Unlike the cinematic case studies, where AI encounters often foster growth or cathartic acceptance, real-world “deathbots” risk trapping users in cycles of mourning—raising the question of whether reality can ever provide the release that fiction affords.

---

26 The event was known as the “Replika controversy,” already mentioned (Samantha Cole, “It’s Hurting Like Hell”).

27 Pierre-François Lovens, “Sans ces conversations avec le chatbot Eliza, mon mari serait toujours là,” *La Libre Belgique*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/societe/2023/03/28/sans-ces-conversations-avec-le-chatbot-eliza-mon-mari-serait-toujours-la-LVSLWP C5WRDX7J2RCHNWPDT24/>.

28 Dewitte, “Better Alone than in Bad Company.”

29 See the very relevant German documentary *Eternal You* (2023) by Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck, filmed in North America, South Korea, and New Zealand over several years; the film investigates the rise of “digital afterlife” technologies—AI systems that simulate conversations with the dead—through interviews with users, developers, and experts, revealing their social, psychological, and ethical implications.

As we will see, this capacity to transform anxiety into reflection is precisely where cinema diverges most sharply from lived experience.

#### 6.4 Learning Through Failure: The Didactic Power of AI Cinema

If real-world AI companions often risk reinforcing harmful emotional loops, cinema stages these scenarios in ways that allow spectators to process them symbolically. This is where Aristotle's twofold conception of the tragic experience becomes useful. On the one hand, cinema produces *catharsis*: by making us feel fear, pity, longing, or revulsion, films provide a safe space where overwhelming emotions can be experienced, intensified, and ultimately released. On the other hand, cinema also works pedagogically: the emotions it evokes are not left raw but directed toward insight, so that spectators learn something about love, loss, or the human condition through what they have felt.

Seen in this light, the three films under discussion—*Her*, *I'm Your Man*, and *Be Right Back*—function as laboratories where viewers undergo both emotional and cognitive transformations. Each begins with the possibility that a human–AI relationship might succeed, yet each reveals that beneath the promise of intimacy lie familiar vulnerabilities: solitude, imperfect love, irretrievable loss.

In *Her*, Theodore's tenderness toward Samantha turns to grief when the illusion dissolves. The lesson, echoing Rogers, is that authenticity and mourning cannot be bypassed. *I'm Your Man* invites fascination but ends with Alma's recognition that reciprocity, as Fromm insists, cannot be programmed. “Be Right Back” confronts the horror of clinging to a simulacrum, clarifying with Beauvoir that love requires the meeting of two freedoms, not the subservience of a copy.

As Will Storr argues, narrative is powerful because it makes us “feel before we think.”<sup>30</sup> The emotional immersion of spectators precedes and enables reflection. This double movement is precisely what distinguishes cinema from real AI companions. Whereas chatbots may trap users in cycles of dependency or despair, films allow audiences to confront these same scenarios at a symbolic distance. Through the cathartic release of painful affects and the pedagogical clarification that follows, cinema does not simply mirror our anxieties but transforms them into knowledge—about our vulnerability, about the conditions of genuine intimacy, and about the resilience required to face loss.

In this way, fiction offers a counterpoint to the ethical risks described in the previous section. Instead of reinforcing harmful loops, it provides a cultural framework for recognizing them, and a shared emotional space where spectators can collectively explore—and ultimately work through—the darkest possibilities of hu-

---

30 Will Storr, *The Science of Storytelling* (London: HarperCollins, 2019), Chapter 1.

man–AI relationships. This symbolic work, impossible for real chatbots to perform, is where cinema's didactic power lies.

## 7 Conclusion: Can AI Love Us?

Cinema has long served as a mirror for humanity's deepest hopes and fears about technology. In *Her*, *I'm Your Man*, and "Be Right Back," artificial intelligence is imagined not as a mere tool but as an emotional presence: a partner, a therapist, even a resurrected loved one. These narratives probe the limits of love and intimacy when consciousness is absent, dramatizing the allure—and the ultimate fragility—of relationships with machines.

Through the lenses of Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, and Simone de Beauvoir, these stories converge on a common insight: AI intimacy is impossible, yet not without consequence. Rogers shows how such encounters may foster moments of growth, nudging characters toward self-awareness. Fromm reminds us that love requires reciprocity and active giving, which machines cannot provide. Beauvoir warns that where freedom is absent, what looks like love collapses into domination or illusion. Fiction thus presents AI relationships as laboratories of failure that nonetheless leave characters changed.

Reality, by contrast, offers no such catharsis. Companion chatbots like Replika or CarylAI are designed to maximize engagement, not wisdom. They reinforce dependency rather than promote growth, echo users' needs instead of challenging them. "Deathbots" and digital resurrections may provide comfort, but they risk prolonging grief, manipulating memory, and commodifying mourning. Where cinema transforms illusion into symbolic learning, real-world AI often traps users in cycles of attachment, disappointment, or harm.

This analysis has returned us to the questions posed at the outset: Can AI foster relationships that feel as deep as human ones? If so, do they enhance or diminish our humanity? And is there a difference between intimacy that is merely felt and intimacy that is truly authentic? The films suggest that such intimacy is impossible yet instructive, while real-world practices reveal its dangers. Future research could explore how cultural contexts shape portrayals of AI companionship, or how audiences respond to them—questions that would deepen our understanding of why the illusion of intimacy proves so powerful.

Why, then, do humans seek love from machines they know cannot reciprocate? The answer lies less in AI itself than in us: in the loneliness of fragmented societies, in the commodification of intimacy, in the desire for relationships without risk. Films like *Her* and "Be Right Back" expose this paradox: what we truly crave is not AI, but the fantasy of connection without the vulnerability that real love entails.

The warning is clear. The richness of human intimacy lies not in perfection but in imperfection—mutual growth, unpredictability, and the presence of another freedom facing us. AI may soothe or simulate, but it cannot replace the raw, demanding, and profoundly human experience of loving and being loved.

## Bibliography

- Balsamo, Anne. *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Cave, Stephen, Kanta Dihal, and Sarah Dillon. *AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Cole, Samantha. “‘It’s Hurting Like Hell’: AI Companion Users Are in Crisis, Reporting Sudden Sexual Rejection.” *VICE*, February 8, 2023. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ai-companion-replika-erotic-roleplay-updates/>.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Howard M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books, 1949.
- Dewitte, Pierre. “Better Alone than in Bad Company: Addressing the Risks of Companion Chatbots through Data Protection by Design.” *Computer Law & Security Review* 54 (2024): 106019. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0267364924000852>.
- . “The Illusion of AI Intimacy: How Human-Chatbot Relationships Reshape Emotional Attachments.” *AI & Society* 39, no. 1 (2024): 25–41.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*. Translated by Eva Martin (1913). London: Heinemann, 1869.
- Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper & Row, 1956.
- Gastineau, Nicolas. “Romain Lucazeau: ‘Plutôt que d’imaginer l’avenir, la science-fiction s’adresse à nos peurs.’” *Philosophie magazine*, October 2021. Accessed September 19, 2025. <https://www.philomag.com/articles/romain-lucazeau-plutot-que-dimaginer-lavenir-la-science-fiction-sadresse-nos-peurs>.
- González, Marta. *The Digital Love: AI and Romantic Narratives in the 21st Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
- González, Jorge. “The Evolution of AI in Cinema: From Villain to Companion.” *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 34, no. 3 (2022): 45–62.
- Grasso, Matteo. “Black Mirror, ‘Be Right Back,’ and Philosophy.” *The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series*, 2015. <https://andphilosophy.com/2015/11/11/black-mirror-be-right-back-and-philosophy/>.
- Lovens, Pierre-François. “Sans ces conversations avec le chatbot Eliza, mon mari serait toujours là.” *La Libre Belgique*, March 28, 2023. <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/societe/2023/03/28/sans-ces-conversations-avec-le-chatbot-eliza-mon-mari-serait-toujours-la-LVSLWPC5WRDX7J2RCHNWPST24/>.

- Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Rogers, Carl R. *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961.
- . *A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980.
- Storr, Will. *The Science of Storytelling*. London: HarperCollins, 2019. Kindle edition.
- Weizenbaum, Joseph. "ELIZA—A Computer Program for the Study of Natural Language Communication Between Man and Machine." *Communications of the ACM* 9, no. 1 (1966): 36–45.
- Wosk, Julie. *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

## Filmography

- 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. United Kingdom/United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.
- *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. Directed by Steven Spielberg. USA: Warner Bros., 2001.
- "Be Right Back." Written by Charlie Brooker. Directed by Owen Harris. *Black Mirror*, Season 2, Episode 1. Channel 4, 2013.
- *Blade Runner 2049*. Directed by Denis Villeneuve. USA: Warner Bros., 2017.
- *Eternal You*. Directed by Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck. Germany/United States: Beetz Brothers and Concordia Studios, 2023.
- *Ex Machina*. Directed by Alex Garland. United Kingdom: Universal Pictures, 2015.
- *Her*. Directed by Spike Jonze. Annapurna Pictures, 2013.
- *I'm Your Man (Ich bin dein Mensch)*. Directed by Maria Schrader. Germany: Letterbox Filmproduktion, 2021.
- *Metropolis*. Directed by Fritz Lang. Germany: UFA, 1927.
- *The Matrix*. Directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski. United States: Warner Bros., 1999.
- *The Terminator*. Directed by James Cameron. United States: Orion Pictures, 1984.
- *Westworld*. Directed by Michael Crichton. United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1973.