The Essence of Ideological Media - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

On the one hand, I greatly regret seeing the movie *Her* (2013) dir. by Spike Jonze, because it is an utter waste of time to see and has nothing to say on its own merit, but on the other hand, it gave me inspiration for this blog-post.

　　Her is the essence of ideological media. But is precisely because our ideology is within an emerging postmodern state that it takes the opposite form — as something entirely apolitical. I was reminded both by Mao's statement in his red book that there is no apolitical art, and by Zizek's retort that ideology today exists as that which "we don't know what we know."

The film is, of course, not accidentally ideological; I only ended up seeing it because of a relative who takes New York Times reviews very seriously, and the film screams "Hollywood" in its cast, budget, etc., in addition to plot. I want to analyze this film as a general example of the way in which ideological media presents itself today.

The story in *Her* is very simple: the lead, played by Joaquin Phoenix, lives in a capitalist hyper-technological future. Lonely from a divorce, he falls in love with an operating system that can simulate the voice and personality of a girlfriend. In the end, the system disconnects, and he goes on to find relationships in real people.

Already merely in *setting* is the film frustrating. The world is divided into mega-countries which are themselves merging, suggesting that world peace has been largely achieved — itself suggesting that scarcity and environmental crises have largely been overcome. But everyone, including the lead, not only still work 9–5 jobs, but none of these jobs are portrayed as useless or causing great suffering. The lead, for example, works a version of an office job such as that portrayed in *Office Space,* but with all of the rough edges smoothed out (there are no asshole bosses present, the desks are larger and nicer, etc.) Advertisements, alienation and the like, are all still present, but even less than they are today.

The backdrop for the film is precisely an escape from the Lacanian Real: it does not consider the odious aspects of capitalism, those so terrible they must be left unsaid; instead, it chooses a fantasy which is almost identical to this world but a *little* better (the film utterly takes for granted the idea that advances in technology will simply create a world identical to this one, but a *little* better.)

> "For Lacan, the Real is what any 'reality' must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality…"
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> — Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism, pg. 18

The entire film is predicated on sufficient detachment from this Real. Every issue which the film encounters could be huge, with devastating consequences, and yet it manages to trivialize it, banalize it, until it becomes a minor social issue in one man's life. The relation of labor to capital, the relation of capital to nature, the relation of the self to the commodity — all of these dilemmas are present, and form the story, but none of them are actually discussed. It shows them without showing them.

For example, the idea of the simulated girlfriend, which is the focal point of the plot, presents a huge dilemma. It is even revealed later on that the overwhelming majority of people in the city the protagonist lives in have these computer friends, and the idea of the computer girlfriend presents an immediate social problem to the lead which he must fix. And yet, the purpose of the film is not to call attention to these issues (which are real already in our society), but actually to make one forget about them. In the end, the lead quietly and peacefully finds true love in real human beings, and the film is one large performance of interpassivity: it did all the work of tackling these issues in its runtime, so now that it's over you can stop thinking about them. It takes real world problems and ties them up into a convenient movie-length package with a perfect story arc and resolution.

Taken in its full, the dilemma of the simulated friend which is felt as more genuine than a real one (an idea which the protagonist admits to), is for Baudrillard the generation of a hyperreal. A society which is hyperreal, dominated by simulacra, cannot parse true from not (*"It is all of metaphysics that is lost."*) Yet this notion is sidestepped by the film so that the entire dilemma can be solved simply by a personal choice: just turn off the computer!

The film offers one massive blanket to cover every horrifying prospect which haunts our future (or maybe there simply isn't one?) It presents a quasi-social democracy in which the market is innovative and only mildly intruding, and in which technology under capitalism is only somewhat alienating. It is alienating, but only enough so that it can be solved by sim-

ple personal choice. It is every liberal's wet dream: the overcoming of techno-capital by simply choosing to look up from our phones and joining hands, or whatever.

This ideology is what Fisher called the *"over-valuing of belief,"* which was also that which allows us to keep participating in the system. In the bourgeois individualist view, if you personally have a conviction, it must mean a whole lot because the individual is the center of his world. In reality, this spiritual yearning for an individualist idea of "freedom" has no basis in reality, and it is exactly in its inability to create real action that the system is allowed to continue. By taking systems and simplifying them to the individual level (i.e., what the individual must take in from the system), the system can go on untrammeled. So it advocates this individualism, this emphasis on personal choice, personal responsibility, and subsequently on this over-valuing of personal belief.

Instead of *Her*, go watch *Children of Men* (2006).