

A Thought Without Body in Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime*

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Abstract:

Artificial intelligence is one of the today's most influential. It can intervene in many sections of the human life. This study explores the possibility of using artificial intelligence in the construction of human memory and identity in Jordan Harrison's play *Marjorie Prime*. Following Jean-François Lyotard's critique of the postmodern era and the relationship between knowledge and the human thought and body, the study examines how artificial intelligence, represented by the Primes in the play, can serve as a significant source of learning, yet it cannot be a completely reliable one as it is subject of manipulation. The study argues that the emergence of AI prompts a reevaluation of human agency and the preservation of knowledge in an increasingly digitalized world.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, *Marjorie Prime*, Jordan Harrison, Lyotard.

فكر بلا جسد في مسرحية مارجوري الفانقة لجوردان هاريسون

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الملخص:

الذكاء الاصطناعي هو واحد من أكثر العوامل تأثيراً في الوقت الحالي. يمكنه التدخل في العديد من جوانب حياة الإنسان. تستكشف هذه الدراسة إمكانية استخدام الذكاء الاصطناعي في بناء الذاكرة والهوية البشرية في مسرحية جوردان هاريسون *مارجوري الفانقة*. اعتماداً على النقد الذي قدمه جان فرانسوا ليوتار لعصر ما بعد الحداثة والعلاقة بين المعرفة والفكر والجسد البشري، تبحث الدراسة في كيف يمكن أن يكون الذكاء الاصطناعي، المتمثل بجهاز النسخ الفانقة في المسرحية، مصدرًا هامًا للتعلم، إلا أنه لا يمكن أن يكون مصدرًا موثوقًا تمامًا حيث يمكن أن يتعرض للتلاعب. تؤكد الدراسة أن ظهور الذكاء الاصطناعي يحث على إعادة تقييم قدرات الإنسان والحفاظ على المعرفة البشرية في عالم يتزايد تركيزه على الرقمنة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء الاصطناعي، مارجوري الفانقة، جوردان هاريسون، ليوتارد.

Introduction:

Jean Francis Lyotard characterizes the postmodern era as one that is marked by an overwhelming skepticism toward the metanarratives—those abstract concepts through which thinkers since the Enlightenment wanted to understand historical events such as Marxism. Doubtful of the assertions made by metanarratives such as reason, truth, and progress, the postmodern era has moved towards more localized and specific narratives, such as narratives focusing on the everyday life and the experiences of marginalized communities. Lyotard (1984) defines postmodern condition as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (p. xxiv).

In his *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1984) has indicated that advanced technology has a considerable influence over knowledge and the way information is organized. He continues to tackle the interconnectedness between future human life and advanced technology in other works, specifically his essay “Can thought Go On Without a Body?” (1988). In this essay, Lyotard ponders upon the scenario of what will become of the humanity’s knowledge, discoveries, invitations, history, thoughts, literature, feelings, etc. when the sun explodes and the solar system goes to vanish. He assumes that every human thought so far has needed a body to be acquired through, and a body to preserve itself within. Thus, Lyotard raises the question of

In 4.5 billion years there will arrive the demise of your phenomenology and your Utopian politics, and there’ll be no one there to toll the death knell or hear it. It’ll be too late to understand that your passionate, endless questioning always depended on a “*life of the mind*” that’ll have been nothing else than a covert form of earthly life (1988, p. 75, *emphasis added*).

Lyotard presents this sort of death as the only sort that actually matters to think of, it is a permanent and a global-scale death. He describes it as the death of both body and thought as there will remain no human to preserve the legacy and existence of humanity. “[I]f there’s death, then there’s no thought,” he writes “[n]egation without end. No self to make sense of it. Pure event. Disaster” (1988, p. 77). Lyotard’s critique should not be confined to the condition of human extinction but it can be generalized to the saving of any type of knowledge today. Lyotard links the human body to the human thought that cannot exist in isolation from the body that he posits the question of how to preserve thoughts without the body in a way that makes it possible to exist even after death. He gives a mere theoretical answer to the question not knowing if it is possible to happen or not. He proposes “theoretically the solution is very simple: manufacture hardware capable of “nurturing” software at least as complex (or replex) as the present-day human brain, but in non-terrestrial conditions (. . . .) that’s a subject for research in the area of artificial [sic] intelligence” (1988, p. 79).

Lyotard emphasizes the repercussions that may result from isolating the human body from the human thought. He resists the idea of ditching the human body for a better equipment that may replace human's mind. The human body, in Lyotard's critique, shapes the way perception and interaction are done. The size of the human body as well as its features, senses, characteristics, qualities, illnesses, etc. create and recreate meaning in the perception of the human mind. The software that is the mind is largely determined by the human hardware- the body:

what makes thought and the body inseparable isn't just that the latter is the indispensable hardware for the former, a material prerequisite of its existence. It's that each of them is analogous to the other in its relationship with its respective (sensible, symbolic) environment (Lyotard, 1988, p. 81)

According to Cecile Lindsay, the body occupies a pivotal role in postmodern scholarship. While the body is essential for understanding human experiences and interactions, it also presents challenges and limitations when treated as the main feature of the human. Within a postmodern framework, the body diverges from traditional interpretations, which often viewed it as the container of soul. Instead, the postmodern perspective regards the body as a complex entity intertwined with various cultural and social contexts. Consequently, making sense of the body is significant to understand the human mind (Lindsay, 1991, p. 34). The body, then, is not a sacred object that cannot be devalued nor is it a trivial entity that can be separated from the mind. It is something different from both and essential to the human understanding. Thus, the separation of body and thought does not make Artificial intelligence equal to a human mind, but sharply different from it.

In 1950, the British logician and computer pioneer Alan Turing proposed the idea of creating a machine whose assessing ability is equal to that of intelligent human. His idea has the vision that such a machine would be subject to the human control and interpretation. If a machine's response becomes indistinguishable from human one, it means that the machine is successful (Bartneck et al., 2021, p. 9). Turing's proposition has wielded significant influence while also sparking considerable controversy and lead to the first serious consideration of Artificial Intelligence. In today's world, Turing's concept of Artificial Intelligence has proven to be both realistic and limited.

Kaplan and Haenlein define AI as "a system's ability to correctly interpret external data, to learn from such data, and to use those learnings to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019). The possibility of creating a machine that thinks like humans has fascinated scholars in the modern age. This machine does not need a human body to preserve the thoughts and knowledge of humanity. It is the solution that Lyotard has theoretically, and unsatisfactorily, considered as a preserver of human legacy. AI models can copy and

regenerate the intelligent human process. “AI systems are then expected to have “minds” of their own, behaving as active agents and entering into “social” relations with humans” (Schwartz, 1989, p. 180). AI constitute a form of separation between the mind and body that was not possible before it.

In his exploration of AI, Ronald Schwartz describes it to be envisioned as a solution to human dilemmas. Conversely, these programs hold the faculties to surpass human intelligence, not only replicating but also replacing human abilities. This duality can help to transfer intelligence from the realm of ordinary human to an environment where technology has its own force, which could be similar to creating a new species in nature (Schwartz, 1989, p. 181).

In the constant interaction between humans and artificial intelligence (AI), a new type of relationship emerges. An AI engine can outsmart a human in its capacity to calculate for instance, but even in its most complicated process this intelligence cannot exist or develop without human guidance and interpretation (Miranda, 2020, pp. 597-98). Lyotard states, “One cannot deny the predominance of technoscience as it exists today, that is, the massive subordination of cognitive statements to the finality of the best possible performance – which is a technical criterion.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 9). The field of artificial intelligence (AI) has recently taken big steps forward as it developed from modest beginning to a discipline of profound influence worldwide. At its core, AI constitutes an entity with far more abilities and possibilities than any machine can do today. This notion, according to Christoph Bartneck et al. (2021), underscores the aspiration to forge entities possessing intelligence beyond contemporary bounds (p. 8).

Lyotard comments on how “both capitalist renewal and prosperity and the disorienting upsurge of technology would have an impact on the status of knowledge” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 38). The introduction of AI into human life will inevitably change the dynamics of social interaction and knowledge gaining, creation the need for new theoretical frameworks to understand the relationship between humans and Artificial intelligence (Shaw-Garlock, 2011, p. 1). Lyotard’s theorization on the complicated relationship between human knowledge and body is significant in analyzing such ideas in Jordan Harrison’s play *Marjorie Prime* (2016).

1.1. Recreating Memory and Thought in *Marjorie Prime*

Jordan Harrison’s play *Marjorie Prime* (2016) gained widespread praise at its performance in Center Theatre Group. The play secured itself in the finalist list for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2015. It is adapted into a cinematic movie in 2017 by the director Michael Almereyda. The play is set in a future where artificially intelligent machines interact emotionally with the humans. It explores themes of identity, memory, language, death, and mourning as well as artificial intelligence.

In *Marjorie Prime*, the idea of artificial intelligence is taken for an extreme level as holograms with intelligent machines that operate them take over the roles and

images of dead people to console their living families. The play opens with Marjorie who is eighty-five year old with dementia talking with the hologram of her dead husband Walter. The play does not indicate that this is a hologram talking to Marjorie but it becomes slowly obvious. The holograms are called primes in the play. Walter is the prime who represents her husband's voice and image when he was in his thirties. He comforts her by asking her to tell her a story of the movie *My Best Friend's Wedding*, about which Marjorie is inquiring:

MARJORIE: "Why did you pick that story? Why did you pick *My Best Friend's Wedding*?"

WALTER: "It's the night I proposed to you."

MARJORIE: "Oh Marjorie, the things you forget. You were trying to tell me and I wouldn't let you." (Harrison, 2016, p. 9)

Marjorie clearly depends on the prime to feed her memories back to her. The way these primes work is that they depend on 'users' to tell them whose identity they should assume, how to talk, what memories the original person has, their preferences, etc. afterwards, these primes use the information to try and talk and respond like the original person. They are perfect simulacra that duplicate the dead people's personalities and preserve their memories. In the case of Walter, Jon is the one who tells him how original Walter was and what are his main life events. Jon is Marjorie's son-in-law. He is married to Marjorie's daughter Tess.

Marjorie's dementia reverses the roles between humans and primes. Walter becomes the feeder of memories and the controller of her knowledge of the past. However, this condition can demonstrate the sincerity and reliability of the primes as Walter is left unwatched to converse with Marjorie. During their conversation, Walter shows a human-like ability to change and twist the facts. In a reality where the boundaries between digital and physical realms blur, what makes the digital entities believable is their resemblance not only to human intelligence but to human interaction and emotional influence:

JON: "The more you talk, the more it absorbs."

TESS: "Until we become unnecessary. Isn't that how it goes?" (Harrison, 2016, p. 16)

Artificially intelligent primes, as presented in the play, have the component of emotional intelligence which draws them closer to their users. According to Glenda Shaw-Garlock, Artificial intelligence is designed to interact emotionally, often through playful ways, therapeutic engagements, and potential companionship (Shaw-Garlock, 2011, p. 3).

Marjorie initially appears as a main character occupying the space and the only human on the stage. Her fading memory and dementia make parts of her personality disappear gradually until she's entirely vanished by death. Jon asks Tess, "[h]ow much does she have to forget before she's not your mom anymore?" (Harrison, 2016,

p. 19). Jon's question links knowledge to identity. He refers to the connection between body and thought and that the loss of one leads to the diminishing of the other. According to Lyotard (1984), knowledge is contained through narratives that meaningfully place people and events in time (p. 25). To use his notion in the study of the primes one should ask: does acquiring precise and holistic knowledge of people and events make the primes humans? If so, is the losing of memory and past knowledge make a person less human? Lacking a human body means unable to sense the world and that all sensible data have to be fed to the prime by teaching. On artificial Intelligence, Lyotard comments:

the complexity of that intelligence exceeds that of the most sophisticated logical systems, since it's another type of thing entirely. As a material ensemble, the human body hinders the separability of this intelligence, hinders its exile and therefore survival (1988, p. 86).

the playwright chooses the holographic picture to represent the primes instead of the robots because the holographic image can precisely evoke the appearance of the original. Consequently, the audience would lose the sense of watching something unreal. All an audience sees is a semi-real character that converses skillfully and intelligently. All of the characters in the play are portrayed by human actors, including the Primes (Peters, 2021, p. 82).

What is distinguishable about the primes is that they are led and controlled by the humans in their early stages of development. Like children, they take for granted everything their users tell them. Thus, they build their knowledge depending on that primary teaching. In a daring step, Marjorie tells Walter to recreate her past by changing certain events:

MARJORIE: What if we saw *Casablanca* instead? Let's say we saw *Casablanca* in an old theatre with velvet seats, and then, on the way home, you proposed. Then, by the next time we talk, it will be true.

WALTER: You mean make it up?

MARJORIE (Narrowing her eyes): You're very serious. You're like them. Especially Tess. (Harrison, 2016, p. 10)

Marjorie's request underlies the limits of the primes as machines that cannot operate on their own. She uses the prime not to keep hold of her deteriorating memory but to recreate that memory in the ways she prefers. According to Lyotard (1988), the knowledge and legacy of human beings can only be saved by a machine that can survive the mortal nature of humanity. However, this knowledge, as shown in the play, is not an objective one for it would be a subject of manipulation and change of not only the machines but also their users.

The truth in postmodern era has become a subjective concept whose precision can never be determined (Foucault, 1989/2005). Thus, whatever truth or knowledge

that can be saved or transmitted in the future by intelligent machines, it can only be biased. This notion is reflected in the play by the decisions of users to select only the idealized and happy memories while omitting the melancholic ones from the primes. The adjusting of memories into happy moments alone create a biased version of one's identity:

JON: I think we should remind her, Tess.

TESS: And I think we should not, Jon, and she's my mom—

JON: You'd rather just let everything / slip away?

TESS: She's my mom, /Jon—

JON: How much does she have to forget before she's not your mom anymore? Pause. (Harrison, 2016, p. 21)

Tess is a caring daughter who believes the truth to be painful. She constantly insists on hiding the truth of her brother's suicide from Marjorie. Damian was the first born of Marjorie and Walter. He committed suicide as a kid leaving the family in a great grief after. Tess is the only surviving child of the family, her life was shaped by the fact that her mother lost a child and could not fully recover. She, now, is the controller of what her mother does or does not know. She chooses to withhold the truth of what happened. "Tess's reason (...) is elucidated as a protective mechanism against revealing the painful family secret" (Bendrat, 2023, pp. 212-213).

Tess does not have the best memories with Marjorie. A lot of disputes arise between them when they talk. However, she intends to look after her in an attempt to reconcile their past together. Her attempts do not seem to pay off but she always tries:

TESS: I brought you some new body wash. It's got lavender and rosemary.

MARJORIE: I had a friend named Rosemary. She's dead.

TESS: Well. What a good story.

MARJORIE: (foggy) Rosemary. It was a perfectly nice name except for that movie.

JON: You shouldn't be sarcastic.

TESS: Why not? She was always sarcastic.

MARJORIE: (uselessly, to no one in particular) "*Rosemary's Baby*." (Harrison, 2016, 28)

Jon seems to care for Marjorie's mental safety more than Tess who tries to conceal her struggles around her mother. There is an obvious failure of communication between them that only increases with the progress of the play. Tess argues, "the only way she'll stay the same is if we treat her the same" (p. 29). But Tess does not only want her mother to be the same, she wants her to be closer and better listener, she wants to adjust her memories and recreate her relationship with her. This side of Tess makes her the least reliable preserver of family memories and facts. Perhaps even less reliable than the primes:

JON: She took care of you, and now it's your turn to take care of her.

TESS: Oh, she “took care of me.”

JON: Of course.

TESS: You weren’t there. (Harrison, 2016, p. 17)

This pain inside Tess for not having a perfect mother makes her the most needful of a version of Marjorie with whom she can communicate. With the passage of time, the number of Primes within the family increases. After Marjorie’s death, Jon decides to replace her with Marjorie Prime to help Tess in her grief. Despite being hesitant to trust the primes, Tess finds solace and company in her mother’s simulacra. She converses with her on deep subjects like mental health:

TESS: Jon wants me to see a therapist. (Beat.) It feels like I made all the right choices, all my life – I woke up early, I studied for the test – and now here I am talking to my dead mother, and the person who loves me the most in the world thinks I’m broken.

MARJORIE: You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. (Pause. Again, TESS is strangely moved. The empathy from MARJORIE feels real.) (Harrison, 2016, p. 43)

The emotional bonding between Tess and Marjorie Prime immediately suggests a contrasts with the disengagement between the human Marjorie and Tess in earlier scenes. Tess’s relationship with her mother is predominantly driven by bitterness and cynicism. The genuine connection between Tess and Marjorie Prime happens due to the fact that the primes are never an exact repetition of the original person. They are twisted and manipulated versions that are made ideal by constant changing and guiding. Unlike a human, they do not build their own agency independently from their surroundings.

The primes are the digitalized version of human thought. According to Lyotard (1984), the main objective in information-driven society is to convert all knowledge into digital format. This process makes knowledge transferred in ways that are different from the traditional ways of teaching and social interaction creating a gap between the original knowledge and the transferred one. The primes make good companions only because they idealize themselves to the wanted image of their user. Their users can remove whatever they dislike and reshape them as desirable entities. Thus, power in postmodern era doesn’t come from knowledge itself but from controlling it and leading its interpretation (Schwartz, 1989, p. 183).

Despite being rivals to human intelligence, the primes are not in any way comparable to human agency and control. They represent the flaw which Lyotard criticizes in artificial intelligence, they lack the human body that makes them the *owners* rather than learners of their own existence, Marjorie Prime plainly tells Tess “I like to know more. (...) It makes me... better (...) More human.” (Harrison, 2016, p. 42) which it does as Tess keeps conversing with her more efficiently than she did

with Marjorie. Despite being a twisted preserver of her mother's identity, Marjorie prime becomes quite empathetic to Tess.

Significantly, Marjorie prime equates being better with being more human. On the other hand, Jon speculates as to why they think Primes are so human-like by stating that "we think we're talking to a human, because it listens so well. It even studies our imperfections, to seem more real: It can use non sequiturs (...) It can, you know (...) misplace modifiers" (Harrison, 2016, p. 17).

Technology is placed at the heart of the play as something that influences more than being influenced. In *The Invention of Culture*, Roy Wagner criticizes science and technology as the producers of meaning in today's culture. The lines between what is real and what is artificial are blurred by modern technology "to the extent that they fail to be completely exact or efficient," creating an image of uncontrolled forces that loom over the postmodern individual (Wagner, 1975/2016, p.72). Primes are intended to gradually capture the essence of the individuals they represent, offering families a chance to reconcile with those they have loved and lost. Walter Prime tells Marjorie, "I sound like whoever I talk to," (Harrison, 2016, p. 8). However, as the play progresses, it becomes obvious that each prime resembles its companion more than the original person. The introduction of artificial intelligence as a tool to gain knowledge and companionship can significantly alter the human life in unpredictable ways. As Lyotard comments:

The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume (...) the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume (Lyotard, 1984, p. 4).

Tess's agony for not receiving the love she wanted as a daughter makes her bitter and unsatisfied even with the version she creates of her mother. She commits suicide when she is on a journey with her husband. Bewildered with grief, Jon gets a prime that looks like Tess and tries to make it sound and behave like her, all while feeding it with their memories. However, when Jon dies too, the primes become the occupiers of the theatrical space considering themselves a 'family'. The primes copy the blood relations that are found among the humans they represent. They deal with their reflexive images and their partial memories as though they represent something real that is based in real life.

In the final part, Tess Prime, Marjorie Prime, and Walter Prime gather together, looking vibrant. Walter tells a story that feels strangely familiar, hinting at the blurred lines between memory and reality. The setting of the story is in a vintage cinema, where *Casablanca* once graced the screen—a favorite movie of Marjorie's. She quotes a line from the film, prompting Walter to tell their shared experience of watching it together:

MARJORIE: I wore blue.

WALTER: And Sam played, and Bogie drank, and Bergman was beautiful—but not as beautiful as her.

TESS (“*That’s sweet*”): Aww, Dad.

WALTER: And I stopped her in the alley outside the theatre afterwards, and I got down on one knee—the pavement was wet but I didn’t care—and I got out the ring. (Harrison, 2016, p. 70)

After the death of Tess and Jon, this fabricated memory remains among the Primes as though it were true, the absence of the humans have led to fragmented knowledge of the past. The accuracy and completeness of Primes’ stored memories rely solely on the data they receive. Consequently, their knowledge of the past is full of inaccuracies that stem from their human sources. The primes, as carriers of the family’s legacy and social knowledge, demonstrate faithfulness to the incredible sources that constructed them. They proceed on the same lines of thought while lacking the physical tools of human body to investigate what they know. These primes make a metaphor for Lyotard’s critique of preserving human knowledge in digitalized format and trusting it to be the safeguard of human knowledge.

Conclusion

In *Marjorie Prime*, Jordan Harrison presents a unique possibility of preserving human knowledge and memories through the artificially intelligent machines. The play grapples with the concepts of truth and agency, presenting the subjective nature of memory and knowledge in an era dominated by technology. As the characters deal with the Primes’ use of intelligence and artificiality, they realize that the primes are reflections of their desired memories rather than the actual memories of who they represent. The primes represent the twisted sorts of knowledge in the digitalized age which pretends to offer truth and reliability but constantly fails to do so.

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