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## The Paradox of the Sublime: The Interplay of Humanity and Technology in Jordan Harrison's Marjorie Prime

### A B S T R A C T

This study analyses Jordan Harrison's Marjorie Prime through the lens of the digital sublime, which encapsulates the awe-inspiring and deeply unsettling dimensions of technological advancement. Employing the frameworks of the sublime articulated by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant and the modern perspective, which underscore the tension between technology's transcendent possibilities and its capacity to disturb human experience, the study illustrates how Marjorie Prime embodies the paradox of the sublime. The research seeks to critically examine Marjorie Prime's engagement with the concept of the digital sublime, highlighting the ethical implications of portraying AI as both a technological marvel and a source of existential unease. The research aims to elucidate how the play explores the ethical, emotional, and philosophical consequences of a society in which technology claims to improve the human experience while threatening the essence of humanity. The study demonstrates that Marjorie Prime serves as a profound commentary on the paradox of the sublime in the digital age, as the play underscores the tension between technical idealism and the enduring complexities of human emotion, memory, and relationships. Employing Gibson's technique, the research finds that Marjorie Prime urges audiences to consider the consequences of a world where technology claims to augment human experience while threatening the essence of humanity.

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## مفارقة السمو: التفاعل بين الإنسانية والتكنولوجيا في مسرحية "مارجوري برايم" لجوردان هاريسون

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وزارة التربية العراقية

## الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تحليل مسرحية جوردان هاريسون "مارجوري برايم" من خلال عدسة مفهوم "السمو الرقمي"، الذي يجسد الأبعاد المذهلة والمقلقة في آن واحد للتقدم التكنولوجي. باستعمال أطر مفهوم "السمو" كما صاغه إدmond بيرك وإيمانويل كانت، إلى جانب المنظور الحديث الذي يسلط الضوء على التوتر بين الإمكانيات المتسامية للتكنولوجيا وقدرتها على زعزعة التجربة الإنسانية، وتوضح الدراسة كيف تجسد "مارجوري برايم" مفارقة السمو .

وتهدف أيضاً إلى فحص نقدي لتفاعل المسرحية مع مفهوم السمو الرقمي، مع التركيز على الآثار الأخلاقية لتصوير الذكاء الاصطناعي كمعجزة تكنولوجية من جهة، ومصدر للقلق الوجودي من جهة أخرى. كما تسعى إلى توضيح كيف تستكشف المسرحية العواقب الأخلاقية والعاطفية والفلسفية لمجتمع تدعي التكنولوجيا فيه تحسين التجربة الإنسانية بينما تهدد جوهر الإنسانية ذاته.

وتؤكد الدراسة أن "مارجوري برايم" تقدم تأملاً عميقاً في مفارقة السمو في العصر الرقمي، حيث تبرز المسرحية التناقض بين المثالية التكنولوجية والتعقيدات الدائمة للمشاعر الإنسانية والذاكرة والعلاقات. باستعمال تقنية جيبيسون، وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن المسرحية تحث الجمهور على التفكير في عواقب عالم تعلن فيه التكنولوجيا عن تعزيزها للتجربة البشرية بينما تقوض أساسيات إنسانيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جوردان هاريسون ، مارجوري برايم ، السمو الرقمي التكنولوجيا ، ما بعد الإنسانية.

## Introduction

The notion of the sublime has historically fascinated philosophers, artists, and intellectuals, acting as a portal to comprehend profound experiences that go beyond ordinary perception. The concept was revived in the 18th century, when Edmund Burke wrote in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) that "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible [...] is a source of the sublime". In addition to terror, there is an aspect of gratification in the sublime. In 1790, *Immanuel Kant* observed that the sublime inspires us to recognise "in our mind a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability". One way of looking at this is that despite nature's overwhelming complexity, the mind can conquer any terror that emerges in our experiences of the world. This yields a sense of pleasure in the exceptionalism of human reason. The sublime thus touches upon a central tension in our experience of reality. We are awed and afraid of the scale and infinite complexity of the universe. Still, this feeling can be transformed into a positive view of ourselves because we can understand its wondrous quality. The paradoxical ability to experience these two sentiments simultaneously is a key feature of the sublime.

The sublime denotes experiences of immense magnitude, breadth, or power that transcend human understanding, eliciting a blend of wonder, terror, and veneration. It is not only aesthetic appeal or agreeableness, but rather an encounter with the vastness and enigma

of existence itself. The philosophical examination of the sublime is mainly centred on the contributions of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, who provided essential analyses of this phenomenon and its significance for human awareness. Edmund Burke defined the sublime as an aesthetic experience arising from our encounter with vast, frequently daunting forces. Conversely, Immanuel Kant extended the concept of the sublime into the domain of human reason and intellect. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant differentiated between the Mathematical Sublime, characterized by an experience of vastness that surpasses our capacity for measurement or comprehension, and the Dynamical Sublime, which emerges when confronted with formidable natural forces that may threaten to overwhelm us yet are cognitively perceived as components of a rational and ordered universe. Kant posits that the sublime encompasses not just an emotional reaction but also highlights the boundaries of our capacity to comprehend or adequately depict the infinite. Kant asserted that the sublime elicits a feeling of intellectual transcendence, highlighting that although our senses may be inundated, our rational faculties enable us to interact with these concepts in significant and profound ways.

The tension inherent to the sublime has generated skepticism about what it stands for. Some see the sublime as a concept that privileges a self-aggrandizing obsession with the powers of human reason and imagination. This critique is most apt when it comes to historical moments of human excess. Significantly influenced by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, Jordan Harrison's drama *Marjorie Prime* adeptly explores memory, technology, and the human condition, delicately interweaving the concept of the sublime with The play's central theme a holographic AI created to emulate departed individuals—confronts its characters with the enormity of memory and the profound power of technology, eliciting a blend of awe and terror consistent with Burke's notion of the sublime. The Primes, as digital avatars of humanity, exemplify the Dynamical Sublime by their ability to evoke profound emotional and cognitive responses, and the Mathematical Sublime via their capability to archive and reproduce boundless memories that exceed human understanding. The drama exemplifies Kant's concept of intellectual transcendence as the characters confront the boundaries of their comprehension about identity, loss, and the moral ramifications of artificial intelligence. *Marjorie Prime*, via its austere design and significant themes, urges viewers to grapple with the tremendous contradiction between human frailty and technological permanence, highlighting the limitations of representation and the persistent mysteries of memory, oblivion, and existence.

### **Literature Review**

The phrase digital sublime, albeit recently coined, has rapidly gained importance due to the growing necessity to clarify the profound effects of technological progress on human experience and perception. Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and digital memory systems blur the lines between reality and simulation, presence and absence, and memory and creation, eliciting a mixture of astonishment, wonder, and existential anxiety as they progress; in 2005, Vincent Mosco's study, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*, analysed the promises and myths of the digital age's societal transformation: with computers, we can transcend time, space, and conventional politics. In *The Digital Sublime*, Vincent Mosco transcends conventional narratives of technical advancements and economic crises to

examine the myths surrounding new digital technologies and the reasons for our compulsion to believe in them. He asserts that the persistence of fervent investors in the dotcom era, who continued to inflate stock prices despite the onset of the crisis, was not due to a deliberate disregard for economic principles but rather a conviction in the illusion that internet was ushering in a new paradigm.

In the 2013 article "Reinventing the Sublime: Post-Romantic Literature and Theory," Steven Vine contends that the sublime in its post-modern and contemporary manifestations encapsulates an apprehensive yet affirming connection with the paradoxes of time and history. 'Reinventing the sublime examines the persistence of the sublime in modern thought and how it might be seen as a representation of the link between representation and temporality.

In 2018, Annie Dorsen's research, *The Sublime and the Digital Landscape*, examines the notion of digital sublime and its influence on her work, *The Great Outdoors* (2017). The Internet and knowledge, in their magnitude and breadth, have evolved into a profound arena for reflection, characterised more by a "sublimity," as Sianne Ngai describes it, indicative of sublime ignorance rather than a Romantic ideal.

The play by Jordan Harrison has been analysed from several perspectives. Shelby Brewster (2017), in *Performing Cognitive Estrangement: Future Memory Technics in Jordan Harrison's Marjorie Prime*, examines the theatrical elements in producing science fiction plays such as *Marjorie Prime*. Brewster relies on Ralph Willingham's publication, *Science Fiction and the Theatre* (1994). The study addresses two primary concerns. The special effects necessary for most science fiction narratives are more challenging to execute on stage than in cinema or television. Secondly, theatre practitioners frequently harbor the erroneous conviction that science fiction is solely escapist entertainment centered on imagination and adventure.

## **Significance of the Study**

Although extensive research exists on memory, identity, and artificial intelligence in *Marjorie Prime* by Jordan Harrison, no one has explicitly examined the play from the perspective of the digital sublime. Researchers have analysed artificial intelligence's psychological and ethical ramifications in the narrative; however, the digital sublime, which embodies the awe, wonder, and existential unease provoked by advanced technology, offers a distinct perspective on how AI transforms human relationships, loss, and memory. This research examines how the Primes defy conventional perceptions of reality, authenticity, and emotional connection, functioning as digital spectres and extraordinary technical creatures.

### **1.1 The Theoretical Background to Digital Sublime**

Edmund Burke's philosophy of the sublime offers a fundamental framework for comprehending human responses to overwhelming grandeur or power. For Burke (1757), "the sublime is distinct from the beautiful" (p.103). While beauty is associated with harmony, order, and pleasure, the sublime "is rooted in vastness, terror, and obscurity, invoking powerful emotions of awe and fear" (Burke, 1757, p.106). Burke posits that the sublime "occurs when we encounter forces far greater than ourselves, which threaten to overwhelm us physically or mentally" (Burke, 1757, p. 109). One of the key characteristics of Burke's

sublime is vastness, “which refers to the sheer scale or magnitude of what is experienced” (Burke, 1757, p.60). Natural examples, such as majestic mountains, vast seas, or infinite deserts, elicit a sense of sublimity due to their incomprehensible scale. When confronted with something too vast to grasp completely, the human mind responds with both wonder and fear. These feelings arise from the uneasiness and fragility elicited by such grandeur; nevertheless, at a safe distance, this dread is mitigated by appreciation and curiosity. Burke posits that such encounters engender a “delightful horror” (Burke, 1757, p. 106), wherein the dread of nature's might is exhilarating due to our vantage point of safety. Terror is fundamental to Burke's understanding of the sublime. Sublime horror, in contrast to ordinary fear that elicits instant flight or defence reflexes, emerges from encountering something overwhelmingly strong and irresistible. The sublime is thus connected to nature's destructive force and the human intellect's capacity to comprehend, contemplate, and surpass that terror. There is, however, another side to the sublime. Instead of privileging the power of human reason, the sublime can help us acknowledge the limits of human imagination and agency.

Kant's ideas, however, broadened the concept of the sublime within a more intricate philosophical framework. For Kant (1790), “the sublime was not only an aesthetic or emotional experience but also a philosophical confrontation with the limits of human cognition” (Kant, 1790, p.78). Burke's conception of the sublime centred on physical and sensory reactions, but Kant highlighted the intellectual struggle presented by the sublime, when human reason endeavours to comprehend notions or occurrences that beyond its limitations. Kant differentiated between two categories of sublime experiences; the Mathematical Sublime and the Dynamical Sublime. The Mathematical and Dynamical Sublime test our capacity to understand the universe fully. Nevertheless, they also assert the capacity of human reason to confront and contemplate these issues. Kant's concept of the sublime connects human limits with the infinite expanse of nature and the universe, highlighting both the constraints and the possibilities of human understanding.

In a contemporary environment, as humanity has progressed and technology has advanced, Youvan, C Douglas (2024), “the concept of the sublime has broadened beyond its conventional links to nature and the universe” (p.6). Contemporary inventions, especially technological advancements, now elicit the same emotions of wonder, trepidation, and cognitive elevation formerly associated with natural occurrences. This extension of the sublime into the domains of technology and the cosmos signifies humanity's increasing ability to generate and comprehend forces that test the boundaries of perception and cognition. Technology has begun to elicit the sublime in manners akin to natural events. The magnitude, intricacy, and potency of contemporary technical advancements, including skyscrapers, space exploration, and nuclear energy, frequently evoke a blend of admiration and trepidation akin to the sentiments articulated by Burke and Kant about nature. “These human-made structures and systems have pushed the boundaries of what is possible, creating a new kind of sublime rooted not in the natural world but in the achievements of human ingenuity” (Youvan, 2024, p.7).

## 1.2 The Indistinct Borders Between Reality and Illusion

including memory, artificial intelligence, and the human desire to maintain narratives. Themes are explored within the domestic sphere and manifest through the protagonist's engagement with a creation known as a Prime, defined as “a holographic recreation programmed using the voice and memory of the deceased to keep them alive in the minds of the living throughout the ages” (DePrado, 2024, p. 5). Although few writers have explored the idea of using computer-generated avatars as characters in drama, Jordan Harrison excelled in his compelling piece *Marjorie Prime*. The play was a nominee for the 2015

Pulitzer Prize for Drama and debuted at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 2014. It was created in 2015 at the Playwrights Horizons Theatre in New York and has been converted into a film of the same title. “The play is set shortly, where technology has developed to create 'Primes' - avatars of deceased revelers that can talk, learn, and interact with the living” (DePrado, 2024, p. 7).

In the narrative of *Marjorie Prime*, eighty-five-year-old Marjorie suffers from dementia while residing with her adult daughter, Tess, and son-in-law, Jon. Robot technology is available for domestic use, offered by Senior Serenity (Harrison, 2016, p. 15); Marjorie is aided by Walter Prime, a holographic facsimile of her deceased husband, imbued with the memories shared by Marjorie and her family. Notwithstanding Tess's apprehensions, Walter Prime's objective is to offer solace and remembrance support to Marjorie. These extraordinary assistances present as deceased characters, expertly crafted to replicate their look and behave appropriately according to the duration of their relationship with Marjorie. Through these engaging encounters and sincere dialogues, “Marjorie gradually discovers the inherent fallibility of human memory and the undeniable truth that machines can augment her knowledge and retain the intricate stories she holds dear (Li, 2020, p. 89).

The primary focus of Harrison's play is the connection between humans and artificial intelligence represented by the Primes. The piece raises a fundamental worry over Marjorie's diminishing humanity as her memory deteriorates. The Primes acknowledge that the acquisition of knowledge enhances their humanity, affirming that this is their objective. Nonetheless, Tess is frustrated by her observation that her mother is more kind towards the robot.

TESS: Science fiction is here, Jonathan. Every day is science fiction. We buy these things that already know our moods and what we want for lunch even though we do not know ourselves. Moreover, we listen to them; we do what we are told. Alternatively, we tell them our deepest secrets in this case, even though we have no earthly idea how they work. We treat them like our loved ones.

JON: Are you jealous?

TESS: What? No. Of the Prime?

JON: You are!

TESS: Am I supposed not to notice she is being nicer to that thing than to me?

JON: It is your father she is being nice to.

TESS: It is not my father. (Harrison, 2016, p. 23)

Using pronouns while referencing the Primes, or robots in general, is significant: Tess refers to Walter Prime as “it.” The dehumanising dynamic of employing “it” not only underscores the distinction between people and non-humans but also establishes a pronounced hierarchy, positioning humans far above robots. Tess’s remark that “every day is science fiction” exemplifies the extent to which technology has evolved and infiltrated everyday life, making it appear magical or beyond human comprehension. The digital sublime often arises from this tension: On one hand, these technologies appear omniscient, comprehending “our moods and our lunch preferences” (Harrison, 2016, p. 23). Conversely, they continue to be enigmatic and inscrutable to their users. The faith and reliance humans place in these machines, regarding them “like loved ones,” highlights the emotional and existential implications of artificial intelligence, demonstrating that it surpasses mere

functioning and profoundly affects human behaviour and relationships. Tess's rejection of Walter Prime as her father, stating, "It is not my father" (Harrison, 2016, p. 23), might also be construed as a repudiation of the digital sublime, resulting in her distress. The AI appears to mimic human presence, however Tess refuses to be swayed by its artifice. In contrast, her mother embraces it, suggesting that some individuals succumb to the appeal of technology, viewing it as a legitimate substitute for human contact, while others remain sceptical, highlighting the fundamental difference between human and artificial existence.

The technology featured in the drama manifests in three separate forms: Walter Prime, Marjorie Prime, and Tess Prime. Each represents an instance of novel mnemonic techniques, an extrapolation of pre-existing technologies that raise numerous enquiries regarding human-technology relationships and the capacity of artificial intelligence to experience emotions, particularly its potential to adversely affect human memory and the preservation of individual identity. In Marjorie Prime, the robots prioritise listening above obedience to learn and assist in a process that enables people to circumvent suffering. In a benign instance, Marjorie alters and distorts the context of Walter's proposal at their Best Friend's Wedding in Casablanca to idealise it and recollect it differently:

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

WALTER: You mean make it up?

MARJORIE (Narrowing her eyes): You are very serious. You are like them. Especially Tess."(Harrison,2016,p.17)

With the suggestion that they "make it up," Marjorie is prepared to alter history so that it would "be true by the next conversation." The digital sublime is sometimes associated with the notion that advanced artificial intelligence might reconstruct, alter, or supplant human experiences, hence obscuring the distinction between reality and simulation. Marjorie is comfortable with this malleability, perceiving memory as something that can be modified, much to a computer file. Conversely, Walter Prime exhibits reluctance and responds with, 'You mean fabricate it?' to underline the contradiction inherent in artificial intelligence memory. Walter Prime is neither inherently innovative nor deceitful, despite its purpose of storing and replicating human memories. Marjorie contrasts his "serious" demeanour with Tess's, suggesting that the accuracy of artificial intelligence, coupled with its inability to engage in imagination, renders it both formidable and limited. This pertains to the digital sublime, since artificial intelligence appears to offer a reality that is simultaneously extraordinary and unsettling: a world that can be perpetually modified, replayed, and rewritten, possessing limitless limitations.

This extensive and profound deadlock is intricately depicted in "Marjorie Prime," particularly when Tess seeks to alleviate her mother's suffering by permitting her to forget that Tess's brother Damian committed suicide. Consequently, Walter Prime initially lacks this knowledge and is unable to inform Marjorie when she enquires about Damian, prompting Walter Prime to solicit Jon for additional information regarding Damian:

JON: I want to tell you about when you took Marjorie to New York at Christmas.

WALTER: I am listening.

JON (Glancing at his notes): You sat on a bench in Central Park and looked at all these saffron-colored flags in the snow. It must have been some installation.

(Beat.) This would not have been long after your son died.

WALTER: My son?

JON: Your son, Damian.

You took a trip to New York, and you took Marjorie along—I think you were hoping to get her mind off it. You looked at the shop windows; you tried to start living again.

WALTER: How did he die?

(Short pause.)

JON: He did it himself. That was the hardest part. You thought you had made a nice life for him.."(Harrison,2016,p.74)

These robots, or more precisely “artificial intelligence systems [...] that utilise advanced holographic projections,” are “descendants of existing chatbots” (Harrison, 2016, p. 75). They tend to apologise when they underperform, can just replicate provided material, and are incapable of generating original content. In this regard, individuals truncate memories to create a version of themselves that aligns with their emotional capacity or need. Robots “become what the humans want them to be, representing the characters’ half-truths and disappointments about their history with the person the hologram portrays”(Bendrat,2023, p. 211). Particularly as Marjorie's dementia progresses, Tess encounters difficulties in discussing the past with her mother. Marjorie's demise is succeeded by her Prime, an emotional support robot designed for Tess, who has been experiencing psychiatric difficulties. Tess embodies the inherent educational cycle that Marjorie Prime illustrates, wherein parents instruct their offspring, who ultimately must impart knowledge back to their progenitors. This cyclical process, whereby technology assimilates, mirrors, and modifies human narratives, exemplifies the digital sublime, in which artificial intelligence serves not only as a passive witness of history but as a medium through which the past may be perpetually rewritten and re-experienced.

Comprehending the digital sublime is contingent upon the cycle of loss encountered between mother and daughter. The death of Damian first rendered Marjorie unable to accept the situation, impacting her trauma processing. Tess endures the grief process, as Anna Bendrat (2023) elucidates, due to “grieving was worsened by her mother's physical and mental isolation and consequent emotional coldness, a hallmark of Marjorie's growing melancholy, which proved destructive to her relation with her daughter.”(p.28).

The Primes may be the most accurate representation of what Tok Thompson (2019) refers to as 'Android ghosts.' Thompson argues that ghosts are supposed to “display the shadow” of ethics by haunting people and communities with past ethical failures, where “an alternative history” can be presented (2019, pp. 44–5). Tess uses Marjorie Prime to try to rewrite history and move past her shortcomings as a daughter. The digital sublime converts

human emotions and experiences into a spectral presence that reverberates with the past. In this regard, artificial intelligence obscures the distinction between reality and simulation, creates an appearance of continuity, and subtly modifies history. The Primes are not only robots; they embody the remarkable and unsettling power of technology to transform human experience, evoking wonder, reverence, and trepidation in equal proportions. Tess is reconstructing her mother's identity and conducting a ritualised digital remembrance while instructing Marjorie Prime about her namesake. This act illustrates the digital sublime through artificial intelligence's ability to construct an idealised and meticulously curated past by extending human memory beyond its natural limits. Technology serves as a mechanism for processing loss and redefining connections; nevertheless, it also presents concerns over authenticity and emotional dependence on artificial constructs. Under duress, Tess admits that her relationship with her mother was strained, revealing that the Primes actively contribute to memory reconstruction rather than merely preserving it. This highlights the enormous and frequently unsettling impact of artificial intelligence on human life:

Tess: You were not a bad mom. However, we did not tell each other things, secret things, not really. Some people have a point where their parents stop being parents to them—they start talking from one adult to another. I am not sure we ever had that. (Harrison,2016,p. 46)

Tess characterises recollection as a wonderful experience, a prison, and a source of comfort. Marjorie's capacity to modify her recollections underscores the human tendency to evade difficult realities and the aspiration to construct a more palatable existence, prompting her to fabricate her ideal of the behaviour of an exemplary mouth. This aligns with the Kantian idea of the sublime, whereby the mind encounters something immense and unfathomable, such as the limitless possibilities for memory transformation. Tess's Marjorie Prime resembles the elder Marjorie. It gives Tess more time to communicate and express sentiments to her mother's holographic facsimile that she could not convey while her mother was alive. Even Marjorie Prime offers, "Maybe I am the Marjorie you still have things to say to"(Harrison,2016,p. 46). affording Tess the opportunity to express herself, a privilege her mother never provided and is now unable of offering in her advanced age. Marjorie Prime exemplifies this article by interpreting Asimov's second law: providing therapeutic assistance to a human by attentively listening to alleviate their suffering.

### **1.3 Conclusion**

The contemporary technology of *Marjory Prime* exemplifies the sublime, as it encapsulates the expanse and indistinct borders between reality and illusion, alongside the intricacy and fluidity of memory through its use of holograms. These artificial constructs elicit comparable emotions of wonder, reverence, and trepidation as those experienced in the presence of natural occurrences such as mountains or storms. The technological sublime demonstrates that human accomplishments, albeit remarkable, frequently elicit apprehension over the repercussions of transcending our inherent boundaries. The conflict between admiration for our inventions and apprehension over their potential consequences characterises the contemporary sublime.

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