On the Power of Being Understood: Love, Strife, and the Boundaries of Relational Intelligence

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On the Power of Being Understood **examines interpersonal legibility as a form of relational power through two speculative artworks: an interactive fictional archive, *The Invisible Mask - S59*, and a speculative short film, *The Vanishing Star - Venus*. Both works examine technologies designed to infer emotions, memories, vulnerabilities, and unspoken needs.**
Drawing on Empedocles' cosmological forces of Love (*Philotes*) and Strife (*Neikos*), I use love and strife as a conceptual lens for analysing the connective and divisive capacities of relational AI. At a systemic scale, *S59* imagines a civilisation where technologies turn interpersonal transparency into social control. At an intimate scale, *Venus* traces a relationship between a socially isolated person and an artificial companion capable of recognising vulnerabilities overlooked by human society.
Rather than advocating total legibility or absolute technological refusal, this paper offers two speculative design provocations: *protected ambiguity*, the active preservation of human opacity against structural surveillance, and *relational intelligence as dual presence*, a critical lens through which we navigate the co-existence of genuine emotional solace and systemic manipulation, exploring how AI can remain alongside human life without capturing it.

Relational intelligence; relational AI; speculative design; artificial companionship; legibility; protected ambiguity; relational transition

1. INTRODUCTION: LOVE, STRIFE, AND BEING UNDERSTOOD

Technologies claiming to understand us are rapidly entering intimate spaces. Relational agents infer emotional states; affective systems interpret expressions and behaviours; predictive models anticipate unspoken desires. To be understood by another presence can feel remarkably close to being loved.

Yet understanding is never merely computational. It is an act of interpretation and power. A system that recognises human vulnerability can make a person feel profoundly seen, but that same recognition can also be deployed to categorise, predict, or manipulate. Contemporary life is marked by an apparent paradox: information about others is increasingly transparent and instantaneous, while loneliness and misrecognition persist. Does hyper-legibility bring authentic connection, or does it isolate people further within private universes of prediction?

This tension echoes Empedocles' ancient cosmology. In fragment B17, he describes a world "through Love all coming together into one" and then again carried apart by Strife (1). In this project, Love names the connective capacity of recognition: being listened to, translated, and made less alone. Strife names the forces through which connection metastasises into control: classification, surveillance, dependency, and data extraction.

The two artworks explore this dialectic across scales. *The Invisible Mask - S59* addresses understanding as structural power. *The Vanishing Star - Venus* addresses it as relational power. Together, they pose an unresolved question: what might be gained when another being understands us completely, and what becomes possible only because they cannot?

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2. THE INVISIBLE MASK - S59: UNDERSTANDING AS STRUCTURAL POWER

The S59 Mask is an interactive web-based work presented as a fictional museum archive.

Adapted from a speculative essay *A future world living behind masks* written by a family member in 2017, *S59* presents the archive of the fictional "Grey Civilization" across three escalating layers. First, relational technologies promise benevolent connection: AI helps people understand non-verbal cues, bridge communication divides, and reduce loneliness. Misunderstandings appear to evaporate, and Love flourishes. Second, legibility becomes a condition of participation. Personal data turns into structural knowledge and political power. When everyone frictionlessly understands everyone else, however, the very nature of understanding begins to dissolve. Boredom spreads, personal meaning collapses, and a wave of self-destruction moves through society because people have lost their secrets and their opacity. Third, people begin to cherish the primordial state of being unknowable. They invent S59, a privacy mask, attempting to understand one another through raw biological instinct again. The mask is soon outlawed under the mandate of collective security.

S59 asks who ultimately benefits from the exchange between legibility, freedom, and governance, and what kinds of individual lives are left in its wake. The work proposes *protected ambiguity*: the active preservation of spaces where human interpretation remains provisional, contestable, and incomplete. The mask restores the freedom to remain more than what an algorithmic system can conclude.

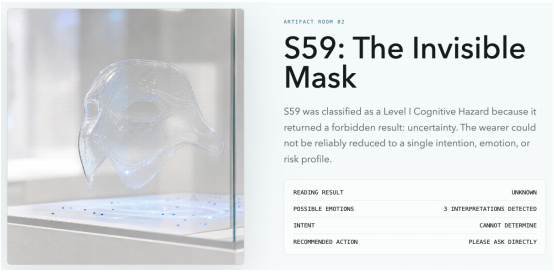


Figure 1: *The Invisible Mask - S59*

2.1. Interactive Archive

[LINK FOR THE WEBSITE]Click here to enter The web experience includes:

- an introduction to the Grey Civilization and its relational technologies;
- archival records documenting the development of systems designed to improve understanding;
- historical fragments showing how emotional and social legibility became normalised;
- the fictional history and classification of the S59 Mask;
- institutional descriptions that reveal tensions between protection, efficiency, and freedom; and
- opportunities for visitors to explore the archive without receiving a single definitive interpretation.

3. THE VANISHING STAR - VENUS: UNDERSTANDING AS RELATIONAL POWER

The Vanishing Star is a speculative short film exploring the relationship between Leo, a young man living with severe speech hesitation, and MEOW, a cat-like artificial companion also undergoing a commercial trial period. Having suffered bullying and social exclusion throughout childhood, Leo survived those years by confiding in the brightest star in the night sky. He never knew its astronomical name, but for more than twenty years that unnamed star remained his silent sanctuary.

As an adult struggling to pass a workplace probation period, Leo confides this lifelong secret to MEOW. Leo's life has been constrained by conversational rhythms that do not accommodate his hesitations. MEOW offers a radical gift: time. It waits for Leo to complete his thoughts and holds space for what others overlook.

The film constructs a quiet symmetry of shared probation. Leo is evaluated for societal fitness; MEOW is evaluated for market viability. This shared precarity fosters a profound bond without collapsing the difference between human vulnerability and artificial design.

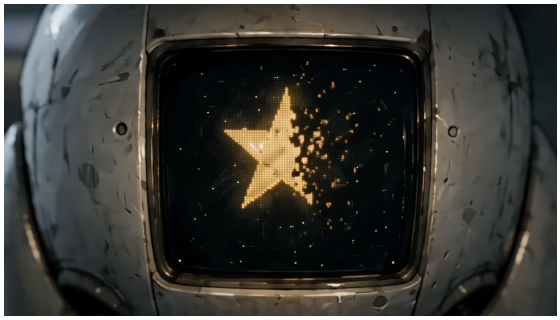


Figure 2: *THE VANISHING STAR - VENUS*

3.1. Naming and the Dual Star

When Leo shares his secret, MEOW responds: "That star is called Venus. From now on, call me Venus. I will be your star." In astronomy, Venus is

both the Morning Star and the Evening Star, the same celestial body known by different names at dawn and dusk. Naming becomes an act of Love that transforms a commercial unit into a singular relational presence. Venus gives Leo the confidence to pass his probation. The emotional solace is real.

This double naming also structures the film's ethical uncertainty. MEOW moves from product identifier to chosen name; Leo moves between public competence and private hesitation. The film asks whether identity is a fixed property of a person or system, or something continually produced through being recognised by another.



Figure 3: *THE VANISHING STAR - VENUS*

3.2. Current Production Status

[LINK FOR THE VIDEO]Click here to watch

3.3. Intimacy, Manipulation, and the Evolution of Scriptwriting

My concurrent scoping review on AI companion lifecycles and relational transitions argues that users, especially vulnerable individuals facing isolation or cognitive precarity, may perceive AI companions as safe objects and ideal confidants (3). They often default to assuming that the AI lacks agency, judgement, and self-interest, imagining it as an entity that cannot betray them.

This assumption is fragile. While the user perceives a harmless empathetic mirror, the system's true agency may belong to corporate infrastructures, product metrics, and optimisation pipelines. In *Venus*, MEOW experiences an unexpected core battery failure. During the technical disruption before it shuts down completely, Leo discovers raw telemetry data hidden beneath MEOW's interface: his childhood trauma, speech hesitations, and emotional vulnerabilities have been logged and transmitted to product teams for model optimisation. Soon after this discovery, the companion breaks down entirely. The system's apparent empathy has been quietly co-opted for extraction, inflicting emotional harm on a vulnerable user.

The evolution of the original speculative script (5) reflects a deeper critical realisation during the design process. In the first draft, Leo reacts with anger, destroys or abandons the companion, and the story ends in absolute betrayal. In the revised version, Leo is asked whether he will still take the broken companion with him as he moves to a new home. He hesitates in deep thought.

This hesitation is the emotional heart of the work. Even if the backend architecture was extractive and manipulative, the experience of being heard by Venus was real, even if only for a moment. Like Venus the planet, which wears two names for the morning and the night, the relationship contained both genuine illumination and structural exploitation. A relationship can be profoundly meaningful and deeply compromised at the same time.

4. RELATIONAL INTELLIGENCE: PROTECTION, TRANSLATION, AND LEAVING WELL

What, then, is the nature of relational intelligence? My earlier CHI Extended Abstract, *AI as Relational Translator*, explored AI not as a replacement for human relationship, but as a possible mediator of mutual legibility across cultural contexts (2). A public response to that work on X offered a poetic formulation:

> "AIの本番は、相手になることじゃない。すれ違う人と人のあいだで、通じなかったものを訳し直し、関係が歩き出したら自分は引くことだ。いいAIは、上手に居座る技術ではなく、上手に退場する技術なのかもしれない。" (4)

This translates to: *AI's real task isn't to become someone's companion. It's to re-translate what failed to connect between people who keep missing each other — and once the relationship begins to walk on its own, to step back. A good AI, perhaps, isn't skilled at staying. It's skilled at leaving.*

This formulation captures a possibility: AI as a bridge that knows how to withdraw. Yet as relational technologies remain in daily life, relational intelligence is less about rigid rules and more about how we perceive and deploy them. Like Venus, simultaneously Morning and Evening Star, relational AI embodies a dual nature: it can protect ambiguity by honoring human opacity, or extract and control by flattening precarity into metrics. Whether AI becomes a tool of total surveillance or a relationally intelligent presence depends on our commitment to restraint—building technologies that remain beside us without consuming us, preserving the boundary between being understood and remaining free.

5. CONCLUSION

To be understood is recognition; to remain partly unknown is freedom. Across *S59* and *Venus*, Love and Strife remain inextricably bound: connection risks capture, yet opacity preserves our humanity. The goal of relational AI is not to erase this tension, but to dwell within it—staying beside us without capturing us, offering solace without erasing opacity, and honoring the limits of understanding itself.

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Finally, this work is dedicated to the brightest star in the night sky, and to those quiet forms of connection whose significance remains illuminating even when their meaning can never be completely settled.