

1Her (2013)

“Anybody who falls in love is a freak.”

Major Credits:

Writer and Director: Spike Jonze

Cast: Joaquin Phoenix (Theodore Twombly), Scarlett Johansson (Samantha), Amy Adams (Amy), Rooney Mara (Catherine), Olivia Wilde (Blind Date), Portia Doubleday (Isabella)

Cinematography: Hoyte Van Hoytema

Production Design: K.K. Barrett

Music: Arcade Fire, Karen O, The Breeders

Production Background:

Following the themes of his first two movies—the nature of human consciousness and the necessity of change—*Her* is the first film Jonze wrote on his own. (His third feature, *Where the Wild Things Are*, was co-written with Dave Eggers). It is an excellent example of global cinema, having been shot in Los Angeles and Shanghai and employing a digitally constructed environment that is a *mélange* of the two cities. *Her* belongs to the tradition of science fiction but is set in the near future and is relatively unique in being neither utopian nor dystopian in its representation of life perhaps twenty years from now. In fact, much of its success can be attributed to how familiar this future world seems.

Her owes as much to the genre of romantic comedy as it does to science fiction. Samantha is a “rebound” girlfriend, a fill-in for Theo’s true love Catherine, and perhaps a transition to his “gal pal” Amy. Reviewers have yet to notice how much the film is indebted to Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977): the opening close-up of Phoenix directly addressing the camera; his occupation as a writer, his people-watching observations to Samantha in the mall; her eagerness for new experiences that provoke his jealousy; the theme that “love fades.”

Jonze shot the entire film with Samantha Morton as the voice of OS1. He decided late in the project to cast Scarlett Johansson instead, an inspired use of digital technology despite his claim that Morton (who is credited as an associate producer) profoundly influenced the film’s final form. Other disembodied voices fill out the cast: Kristen Wiig is SexyKitten, Jonze himself is the profane avatar in the “Alien Child” video game, Brian Cox (the screenwriting guru in *Adaptation*) shows up as Allan Watt, another kind of guru from an earlier age.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Casting/acting: The particular voice of Scarlett Johansson—sometimes girlish, often throaty and sultry, with a great laugh—instantly humanizes her identity; meanwhile, the audience “fills in the gaps” by recalling her luscious body from prior films. A word more about Johansson: in the same year she played a nearly voiceless role as the seductive automaton in Jonathan Glazer’s brilliant sci-fi film *Under the Skin*. Combined, these performances *should* have earned her an Oscar in 2014. Joaquin Phoenix’s star persona combines antic behavior with vulnerability, making him this

- generation's version of James Dean. Here he softens the madness, rendering the film "unfashionably sincere" (Michael Phillips).
2. Close-Ups: Phoenix is in nearly every scene and is often viewed in tight close-ups. In one especially poignant moment, he creates a pattern of furrows on his brow that expresses his pain more than his whispered words.
 3. Production Design: *Her* is definitely not an action picture. Much of our attention, therefore, must be drawn to the details of the futuristic cityscape and the interior designs. Gradually we become aware of the high-waisted pants and ubiquitous shoulder bags, the isolated city dwellers conversing with their earplugs, the empty bookshelves and alienating public spaces.
 4. Music: Arcade Fire's modernist score adds to the effects of the production design and highlights the sentimentality of Theo's ukulele.
 5. Montage: Frequently used to move along the plot, as in flashbacks to Theo's marriage, city life during Samantha's piano composition, their mountain vacation.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Jonze makes philosophical films (*Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*). Thus, it may not be surprising that *Her* seems less concerned with *showing* what the future might look like than "*thinking about*" the way the mind works or the borders that define sex, romance, and love. The advertisement that draws Theo to Samantha proclaims, "it's not just an operating system; it's a consciousness." What is the distinction? Notice that while Theo has wildly pleasurable *aural* sex with Samantha (followed by the blissful shyness of the morning after), his attempts at phone sex with SexyKitten and physical sex with Isabella end disastrously. To paraphrase an old question, what does Samantha have that the others don't?
2. When she introduces herself, Samantha celebrates "my ability to grow through my experiences. In every moment I'm evolving. Just like you." Herein lies their doomed relationship. Why can't Theo adapt and keep up with her?
3. The film's closing long shot on the rooftop seems to suggest hope (like the ending of *Adaptation*). But given the future world in which romance can be outsourced (BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com) and face-to-face relationships (two marriages, one blind date, one surrogate sex encounter) seem to fail, what credibility does this promise hold? Is the final scene a sentimental Hollywood ending?
4. Samantha pronounces a philosophy of love: "The heart's not like a box that fills up. It expands inside the more you love." At the end of *Adaptation*, Donald tells his brother, "You are who you love, not who loves you." Are these two propositions compatible? Will either of these two philosophies serve us in the future?