

Spike Jonze's 'Her' is Masterful Commentary on Connection

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 19, 2013 - 2:09pm

- [Amy Adams](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Film Review](#) [4]
- [Her](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Joaquin Phoenix](#) [7]
- [Olivia Wilde](#) [8]
- [Rooney Mara](#) [9]
- [Scarlett Johansson](#) [10]
- [Spike Jonze](#) [11]



Rating: **5.0/5.0**

How do we connect with other people? Why do we often push away those we need and stay with those we don't? Why do we hold on to relationships long after they have stopped working? Is a physical relationship with no intellectual or emotional component somehow more valuable than one that can never be person-to-person but engages on a deeper level? And how do the ways we deal with love and loss impact the way we look at the rest of the world? And why aren't more movies as good as "Her"?

Not unlike the man who wrote this deeply-personal piece, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) makes a living crafting emotion for other people. In the near-future, he works at a company that writes letters for you. Can't figure out how to say what you really feel to your wife on your 50th anniversary or your son on the day he graduates? Theodore will write the letter for you. And he's damn good at what he does, making it clear that he's an emotional fellow, the kind of guy who uses words and communication not purely functionally but on a deeper level.



Her

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Theodore is also sad and lonely. He's still holding on to a relationship (with Rooney Mara, who plays a creative artist who could be read as a fictional version of Sofia Coppola, to whom Jonze was married) that long ago lost its passion and having serious trouble meeting people. A good friend of his (played beautifully by Amy Adams) sets him up on a date with a gorgeous woman (Olivia Wilde) but Theodore doesn't seem physically ready for the intimacy and it ends awkwardly.

Then he meets Samantha (Scarlett Johansson). Well, he "hears" Samantha, the voice of his new "Intuitive Operating System," a Siri-esque technology in the future that doesn't just tell you how to get to Chipotle. It grows, changes, and adapts to your needs and interests, while also containing more of an independent degree of personality than any actual iOS. Samantha becomes Theodore's closest friend, someone who listens to him, challenges him, and actually grows with him. In a series of remarkably written exchanges that feel more truthful and emotional than most romantic dramas between two actual people, Theodore and Samantha fall in love.

"Her" is conceptually brilliant but it's the execution that matters. Jonze and his team have crafted a wonderful piece of cinema in terms of technical elements, from the art direction that perfectly captures a near-future that feels real to the great score from Arcade Fire to the beautiful cinematography that often plays with reflections and images shot through glass. We can see each other but not quite – it's a mirrored image or something physical that separates us. Every technical aspect of "Her" is well-above average, adding to the overall artistic quality of the piece in ways that can't be overstated. "Her" is such a delicate story conceptually in that if it feels cheap or false for even a second it could collapse like a house of cards. It never does.



Her
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

It helps that an actor as talented and completely committed as Phoenix plays Theodore. In a year in which Best Actor is incredibly crowded, this performance is getting tragically overlooked. It's a beauty, largely because it's not showy. When one thinks about the fact that Phoenix had to play many of his scenes alone, working with Samantha Morton, who originally voiced Samantha but was recast in post, but not having a physical partner with which to play, his work here becomes even more remarkable. And I love the subtlety of Phoenix's performance, especially when balanced with his great work last year in "The Master." Whereas that character was such a physical display of a man's wants and needs, Theodore's progression is internal. Phoenix mastered both. And he's matched by Adams, Mara, Wilde, and, most of all, Johansson, who gives arguably the best voice-only performance in film history.

Arcade Fire, ScarJo, Adams, Phoenix – all of the elements of "Her" work but it is primarily a display of Spike Jonze's true genius, a word that I don't use freely. It applies here. This is such a daring, stunning piece in that it shouldn't work. It should be silly. It should be unbelievable. It should be cold. Instead, Jonze has made a futuristic tale of love that is everything we don't think of when we think of the way we operate with modern technology – it's sweet, it's genuine, it's remarkably not cynical, it's optimistic, and it's absolutely beautiful in what is lacking from so many visions of our future and the way Hollywood sees relationships: Its humanity.

"Her" stars Joaquin Phoenix, Scarlett Johansson, Amy Adams, Rooney Mara, and Olivia Wilde. It was written and directed by Spike Jonze. It is now playing in some markets and opens in Chicago on Christmas Day. It is rated R.



[12]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/brian-tallerico>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/film-review>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/her>
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