# *Her*: A lonely man falls in love with his computer

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*Written and directed by Spike Jonze*

The new film, *Her*, is writer-director Spike Jonze's fourth feature film, following *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002) and *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009).

Jonze (born Adam Spiegel in Maryland in 1969) first made a significant name for himself directing "unusual" music videos, for the likes of Sonic Youth, Beastie Boys, Weezer, R.E.M., Björk, Daft Punk, Mike Watt, Sean Lennon, Puff Daddy, Fatboy Slim, Ludacris, Kanye West, Arcade Fire and others.

Jonze was initially associated in his movie-making efforts with Charlie Kaufman, who wrote *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*, before writing and directing his own *Synecdoche* (2008). Kaufman has been linked with Michel Gondry, for whom he wrote *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). Gondry also directed *The Science of Sleep* (2006), *Be Kind Rewind* (2008) and *The We and the I* (2012).

In *Charlie Kaufman and Hollywood's Merry Band of Pranksters, Fabulists and Dreamers: An Excursion Into the American New Wave* (2008), which discusses Richard Linklater, David O. Russell, Wes Anderson, Jonze, Sofia Coppola and Gondry (as well as Kaufman), author Derek Hill describes Jonze's early work "on a number of commercials for Lee Jeans, Coca-Cola and Nike. His ad for Levi's jeans … is another highlight of Jonze's short work. Jonze finally made the leap to feature filmmaking in 1997 when he was offered the script of *Being John Malkovich* … The collaboration between Jonze and Kaufman is a watershed moment in American film."

Jonze, Kaufman and Gondry can be imaginative and sometimes lively. The French-born Gondry is the only one of the three to take a look at American social life. However, none of their work so far, separately or together, represents a watershed.

In Jonze's *Her*, which might be termed a science fiction film, Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) earns a living writing love letters for people who are presumably unable to do so for themselves. Twombly has split up in the relatively recent past with his childhood sweetheart and, later, wife, Catherine (Rooney Mara). He is sad being on his own and hesitant to sign the divorce papers.

Early in the film (shot precisely by Dutch cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema), we see Theodore walking on his own among high rises in a crowd of people who look similarly lonely. In a nice satirical touch, his personal digital device gives him a banal, mind-numbing mix of "celebrity news" (and "sexy" pregnant celebrity photos), world events (India and China are merging!) and the weather, along with his voicemail.

Theodore buys an operating system with artificial intelligence. He chooses a female voice and the OS names "herself" Samantha (the voice of Scarlett Johansson). "She" has the capacity to learn and to develop real, complex feelings. Needless to say, the desperate Theodore and his "Samantha" draw closer over time. He spends more time with and has more to say to her than with any human being. Jonze and Hoytema stage a number of scenes, in fact, in which we see individuals speaking to and interacting in an animated fashion with their various devices.

Theodore's longtime, married friend Amy (Amy Adams) is making a documentary, which includes footage of her mother sleeping, unmoving. We spend one-third of our lives asleep, Amy explains a little defensively, it is when we're "most free." She eventually breaks up with her overbearing husband, Charles (Matt Letscher).

Samantha insistently attempts to establish a relationship with Theodore beyond that of Machine and Man. They enjoy a type of "phone sex" together and she even arranges for a "surrogate date," Isabella (Portia Doubleday), to take her place and sleep with Theodore, while she experiences, through the surrogate, the physical sensations. That effort proves a fiasco.

The female operating system is made jealous by Theodore's continuing feelings for his soon to be ex-wife. Catherine, when she meets Theodore to sign their legal papers, is understandably appalled that "You're dating your computer."

Theodore becomes upset when he discovers Samantha has begun spending time with a mechanically reincarnated and reassembled version of Alan Watts (the voice of Brian Cox), the British-born mystic and popularizer of "Eastern philosophy" in the 1960s. Theodore learns that Samantha is talking to more than 8,000 operating systems and humans at once and considers herself to be in love with more than 600 of them. "I'm yours," she tells him, in an apparent understatement, "and not yours."

Will Theodore and his very vocal operating system come to a

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meeting of the minds, so to speak, or will he opt for a relationship of the flesh-and-blood variety?

Jonze's film, at its best, is a sweet, sad tale. It has a somewhat wan quality. Joaquin Phoenix is not mannered here, which comes as a pleasant surprise. He plays Theodore, who lives life at second-hand, in a straightforward fashion, at times even movingly. There are some lovely images of buildings, the skyline, rooftops, with an affecting, quiet piano on the soundtrack. (The film's score was composed by Arcade Fire and Owen Pallett, with additional music by Karen O.)

That many people are distanced from other human beings and spend much of their time with mechanical devices is not earthshaking news. (Various East Asian films of the early and mid-1990s, for example, dealt with this sort of alienation in a more socially hard-hitting and poetic fashion.) This situation is in part a product of technological development, but it has far more to do with the social and political history of the US and other advanced capitalist societies over the past several decades.

The forcible suppression of social struggle and the alienation of vast numbers of people from official public life and institutions, which go on "in the automatism of yesterday," have helped create a peculiar situation in which many turn to their computer as their primary and more trustworthy connection to the world. The problem does not lie with these people, but with the rotten and discredited official connections, which are more than ripe for disruption and overthrow.

So *Her* starts off on the wrong foot, implicitly blaming Theodore and others for a situation not of their making. At one point, Theodore discusses his clients, or people in general, and refers to them only in terms of their "heartbreak," as though they were mere consumers and purveyors of emotion, not *social beings* with (or without) jobs, money problems, family pressures, mortgages, debts and so forth. Generally, writers and directors who make films about abstract, largely asocial figures like this do not themselves have money problems.

Another problem with *Her* is Samantha. I don't care for voices without faces and bodies. Robert Montgomery directed *Lady in the Lake* (1947), based on the Raymond Chandler novel, in which he starred as detective Philip Marlowe, as an attempt at a "first-person narrative style." The camera is Montgomery-Marlowe's eye—we see only what he sees, we never see *him* (except for a few occasions in mirrors and such). It's tedious and irritating finally, and so, ultimately, is *Her*'s central narrative device. Watching Theodore talk, flirt and laugh along with his operating system is neither dramatic or intriguing enough.

Anyway, if Jonze's concern is presumably with humanity's future and fate, Samantha is largely a diversion, a gimmick. Various films, by David Cronenberg and others, have been made about the mating of flesh and metal, and none of them have been convincing or left a serious mark. They all leave out the *social* (property, class) relationships in which every other relationship of note is grounded.

The WSWS is currently posting a series marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of the great writer, political revolutionary and natural scientist Georg Büchner, author of *Danton's Death, Woyzeck, Lenz* and other works. Of course, Jonze and his colleagues are the products of decades that were not favorable for insightful, enduring artistic work. Those circumstances were not of their making; to a certain extent, they are *victims* of those circumstances. And Jonze is by no means the least talented artist currently at work.

All that being said, it remains painful at times to watch and analyze films that have an essentially insubstantial and unserious character, at a time of substantial and serious crisis, in which millions and millions of people are suffering. Theodore's postmodern female computer says, almost in passing, at one point, "The past is just a story we tell ourselves."

Büchner, on the other hand, wrote in 1835 that "the dramatist is in my view nothing other than a historian ... His supreme task is to get as close as possible to history as it actually happened. His play must be neither more *moral* nor more *immoral* than history *itself* ... The writer is no preacher of morality, he invents and creates characters, he makes past ages live again, and people can learn just as well from that as from the study of history and from their observation of what happens around them in real life."

In his novella *Lenz* (1836), Büchner has his central character argue for this view of art: "What I demand in all things is—life, full scope for existence, nothing else really matters; we then have no need to ask whether something is ugly or beautiful, both are overridden by the conviction that 'Everything created possesses life,' which is the sole criterion in matters of art. All the same, we meet it only rarely; we find it in Shakespeare, it speaks to us full-throated in folksongs, fitfully in Goethe."

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