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Review: The magical, lonely love of 'Her'

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FILE - This file image provided by Warner Bros. Pictures shows Joaquin Phoenix in a scene from "Her." In "Her," [Spike Jonze's](#) futuristic exploration of a man's [relationship](#) with his computer, the filmmaker surveys human disjunction. (AP Photo/Warner Bros. Pictures, File)

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — How essential are physical and emotional connections when falling in love? What would you miss — looking into someone's eyes, caressing them, tasting them? In "Her," Spike Jonze's futuristic exploration of a man's [relationship](#) with his computer, the filmmaker surveys human disjunction.

Joaquin Phoenix is Theodore, a loner struggling to cope with his unwanted [divorce](#) from neuroscientist Catherine (a comely, sullen [Rooney Mara](#)). Theodore has become guarded, but his work requires an outpouring of emotions as he pens tender, personal letters for others at beautifulhandwrittenletters.com.

After seeing an ad for an artificial intelligence operating system, Theodore purchases one and finds his new OS is voiced by a dame with a sultry, whiskey-stained tone named Samantha (a witty and relaxed [Scarlett Johansson](#), who is never seen on-camera). Samantha is at Theodore's beck and call. Communicating by way of an earpiece and a small hand-held device, she keeps him on schedule and encourages him to get back out there and go on a [blind date](#). His date (Olivia Wilde) critiques his kissing ability and scolds him for refusing to indulge in the idea of a relationship. "I'm not in a place where I can commit right now" becomes one of Theodore's signature lines, even as he becomes smitten with Samantha.

But eventually Theodore and Samantha, who is eager to please and has the ability to grow through her experiences, fall for each other. Jonze effectively manages to capture real intimacy as the couple greet each other in the morning and say goodnight when the day is done. Theodore takes Samantha on a [double date](#) with his co-worker, Paul (played by the ever-hilarious Chris Pratt), and Samantha composes piano melodies to emphasize their experiences. (The sound of the film is engineered by indie rockers Arcade Fire and violinist Owen Pallett.)

Jonze has become known for creating bewildering worlds, from his work on the maniacal Oscar-nominated "Being [John Malkovich](#)," his layered "Adaptation" and the heart-rending "Where the Wild Things Are." He's also crafted arresting videos for inventive artists like [Bjork](#) and [Kanye West](#), as well as a collection of short films, commercials and documentaries. But "Her" is the first feature film he's penned solo and he's never been so ingenious.

In a dark theater, surrounded by the wondrous world Jonze creates in "Her," in theaters Friday, it's difficult to avoid getting emotional. There is such a somber and supple tone throughout, as Theodore (faultlessly performed by a pensive and vulnerable Phoenix) surrenders to his desperation, finding glimpses of glee we're pleased he's afforded.

Visually Jonze has built a bold dreamland: a near-future Los Angeles awash with primary colors and warm pastels that tickle our childlike senses. Every fella dons high-waisted pants, a fashion choice emphasizing the sign of the times. And for the magnetic cityscapes, the movie was filmed in Los Angeles and China.

Amy Adams delivers a delicate portrayal of Theodore's lovelorn neighbor and best friend, Amy. She supports his decision to date his OS, but thinks anybody who falls in love is a freak. "It's kind of a form of socially acceptable insanity," she proclaims.

But Theodore's ex-wife thinks his latest turn at love is crazy. "You always wanted to have a wife without actually dealing with anything real," she tells him. Thus, the lingering questions are brought to the forefront: To what lengths would we go to avoid certain truths? And could virtual affairs be the inevitable evolution of relationships in our tech-blooming society? The notion of unconventional romanticism is certainly enchanting, but even computer love can be fleeting.

"Her," a Warner Bros. release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for "language, sexual content and brief graphic nudity." Running time: 126 minutes. Three and a half stars out of four.

MPAA definition of R: Restricted. Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian.

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