

Alyssa Torralva

Dr Elena Sommers

ENGL 211

2 March 2023

Her and the Pervasiveness of Melancholy

Her follows the life of Theodore Twombly, a man living in a futuristic Los Angeles in the midst of a depression and longing after the divorce of his recent wife, Catherine. He is reintroduced to love after he starts to fall in love with his Operating System AI, Samantha. Over the course of the movie we see the growth of Theodore and Samantha's relationship bloom and grow in a way that makes you love both of them. Unfortunately this beauty is short lived, as the disconnection between Samantha and Theodore grows further, and their doomed relationship becomes more evident. The love story of Theodore and Samantha, however, acts as a veil for the beautiful character study of Theodore Twombly right under our noses. The method of which this movie uses its framing, montage, sound design and music design, and especially its story give such a rich narrative that it leaves you both satisfied with its conclusion and wanting more.

The sound production and music in *her* is hard to listen to without feeling something. In the beginning, before the visuals of the movie even start, we hear the soundtrack “Milk & Honey” which immediately starts with a discordant humm of a string instrument being played. As the music plays it sounds synthetic while at the same time you’re able to hear the imperfections of it; as if the faintest sound of fingers on strings can be heard. This brief introduction made me immediately pay attention to the music of the film. Immediately after this introduction we are introduced to “Loneliness”, a song which plays over a panning shot of Theodore's Co-Workers. This shows the unifying nature of all the people who work at

BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com, in their separation from themselves. We don't actually hear the song until we get the panning shot of the Co-Workers. With this scene alone, the movie is trying to tell us that the nature of Theodore's melancholy and his escape into his writing as a means to live vicariously through the love of someone else is something that these people can all relate to.

This isn't the only time the movie uses its music to deepen the narrative. The most beautiful example of this comes in the shape of a song called: "Photograph." This song comes at a time in the film where Theodore and Samantha have rekindled their relationship after a problem arose in their relationship. Samantha, realizing that her lack of a body makes it hard to capture it in a photo, she instead writes a piece to attempt to capture that concept. In doing so, "Photograph" swells in the beginning creating this sense of nostalgia and joy with lighter tones signifying a growing and flourishing movement. Almost as if the song itself is constantly trying to outdo itself and build upon what came before. But in a sudden sharp tone shift the song moves slightly deeper and slower. Creating this finale that perfectly encapsulates the feeling of looking at a memory and realizing that it's gone. But at the same time being okay with that. "Photograph" perfectly crafts the idea of crying with a smile and turns it into what can only be described as auditory gold.

While tempting as it is to go through every song in the soundtrack and tell you the importance and beauty behind each note, it would simply take much too long. So instead we will move onto Montage Theory. There are many scenes in which Theodores present is intercut with scenes from the past. While normally this would be a way of giving us a brief insight into the person Theodore was in his past. The concept of Montage Theory, popularized by Sergei Eisenstein, is the understanding that when two pieces of footage are placed next to one another, a

third meaning is derived. The joining of one shot representing one idea, and a second representing another idea, results in an insinuated third meaning. In relation to how this is performed in *her* we can reference the first time this is used. Theodore lays in bed after returning home from work. Unable to sleep, Theodore closes his eyes and we are immediately shown glimpses of his past. From moving furniture with his ex-wife to her aggressively displaying her love for Theodore through words of affirmation. These shots of a loving relationship are immediately ended with Theodore once again laying alone in the dark room. In separation these shots can be boiled down to “love and happiness,” and a simple shot of laying down. But only through the joining of these two scenes side by side do we see the heartbreak that Theodore feels. We understand, without words, the extent and longing of Theodore melancholy and understand the distance we have seen him create. Not only that but every time a montage is displayed on screen, it is both preceded and proceeded by a close up of Theodore's face. This is purposely done to show the connection between Theodore and his past specifically. In doing so we understand exactly what's going through his mind during these moments, and also the way it makes him feel. This imagined third meaning is constantly being derived each time we get a glimpse of his past.

To get to the actual core of the film, *her* can be described by some as “The movie where the guy falls in love with his computer.” While this is mostly true, to say so is to ignore a massive aspect of this film. In essence Theodore doesn't fall in love with a computer nor another person, but instead falls in love with a god. For all intents and purposes, Samantha is what would be called a Post-Human; that being a being that resembles a human being, but is so far beyond what a human is capable of. She can access information in less than an instant and process situations at once. At a certain point in the film it becomes apparent the growth of Samantha

surpasses Theodore. This shift is actually preceded by a scene in which Samantha and Theodore sing “The Moon Song,” in which the first two verses go as follows:

I'm lying on the moon
My dear, I'll be there soon
It's a quiet and starry place
Time's we're swallowed up
In space we're here a million miles away
There's things I wish I knew
There's no thing I'd keep from you
It's a dark and shiny place
But with you my dear
I'm safe and we're a million miles away (Jonze)

While alone explores the distance between Theodore and Samantha and the love they both share does act as a form of foreshadow. Mainly sung by Samantha, this is the best glimpse we get into viewing Samantha's thoughts and feelings about things. While deeply in love, Samantha still feels distance where time is swallowed up. The distance between them is growing.

The nature of space and the symbolism that it brings directly corresponds to the scene at the end of the film where Samantha leaves Theodore. Samantha and Theodore talk, the tone more isolating and tense. Theodore lies on his bed as per the request of Samantha and asks “Do you feel me with you right now?” while the camera zooms into his face. Not only does this give the viewer a sense of closeness - but also lets us fill in the imagined negative space. Zooming out would show him being alone in bed, while

zooming in lets us imagine that maybe Samantha is truly with him. The scene progresses and Theodore asks Samantha why she's leaving to which she replies:

It's like I'm reading a book, and it's a book I deeply love. But I'm reading it slowly now, so the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. ... and I need you to let me go. As much as I want to, I can't live in your book anymore. (Jonze)

As the relationship of Samantha and Theodore closes, we understand the void that Samantha's in. While before it was beautiful, a starry expanse with the moon and each other, the distance irreverent, has now become a place where the space between everything is so far apart that the only thing she can do is feel what they have.

To take a quick break from the standard writing conventions we so eagerly place upon ourselves, I want to take a moment to talk about what this movie meant for me personally. Theodore says at exactly 38 minutes and 19 seconds into the film, "You know, sometimes I think I've felt everything I'm ever going to feel. And from here on out I'm not gonna feel anything new. Just lesser versions of what I've already felt." (Spike) Without a doubt this is when the film became real for me. To say that I have thought this exact thing every time anything good happens to me would be an understatement. I think all of us have that part of ourselves that feels like that might be true. And to be honest I don't think I've matured enough past this point to say if it gets better or not. I don't think I'll love anyone the same way I loved someone that didn't even deserve it. This movie made a voice, I didn't know I had, feel heard.

Spike Jonze described the world of *her*, in an interview with The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, as a:

Utopic world that everything's nice and everything's comfortable yet even in this world where you're seemingly getting everything you need and having this nice life there's still loneliness and longing and isolation and disconnection ... You know, much like our world but just a heightened version of our world where everything is getting nicer as the years go and there's more design and there's more convenience and our technology is making things easier but there's still this loneliness. (Oscars)

Over the course of the film we learn the depth of Theodore's melancholy and in doing so we see glimpses of our own as well. We are so caught up in our memories of the past and what we believe them to mean that sometimes we forget we aren't the only ones who know what it's like to be alone. Loneliness is a part of being alive, its the reason we crave human connection. Forgetting that we are allowed to feel lonely only pushes us deeper into the feeling itself. Spike Jonze's vision may not have resonated with everyone, but to the people it did matter to: *her* is a movie that can only be described as "Human."

Work Cited

Jonze, Spike,, et al. Her. Burbank, CA,

“Academy Conversations: Her” *Youtube*, uploaded by Oscars, 4 January 2014,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W7I9UP1z0Q>