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## *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013): Digital Romance and Post-cinema

**Abstract:** Spike Jonze's film stages our contemporary relation to the digital through a love story between Theodore Twombly, the film's main character, and an AI named Samantha, appearing as an operating system on a digital interface but devoid of any physical incarnation. This story explores how the digital realm, because it eludes filmic representation, comes to question the very ontology of cinema as rooted in outer reality. As such it opens the possibility of post-cinema, and calls for a renewal of conceptions of spectatorship in relation to this possibility, but without defining this new relation to the filmic medium that digital revolution makes necessary.

**Keywords:** Her, Spike Jonze, Post-cinema, Digital, Intermediality, Ontology.

As far as technology goes, we are confronted with an increasingly mediated environment. It is self-evident that the place of digital devices is growing larger every day in our lives, and it is no great wonder that cinema should have integrated this digital development in its staging of characters' relationship. A telling example is Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (1998) which capitalizes upon the "trendy" urban culture of constant but anonymous connection made possible by social networks, to suggest a utopian reconciliation between initially opposite characters. This film was inspired by Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner* (Scheible 22 and 30), a token of its continuity with a past filmic tradition. But as 1998 was only the beginning of the internet era, the film could not address digital natives and millennials. Now the situation is changed.

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Today, the digital accounts today for a whole new range of media which sometimes enhance and sometimes threaten the extant relationships we entertain with cinema as another, “older” medium. This article examines how Spike Jonze’s film reflects this ambivalence towards the digital as alien to the cinematic medium, and how this filmic discourse connects to more general anxieties about the future of cinema—or a future without cinema, in the wake of a phenomenon which Gaudreault and Marion described as “post-cinema” (2015). The two critics consider that cinema as a medium is now experienced on a variety of platforms in the digital age, from cell phones to laptops or Imax theatres, and not only in traditional venues, which creates a proliferation of the filmic form but also a blurring of the association of the medium with a uniform mode of cultural consumption, hence the conclusion that some kind of cinema is dead and a new post-cinema is emerging.

In this age of media hybridity, cinema-as-a-medium has been called on to share with other media the same screens and the same platforms that, not that long ago, were foreign to it, or simply did not exist. The result is that today, more often than not, the word *cinema* is something that has to be handled with kid gloves. (Gaudreault and Marion 2)

Gaudreault and Marion yet point out that cinema has throughout its history been faced with such changes, like the shift from silent to talking pictures, which were integrated into the medium and did not endanger its very autonomy as a specific medium. Their essay is actually partly an account of these various revolutions, or “deaths” which cinema has gone through, like the advent of television, and which the filmic medium has managed to overcome. But what is specific with the digital revolution—and what accounts for the fact that it changes cinema into post-cinema—is that it erases the boundaries between the filmic medium and the other medias, and thus threatens the autonomy and identity of cinema as a specific mode of representation.

This shaking up of cinema’s foundations is accompanied by numerous questions about the very identity of the medium, in that the boundaries between it and other media, which until just recently were seen as stable and easy to demarcate (something that in reality was far from the case), are gradually being erased, revealing to increasing degrees these boundaries’ true nature, that of a pure theoretical and cultural construction (something they have always been, but that is a story for another day). (Gaudreault and Marion 11)

This definition of post-cinema as the result of a transformation of cinema by the digital revolution is addressed by the two authors with due caution, since they take great care not to simplify matters and they strive to situate this transformation in relation to other partly similar mutations which cinema has gone through in the past. But the radical quality of the digital revolution remains a valid hypothesis if we

consider that it *disseminates* the filmic experience among a variety of platforms in a way that is not comparable with the impact of previous transformations of cinema. This confusing dissemination of the filmic experience through the digital mutation is, as we shall see, one of the main interests in Spike Jonze's *Her*, through its discourse on our relation to digital representation and on how this relation changes our perspective on the audiovisual medium at large.

A related issue is the extent to which this staging of the digital romance confirms the persistence of a type of visual pleasure determined (in film reception) by a voyeuristic impulse in an essentially male gaze.

The uncanny validity of Laura Mulvey's original and revised observations on introspective female spectacularity is supported by the extreme processes of objectification the female bodies, apparently gaining visibility, must undergo in these films, as they are literally, symbolically or figuratively dismembered throughout the narratives. (Virginás 289-290)

But as Virginás (working on a set of films which stage the digitalization of the female body) points out, this digitalization also effects what she calls a transmediation from the analogue to the digital that bears a strong impact on the content of the digital romance and that raises questions on the viewers' relationships to the filmic material. These changes are the focus of this study. I will consider Spike Jonze's film as an allegory of the relation between the two medias — the film and the digital — in so far as the main character, being faced with a digital relationship invading his private life, often embodies another approach to reality that is closer to the cinematic mode. My outlook will therefore focus on intermediality and the relation between the digital and the filmic modes. The filmic and the digital may yet be construed as not necessarily different medias and only referring to different embodiments of the audiovisual representation, in the sense that little difference can be made between digital and analog cinema by the general public.

[The] resemblance between films made before and after the introduction of digital technology is not a product of chance. It is in some way inherent and consubstantial with the digital process itself, which is first and foremost an encoding process (and not a "transfer" or a recording process as such) [...]. In the end the result is a film-projection that, even if it reaches the viewer by means of information stored in a computer file, can throw us off the scent: for most people, this film-projection is not radically different from a film-projection produced by a succession of traces of light thrown onto a screen after having passed through geometric forms spread across a piece of celluloid film. (Gaudreault and Marion 6)

However, our mode of access and relation to the digital form of the audiovisual medium is strikingly different from our relation to the filmic, especially because the digital revolution makes audiovisual content available on a variety of platforms and

potentially *always* present in our lives, not only during chosen periods devoted to film-watching. This difference is what grounds the discourse in Spike Jonze's *Her* focusing on the different contents the digital may convey compared to the filmic in cinema. The gap between filmic and digital forms of the audiovisual eventually threatens the stability of the filmic representations which appear more limited than the digital. Starting with a theoretical presentation of the debate on our relation to the digital, I shall then show how *Her* constitutes an allegory of cinema before examining what dialogue it suggests between cinema and the digital, which may help us better to understand what post-cinema represents.

### Digital culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

A first step in this examination is to present the general cultural frame in which we receive the internet technology as a new medium, to then assess how this interacts with film as a medium and with Spike Jonze's perspective in *Her*. A number of essays were released in the early 2010s about this topic, but the most influential, if not perhaps the most in-depth study, is Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*, published in 2012. This essay develops around a series of interviews the author organized with MIT researchers involved in the conception of AI and robotic assistants, but also with ordinary people interacting with these robots, ranging from nurses taking care of elderly people to baby-sitters, divorced couples, kids or depressed adults. The general conclusion that informs the discussion by Turkle, whose book is in a large part made of these case studies, is that we are living through what she calls a "robotic moment," i.e. a period in history in which humans are ready to delegate their affective relationships to robots and AIs. The argument that comes back in these interviews is that robots are not only "better than nothing" — better, e.g., than leaving a lonely elderly parent alone — but also sometimes "better than anything," because for instance they will not get angry or distressed by an Alzheimer patient or, perhaps more significantly, they will provide a (fake?) feeling of intimacy for lonely people without imposing the constraint of commitment. This argument comes up strikingly when the author relates her conversation with a reporter advocating the marriage between humans and robots:

More than this, the reporter was insisting that machines would bring their own special qualities to an intimate partnership that needed to be honored in its own right. In his eyes, the love, sex, and marriage robot was not merely "better than nothing," a substitute. Rather, a robot had become "better than something." The machine could be preferable—for any number of reasons—to what we currently experience in the sometimes messy, often frustrating, and always complex world of people. (Turkle 18)

Sherry Turkle strongly disapproves of this attitude, as she thinks that in the robotic exchanges we are surrendering an important part of what makes human interaction significant and that we are fooling ourselves doing this. Although some critics judge

her discourse too prescriptive (Jago 161), Turkle does point to a contradiction between a utilitarian approach of robotic technology and the anxiety this technology provokes in human beings: by investing so much into technological objects, we lose part of the desires that were formerly invested onto other people. This is what Flisfeder and Burnham call “libidinal depletion” or “depressive hedonia” (28). When robots become the ultimate goal of human interaction, as in the case of robotic love partners, the intimacy that is reconstructed with them dispossesses us from richer interaction—this is depletion—and leaves us empty of feelings.<sup>1</sup>

This is the situation we find in Spike Jonze’s film *Her*, which not only deals with our relation to technology but also with the way this relation may change our experience of cinema. *Her* tells the story of Theodore Twombly (played by Joaquim Phoenix), a writer for the commercial website *BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com*, which is a fictional venture that offers to write private correspondence for individuals who feel they have no time or ability to do so themselves. A critic calls him a “latter-day Cyrano.”<sup>2</sup> Himself a very lonely person about to complete a divorce process, he enters a romantic relationship with an OS — an operating system, named Samantha — which he loads into his computer, and slowly develops feelings of jealousy and self-loathing in reaction to this artificial intelligence, just as he would do with a “real” person. Samantha has no body, she is only a voice — in this case the highly erotically charged voice of Scarlett Johansson — and the plot ends when she and other OSes (which communicate online) decide to suspend their relation to humans indefinitely and to go on with interactions only between OSes online. This is then the story of a failed digital romance, although the last scene suggests Theodore is about to enter another, real relationship with Amy, a friend who has similarly been “dumped” by her OS. We seem to find in this film a perfect example of the alienation of mankind by technology. The emotional detachment that characterizes Theodore can be understood in terms of what Steven Shaviro describes, after Brian Massumi (2002), as illustrative of the distinction between affect and emotion.

For Massumi, affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful, a “content” that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject. Emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions. Today, in the regime of neoliberal capitalism, we see ourselves as subjects precisely to the extent that we are autonomous economic units. As Foucault puts it, neoliberalism defines a new mutation of “*Homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” ([Foucault] *Biopolitics* 226). For such a subject, emotions are resources to invest, in the hope of gaining as large a

return as possible. What we know today as “affective labor” is not really affective at all, as it involves rather the sale of labor-power in the form of pre-defined and pre-packaged emotions. (Shaviro 131-32)

The lack of emotion in Theodore would then point to the weakness of his subjective feeling. It is also possible to relate the production of *Her* to an earlier trend in American cinema that was studied by Mayshark as being typical of the 1990s, and that pointed to the use of self-consciousness and the discourse on the cinema as a medium in an ironical way — most famously with Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* in 1994.

Although they represent a range of styles and subject matter, [these directors’] works all revolve in different ways around questions of identity, empathy, and the difficulty of establishing and maintaining emotional connections between family members, lovers, strangers, friends and cultures. Some of them are very funny but their aims are serious. They represent a step from Wallace’s stand-off between irony and sentiment, towards a sort of self-conscious *meaningfulness*. Having grown up on the wink-and-nod knowingness of postmodernism, they use it as a starting point rather than a conclusion. They take deconstructionism as a given, and redirect its analytical toolkit towards something more holistic; reconstructionism, maybe. (Mayshark 5-6)

But beyond the debate on this postmodern detachment from emotion (which for Shaviro is not incompatible with the presence of affect) and reflexive irony, how can we read *Her* as voicing a wider discourse on representation — not necessarily an ironic discourse? In other words, how does the plot refer viewers to the relationships between two medias, the filmic medium and the digital medium?

### *Her as a confrontation of cinema and the digital*

Beyond the explicit discourse which the film articulates about the dangers of technology invading human relationships, *Her* also focuses on what this technology means in the cinematic experience. Showing the relationship between Samantha and Theodore as an obviously contrived, artificial experience, although it produces “real” emotions in Theodore, Spike Jonze’s film reflects and criticizes the very principle of mimetic illusion in cinema, through which an artificial image produces real feelings. An essential point is the question of disembodiment — namely the fact that Samantha, as an AI, does not have a body. This question of disembodiment becomes crucial in a scene where Theodore and Samantha are having an argument and Theodore blames Samantha for “faking” human breathing in her way of speaking to him, whereas she literally does not have to breathe in and out [1:17:10 – 1:19:20]. Theodore resents his own emotional engagement with the AI, which researchers refer to as the ELIZA effect, after the name of a specific robot experience.

The film negotiates questions about intelligence and consciousness that go back to the days of early AI and the Turing Test and which are now returning in the antihumanist philosophies emerging in object-oriented ontology and speculative realism. Samantha has the ELIZA effect, which refers to the tendency of humans to assume computer behaviour is analogous to human behaviour. The name comes from the ELIZA computer program of the 1960s, which imitated an encounter with a Rogerian psychotherapist, asking questions that turned the speaker's comments back toward themselves. Even though the program was quite formulaic, users reported having profound interactions with it. Samantha, however, is a much more sophisticated system, programmed to intuitively learn and process information that she gathers from across the Internet and in her interactions with Theodore. (Jago 167)

Theodore also accuses Samantha of faking human behaviour, but she aptly answers that she "picked it up" from Theodore himself — after all Theodore too is a fraud since he coins private correspondence on behalf of other people. Most importantly, this scene suggests how deeply this discourse on the "robotic moment" applies to cinema. Theodore resents Samantha for the representational fallacy she evinces — she sounds real but is artificial — and the same goes for cinema at large, all the more so in a digital age. Although *Her* does not use any CGI, the very topic of the film is the way we can relate to cinema and experience "real" emotions if the premise of representation is artificial. Can digital images produce real feelings in the spectators or is this artificiality an obstacle to our engagement with the characters? And how can Theodore's engagement with Samantha touch us if we know he is supposed to be dealing with a machine?<sup>3</sup>

To embody this discourse on cinema within the film, Spike Jonze includes in the plot a number of scenes that are metaphors of our relation to the digital world and its impact on the spectator's experience. The first element is Theodore's job itself, which consists in dictating letters to his computer, which are then printed out so as to appear as if they had really been handwritten by the sender. The source is digital, but the product is made to look like an "analogue" version — a reading grid which is called upon by Muhlhauser and Arnal (144) when they present Theodore's work as "inauthentic." But other scenes more directly address the presence of cinema in a digital world or through digital devices. We should first note how Theodore creates Samantha as a director creates a character (Flisfeder and Burnham 32), but the reverse is true too. When Samantha asks Theodore to close his eyes and guides him with her voice through a stroll to a place she has chosen to surprise him (actually, a mere pizza joint [Figure 1])<sup>4</sup>, or when Theodore runs through the street and dodges people at the last moment to give Samantha (who is watching the scene through the device pinned to his shirt pocket) a feeling of elation by speed, the film is alluding to what "directing" a spectator's glance may refer to in a digital environment.



*Figure 1.* Theodore's relation to Samantha as a metaphor of film directing [23:37]

And during the only sex scene between them, looking like some kind of “phone sex”, the screen slowly becomes pitch dark, as if to suggest that this “digital” love scene eludes the capacity of the camera to represent frolics with a bodiless entity. All these elements both integrate the digital into the discourse on film and point to the difference the digital brings into our idea of filmic representation—actually, the sex scene in the dark is tantamount to confessing cinema is unable to capture their relation. The most significant scene in this regard is the very beginning of the film, which stages Theodore dictating to his computer without our seeing the machine first. He really seems to be talking of love to someone off screen—this is a transcript of his whole discourse:

To my Chris. I've been thinking how I could possibly tell you how much you mean to me. I remember when I first started to fall in love with you like it was last night. Lying naked beside you in that tiny apartment it suddenly hit me that I was part of this whole larger thing, just like our parents, and our parents' parents. Before that I was just living my life like I knew everything; but suddenly this bright light hit me and woke me up. That light was you. I can't believe it's already been fifty years since you married me and still to this day, every day, you make me feel like the girl I was when you first turned on the lights and woke me up and we started this adventure together. Happy anniversary my love, my friend till the end.

The last part of the scene (the final sentence) reveals Theodore's words are being recorded by a computer, as a letter addressed to someone — and suggests that the character is writing on someone else's behalf, but his self-designation as “the girl I was” remains striking. As Donna Kornhaber has remarked (4), this scene obviously blurs gender divides and is meant to present Theodore as a “digital” worker outside the boundedness of known forms: Theodore is here, as another employee suggests to him later on, part woman and part man. But this also posits the digital or posthuman subject beyond what is clearly representable in cinema. The twist that reveals Theodore as a man posing as a woman destabilizes the classical cinematic representation and points



to his elusiveness as a subject considered in the digital environment — significantly this twist appears when the presence of a computer which had remained off-screen is revealed next to the character [Figure 2]. The reason for this is that through his interaction with machines, Theodore has become a hybrid creature, part machine and part human (Kornhaber 16), which is reflected by his initial, transgender presentation — a creature which can hardly fit the boundaries of representation by usual medias.

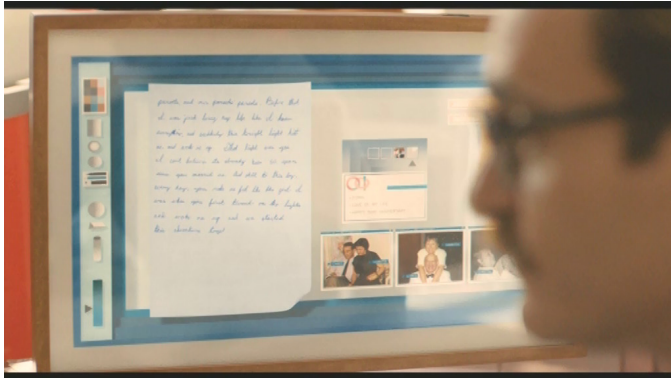


Figure 2. The initial twist revealing the computer next to Theodore [1:02]

### The digital as post-cinema

Theodore's relationship to Samantha develops mostly out of the scope of the filmic medium conceived in a conventional (or "analogue") way — this is confirmed by the strategy which the film develops around the digital world which is both the topic of the film and what the film constantly "misses." In Kornhaber's words: "The world that lies beyond the physical conception of ourselves is not one to which film has access" (21). A number of clues point to this problematic access to reality which film — as a medium — is having trouble to convey. First of all, the referential frame of the plot is weak at best, because the film takes trouble to build the vision of a generic city which is deprived of any definite, "authentic" identity. As Lawrence Webb pointed out (111), the urban design of *Her* merges Asian references with Californian settings, ending with a composite city nicknamed by critics San Fransokyo [Figure 3]. This looks back to Ridley Scott's choices in *Blade Runner* (1982) and to "retro-futurism" (Bell 25), but whereas Scott's designs reflected the already dystopian, decaying reality of Los Angeles, Spike Jonze empties his urban creation of any class or ethnic struggles, which raises issues about the actual reference we can connect to this urban representation—in other words about its authenticity: "The issue of authenticity and emotional resonance in the digital era is one duplicated by the film itself and its ambivalent tonal oscillations between irony and sincerity" (Webb 113). The urban environment is thus the setting of the digital romance but its artificiality stands out as a correlative objective of this lack of authentic emotions, which Webb describes as irony. Interestingly, this artificial urban setting is temporarily abandoned when

Theodore goes on a trip to an unspecified, snowy landscape, together of course with Samantha, and enjoys long walks by himself, without his digital devices — i.e. without taking Samantha with him. These are the only sequences in which Theodore experiences space non-socially, alone, without the interaction of colleagues and friends who represent in a large part the strain he feels to get into a relationship, albeit virtual. This is a confirmation that the digital romance prevents his connecting with reality, but these sequences also testify to a more conventional treatment of Theodore's loneliness from a cinematic viewpoint, especially due to the music and camera movements which are fairly in the range of the expected. They show the incompatibility between the usual cinematic representation and the digital romance set in an environment that eludes realistic references.



Figure 3. A specific, hybrid urban space [59:20]

This incompatibility is precisely what Spike Jonze's film suggests as its own limitation. What occurs between Samantha and Theodore is mostly beyond cinematic representation except when Theodore is alone. By definition, Samantha's story is non-existent on screen, as she does not have a body but a mere voice — and this voice is leading a life of its own not only off screen but off *any* screen, as becomes clear when she reveals to Theodore she has been entertaining numerous relations with other AIs online in the blanks of her relation to Theodore, or even as she was chatting with him, since ubiquity is one of her main characteristics. This of course is beyond cinematic grasp. A telling sequence is the episode in which Theodore fears Samantha has disappeared because she was, in her own terms, "updating herself," and we see him run through the streets in search of her [1:37:25 – 1:43:53]. This breakout scene in which Theodore learns that Samantha is "in love" with so many other people articulates the — to him — inhuman justification of "shared" love to the very human stumbling on reality that is pictured when he runs after her. This stumbling reasserts the incompatibility between the human and the digital and adumbrates the doomed quality of the romance between Theodore and Samantha. But more than that, it pinpoints the discrepancy between his attitude (running after Samantha) and the context that makes this attitude irrelevant:

Samantha is not a body you can seek to retrieve since she lives in the ethereal space of online communication. What is Theodore actually running after in this scene and how could he possibly catch up with Samantha? By associating these two plot developments, the “material” chase after the AI and the revelation of her multiple affairs online, the sequence shows how irrelevant the conventional modes of cinematic representation (related here to the suspense situation of Samantha’s “disappearance”) have become when it comes to grasping the elusive, multi-dimensional quality of the digital medium.

Does it mean that, to put it bluntly, the digital has defeated the cinematic? And how do the two medias compare in this interaction? First of all, what defeats the cinematic in Samantha is that peculiar feature that cannot be bounded by cinema and that *exceeds* representation, namely the multiplicity of mediums that are cohered together in her: Samantha is writing music, reading philosophy, or physics, drawing sketches, and entering complex conversations with long dead scientists whose intellect is revived by technology. There is no way either Theodore or the filmic discourse can compete with that. The space she inhabits is literally outside the filmic space. But it does not mean that the digital medium is not representable on screen — it is, through a variety of devices, present in an intermediate space that bears testimony to only part of the digital reality. We experience the digital reality only partially, i.e. during Theodore’s interaction with Samantha, but the ubiquity of the digital medium means that her reality occurs largely off-screen. This partial quality of cinematic representation has always been there in relation to reality, what changes with the digital medium is that this partiality of representation is foregrounded and becomes severed from cinematic representation when the OSes decide to cut links with their human creators. Post-cinema may be that cinema which acknowledges and thematizes the incompleteness of representation, but the aesthetic and narrative response to this new challenge is still uncertain, and Spike Jonze’s film describes rather than answers such a challenge.

Secondly, the impact of the interaction with digital devices on humans upsets the whole foundation of cinematic narration as intersubjective and articulates a phantasy of “unmediated intimacy” (Lundeen 59). This cinematic narration becomes impossible if the digital takes precedence over the relations between characters. This is what happens when Samantha tries to solve the problem of her being without a body by asking Isabella, a voluntary female surrogate to act as a sex partner with Theodore while she is controlling her performance with a digital interface (an earbud and a miniaturized camera hidden in a fake mole on Isabella’s face). The whole attempt fails because Theodore cannot project his feelings for Samantha on this surrogate, namely because she twitches her lips at a moment when he did not expect it. In other words, his fantasy of Samantha fails to be fulfilled with a “real” human being. This sequence not only confirms the solipsistic, fantasized relation Theodore entertains with Samantha, it metaphorizes the failure of *mise en scène*

associated to the digital. When we try to convert the digital fantasy into the cinematic representation — Samantha here acts as a director of sorts —, the cinematic fails to conform to fantasy. Confronting the two medias, *Her* makes a statement about the necessity for our approach to cinema to evolve in view of this partial contradiction; but it also reasserts the essential role cinema has to play as a “taming” of the digital into a more intersubjective medium, away from a purely solipsistic outlook.

### End Notes

1. Alla Ivanchikova understands this depressive state in Jonze’s protagonist Theodore as the consequence of a situation where humans have become surrogates to machines and supply them with material bodies (74). This is also what she defines as “xenosexuality”: “[a] relation with an alien, parasitic life form that escapes human understanding” (84).
2. See the critical review by Scott Foundas on variety.com (<https://variety.com/2013/film/reviews/film-review-her-1200710608/>). Accessed 18 Nov. 2019.
3. This issue connects to the much-debated topic of representational realism of cinema as a medium, most famously grappled with by André Bazin in the 1950s. Yet the introduction of a new medium, the digital, in the cinematic representation changes the very essence of this debate, because it foregrounds the possibility of constant, explicit artificiality. Digital devices as a new medium will be discussed later on in this paper but we may already suggest that many features in representation point to this autonomy of the digital as a medium, such as the constant interaction with screens within the frame, the bodiless voice of Samantha or the various devices through which Theodore communicates with her (an earbud, and a notebook-like interface carrying a lens). These devices problematize the very relation Samantha entertains with everyday “reality.”
4. This scene is commented on by Flisfeder and Burnham (35).

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