"How dreary—to be—Somebody!": *Being John Malkovich* and the Sadomasochism of Movies

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Spike Jonze's debut film *Being John Malkovich* represents a unique reformulation of Mulveyean film theory—a sophisticated, calculated implementation of pop cultural references and renegade feminist critique. Through surrealist comedy, taking Craig's (John Cusack) ambition to be a world-class puppeteer seriously, *Being John Malkovich* re-presents film theory and film spectatorship in a postmodern, self-reflexive way, making high-concept, meta-level concerns about the displaced desires and misidentifications inherent in traditional film spectatorship accessible to a popular film audience. In diegesis, the film's fantastical act of "being" the actor John Malkovich mirrors, in several ways, traditional film theory's conception of how the film spectator views a film—sitting in a darkened theater and self-identifying with the male protagonist onscreen. However, by suggesting that Craig, the film's solipsistic male protagonist, identifies with the feminine—with the film's ending and a reference to William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst*—*Being John Malkovich* also evokes Camille Paglia's work on sadomasochism in the poems of Emily Dickinson, which suggests that the poet's oeuvre concerns a self-identification outside the body. This essay argues that that meta, self-reflexive and satirical representation of film theory in *Being John Malkovich* not only offers salient cultural critique; it also reorients traditional film viewership.

The act of entering the Malkovich body through a darkened tunnel, pimped-out by Craig and Maxine, replicates the act of

entering a movie theater and watching a movie. In Laura Mulvey's seminal film theory text, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the darkness of the cinema not only creates the illusion of anonymity amongst the film-going crowd, but it also facilitates voyeuristic desires that identification with the male film star "satisfies." This "illusion of voyeuristic separation" (Mulvey 836) enables a central, pre-Oedipal misidentification—the mirror stage, wherein the mirror self is confused as the ego ideal.

The discovery of a portal inside a cramped office on the seventh-and-a-half floor of an office building that leads to the mind of celebrity John Malkovich presents a unique opportunity for all three of *Being John Malkovich*'s central characters: for Maxine (Catherine Keener), the Malkovich body presents a lucrative business opportunity, a medium through which she can express her desire for Lotte; for Lotte (Cameron Diaz), the Malkovich body presents a male vessel through which she unearths her ostensibly contradictory desires to both be a mother and consummate her newly discovered same-sex desire; and for Craig, the Malkovich body presents an opportunity to express his desire for control and escape, a large-scale celebrity mimicry of his artsy yet saucy street corner puppetry. These motivations constitute the cultural critique central to *Being John Malkovich*. As Armond White writes in his review of the film: "The fantasy of being inside someone else's skin is understood in contemporary terms as a sign of displacement and estranged desire...This becomes the basis of Jonze's wild ride through Malkovich's head, the escape from dread marital circumstances through the aura of celebrity." For Craig, Lotte, Maxine and the people who pay to take the "wild ride through Malkovich's head," the goal is not to simply be John Malkovich; it is to become someone, anyone else. Effectively, "the commodity," Malkovich's body proxy, "reveals itself to be a symptom of our desire to

hear our split subjectivity by a return to pre-Oedipal plenitude" (Dragunoiu 14).

Craig, Lotte and Maxine's alienated displacement of desires update Laura Mulvey by suggesting a variety of relations to the film screen mirror. Specifically, Lotte and Maxine's lesbian romance pokes fun at Mulvey by presenting the Malkovich celebrity body as the impetus for a psychological breakthrough—the same-sex desire that seemingly resolves Lotte's sublimated parental desire and Maxine's narcissism. After first inhabiting Malkovich, Lotte's sudden suggestion that she is transsexual reveals a dilemma at the heart of Mulvey's "implied male viewer" and also, ironically, resolves Lotte's displaced desires and forces Maxine to confront her narcissistic manipulation. Lotte's initial objectification of Maxine as an erotic object, while inside the Malkovich body, is also an objectification of the Malkovich body, whose status as a continuously misrecognized but universally lauded celebrity is an ironic subversion of the Classic Hollywood male movie star—and an update of Mulvey's analysis.

As White writes, in *Being John Malkovich*, "Art, acting, puppetry are skills of distance, alienation, lack of direct touch." Craig's puppets represent the human tendency to project desire onto representations which only "deepen our sense of alienation" (Wilkins 79). This evokes Mulvey, who suggests that the act of looking "can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (835). Craig's puppetry exemplifies Mulvey's perverted look by displacing his desires in his puppetry, objects who embody his displaced desire for recognition and control, diverting his envious look. Through the constant manipulation of the Malkovich celebrity, Jonze teases Mulvey's conception of male-female gazes when they conflate spectatorship and acting, the liminal space between the viewer in the darkened

theater and the actor onscreen, whose reification presents a central paradox of Mulveyean film theory—that the male movie star is simultaneously not an "erotic object of the gaze" but is the embodiment of the "more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego" (Mulvey 838). In effect, the Malkovich body becomes both a celebrity vessel of Craig's desire for artistic acknowledgment and an erotic vessel for Maxine and Lotte's lesbian-by-penis-proxy affair.

Importantly, Craig's resentment of his rival Derek Mantini's staging of William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst*, a one-woman play about Emily Dickinson, evokes several ideas that are relevant to the meanings of the film: first, cultural images of well-known yet simultaneously obscure artists; second, recognition of artistic achievement; and, finally, displaced desire. Camille Paglia writes that "No major figure in literary history has been more misunderstood" than Emily Dickinson, and the parallels that the film makes between Craig and Emily Dickinson are remarkably similar to the images of Dickinson created by both Luce's play and Paglia's essay on Dickinson.

Like Dickinson, Craig recoils inward to perform his craft, sheltering himself in his basement and tucking away his vanity that fuels his artistic zeal. Luce provokes such images of private vanity and perfectionism from Dickinson, who when horrified at the prospect of dying without having published her work, she remarks, "No one must know that that famous and mysterious 'E. Dickinson' writes second and third drafts of her letters!" (Luce 41). Craig also channels his artistic and commercial obscurity into martyrdom. Like Dickinson, Craig "is an ostentatious flaunter of injuries" (Paglia 415), constantly reminded that he cannot have what he desires—whether it be by the beating he receives for his rude staging of the famously cloistered monastics Abelard and Héloïse (after which Lotte remarks, "Honey, not again!"); Maxine's emasculating and homophobic belittling at The Stuck Pig, as well as her subsequent romance with Lotte; his bar

brawl inside the Malkovich body; or by his consciousness itself. So it is no surprise when, in a conversation with Elijah the chimp, Craig condemns human consciousness as inherently sadomasochistic:

> You don't know how lucky you are, being a monkey, because consciousness is a terrible curse. I think. I feel. I suffer. And all I ask in return is the opportunity to do my work. And they won't allow it because I raise issues.

Vague and self-flagellating, Craig's remarks confirm Paglia's reading of Dickinson's poems: "Who are 'they'? No matter what reading we choose, we are left with a spectacle of Sadean torture. The speaker is a martyred saint…racked by the deputies of the state" (411). Additionally, Craig's sado-martyrism mentions Paglia's reading that, for Dickinson, "Incarnation is torment. The soul, like the Greek winged psyche, is a butterfly fixed by a pin" (412). Craig's consciousness is, horrifically, trapped by the flesh, a curse that a chimp like Elijah could not possibly understand. (Apropos, we learn later, in a hilarious sequence that parodies Peter Gabriel's "Shock the Monkey" and mocks psychoanalytic behavioral regimens, that Elijah suffers from trauma just the same as Craig.) Like Dickinson's disembodied torturer, the viewer is left to surmise that Craig's gatekeepers lie within.

Perhaps most revealingly, in both Dickinson's poetry and Craig's puppetry, "things become persons and persons become things" (Paglia 419). Rather than Craig's artist cliché that he wants to "feel what another feels," his puppetry "is not an exercise in empathy but a projection of control and self-interest" (Wilkins 79–80). Such an idea is best conveyed within the film by Craig's "Dance of Disillusionment and Despair." His "Dance of Despair and Disillusionment" is first performed by Craig as a wooden puppet at the beginning of the film, as Malkovich in the middle of the film and then as Malkovich as a human-sized puppet near the end. For the director Jonze, this is

the ultimate conflation of spectator and actor, as Craig's dance with a wooden then flesh puppet in Malkovich makes a person of an object and an object of a person. For Craig, hopelessly "trapped" not only in his solipsism but in artistic obscurity, who finds himself in what Dragunoiu calls a "historically feminine position" (9). Craig must, like Dickinson, "divide mind from body to embrace the Muse" (Paglia 420), whom he misidentifies as the erotic object Maxine (who uses her status as a sex object to manipulate both Craig and Lotte) but the film correctly identifies as the celebrity body of Malkovich. The film suggests that the celebrity body provides for Craig the opportunity of working-through his alienation and desire for control, which, metacinematically, makes the experience of film spectatorship so attractive.

Therefore, like Dickinson, Craig's willing seclusion and disembodiment of desire inside the Malkovich body is self-hermaphroditic, monastic. The pleasure derived from the recognition of his artistry, his feeling of control inside the Malkovich-puppet-puppeteer, accompanies the pain that his acclaim requires the celebrity of the Malkovich body—a proxy to embrace his artistic will. Therefore, Craig's projection onto the celebrity puppet body clarifies and problematizes the act of film spectatorship as a "sexualized pleasure-pain," that is, sadomasochism, a characteristic of "Dickinson's iconography of suffering" (Paglia 414). In the film's ending, once Craig's identification with the Malkovich body has been ironically twisted, stuck inside the mind and body of Maxine's daughter, aptly named Emily, the prospect of emotional projection and identification with the object-body erodes the pleasure of identification (control) and leaves behind only the pain of misrecognition and obscurity. Craig's solipsism, his inability to empathize with others, prevents him from examining himself, deepens his sense of alienation and leaves him trapped inside Malkovich's then Emily's body, perversely echoing Dickinson's somewhat

pathetic lament in *The Belle of Amherst*: "I wish we were *always* children!" (Luce 29; emphasis Luce's). In this way, Luce's lament and the central scenario of *Being John Malkovich* tie themselves to film theory through their connections to the pre-Oedipal.

Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman's sophisticated intertwining of subjects such as film theory, literary criticism, and popular culture constitutes not only a meta-cinematic reflection on film theory but also a close examination of why spectators watch movies, using the aura of celebrity around the peculiar actor John Malkovich as its satirical case-in-point, poking fun at the fascination with celebrities while pinpointing the source of such fascination in socio-economic alienation. In *Being John Malkovich*, the combination of film theory and pop culture—traditionally framed as high and low culture—are not superficial; they are sophisticated and pertinent, showing audiences their mirrors in Craig, Lotte and Maxine while exposing their flaws, thereby asking the audience to re-consider why they attend the movies in the first place.

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