

Comedy, despair, isolation

Being John Malkovich, directed by Spike Jonze, written by Charlie Kaufman

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Film is a medium uniquely suited to depictions of alienation. This may seem ironic, given its collaborative nature, but the impact that can be created when a camera focuses on a single isolated individual and begins to tell his or her story, is for me singular and powerful. Some examples from the last 30 years are *Taxi Driver*, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Atlantic City*, and, more recently, *Buffalo 66*, *Safe* and the films of Todd Solondz (*Welcome to the Dollhouse* and *Happiness*).

One would not immediately expect Spike Jonze's debut feature, *Being John Malkovich*, to be included in a Festival of Despair and Isolation along with the above-mentioned films. On the surface, it appears to be a fantasy/screwball comedy with an inventive hook: a secret passageway in a midtown office leads directly to the inside of actor John Malkovich's psyche. Most of the critical attention surrounding the film has focused on the imaginative quality of the screenplay (for which co-screenwriter Charlie Kaufman must be given large credit), while ignoring the dark and disturbing tone that prevails throughout.

Craig Schwartz (John Cusack) is a puppeteer in New York City with extremely grandiose notions about his work. He appears in the opening scene as a caricature of the unkempt, willfully anti-social, suffering artist. At the same time he obviously feels a great deal of connection to what he does. The early scenes of Craig working with his lovingly detailed puppets are quite moving and sad, especially when it becomes apparent that his art (which includes street-corner renditions of classics like *Héloïse and Abelard*) is a means of acting out his unfulfilled romantic and erotic longings.

His wife, Lotte (Cameron Diaz), who has a need for a family and a loving relationship with her husband,

sublimates by turning their apartment into a menagerie with stray animals and a chimp suffering from unresolved childhood trauma. They make an extremely plausible couple.

When Craig is finally driven to look for paying work, he easily gains employment as a filer in an office located on the seventh-and-a-half floor of a midtown Manhattan office building. The workplace scenes are classic screwball absurdity. Craig's new employer and the office receptionist (played by Orson Bean and Mary Kay Place, respectively) are characters that bring to mind some of the supporting players in Preston Sturges's films.

But more importantly, it is in this office where the film begins to take shape due to Craig's dual discovery of Maxine (Catherine Keener)—a vampish, manipulative brunette with whom he immediately is smitten and soundly rejected by—and the mysterious portal leading to John Malkovich's head. Craig is initially awed by the “metaphysical implications” of his discovery but soon, with Maxine's goading, is eagerly exploiting this access and selling tickets at \$200 a pop.

Craig proves himself to be a less than sympathetic character as the story develops. He seems to fall for Maxine because she is physically attractive and has a dynamism that he feels is missing from his life and from his marriage. He includes her in his erotic fantasies, fashioning a puppet based on her likeness. and is seen begging for approval for his art: “Puppetry is about being someone else, seeing the world through their eyes.”

He is blind to Maxine's avaricious nature or perhaps he is excited by it and becomes willfully deceptive toward his wife. When Lotte finally meets Maxine and

shares in the discovery of the Malkovich portal the story begins to go into overdrive. A bisexual love triangle begins to develop as Maxine becomes attractive now to Lotte, as long as the latter is inhabiting Malkovich's head. Then Malkovich himself steps into the picture.

There are some echoes of last year's *Truman Show*, with loss of privacy and identity as the key themes. The questions raised by *Being John Malkovich* are different. One could certainly sympathize with Malkovich, suffering the virtual hijacking of his mind, but one is not asked to. Instead we are given the story of people who are willing to trade their identity for love and acceptance. Jonze (the director of numerous music videos) and Kaufman manage to maintain all the madness inherent in the story while not losing sight of the sadness of their characters. An improbably poignant moment occurs when Craig in a rare burst of self-reflection, after preventing his wife from having another vicarious tryst with Maxine, says "What has happened to me? My wife locked in a cage with a monkey." One would not expect such a line to evoke compassion but it does.

Unfortunately, the obligatory explanation for the portal is severely anti-climactic, but the film's final moments are incredibly moving, with Craig wholly addicted to the erasure of his identity, as it is his only means of being close to the affection that he so deeply craves.



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