


The Perverse Cosmos of *Being John Malkovich*: Forms and Transformations of Narcissism in a Celebrity Culture

Lissa Weinstein and Banu Seckin

Abstract: When Craig, an oft-humiliated and unsuccessful street puppeteer, discovers a portal into the body of John Malkovich, he finds that fusion with a live “celebrity puppet” offers a solution to the dilemmas of being human—imperfection, vulnerability, and death. In this fantastical context, the filmmakers raise questions about intention, identity, authorship, and the wisdom of elevating narcissism over Eros. Although a desire to transcend the limitations of the mortal body may be ubiquitous, the unique solution offered in *Being John Malkovich* is the apparent *triumph* of this narcissistic fantasy, rather than an acceptance of reality. This article first explores the film’s use of the universal imagery of narcissism and then examines how technology, which allows widespread access to a visually oriented media culture, and changes in the meaning of fame have altered the expression of narcissistic fantasies, as well as the anxieties that accompany their fulfillment.

Keywords: celebrity, doubles, fame, idealization, narcissism, perversion, puppets, twinship

Introduction

Blue velvet curtains part to reveal a life-size marionette. Distraught, the marionette seeks his image in the mirror. Confronted with his strings, he notices them as though for the first time, and then smashes his painful likeness in a destructive rage (Figure 1). Looking up, he sees the puppeteer who controls his every move. The camera pulls back and the scene expands to reveal a marionette theatre. As the audience realizes that the puppeteer is an exact duplicate of his marionette, the marionette begins an elaborate and beautiful dance, tumbling through space in moves that defy gravity. The puppeteer’s hands move frantically; he is sweating as if he has himself performed the physical feats carried out by his creation. The puppet collapses in despair, raises its





Figure 1. *The puppet notices his strings in the mirror.*

hands to its face and weeps. The puppeteer hangs the marionette from the theatre's ceiling; its legs dangle, impotent, in space.

This mesmerizing scene introduces the questions of identity, self-consciousness, authorship, and intention that are the leitmotif of the hilarious film, *Being John Malkovich*—the story of an unfortunate puppeteer, an “everyman” who inadvertently discovers a way to become a celebrity. The film, whose stunningly beautiful puppets contrast with its unattractive “live” characters, and whose plot line is, at best, eccentric, won the National Society of Film Critics’ Best Picture Award in 1999, the year it was released. This fact probably surprised no one more than its author, Charles Kaufman, who saw the script languish in producers’ offices for several years before being made (Repas 2004). The movie is riddled with subtle jokes about the nature of celebrity, among them the fact that the main characters are cast against type, heightening the audience’s awareness of the differences between screen persona and actuality. Thus, the stunning Cameron Diaz plays Lotte, the mousy wife, while Catherine Keener, an actress known for character roles such as Amelia in *Walking and Talking* (1996), plays Maxine, the femme fatale. Similarly, the choice of Malkovich, an actor clearly cynical about his own celebrity (Gabbard 2001), who has been described as “odd and unknowable” (Kaufman 2000), and who had played a robot in Susan Seidelman’s *Making Mr. Right* (1987), gives additional texture to a film that takes the malleability of public personas as its subject.

Our interest in the film stems from the prescient and multifaceted questions it raises about the fixity of identity and the ways in which the subjective experience of loss and vulnerability are impacted by technological advances that engender confusions between the virtual and the real. Similar themes have also appeared in a science fiction context in such films as *The Matrix* (1999), *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001), and *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), as well as continued to be a focus of Kaufman's subsequent work both with producer Spike Jones in *Adaptation* (2002) and screenwriter Michel Gondry in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). It is a credit to Kaufman's talent that through his humor, themes that are usually the province of serious philosophical and sociological inquiry (e.g., Baudrillard 2006; Nelson 2002), were made palatable to a wider range of filmgoers.

We first highlight the film's expressions of narcissistic fantasies, using the main character as an exemplar of a universal developmental crisis (Gabbard 2001). Although we are aware that the wish to be someone else exists on varying levels of psychic differentiation with multiple possible causalities, our focus is the fantasies of exceptionality noted by Bach (1977, 1985), namely the rope to another world, the creation of the androgynous double, fusion with the idealized other, and fantasies of self creation—all of which function to transcend the limitations of mortality. An explanation of the film's ending is then proposed in terms of the multiple ways that the ubiquitous stimuli of our visual media culture may alter the manifestations of universal fantasies.

There are, of course, other fruitful approaches to the film. For example, Dragunoiu (2002) discusses the film in terms of Lacanian notions of desire and the constitution of subjectivity, while Shaw (2006) highlights the philosophical questions raised about the roles of consciousness and will in the constitution of personal identity. The film's texture, its humor, and its concretization of philosophical abstractions are also attempts to dramatize an existential plight; hence, the film has affinities with works by such satirists as Rabelais, Swift, and Kafka. Our focus, however, dovetails with shifting societal trends in the meaning of fame (Braudy 1997), the alteration of facets of reality as they become increasingly detached from their context and are set free in cyberspace (Borgmann 1999), and the ascendance of simulacra over their referents (Baudrillard 2006).

Being John Malkovich

In his daily life, Craig Schwartz, a highly skilled but perpetually unemployed street puppeteer, is frequently shunned while performing his art. The people he observes find Craig's overly accurate impersonations of their foibles infuriating. Narcissistically injured himself, Craig seems unaware that the "objectified and alienated mirror images" (Lacan 1949) he creates with his puppets cause other people pain. Hence, Craig's change cup often remains empty, and

the fame and wealth of “the Great Mantini”—a less talented puppeteer who produces spectacles with giant marionettes—elude him. In his marriage, Craig is unable to give his wife, Lotte, the child she desires. Craig’s choice of the medieval monk Abelard, who was castrated for impregnating his love, Heloise, as a subject for his puppet theatre further exemplifies his fear of consummation. Craig’s show focuses on their agonizing deferred desire; while allowing his puppets to mime the lewd physical forms of sexuality, he misses the truly passionate depth of Heloise and Abelard’s intellectual and erotic connection.

Craig’s disappointment in himself for falling short of his ideals, fuels his dejection and rage and leads him to create the Craig puppet, a miniature double of himself. This concrete manifestation of an infatuation with one’s own

The puppet dance that opens the film expresses the puppeteer’s despair over being flawed, small, and lacking control of his life.

image (Lacan 1949) serves as a defense against the fears aroused by narcissistic vulnerabilities, especially those of imperfection, aging, and death (Rank 1925). The puppet dance that opens the film expresses the puppeteer’s despair over being flawed, small, and lacking control of his life, as well as Craig’s wish, actualized in the puppet-double, to soar free of the constraints of gravity and the terrestrial limits it signifies. The proxy figure, idealized as a purified representation of himself, helps Craig to temporarily rid himself of painful feelings. The feelings are projected into the puppet while Craig, the puppeteer, works God-like, above. The strings that control the puppet come to represent “the rope to another world,” an ascension fantasy (Eliade, cited in Bach 1977: 282) whereby privileged individuals can rise to Heaven, escaping their earthly surroundings.

Forced by Lotte to get a job, Craig answers an ad for “a man with fast fingers,” and finds himself in the strange world of LesterCorp, an office space housed on floor 7½ where everything has been scaled down to fit its four foot ceilings. At Lestercorp, full-grown people are the freakish and despised; a reversed scale of value expressed clearly in their orientation film, when Captain Mertin, the building’s designer vows to build a world where a leprechaun-sized office worker will feel right.

Tiny Woman: I’m not a child, Captain Mertin, rather an adult lady of miniature proportions. . . . I am afraid that the world was not built with me in mind. Doorknobs are too high, chairs are unwieldy, high-ceilinged rooms mock my stature. Nor am I a married lady, Captain. After all, who would marry a person of my diminutiveness, so I am forced to work for my few pennies a week as an optometrist? Why cannot there be a place for me to work safe and comfortable?

Mertin: Woman, your story moves me like no other. My own sister was tiny and then died. Therefore, I shall make you my wife. And I shall build a floor in my building, between the seventh and eighth which will be

scaled down, so from now on there shall be at least one place on God's green Earth that you and your accursed kind can live in peace. (Kaufman 2000: 13–14)

One cannot help but hear the resonance in these words to the plight of an Oedipal-age child, pained to discover they are too small to be loved in the way that they desire.

Despite the obvious nuisance of being forced to walk cramped and bent over, the discomfort of living in such a peculiar world is denied. At LesterCorp wish governs reality and identity is fluid so that repudiated aspects of the self can be projected onto others. For example, Dr. Lester contends that Floris, his secretary, is not deaf, insisting that it is he who has an “incomprehensible speech impediment” although he speaks quite clearly. At the other end of the spectrum are unrealistic idealizations; for example, Dr. Lester immediately addresses Craig as Dr. Schwartz, even though Craig is only a file clerk.

Initially, Craig attempts to hold on to the actuality of his imperfect existence, refusing to accept his elevated status as a doctor and remaining aware of how disconcerting the small office space feels. However, neither the confining office walls of LesterCorp nor the repetitive mindless activity of filing are able to contain Craig's anxieties around his lack of a positive self image. He next attempts to assuage these anxieties by courting Maxine, the beautiful, disaffected girl he meets at LesterCorp, who serves as his eroticized ideal. Maxine's aloofness and sense of entitlement breed an uninhibited, predatory relationship toward those around her. Her tangential relationship to reality is tersely expressed in a statement to Craig that “truth is for suckers.” Living in a self-involved haze and needing no one, Maxine seems perfect to Craig. As Modell (1975) suggests, for the narcissist, to have strong emotions and dependent longings is, in itself, a source of shame.

Maxine's scorn for Craig heightens his desire to be inside another skin “moving differently, thinking differently, feeling differently” (30), leading him to create a Maxine puppet whom he can make behave as he wishes the real Maxine would. He transforms the Heloise puppet, changing her dress and painting her toenails. Craig then enacts his fantasy of being inside Maxine and taking on her magic and power as he puts the Maxine head on the Craig puppet and then the Craig head on the Maxine puppet, obliterating all distinctions between them (Figure 2). In addition to creating the longed for twinship, the act carries other unconscious meanings. It is the enactment of a regressive fantasy of intercourse, where the difference between the sexes is eroded as one partner literally becomes the other. Thus the meaning of and necessity for intercourse is denied while pregenital sexuality, with its mixture of interchangeable erogenous zones and modes of satisfaction, is elevated (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1983). Craig's wishful denial is highlighted by contrast



Figure 2. Craig manipulates the Craig and Maxine puppets.

with the immediately ensuing scene, where Maxine tells him, “You’re not someone I could get interested in, Craig. You play with dolls” (31).

Craig is not the only one at LesterCorp who suffers from being trapped in his body. Dr. Lester, bitter about aging, bemoans “the agony of the flesh” as he is forced to sit down “like a girly girl” and “piss orange” from his excessive intake of carrot juice necessitated by his effort to stay young. When Craig attempts to tell him that the elderly are valued as a link to history Lester, uninterested in taking a more reflective stance, replies: “I don’t want to be your goddamn link . . . I want to feel Floris’ naked thighs against my own . . . I want my body to inspire lust in that beautiful complex woman” (23). The answer to this dilemma of the “finite body” will soon be found, for inside the almost womb-like LesterCorp is a portal.

Inadvertently dropping a file behind a cabinet, Craig comes upon a small door. He pries it open to find a dirt tunnel of a maroon, purplish hue, with “wet and membranous walls” (32). This vaginal/cloacal tunnel provides a brief, but very satisfying ride, a temporary restoration of the omnipotence of the self inside the skin of a celebrity, John Malkovich. The ride into John Malkovich is a typical Sadian scene of a voyage through the digestive tract, where the “executioner”—the rider in this case—holds and controls the “victim” at the end of the rectal passage where he is enclosed. The point of view of the camera switches to being through Craig/John’s eyes. The audience has also invaded Malkovich, seeing the world as if from inside him, but still separate from him. To signify this state, the camera view is cropped as if one were looking through binoculars and the sounds of Malkovich’s bodily processes (chew-

ing, swallowing, touching himself) are heard as if the audience were inside a sensory isolation chamber or a fantasy of the uterine environment.

The activities that Malkovich engages in are comically pedestrian—ordering a bath mat and checking the fridge for Chinese food—yet they appear magical because *he* does them. As with a child's overestimation of his/her parents, the magic emanates from the child's wish-imbued perceptions rather than the parents real qualities. The comedic aspects of the film are heightened when it becomes clear that no one is entirely sure what film roles Malkovich has played. Nonetheless, after Craig and Maxine start a lucrative business capitalizing on this ubiquitous wish, scores of people are willing to pay \$200 apiece for the glorious experience of being someone else. The need to compensate for unbearable feelings of imperfection (Bach 1994) makes becoming any celebrity attractive; as one of Craig's customer's states when Maxine informs him he can be John Malkovich: "That's perfect! My second choice. Ah, this is wonderful. Too good to be true. You see, I'm a sad man. Sad and fat and alone. Oh, I've tried all the diets, my friends. Lived for a year on nothing but imitation mayonnaise. Did it work? You be the judge. But Malkovich! King of New York. Man About Town. Most eligible bachelor! Bon viveur! The Schopenhauer of the twentieth century. Thin man extraordinaire!" (54).

The portal obviates not only the immutability of identity, but also the fixity of a gendered position. With the regression to narcissism, pregenital desires serve to disguise and replace genital wishes. When Craig allows Lotte to enter the portal, bisexual fantasies dominate her experience; she sees Malkovich's portal as "almost . . . vaginal. It's like he's got a penis and a vagina" (42), and she becomes desperate to repeat the experience. Only inside the magic world of Malkovich can Lotte transcend the painful limits of her femininity. Maxine echoes the pleasure of superseding gender when she becomes infatuated with Lotte, but only when Lotte is inside John Malkovich.

Thus, in the state of celebrity, Malkovich is an ideal container into which to project an imagined self. Craig's fantasies of being another, which existed in a less coherent form first in his work as a puppeteer and later in his relationship with the idealized Maxine, can now come to fruition. Unfortunately, although the restoration of the power of the self while inside Malkovich is satisfying, it is also brief. Upon being dumped on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike, Craig is painfully himself again, forced to confront his own feebleness. The ride into John Malkovich becomes addictive and Craig soon finds that just "seeing through someone else's eyes" is insufficient. He realizes that as an experienced puppeteer he can enter into and command Malkovich—a feat he demonstrates to Maxine by recreating, as Craig-in-Malkovich, Craig's "Dance of Despair and Disillusionment" from the opening scene. At Maxine's request, he agrees to stay in Malkovich indefinitely, which allows him to use Malkovich's notoriety to launch his puppeteering career and to win him Maxine.

This invasion occurs much to the chagrin of Malkovich, whose independent selfhood is now obliterated. When Malkovich attempts to protest this new state, Craig, revealing the sadistic devaluation that is always the complement of idealization says, "Shut up you overrated sack of shit." As Craig succeeds in controlling Malkovich, the goggle-eyed perspective used to indicate to the filmgoer that someone was "visiting" Malkovich disappears; Craig has now fully appropriated Malkovich, revealing more clearly the vampirish and cannibalistic aspects of his desire for a double.

However, dangers remain for Craig in this new state. Being Malkovich symbolizes an oscillation in the sense of self between absolute perfection (Craig is John Malkovich) and complete destruction (nothing remains of Craig himself). But the unconscious awareness of the disavowed worthless self and the continued need to obliterate it remain. This is graphically shown in a scene from the screenplay, omitted from the movie, when during his televised biography, a young Craig/Malkovich repeatedly kills the Craig puppet in a piece titled "Twenty-One Ways to Die." "In this world there are . . . Twenty-One Ways to Die. Some are easy and some are hard. But all are fatal. Arsenic poisoning . . . Drowning . . . fall from a tall building. *The Craig puppet is torturously demonstrating the various deaths and ends up crushed in a heap*" (Kaurmfan 2000: 92–93). Yet despite the wish to keep them separate, the Craig personality subtly invades the Malkovich character as Malkovich begins to take on aspects of Craig's unkempt appearance.

That the idealized other is created in order to ward off awareness of the real self's puny status is also shown when Lotte and Maxine are accidentally pushed down into Malkovich's subconscious. They find images that Malkovich's celebrity is designed to keep at bay (albeit in a parody of simplistic psychoanalytic interpretation)—his parents engaged in an incomprehensible sexual congress, Malkovich as a physically underdeveloped child, Malkovich sniffing at soiled underwear, Malkovich wetting his pants. These "actual" childhood scenes stand in direct contrast to the TV biography offered in the film of Malkovich's fantasized childhood, which can be seen as a virtual fantasy of self-creation (Rittenberg & Shaw 1992).

Unbeknownst to Craig, the portal into Malkovich exists for another purpose: to serve as a conduit to immortality, since chosen people are able to enter "vessel" bodies. As Dr. Lester explains to Lotte: "I am not Dr. Lester, my dear. I am Captain Mertin. You see, there are seventeen of us who live in the being you know as Lester. It was ninety years ago that I discovered a strange portal . . . and I discovered that the portal led to a "vessel" body and that my friends and I would be able to live forever, by leaping form vessel to vessel" (83).

Thus, Lester/Mertin has achieved serial immortality (Shaw 2006), endlessly recreating himself. This interesting variant on the fantasy of self creation, the "ability to be born" (Milan Comparetti, 1981) allows for instantaneous trans-

formation, a self creation/reincarnation governed by autoeroticism, and a rebirth into a world of timeless immortality where the body never ages (or in this version is continually exchanged), can be of either gender, and can procreate without intercourse.

Although Malkovich is the chosen vessel-to-be, the transformation can only occur when a vessel is ripe, on the first midnight of its forty-fourth year. If the magic moment is missed, those seeking to be reborn are subsumed into a new “larval vessel,” lost forever, able only to see the world through the larval vessel’s eyes, but not influence them. Lester/Mertin cannot enter the portal while Craig is occupying Malkovich. Desperate, Lester threatens to kill Maxine unless Craig leaves. Although Craig fears returning to being a nobody, he ultimately makes a choice toward object love and relatedness, agreeing to leave Malkovich’s body in order to save Maxine’s life. For this heroic sacrifice, Craig ends up in the ditch “wet, dirty, and crazed,” abandoned by Lotte and Maxine, who start living together as Maxine prepares to give birth to a child conceived through Malkovich when Lotte was inside of him. Finding the return to his pathetic self unbearable, Craig attempts to rush back through the portal. He ends up getting absorbed into the as-yet unborn, next “vessel to be,” the child conceived by Maxine and Lotte, thereby losing himself forever. Malkovich momentarily regains his selfhood when Craig departs only to lose it again as Lester and his friends gently enter the portal. The violent spasmodic movements of Malkovich’s body in response to their “rebirth” reveal the aggression central to this process of absorption, a recreation of the self through fusion that destroys the “other.”

Seven years later, Malkovich/Lester (a physical fusion of the two characters) has finally gotten Floris and has begun to focus attention on the new “larval vessel.” It remains unclear what happened to the other people who entered Malkovich; presumably only special people such as Lester or Craig have the ability to control the vessel body. Lotte and Maxine are parenting the child, named after Emily Dickinson, whose disparaging views on fame were quoted earlier in the film (“How dreary to be somebody, / How public like a frog / To tell one’s name / the livelong June / To an admiring Bog”). The movie ends with the new vessel, Emily, swimming in a pool. The camera switches to a point of view deep inside her head, presumably Craig, looking out through her eyes, but unable to influence her or to be heard by his beloved Maxine, more lost and powerless than ever.

Narcissistic Fantasies and Culture

The limitations associated with being human, the boundaries of our power, the inevitability of loss and eventually death have, throughout history, engendered wishes to rise above the constraints imposed by the mortal self. Such desires have inspired classics of childhood literature, including *Alice in Won-*

derland, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Peter Pan*. However, the resolution offered in these works emphasizes the necessity of embracing the limiting conditions that are the core of an adjustment to reality, while transforming the magic of childhood into the pleasure of everyday reality. Wonderland continues to exist, but only as a transient fantasy, where “the rattling teacups would change to tinkling sheep bells and the Queen’s shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd-boy . . .” (Carroll, 1865 [1998]: 163). Her adventure becomes a tale that Alice can someday tell her own children, as she attempts to “make *their* eyes bright and eager” (Carroll, 1865 [1998]: 138). Dorothy returns to gray Kansas; leaving behind the technicolor magic of Oz, she tries to find happiness in the flawed, but real, objects in her own back yard. Wendy, too, bids goodbye to Never Land, trading eternal youth for the ability to have babies. Magic is translated into the satisfaction of action in the real world. Relegated to the realm of the dream, the perfection that existed for a moment is now only a story, as language with its temporal structure offers the muted pleasure of trial action.

How are we to understand the ending of *Being John Malkovich*? At first glance, it seems that narcissism triumphs and that, to quote Maxine, “truth is for suckers.” Lester’s coup suggests that one can live forever, generating an “eternity of the same” (Baudrillard 2006) that no longer requires sexuality for reproduction. Rather than ending with repudiation, *Being John Malkovich* appears to actualize a desire to cheat death. Craig, who attempts to return to reality, ends up the biggest loser, a castrated and invisible puppet.

Yet it would be a mistake to see the film merely as a paean to the glories of narcissism. By depicting in concrete form various abstract ideas about the continuity of identity, and the difference between our external personas and the memories, losses and vulnerability that constitute our subjectivity, *Being John Malkovich* raises questions about the unique forms that narcissistic fantasies take in our culture, rather than providing answers. One implication of the adaptive viewpoint, suggested by Hartmann (1958) is that culture will shape the expression of universal fantasies. In what follows we first examine three historical trends that, in our interpretation, contribute to the belief that these fantasies can be actualized in the social arena, rather than represented intrapsychically as a wish. Finally, we examine how the film sheds additional light on changes in the anxieties engendered by the potential fulfillment of these fantasies.

Divine Robots

The first trend, detailed by Nelson (2002), begins with the disconnection of the supernatural from religion and its displacement and eventual resurfacing in the world of simulacra. The tendency to impart fantastical elements to inanimate forms such as puppets is a common activity in childhood. However, the use of puppets as the repository of the divine was a central theme of Heinz Von Kleist’s seminal work “On the Marionette Theatre” (1810). In this

brilliant essay, known to have influenced among others Heinz Kohut (1966, 1972), the author asserts that no human dancer can approach the perfect grace of a puppet, since the puppet does not suffer the human problem of self-consciousness, which inevitably follows from a realization of one's limitations. This connection of the puppet with superior beings—God, or his opposite the Devil—was already evident in the nineteenth-century children shows and in the puppet theaters of the European avant-garde.

The fantasy of the puppet/God was further advanced by the industrial age, when the machine, already hailed for its capacity to support capitalism and identified with the future, was touted as the thing that would be able to “conquer space and time.” As Nelson (2002) argues, the robot, a puppet made in our own image, was the machine most resonant with the soul. Increasingly, the line between human and robot was blurred in images of androids in such films as *Blade Runner* (1982), the *Terminator* (1984), and most recently *Artificial Intelligence: A. I.* (2001), that were both more powerful and more “humanlike” in terms of their capacity for feeling. Unlike Pinocchio, who could only become human when he acknowledged love and loss, these idealized simulacra had no such limitations. More appealing than the real item, the robots became a storehouse for the idealized attributions of their creators.

Fame and Performance: Just Be Yourself

In the world described in *Being John Malkovich* the blurred line between human and puppet is traversed in the opposite direction. Living media celebrities now function as divine puppets, although given Craig-in-Malkovich's rendition of the “Dance of Despair and Disillusionment,” still less graceful than their non-living models. Before this final development could occur, two other changes were necessary. The first change involved an alteration in the conception of fame into a form of performance. Braudy (1997) notes that prior to the twentieth century, ostentatious self-creation as a source of fame was inhibited because of the belief that exposure on the stage of the world, devoid of any real achievement, would be unacceptable to the “audience of history” or the “audience of God.” With increasing secularization and the democratization of society, however, these previously existing frames of achievement were superseded by the more palpable and immediate “audience for performance.” Renown itself became a goal, rather than an accidental by-product of achievement. As fame gradually separated from genealogy, anyone could become famous and it was increasingly possible to become famous for playing a version of oneself. In this context, fame, in any venue, became equated with being on stage. Freed of its prior constraints, a new form of fame—a virtual Cinderella fantasy—would become potentially available to everyone.

At the same time, the nature of performance changed. A stage performance is singular; like a piece of sculpture or a painting, it cannot be infinitely

reproduced. An actor in a play can only possess a limited number of roles because each role must be repeated over and over. However, with the development of the still camera, and later the motion picture, actors became “free agents,” able to change costumes endlessly and move from plot to plot, no longer identified with a particular role. But, at the same time, captured on celluloid, in countless roles, the actor could remain an ideal image, young forever, even

The ubiquity of the media allowed for a constantly present, instantly recognizable version of fame, unbounded by time or space/geography.

without the intervention of plastic surgery. These created images were also infinitely reproducible and could be owned by anyone. The ubiquity of the media allowed for a constantly present, instantly recognizable version of fame, unbounded by time or space/geography. An example of this would be the 2007 death of Anna Nicole Smith, whose actual body was decom-

posing as it awaited burial, while her image, ubiquitously moving across TV screens, offered views of still fulsome breasts and buttocks in Guess jeans.

As Braudy (1997) notes the proliferation of visual images made it inevitable that the coin of the realm for fame would now become tied to the visual presentation of the performer and to the perfection of the body. The focus on the physical body, as opposed to achievement that was the result of years of effort or unique talent, supported the notion that anyone could potentially “be” one of these idealized persons. An essential component of modern fame became “being yourself.” This way of presenting oneself enabled a fusion, a powerful identification of the audience with the star. Anna Nicole Smith was beloved as “one of us,” as she herself sought fame through her physical resemblance (not her talent) to Marilyn Monroe. If one can look like a star, move like a star, and talk like a star, then he/she *is* a star, much in the same way that an infant believes that if it makes the gestures of mother, it is the mother (Jacobson 1964).

The Ineluctable Modality of the Visual

The visual nature of the new media allowed for participation in the actor’s performance in several other ways. A stage performer knows he/she is being watched and his/her consent for the audience to do so enforces a partial separation from the onlooker. Stage actors move, sweat, and speak, while the audience must remain silent and motionless. The stage actor can come out of role or remove his/her costume volitionally. The image offered on the stage is transient, unlike a celluloid depiction.

In contrast, TV and movie celebrities, observed closely without their knowledge, are given over to an anonymous public, whose viewing eye “owns” what it sees. This secret voyeuristic observation, reminiscent of the primal scene (Metz 1982), in conjunction with the sheer availability of the imagery, further stimulates the onlookers’ wish to fuse with the celebrity, to be “inside someone else.” The solitary position of the onlooker encourages entry into a hyp-

nagogic, dreamlike fantasy and furthers the likelihood of regression to a state where it is harder to separate images of the self from images of idealized others, who easily become continuous with our imaginary view of them. Add to this already powerful draught, the ability to change the channel, or to have the object perpetually available on the Internet, and it becomes easy to imagine that, like Craig, we control these celebrity “vessel” puppets.

Because of their depersonified presentation in the media, celebrities become both less and more than fully human, and are the inheritors of a long line of supernatural and quasi-religious attributions made to non-living figures. Offered up daily, they are ideal forms with whom the audience can identify and use for self-esteem regulation. Recognitions of our own imperfection that might once have been transcended through slow and piecemeal acts of mourning, represented by the alteration of intrapsychic structures, or made manifest through sublimatory activity, are now counteracted by a set of external socio-cultural conditions that foster the fantasy that the wish to be omnipotent can be immediately gratified and that the pains that make us human can be erased.

Do You See What a Metaphysical Can of Worms This Portal Is?

Craig poses this question to Maxine after his first “ride” into Malkovich. Translated into the terms of our discussion, it might refer to the consequences that follow from the societal and technological developments that make it possible to fulfill wishes for omnipotence through imagined fusion with celebrity puppets. One consequence is that the classic danger situations of childhood (loss of the object, loss of the object’s love and castration) are replaced by a more primitive fear of the annihilation of the self. The scene when Malkovich goes through his own portal, falling into a world where everyone is identical to himself and the only spoken word is his name, seems to us to imply such a shift. In response to the experience, Malkovich claims “I have seen the dark side that no one should ever see” (Figure 3). In addition to a trenchant visual joke about the self-involvement of actors, the scene shows the profound lone-

Figure 3. Malkovich’s horror in the World of Malkovich.



liness that follows should the double ever seem to materialize in flesh and bone, rather than remain a fantasy. In this beautifully realized version of the subjective Fregoli syndrome,¹ we see that the danger of the narcissistic solution is the absence of a defining “other.” As Rapaport pointed out, “Only the implicit reactions and explicit communications of a variety of other ‘me’s can free the ‘me’ from its solipsism (autism) by providing mirrors to reflect various sides of the ‘me’” (1951: 724). Thus, the other is essential for the development and recognition of the self, a need demonstrated experimentally by Gergely (2002), who showed that non-contingent (non-exact, imperfectly matched, or exaggerated) marking of the infants facial expression is necessary for the development of a mentalizing self, who can then come to know both his own mind and the mind of others. The endless repetition of the self, closely allied to cloning, inevitably destroys the “aura” of the individual, its valuable and authentic singularity that Benjamin (1936) spoke of in reference to the art of the camera as opposed to painting. In this way, the materialization of the double always “signifies imminent death” (Baudrillard 2006), as the sexless, invariant reproduction of the self also refers to the opposite of Eros, namely the repetition compulsion and death.

Another scene presents a cautionary note. In the final shot, perhaps the most truly horrifying scene in the film, Emily, the new “vessel to be,” is shown swimming underwater in a familiar picture of childhood innocence (Figure 4). This silent scene, which goes on for two minutes while the credits roll, evokes an eerie, uncanny feeling in the viewer. Its length allows time for the recall and evocation of one’s own childhood experiences and fantasies, which then

Figure 4. Emily, the vessel to be, swimming in the pool.



meld with our interpretation of what is taking place. Freud, in his famous essay (1919) used the term uncanny to refer to something that had once been familiar (*heimlich*) but is now seen in a new and discomforting light (*unheimlich*). As innocent as she appears, because of all that has preceded the scene, the viewer cannot help but be aware that Emily is anything but innocent. Unbeknownst to her, her body is prison to Craig who is now living in an eternal hell where he is forced to continually gaze at his love object with no hope of possessing her or even getting Emily to “look away.” Further, Emily is not the author of her own life; as the “vessel to be” she will soon be taken over by others and she is already the object of their watchful, predatory gaze. As the scene expands, we see the legs of other swimmers, dangling in the ganzfeld of the pool—a visual reprisal of the position of the Craig puppet’s legs in the opening scene, hanging powerless. It occurs to us that perhaps they might also be puppets performing at the behest of others, rather than the authors of their own intention. Or worse, that we, like the Craig puppet, are unaware of the strings that control us. The beautiful Emily horrifies the viewer as if she were the devil incarnate.

So what is the ultimate solution suggested by *Being John Malkovich*? While society offers us the palliative drug of fusion with celebrity puppets, there are downsides, dangers, and new anxieties. At the extreme end, the ready availability of the double raises the specter of the loss of self previously confined to late stage schizophrenia (Tausk 1919 [1933]) as well as a host of other less extreme difficulties—an inability to grow that comes from mourning, an acceptance of the vulnerabilities that constitute our unique history, our shames, and our triumphs. Which is preferred? Kaufman offers no answer; instead he continues to struggle with the issues raised in his subsequent films. In both *Adaptation* (2003) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) he again revisits the questions of human vulnerability, the source and locus of self-esteem, and the consequences of the desire to erase the consciousness of pain and loss.

Lissa Weinstein is an Associate Professor in the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program at the City University of New York and a faculty member of the Columbia Center for Psychoanalytic Research and Training. She is co-recipient of the Heinz Hartmann Jr. award for several papers that she wrote with Arnold Wilson, Ph.D., and the winner of the Margot Marek prize for *Reading David: A Mother and Son’s Journey Through the Labyrinth of Dyslexia* (Penguin, 2003). Her research topics include Freud’s theory of language and representation, the interface of attachment and infantile sexuality, and child psychoanalysis and film.

Banu Seckin attended Bogazici University, Istanbul, graduating magna cum laude with a B.A. in Psychology and M.A. in Clinical Psychology. She received

her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. She completed her post-doctoral training in psychotic disorders and their treatment in inpatient and day hospital settings at the North Central Bronx Hospital. She is currently an advanced candidate at the Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research. She continues to work as a psychologist at the North Central Bronx Hospital.

Notes

¹ The Fregoli syndrome is one of several delusional misidentification syndromes and involves the belief that the bodies of others, even strangers, can contain the minds of people the patient knows. The subjective Fregoli syndrome is the delusion of subjective doubles, the idea that one's physical double exists with one's own mind.

References

- Bach, Shelley. 1977. "On Narcissistic Fantasies." *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 43 (3): 281–93.
- . 1985. *Narcissistic States and the Therapeutic Process*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 2006. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1936. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Pp 217–253 in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books.
- Borgmann, Albert. 1999. *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millenium*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Braudy, Leo. 1997. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*. New York: Random House.
- Carroll, Lewis. [1865] 1998. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Penguin.
- Chasseguet-Smirgel, Jeanine. 1983. "Perversion and the Universal Law." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10(3): 293–301.
- Dragunoiu, D. 2002. "Psychoanalysis, Film Theory and the Case of *Being John Malkovich*." *Film Criticism* 26 (2): 1–17.
- Freud, Sigmund. [1919] 1956. "The Uncanny." 17: 217–256 in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press.
- Gabbard, Glen. 2001 "Fifteen Minutes of Fame Revisited: Being John Malkovich." Pp. 229–234 in *Psychoanalysis and Film*, ed G. Gabbard. London: Karnac Books.
- Gergely, Gyorgy. 2002. "Marked Affect-Mirroring and the Development of Affect-Regulative Use of Pretend Play." Pp. 291–316 in *Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of the Self*, ed. P. Fonagy, G. Gergely, E. Jurist, and M. Target. New York: Other Press.
- Hartman, Heinz. 1958. *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Jacobson, Edith. 1964. *The Self and the Object World*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Kaufman, Charles. 2000. *Being John Malkovich*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kohut, Heinz. 1966. "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 14 (2): 243–72.
- . 1972. "Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage." *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 27: 360–99.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1949. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." Pp 75–82 in *Ecrits: A Selection*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Metz, Chistian. 1982. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Milani-Comparetti, A. 1981. "The Neurophysiologic and Clinical Implications of Studies on Fetal Motor Behavior." *Seminars in Perinatology* 5 (2):183–189.
- Modell, Arnold. 1975. "A Narcissistic Defense Against Affects and the Illusion of Self-Sufficiency." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 56 (3): 275–82.
-

- Nelson, Virginia. 2002. *The Secret Life of Puppets: Tracing the Curious Reversing Roles of Art and Religion by Surveying the History of Simulacra as Players and Holy Objects in Western Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rank, Otto. 1925. *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rapaport, David. 1951 *The Organization and Pathology of Thought*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Repass, Scott. 2004. "Review: *Being John Malkovich*." *Film Quarterly* 56 (1): 29–36.
- Rittenberg, Steve, and Noah Shaw. 1991. "On Fantasies of Self Creation." *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 15: 217–36.
- Shaw, D. 2006. "On Being Philosophical and *Being John Malkovich*." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (1): 111–18.
- Tausk, Victor. [1919] 1933. "On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 2 (4): 519–56.
- Von Kleist, Heinz. 1810. "Uber das Marionetten Theater" [On the Marionette Theater]. *Berliner Abendblätter*, December: 12–15.

Filmology

- Cameron, James. 1984. *The Terminator*. USA.
- Gondry, Michel. 2004. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. USA.
- Jonze, Spike. 1999. *Being John Malkovich*. USA.
- . 2003. *Adaptation*. USA.
- Scott, Ridley. 1982. *Blade Runner*. USA.
- Seidelman, Susan. 1987. *Making Mr. Right*. USA.
- Spielberg, Steven. 2001. *Artificial Intelligence: AI*. USA.
- Wachowski, Andy, and Larry Wachowski. 1999. *The Matrix*. USA.
- . 2003. *The Matrix Reloaded*. USA.
-