

Holly Cao
Professor Brasiskis
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John Malkovich the Puppet Show

As a Cinema Studies student, I have this strange preference for films that are about filmmaking. The wholesomeness in the purpose of the movie in making statements of its very own medium, making references and reflections on itself that makes it challenging and exciting to examine. When I watch films, there are two parts of the film's ideology that determine whether I find the film worthy to watch: the ideology of the film as a medium and the ideology of its narrative. A good film should have the two parts of ideology resonate with each other. The former chief editor of Cahiers Du Cinema Jean-Louis Comolli points out in his article *Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field* that many film critics in his time focus only on the "political ideology" of the film, which is largely narrative-based, but not so much about the practical techniques and apparatus that makes up the film, which is the ideology of the film medium.

As a film with implications on the ideologies of filmmaking, Spike Jones's film *Being John Malkovich* discusses the techniques and apparatus of film through its narrative. The film is about the "film" within the eyes of the famous actor John Malkovich. The main character Craig Schwartz comes across the Malkovich film when he finds a portal in the office of his new job which allows people to get into the perspective of Malkovich by seeing what he sees and hearing what he hears. The tunnel changes the relationships between Craig and his wife Lotte, his new office love interest Maxine, as well as getting the identity of John Malkovich involved in the personal lives of these characters. Through the perspective of John Malkovich, Craig and Maxine were each allowed to have something that is forbidden to their own identities: Craig becomes a

famous puppeteer and marries Maxine, while Lotte becomes a lover of Maxine. The film demonstrates how the visual and auditory senses from Malkovich influence the characters.

In Comolli's essay *Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field*, he argues that "it is only when the determinations of the apparatus (the camera) which structures the reality of its inscription are thought through – that the cinema will be able to objectively envisage its relationship to ideology." *Being John Malkovich* envisions the ideology of cinema, the "vigilance" through the camera, by positioning Malkovich as the camera. In the film, Malkovich's perspective is presented in a filter of his vision and auditory sense in resemblance to the input for a camera. His vision is framed by a dark circle around the film screen, and the voice that he hears sounds distorted as if he is hearing things from a vacuum tube. In the film, everyone wants to get a view of the perspective of John Malkovich for a brief chance to escape from their own lives and to discover something new about themselves. Other characters in the film symbolically represent other roles in the process of film production. The story of the film is encountering Maxine the subject, who is the stereotypical femme fatal that Craig encountered at his job. Lotte, the audience in this analogy, attains an emotional attachment with the subject throughout the film. Baudry refers to the operator and mechanists involved in the process of film production and distribution as the puppeteers that are behind the scenes of the puppet shows. The film makes use of the puppeteer analogy. In the film, Craig identifies himself as a puppet master who dreams of a career in puppetry, but he is forced by his finances to be in an office job. The mentality of Craig is the director behind the scene who is trying to create the illusion of reality that he constructs. The narrative of the Malkovich film comes from the director Craig's interest in the subject Maxine.

The conflict in *Being John Malkovich* comes from the challenges that the characters face in their roles within the film production process. In the film, Craig the director is challenged by his creative control of the camera. A mishap in the use of creative control leads to his downfall towards the end of the film when he turned from a sympathetic protagonist to an unpredictable antagonist. This shift is propagated by a change in Craig's role from an observer to the manipulator of the camera. Baudry writes in his article *The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema* with reference to Plato's analogy of the cave that chains the prisoners that "by associating themselves with the objects that they are moving back and forth before the fire, they would project a heterogeneous image capable of canceling the reality effect they want to produce: they would awake the prisoner's suspicions; they would awake the prisoners." To achieve realism, the director must not show himself through his work in a heterogeneous way. He must not be involved in a conversation with the show himself.

The moment when Craig starts to control Malkovich, two things happen: Firstly, the cinematic apparatus has been exposed. Secondly, the director is no longer directing the film, he is living it because he is so obsessed with his view through the perspective of Malkovich. Instead of giving the audience perception of reality in the big picture, they see the director struggling with the camera, glitches, and inconsistencies of the film. The film is no longer capable of presenting the illusion of reality once the audience is aware of the source of the illusion. In the film, the trouble of the audience is reflected by Lotte and Craig's conflict. The two characters fight with each other about the chance of using Malkovich to talk to Maxine. At one point, Craig chained Lotte as the audience, like the prisoner in Plato's cave as a punishment for her fascination with Maxine which Craig takes as a shock. Once Craig starts to control Malkovich, she feels helpless and lost in her purpose, with no place in the Malkovich film. Once Craig

controls what Malkovich does, the view becomes convoluted, intentions-filled instead of observation-filled. Instead of seeing the actor play his role, Craig pushes out Malkovich's mind and takes his body as his own. When he does this, the director is no longer in control of the creative process, preventing any other characters to go into the channel with his "too powerful" presence that sends others who enter only to Malkovich's subconscious. To draw analogy back to the film theory, a director should not be too involved in the film because it would disrupt the media's natural progression which allows the audience to be involved in the film.

Films should be allowed to progress somehow naturally because the camera and the subject should be interesting and compelling in themselves, as the film demonstrates. After Craig dominates the body of Malkovich, Maxine is portrayed in the film as the one controlling Malkovich, the "entrepreneurial woman behind the scenes". The point when Craig gains total control of the camera is the moment that he loses control of himself as the director. Perhaps it is always a hidden fact that the subject has always been compelling the directors to make films all along. At this point in the story, Maxine's realization that Craig can control Malkovich, and she can control Craig takes the film in a different direction. Although it is established in the earlier scenes that Craig is the puppet master, when Maxine is in the bedroom with Craig in Malkovich's body, she asks Craig to do his puppet dance with Malkovich's body. Craig does the dance with the intention of showing his ability in puppeteering, but he is in fact not the one controlling the situation. Instead, Craig becomes the puppet himself, and Maxine controls the puppet show not by her hands like Craig does, but by her words of manipulation. There is a difference in the way that the director and the subject control the film, in that whereas directors control with their executive power, the subject controls with the internal ideology that it carries.

This scene in the film suggests that the control of the subject overpowers the control of the director.

The film suggests a source of the director's over-possessiveness for the film: the director does not have control over how the audience interprets the film. The nature of the film as an ideology comes from the fact that the audience generates a conception of the subject of the film in their minds based on the film itself, independent from the intent of the directors. The audience's perception of the film is a sort of natural reaction. The audience wants, and accepts, only a monogenous image from the film, because it is what gives cinema its realism. The director, on the other hand, is saddened by the fact that he cannot control how the world receives the film, hoping that with more involvement, he can change that fact. The fallout between Craig and Lotte, because of Lotte's romance with Maxine, is what drives Craig to attempt more control of the camera.

The film ends with Lotte and Maxine starting a family together, and Craig still observing Maxine through the lens of their daughter. The ending brings out the fact that the purpose of the film is often to let the audience develop the sentiment of the subject. Both the audience and subjects are real, and film as the approximation to the real only serves as a medium to change and to expand the perceptions of the audience, as Baudry suggests in his essay *The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema*. After Craig takes control of Malkovich's body, the body deteriorates and looks less well-maintained, similar to the body of Craig. Afterward, he disposes the body of Malkovich and uses the body of their daughter instead to get closer to the subject. This brings out the topic of the disposable camera. And thus an understanding of the role of the apparatus has been reached: the role of the camera is not so important in itself, other than that it can get a good view of the subject. Craig is not the only

director that dominates the camera in the film. Craig's boss Dr. Lester, as exposed towards the end of the film, is, in fact, a captain in the past that is now using Dr. Lester's body. He claims that he has been living in other bodies before and that through living in different bodies, he wishes to achieve immortality. The relationship between the bodies and the controller of bodies suggests another point about the relationship between the directors and the camera: they are all just apparatuses, the means to an end. This illustrates the misconception that Comilli points out, that film critics such as Lebel reduces cinema to the camera apparatus.

The misconception is to be blamed by the meta-ness of the cinema, perhaps the director is once a camera as well. After all, it is the eyes of the filmmakers that inspire them to make the films. Moreover, what powers the captain to dominate the camera is not so much about his fascination for a subject, but about achieving immortality himself. It is an attempt for the director to indulge his appreciation of the world as a whole, no matter who's reality he lives in. Or perhaps, could it be his appreciation of the varieties of the views he can achieve through the different cameras?

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