

Being John Malkovich (1999)

“What happens when a man goes through his own portal?”
“We’ll see...”

Major Credits:

Director: Spike Jonze
Screenplay: Charlie Kaufman
Cast: John Cusack (Craig Schwartz); Cameron Diaz (Lotte Schwartz); Catherine Keener (Maxine); Orson Bean (Dr. Lester); John Malkovich (Himself); Charlie Sheen (Charlie)
Cinematography: Lance Acord
Music: Carter Burwell

Background

Being John Malkovich is the first of two very successful Jonze/Kaufman collaborations, followed by *Adaptation* (2002). Jonze (birth name Adam Spiegel) was already something of a prodigy, having made a name for himself as a magazine editor, skateboard entrepreneur, and director of music videos. He has returned to making short documentaries after directing *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009). Kaufman, a self-described “idiosyncratic” screenwriter, has gone on to write *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), which he also directed, in addition to adaptation. In retrospect, his screenplays all focus on struggling artists trying to find a viable form for their art and meaning in their personal lives.

For Kaufman, John Malkovich was the only possible actor to fulfill his conception of the screenplay. Malkovich was a highly respected stage actor noted principally for filmed adaptations of prestigious American works like Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (where he plays Lenny, “the retard” referenced in a scene from *BJM*), Shepard’s *True West*, and Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, and for his slithery role in *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988). He was probably selected for his enigmatic screen persona, his slightly sinister sexual ambiguity, and his reputation for artistic seriousness.

With its extremely complicated plot and offbeat dialogue, *BJM* can be properly catalogued as an early representative of what have come to be known as “complex narratives” or “puzzle films,” a genre often attributed to the influence of Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*). Other examples include: *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Memento* (2000), *Traffic* (2000), *Amores Perros* (2000), *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Lantana* (2001), *Waking Life* (2001), and *Crash* (2004), in addition to Kaufman’s later films. In its exploration of alternative realities and celebrity, *BJM* might also be compared with two equally absorbing American films of the previous year, *Pleasantville* and *the Truman Show*.

Cinematic Qualities

Although the most conspicuous stylistic element in *BJM* is probably Kaufman’s screenplay, Spike Jonze contributes a layer of self-reflexivity through his direction, particularly of the two performances of “Craig’s Dance of Despair and Disillusionment,” the first with a marionette, the second with Malkovich (and, presumably, a body double). Note the deceptiveness of the opening sequence: how the deployment of establishing shot, music, close-up, montage, and editing all subliminally remind us of the *filmmaker’s* art as we watch what we successively take to be a theatrical, musical, and puppetry performance. With the later foregrounding of Malkovich’s reputation as an *actor* and the contributions of Carter Burwell’s score, the film continually emphasizes the collaborative nature of film art.

Another, more obvious dimension of the film’s self-reflexivity can be found in the two parodic documentaries, the training film (“The 7 1/2th Floor”) and the PBS-style biography “John Horatio Malkovich.” The first is patently ridiculous: a low-budget re-creation of a ludicrous legend. The second, however, like Welles’ newsreel in *Citizen Kane*, delights us with its faux history and visual effects (Malkovich with the Pope possibly reminding cinephiles of Kane with Hitler).

Topics for Discussion

1. *BJM* may be described as a protracted inquiry into the nature of identity (see Scott Repass' review in *Film Quarterly*, 56.1: 29-36). After exploring the significance of artistic creativity, the physical body, economic status, celebrity, and gender, does the film offer a thesis about the formation of human identity or the possibility of knowing who we "really" are?
2. Maxine responds to the training film in the Mertin-Flemmer building as "bullshit," which it surely is. But Malkovich says in the midst of the mockumentary about his "protean" career, "Art always tells the truth, even when it's lying." And Charlie (Sheen) tells his friend Malkovich, "Truth is for suckers, anyways." How do these comments apply to *Being John Malkovich*?
3. Craig's street theatre performance of "Abelard and Heloise" appears to serve merely the comic function of demonstrating his public failure as a puppeteer. But since Kaufman also alludes to this same famous couple in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (the title is taken from Alexander Pope's poem, "Eloisa to Abelard," might the choice of this particular historical narrative serve as a deeper commentary on the film's themes?
4. Are all of these "topics for discussion" ultimately *beside the point*, essentially blind alleys that do not cohere into a philosophical vision and therefore remain irrelevant in assessing the film's achievement? Are we more in tune with the film's postmodernist project when we "ride the wave" of its fantasy, responding simply to Jonze/Kaufman pulling our strings, than when we try to make sense of its meaning? Perhaps the only "meaning," to refer to the dialogue at the top of the study guide, is in the *seeing*.