

# **Being John Malkovich Film Summary**

**Being John Malkovich by Spike Jonze**

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## Context

*Being John Malkovich* is one of the most original films ever created. Spike Jonze has created a movie without comparison. Charlie Kaufmann wrote the screenplay and sent it to Jonze's father-in-law Francis Ford Coppola who showed it to Jonze. At this point, Jonze chose to direct the film after already becoming famous for his direction of music videos for groups such as the Beastie Boys.

The film takes an in-depth look at what would happen if you could enter someone else's mind. Additionally, the characters explore different types of people and what they will do with unlimited power over another. For example, Craig and Lotte take completely different approaches to dealing with Malkovich and through him, Maxine.

*Being John Malkovich* is a fantasy movie and everything in the movie sets up a world where anything is possible. After watching the first half hour of the film, the viewer believes that anything is possible, even finding a door into John Malkovich's head. Floor 71/2 and its entire history present a world where nothing is as it should be. The viewer might even be reminded of scenes from the classic *Alice in Wonderland* as everything becomes topsy-turvy.

The original script has Dr. Lester and the others entering John Malkovich's portal for quite a different reason than extending their lives. The original plan was that they would be trying to take over the world in the name of Satan. Satan's actual name would have been Flemmer, the unknown Flemmer that the Merton-Flemmer building in which Craig and Dr. Lester work is named for. However, the script was eventually changed, and Flemmer remained unknown.

John Malkovich was chosen for the role and he describes his first reaction to the role and the screenplay as "When I first looked at the script, the title seemed like a one-line joke, but it turned out to be a 100-page joke." John was right that the script was a bit of a joke that turned into one of the most popular fantasy/comedy films of the year. He also later said, "I don't think, personally, I'm much like any character I ever played, including 'John Malkovich' (in *Being John Malkovich*). I don't really see the resemblance at all. It's more a frequency you transmit than something that you fundamentally are." However much unlike the real Malkovich his character may be, he plays the role amazingly well in this film.

A few pieces of film trivia will help the viewer understand how meticulous the writer and director were when creating the film. When Craig first enters the building, he reads "Floor 71/2" at the exact moment that the film reaches its seventh and a half minute. Additionally, Malkovich is practicing a scene from *Richard III* when Maxine comes to visit him one night. He is just saying the lines, "Was ever a woman in this humour woo'd? / Was ever a woman in this humour won?" when Maxine enters. In Shakespeare's play, this is the moment when Richard is boasting of using any and all means - power, lies, manipulation - to get the woman of his dreams, Queen Anne. When he leaves, Craig enters him and uses him to sleep with Maxine for the first time. The

moment is not just ironic, but also shows Jonze and Kaufman's clear attention to detail. These types of details make the film all the more interesting and captivating.

*Being John Malkovich* was nominated and won dozens of awards. A few of the nominations include nominations by the Academy Awards for Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Catherine Keener), Best Director (Spike Jonze), and Best Writing (Charlie Kaufman). In the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films Awards, the film won Best Film and Best Writer (Charlie Kaufman) while Catherine Keener received a nomination for Best Actress. Meanwhile, the American Comedy Awards presented John Malkovich with the award for the Funniest Supporting Actor in a Motion Picture. *Being John Malkovich* won hundreds of awards from around the world for its intricacy and comedy.



## Summary and Analysis

As the film begins, a stage curtain is opened and a life-sized male puppet walks around the stage. The puppet begins to destroy the room, breaking a mirror and turning over a table. Then, he looks up, realizes he's attached to the puppeteer, Craig, by strings and struggles to unbind himself. As the play comes to an end, the puppeteer takes a drink of his beer.

The next morning Craig is in bed with a parrot talking on his head. His wife, Lotte, comes in, removes the parrot, and talks to her about finding a new job. She goes to work and asks her husband to check out Elijah, the chimp, who is not feeling well. As Craig watches television later, he sees Derek Mantini's gimmick to get people to praise him - move a massive puppet from the side of a bridge. Craig says that he suffers because he raises issues.

Later, Craig is performing on the side of the street and a little girl stops to watch. Her father punches Craig when he realizes that it is a show about a nun and a priest wanting to sleep together. When Lotte asks why he does this to himself when she sees his eye, he responds, "I'm a puppeteer, honey." However, Craig does begin to look for a job and as he searches the classifieds, he sees an ad for a man with "fast hands."

John goes on a job interview on floor seven and a half. A woman in the elevator realizes his destination and helps him pry open the door. The ceilings in floor seven and a half are very low, so Craig must stoop to walk. The floor is part of a filing company, Lester Corporation. The secretary cannot seem to understand Craig's last name. He is sent in to see Dr. Lester. When Craig tries to tell Lester his real last name, he calls the woman out front a secretary and Dr. Lester becomes upset, telling him he's not sleeping with her. Dr. Lester has Craig perform a couple of tasks to see if he is skilled before calling his secretary to bring someone else in.

Dr. Lester and Craig talk as they wait and Lester explains that his secretary is sweet to put up with his speech impediment. Craig tries to explain that Lester doesn't have a problem, but Lester says his secretary has a Ph.D in speech impedimentology and must know. Lester explains how lonely he is because of his speech problem. Lester gives Craig the job and asks if he has any questions. Craig has just one: Why are the ceilings so low? Lester says that he will find out the information in training.

Craig goes into an orientation room where he begins to watch a video. A man on the video explains that an Irishman named James Merck wanted to erect a building named after him self. One day a dwarfed woman came and complained that the world was not made for her--she wants to be able to work in safety and comfort. Then, he tells her that he will take her as his wife and he'll build her a floor that's the right size for her. Since the rents are lower, businesses that need to cut corners have often used this floor.

As the video ends, Craig turns to a woman in the back and comments on the story. She tells him it's not true. He tries to strike up a conversation, but she will not tell him where



she is working. Craig comes home, and Lotte tells him that she is getting help for Elijah. At work, Craig talks to the girl again and she accuses him of trying to "get into her pants." Another woman, the secretary, hits on Craig, but he tells her that he's in love with someone else.

Dr. Lester comes over and tells Craig not to toy with Floris. Dr. Lester shares that he is 105 years old because he has continued drinking carrot juice through the years. Lester then begins to tell Craig how much he wants to get into bed with Floris. Craig explains that the workplace is not the best place to share this personal information, so Lester tells him to meet him at a juice place after work. When Craig calls home to tell Lotte, he will be late he stops the girl. He tells her that if he gets her name right in three tries, then she has to have a drink with him that night. He finally finds out that her name is Maxine, and she tells him to meet him that night at the Stuffed Pig.

At the juice place, Dr. Lester tells Craig all his sexual fantasies. Lester asks him and Lotte to dinner on Thursday. Finally, Craig tells him that he has to get home to his wife, but he actually goes to meet Maxine. Craig tells her that he likes her: her energy and attitude. Maxine jokes with Craig telling them that he must be gay, but he explains that he would really like to sleep with her. She tells him he doesn't have a chance. When he tells her that he's a puppeteer, she asks for the check.

Craig finally goes home and tells Lotte about the possible dinner plans but says he can get them out of it. He tells her how hard it was for him to get away. Lotte tells John that Elijah isn't feeling well, so he's sleeping with them tonight. Craig goes to his workshop before going to bed. Craig acts out his interaction with Maxine using his puppets. The next day, Craig tries to explain his interest in puppets to Maxine as well as his attraction and interest in her.

As he is filing, Craig drops a file behind the cabinet. When he attempts to retrieve it, he discovers a small door. He opens the door and enters a small passageway. As he crawls through the passageway, Craig touches something slimy and then he is sucked through a vessel. He ends up inside John Malkovich's head and watches Malkovich read the newspaper and get ready for the day. We discover that it is Malkovich when he looks into a mirror and then a cab driver recognizes him. In another scene on the phone, Maxine tells someone that the puppeteer told him he loved her today, and she can't "think of anything more pathetic." After a few minutes, Craig falls out of the vessel and ends up on the side of the New Jersey turnpike.

When Craig gets back to the office, he visits Maxine and tells her what happened. Craig tries to explain who Malkovich is and that this brings up a lot of ethical questions. He tells her that this has been a life-changing experience. Later that night, Maxine calls and tells him that they should sell tickets. He is not sure whether this is a safe idea. Lotte comes home, and then Craig explains that he's going to be busy at work selling tickets to Malkovich. Lotte tells him that she wants to go into Malkovich's head. He says she can't do it tomorrow because of work at the office, but he tells her she can go tonight. He tells her he'll pick her up by the side of the New Jersey turnpike. While in



Malkovich's head, Lotte sees him getting in and out of the shower. She is turned on by his sexy looks.

Lotte falls out by the turnpike and tells Craig she must go back. She explains that everything made sense there, and she knew who she was. In awe she says, "I was John Malkovich." They are on their way to meet Lester, so she cannot go back.

Lester is surprised that Lotte can understand everything that he says. She asks for directions to the restroom, but when she arrives at the top of the stairs, she has difficulty finding the room--all the doors look alike. One door she opens has pictures of John Malkovich on every wall. On the way home, Lotte asks what Lester's relationship to Malkovich is, but she doesn't tell about the room.

At work the next day, Craig and Maxine make plans and they put an ad in the newspaper. Craig is shocked when Lotte walks in as they talk. Lotte has come back to "do Malkovich" again. After evaluating her experience, Lotte has decided that she's a transsexual and if she still feels that way after a second experience, she is going to ask her allergist, Dr. Feldman, about sexual reassignment. Maxine encourages Craig to let Lotte go. After they leave her office, Maxine calls John Malkovich.

Malkovich is home reading a book. In his head, Lotte reads with him. The phone rings, and Maxine is on the other line. Malkovich is uncomfortable with the conversation and asks her not to call again. She tells Malkovich to meet her for dinner later that night, and Lotte keeps telling him to "meet her there." Lotte tells Craig that she must go back later that night.

When Maxine walks up, Lotte is shocked to see that it was Maxine on the phone. Lotte is oddly attracted to Maxine. John tells her that he was intrigued by her voice, but Maxine explains that her voice is the most uninteresting thing about her. Craig tries to explain to Lotte that men feel unfulfilled sometimes too after she tells him that she thinks Malkovich is lonely. Lotte then suggests that they invite Maxine over, but Craig says that he doesn't want to expose Lotte to tensions at work. She says that's okay.

Later that night, a man has come in response to their newspaper advertisement. The man goes into Malkovich as he fixes dinner and tries to order a bath mat. After his experience, the man runs to Craig and embraces him. At dinner, Lotte talks and flirts with Maxine as they drink and smoke joints. Craig and Lotte are competing for her attentions. Maxine explains her theory that the world is divided into two people: those who go after what they want and those who don't. Both Craig and Lotte lean toward Maxine for a kiss. She tells Craig that she's not attracted to him and tells Lotte that she's only attracted to her when she's inside Malkovich.

More people are coming to be Malkovich. Lotte calls Maxine and says she wants to see her again, so Maxine sets up an appointment with Malkovich at 4:11. Craig lies in bed alone, while Maxine joins John. As John kisses her, she tells him to wait a couple of minutes because she's early. When 4:11 arrives, Maxine begins making love to John. Inside John's head, Lotte is excited, and Maxine tells her she loves her. When John is



shocked to be called Lotte, she asks if it's okay and he says "yes." After 15 minutes, Lotte falls to the ground by the turnpike and lies there exhilarated.

When Lotte comes home, Craig accuses her of being in John with Maxine. Lotte tells him that they love her. John walks away, and the next day at work, we can see that his spirits are low. He goes to see Maxine and asks her if she's torturing him on purpose. Craig claims to be in love with her, but Maxine says she's in love with John and Lotte. She asks if he knows how it feels to be looked at by two people with lust and devotion through the same pair of eyes. Craig storms out of the office and runs through the streets toward home.

Craig hides in their apartment and he holds Lotte at gunpoint. He throws her to the ground, dials Maxine's number, and tells her she needs to see her. Lotte tells Maxine to close early and Maxine says she'll see them both in an hour. Craig forces Lotte into one of the animal cages and goes to meet Maxine.

John is practicing for his new show when Maxine shows up. He asks for a short break and goes to meet her. Craig meets them and he forces John to move and speak as John and Maxine make love. Craig comes home and brags to Lotte that "it's just a matter of practice before Malkovich is nothing more than another puppet hanging next to my worktable." Craig says he'll tell her more when he gets back home.

In Malkovich's home, he talks with Charlie Sheen, explaining his experience to him. Charlie tells him that he was stoned so that explains the circumstance. Charlie suggests that maybe Maxine's using him to channel a "dead lesbian lover." Malkovich says he must know the truth, but Charlie tells him that "the truth is for suckers."

Malkovich follows Maxine when she leaves for work later that evening. He follows a group of people onto the floor and asks one man to explain what service is being provided. A man tells him that you get to be Malkovich for fifteen minutes. John runs to the front, and Craig tries to explain to him what is happening. John demands to have the experience too. Craig is worried about what will happen when a man enters his own portal, but Maxine tells him just to wait and see. When John is sucked through, he watches himself eating dinner dressed as a woman. The entire menu says "Malkovich." John is terrified to see hundred of copies of him self around the restaurant, all in different shapes and forms. He runs out of the restaurant and falls onto the side of the turnpike. Malkovich demands that the portal be closed immediately. Malkovich says he'll see him in court.

At home, Craig and Lotte fight over Maxine. He admits to only avoiding Maxine, because she wouldn't allow him near her. Lotte begs him to let her out and allow her to take a shower. Craig feels that he's a monster, but Lotte reassures him that he's just very confused. They each confess their love, and he climbs into the cage next to her. Then, he calls Maxine and has Lotte tell her that they need to meet. Maxine says to meet her in Malkovich in an hour. Craig locks Lotte back up with Elijah and leaves.





The scene then switches to Elijah's memory of trying to save his family from hunters. He then unties Lotte so that she can get free. Lotte then calls Maxine again and explains the situation to her. Maxine is impressed that Craig can control Malkovich. Lotte is concerned that Maxine no longer loves her. Maxine hangs up so that she can meet Malkovich.

Malkovich angrily asks what Maxine wants and she says she can explain about the portal. Malkovich is still wary, so she calls to Craig explaining that Lotte called her. Craig tells her that he loves her and didn't know another way to be with her. Maxine is impressed that Craig can control Malkovich almost completely. She suggests that they have sex on the dining room table and then make Malkovich eat an omelet off of it. Although Malkovich tries to refuse, Craig is too strong.

Lotte goes to Dr. Lester's house and explains her obsession with Malkovich. She tells him she came to him because of the room she saw. Lester is surprised that she wants to be Malkovich. He explains that his real name is Captain Mertin and he discovered that he could live forever by leaping from vessel to vessel.

Mertin explains that he can leap to Malkovich on his 44th birthday when he is ripe. However, if he does not enter by midnight, then he will be confined to a new infant vessel and will be stuck there. He also tells her that he found a way to bring others along, and he introduces her to the others. They ask Lotte to join them inside John Malkovich, but she tells him that there is something she must tell him.

Craig explains to Maxine that he can stay in Malkovich longer by wearing him like a suit. Maxine asks Craig to do a puppet show for her with Malkovich. He performs "Craig's Dance of Despair and Disillusionment" to a CD that he found in Malkovich's room. Like the puppet in the first scene, Craig uses the Malkovich to tear the room apart. Maxine finds his performance to be incredible. Maxine asks Craig to stay in him forever. They realize that they can use his fame and money to care for themselves. Malkovich and Maxine go to visit his agent to tell him that he wants to be a puppeteer, and the agent takes care of the situation.

On television, Malkovich's new show begins that speaks about his puppeteering career. John calls to a pregnant Maxine to come watch the television show. John has become a star in the world of puppets; he has even starred at the Emmys. Sean Penn speaks on television to say that eventually most actors will probably become puppeteers. Maxine is described as his mentor and muse. While Lotte watches the show with the others, she shed tears over her lost life. John is surprised to hear that Maxine has recoiled from the public and him since becoming pregnant. In the nursery, Maxine puts a puppet to bed.

John calls to Maxine and tells her that he has to go to a premiere, but maybe they can celebrate John's 44th birthday later that night. Craig in John complains that he should've found a younger body. At the premier, John receives a standing ovation for his puppeteer work in Swan Lake.



At home during the premiere, Maxine rubs her stomach. When John arrives home, he sees that the house has been trashed. As he walks in, he receives a call from Lester telling him that they have Maxine and will kill her if he doesn't leave Maxine. Craig is concerned that Maxine will have nothing to do with him if he's not in Malkovich, and he will not have the fame and fortune he now has. Craig hangs up on him.

Lotte asks Lester if they can't just push Craig out, but Lester explains that Craig is too strong and that they will just be pushed into the subconscious. Lotte goes to Maxine and tells her that if she can't have her, no one will. Lotte tries to shoot Maxine, but Maxine runs into the portal with Lotte following her. They fall into a closet in a room where two people are having sex. They then run through different doors ending up in a locker room, a room where a boy talks to himself, a bathroom, living room, a bus, and finally onto the side of the New Jersey turnpike. Through all the scenes, Malkovich is constantly being mocked by others.

Lotte yells at Maxine, telling her that she loved her. Maxine tells Lotte that she is the father of her child. They decide to parent the child together. In a bar, Malkovich drinks and fights a man who recognizes him. Craig calls Lester and begs him not to kill Maxine. Craig leaves Malkovich, and the others enter. Malkovich gets to his feet in the bar's bathroom and is shocked to see himself but exhilarated to be free. One moment later, however, he once again becomes a captive to the others. Lester wants to wait for Lotte, but she is on the turnpike kissing Maxine. Lester finally crawls inside, and they become John Malkovich. On the turnpike, Craig calls to Maxine and tells her that his leaving Malkovich proves his love. He calls after her, crying bitterly and tells her that he will reenter Malkovich's body and push Lester and the other out.

Seven years later, Charlie Sheen comes to the door of Dr. Lester's house, but now Malkovich lives there. Malkovich and Floris have gotten married, and Malkovich explains to him that he has found a way for them all to live forever. Malkovich's marriage to Floris lets us know that Dr. Lester and the others were able to take up residence in Malkovich's head. They enter a room devoted to Emily, Maxine and Lotte's daughter. Because he waited until after midnight on Malkovich's 44th birthday, Craig was sent into the next vessel: Emily. Craig has entered Emily's head, and Craig proclaims his love for Maxine. Emily begins swimming underwater and the final credits roll.



# Characters

## Craig Schwartz, played by John Cusack

### Description

Craig is a puppeteer who wants to be famous like his rival, Derek Mantini, but since Craig wants to use puppets to talk about issues, his career seems to be doomed. We first see Craig on the side of the street performing a rather risqué scene from the letters of Elois and Abelard. A little girl stops to watch the puppet show, but when her father realizes what she's watching, he punches Craig and hurries off with his daughter.

Craig is married to Lotte, an animal lover. Craig hates staying in the house while she's out working, so he finally finds a paying job on Floor 71/2. Craig does not understand what his job will be, but he is desperate so he takes the job anyway. Craig falls in love with Maxine and vows to do whatever it takes to get her.

### Analysis

Craig is a selfish man who focuses only on his career and his desire for Maxine to the exclusion of all else. The only thing Craig seems to have going for him is his relationship with Lotte. He is out of work, and his career as a puppeteer seems to be a failure; however, after taking the job on Floor 71/2, Craig becomes interested in Maxine and is willing to do almost anything to be with her. His desperation reveals his lack of confidence in himself and his future.

Craig becomes more and more obsessed with himself after finding the vessel into John Malkovich's head. Finally, he believes all his dreams can come true by manipulating Malkovich to do what he wants. However, he ends up falling in love with Maxine, and he finally sacrifices himself for her. After being rebuffed, Craig gets stuck in Maxine's daughter, Emily, and has to live out his life inside her. His great ruse to have a successful career and the woman of his dreams failed dismally in the end.

## Lotte Schwartz, played by Cameron Diaz

### Description

Lotte is a rather innocent woman who loves animals. Lotte is Craig's wife, and she supports him even through the difficult times he faces after his career as a puppeteer seems to have ended all too soon.

Lotte eventually finds out about the portal into Malkovich's head and she falls in love with Maxine while she is with Malkovich. Lotte begins to fight Craig for Maxine, but Maxine tells her that she only loves her when Lotte is inside of Malkovich. Lotte tries to



stay inside Malkovich, but she is locked up by Craig who is fighting her for Maxine. Lotte eventually wins Maxine and expresses her love for her as they raise Maxine's daughter, Emily, together.

## **Analysis**

Lotte changes during the course of the film. When we first meet her, she seems innocent and unassuming. She puts up with all of Craig's moods and treats the animals in their home like her own children. However, after entering Malkovich and being with Maxine, Lotte loses sight of the rest of her life.

Lotte begins to fight Craig for Maxine, but he eventually tricks both her and Maxine as he enters Malkovich personally. Lotte considers going with Dr. Lester and the others into Malkovich, but she realizes that she cannot give up Maxine. Maxine finally accepts her homosexuality, and she and Lotte raise their daughter in peace.

## **John Horatio Malkovich, played by himself, John Malkovich**

### **Description**

John Malkovich is a famous actor who is manipulated by various characters in the film. There is a portal in Craig's office on Floor 71/2 that leads directly into Malkovich's head. Malkovich does not realize at first that he is being invaded other people. Only when Craig takes full control of Malkovich does Malkovich realize that he is being manipulated.

Throughout most of the film, Malkovich is not himself but whoever is living inside his body at the time. He often does what Lotte says, but when Craig enters, Malkovich is simply the puppet that Craig uses to be with Maxine.

### **Analysis**

Malkovich has little character in this film as he is constantly under the control of someone else. When he is himself, Malkovich seems to be a calm, collected man dedicated to his profession. However, he changes professions completely to become a puppeteer after Craig takes over his body.

Malkovich is the most intricate character in the film, but he is embodied by other people so that his own personality is barely seen. Craig inhabits Malkovich and becomes selfish and obsessed with fame, while Dr. Lester uses Malkovich's body to live forever and marry his secretary Floris with whom he has been obsessed. Malkovich is never allowed to be himself, but he is the puppet of those in and around him.



## Maxine Lund, played by Catherine Keener

### Description

Maxine works with Craig, but he never finds out what her mysterious job on Floor 71/2 is. Craig is immediately interested in Maxine, but she is not interested in him. Maxine is a very trendy woman who finds John's puppeteer work to be synonymous with playing with dolls.

Maxine works with Craig after he finds the door into Malkovich's head. Maxine also sets out to meet Malkovich so that she can see how the process works. One night she ends up sleeping with Malkovich while Lotte is in his head, and she falls in love with Lotte.

### Analysis

Maxine represents the trendy girl of today in the film. She is what everyone else in the movie wants or wants to be. Both Craig and Lotte end up falling in love with her as does Malkovich. However, Maxine only really cares for Lotte, but she only loves her when Lotte is inside Malkovich.

Eventually, Maxine is able to admit her feelings for Lotte and embrace her homosexuality. Together, Maxine and Lotte raise the child Maxine has with Malkovich without ever realizing that she is actually inhabited by Craig. Maxine goes from being the trendy girl to the wise woman who is willing to admit she loves Lotte so that they can be together.

## Dr. Lester, played by Orson Bean

### Description

Dr. Lester is Craig's boss when he joins the team on Floor 71/2. Dr. Lester believes he has a speech impediment because Floris cannot understand what he says. Lester tells Craig that he is 105 years old because he drinks carrot juice, but we later find out that he has actually found a way to inhabit the bodies of other people.

### Analysis

Dr. Lester helps to hold the entire story of the vessel and living forever together. Without Dr. Lester's experience with the vessel and his attempt to take more than one person with him, the story would make very little sense.

Since the vessel seems to go through family members, one can assume that Dr. Lester is John Malkovich's father; however, this is never mentioned explicitly in the film. Lester's desire is not only to live forever but also to marry his secretary, Floris; by becoming John Malkovich, Lester can achieve both of these desires.



## Floris, played by Mary Kay Place

### Description

Floris is Dr. Lester's secretary who constantly misunderstands what people say. She is also his primary love interest; however, she does not find him attractive. Eventually, she marries John Malkovich after Lester and the others have taken up residence in his body.

### Analysis

Floris is a relatively unimportant character in the film, but her marriage to Malkovich indicates that Lester and the others were able to get into Malkovich's body without being kicked out by Craig.

# Themes

## You Can Live Forever... at a Price

In *Being John Malkovich*, we see a number of characters who plan to live forever. Not only do they want to live forever, but also they actually are living forever. Dr. Lester is 105 years old and plans to continue living in John Malkovich's body until the next vessel is ready. The most important part of any vessel is its ripeness which is not reached until the age of forty-four, and the only concern would be if the present vessel died before the next vessel was available.

Although people are able to live forever, they must sacrifice something for this privilege. All those who enter a vessel that is ripe must sacrifice their old bodies in order to inhabit the new body. All the old hopes and dreams must be given up as they change bodies so that they actually can live forever.

## No One Can Be Trusted

Throughout this movie, those closest to the characters tend to be the ones that are least worthy of trust. Lotte cannot trust Craig at all because he treats her terribly in order to be with Maxine. First, he beats her and then he locks her in a cage with the other animals. Both Lotte and Craig have become "animals" in their fight for Maxine. Also, Maxine does not know who to trust since both Craig and Lotte inhabit Malkovich at different times. Eventually she ends up married to Craig while intending to be with Lotte.

John Malkovich is the most used of all the characters in the film. He has no one whom he can trust as everyone has their own agenda for entering his mind and his world. Malkovich is first used so that Craig and Maxine can make money, but eventually he is used by both Craig and Lotte to be with Maxine. Craig also uses Malkovich to further his career as a puppeteer. No one in this film can be trusted since they are all looking out for themselves.

## Reality is Many-Sided

Reality is skewed in this film. First, we see an odd reality as Craig goes to work on Floor 71/2. The ceilings are low, the people confused, and the job strange. Nothing makes sense in this world, creating a place where anything can happen. The alternate reality helps to build the story to the point that Craig finding a door into Malkovich's head no longer seems quite so strange.

In the film, Malkovich's reality is different from that of others in the film. Although he thinks he is having a relationship with Maxine, the alternate reality is that Maxine is having a relationship with Lotte through him while actually Craig is in Malkovich most of the time. The viewer sees that reality at any one time is made up of many different

perspectives, all of which are correct in their own views. Neither reality nor truth is stable, but both change with the person and perspective from which they are viewed.



## Style and Cinematography

*Being John Malkovich* moves the viewer into an entirely different universe. The director and writer use plot devices and stylistic decisions to portray this alternate universe. Spike Jonze has a certain style, a type of approach to this film that allows the implausible and unbelievable events to seem possible. As the film begins, we are introduced to Craig, an out-of-work puppeteer, who tries to make statements through his art. In real life, it is unbelievable that someone would actually spend their days performing on the side of the street or trying to beat out a competing puppeteer; however, in the world of the film, it slowly begins to seem normal.

Craig's job on Floor 71/2 adds to this world by creating a world of its own. Floor 71/2 has an amusing cast of odd people, including Floris, Dr. Lester, and Maxine, who make anything seem possible. The low ceilings and unusual training video only add to the strangeness of this world. Then, as you have finally come to believe that this odd world can be real, a twist is thrown in when Craig finds a vessel into John Malkovich's head. Although the viewer should be shocked, the artistry used in creating the world makes this seem like just another unusual but possible event.

The movie begins with what you think is a bit of joke; you might even think, "Surely, this movie isn't like this all the way through!" But, the movie draws you in little by little until you can see how it is possible for Craig to find a vessel into John Malkovich's head, take over his body, and then get kicked out only to re-enter the body of a child name Emily, yet to be born. By the time you get to the end of the movie, you are amazed to find that the story and the characters were so vivid, so alive that they actually sucked you in. That's why this movie is not only a work of art, but also it is a resounding success.



# Motifs

## The Beautiful Woman

Maxine is the beautiful woman in this film. She is the woman that everyone wants, but no one can completely have on their own. Throughout literature, film, and history, the beautiful woman has been a prize sought after even to the death. Greece and Troy had a war over the beautiful woman; Adam fell because of Eve; the beautiful woman is the unreachable, the desired prize.

Using the beautiful woman as a part of the film gives the characters motives for their actions. Craig and Lotte both try to get inside Malkovich and try to outwit each other just so that they can be with Maxine for a few moments. Maxine is the reason for their private war and for Craig's entrance into and exit from Malkovich.

## Journey

The characters in *Being John Malkovich* make their own journeys. Each person experiences some type of change after being in Malkovich. Craig becomes obsessed with being the master puppeteer who controls Malkovich; Lotte becomes obsessed with Maxine and being with her through Malkovich; Maxine becomes obsessed with Lotte from having been Malkovich.

All the characters change throughout the course of the film with their journey through Malkovich being symbolic of their change, their rebirth. Each person also journeys through time to become a new person. Craig begins to watch Maxine and Lotte from the body of their daughter while the two women begin to love each other without Malkovich.

## The Outcast

Craig and Lotte are the outcasts of society. Both are odd and have unusual ways of expressing themselves. Whereas Maxine is the beautiful woman that everyone wants, these two can't seem to find a place to fit in. Once they experience being inside Malkovich, however, the two begin to have a sense of identity.

Unlike many stories, this story does not tell of a triumphing outcast. This is not a Cinderella story, but the story of outcasts where only one truly finds a sense of self. Craig never finds a place where he is entirely comfortable since he gets stuck in Emily and has to live her life. However, Lotte eventually stays with Maxine and admits her feelings openly.

# Symbols

## Floor 71/2

Floor 71/2 is symbolic of the entire ridiculousness of much of the story. Nothing in the story is at all believable when you consider it logically. From the beginning, the story is complete fantasy, but by the end of the film, the plot seems almost believable. Floor 71/2 and other odd events and people make the story seem somewhat plausible.

Floor 71/2 also gives a basis for the story in that Craig has to find the door somewhere, and he needs to learn about the vessel. By working for Dr. Lester on this floor, Craig is able to do both in a believable way.

## Many Malkovich's

What would it look like if you went inside your own brain? Malkovich's experience inside his brain seeks to answer that question. When he enters, he sees many different Malkovich's all living and eating together. He is terrified of the scene and hurries to get out of his own brain.

Taking the view that humans are self-serving and have the primary goal of self-preservation, it is no surprise that if you went inside your own head all you would see was yourself. Malkovich wants the best for him, and his entire mind is filled with himself.

## The Vessel

The Vessel allows those who enter to experience a type of rebirth. After entering Malkovich, the person sees life through his eyes before coming out beside the New Jersey turnpike. Each person who leaves Malkovich is covered in a gooey slime looking like a child who has just been born.

Being inside Malkovich changes every person, but not all change for the good. A rebirth can be either good or bad, and the outcome seems to depend on the person more than their experiences. The Vessel represents the way to be reborn, but the Vessel does not decide who will be reborn or what will happen to them; the Vessel is just a tool for the rebirth.



# Essay Questions

Why does Craig take the job on Floor 71/2?

Why are the ceilings so low on Floor 71/2?

What is the relationship between Floris and Dr. Lester?

How does Craig stumble upon the door in his office? Where does the door lead?

Where does Craig end up at the end of his journey?

What does Dr. Lester mean when he says that Malkovich is not yet "ripe"?

How does Dr. Lester plan to not be lonely when he enters the next person?

Why does Craig take over Malkovich's body? Why is he so much better at that than other people?

Who does Maxine fall in love with? Why does she later seem depressed after she becomes pregnant and is living with Malkovich?

Where do all of the people in the film end up? Who is in which body and how do we know?

## Bibliography