The Absurdity of *Being John Malkovich*

I had never heard of John Malkovich before watching *Being John Malkovich*. In fact, upon hearing the title of the film, I assumed he was a fictionalized, slightly intimidating-sounding character conjured up by some screenwriter. Only halfway through the film did I realize that John Malkovich is indeed a living, breathing man. In fact, John Malkovich is an actor, producer, director and, to top it all off, a fashion designer. This revelation did not make anything clearer to me than before knowing John Malkovich was a real person; instead, it only added to my confusion about why this movie existed in the first place. I knew the basics: The movie came out in 1999, directed by Spike Jonze, starring John Cusack, K.K. Dodds, John Malkovich himself, and the *very* young Cameron Diaz. I certainly wasn't the only one who hadn't heard of John Malkovich, and the release of the movie wasn't that far away from the present day.

The beginning of the film starts out promising, but then again, most films tend to be promising at the beginning. I watched expectantly as the story began to unfold, wondering when and where the action would finally begin to rise. When it did, I was not prepared. Think of one of Yo-Yo Ma's cello suites, but three-fourths of the way through Skrillex rudely blasts over the gentle swells of strings. That may be the best analogy I can use to describe the plot mapped out in *Being John Malkovich*. While the story begins benignly enough with a mildly-unhappy couple in some dire need of communication skills, the rest of the story takes a turn that I still can't seem to wrap my head around. The New Yorker couple's relationship quickly breaks down when the husband gets a menial office job and discovers a portal in the building that leads into the mind of the none-other-than John Malkovich. In an attempt to make a profit off of this portal, the husband and his female co-worker combine efforts to create a business scheme out of the experience of being Malkovich. Relationships get blurred, and from there it's difficult to be precise in the plot's logic. I found myself exclaiming to my TV, which, as someone who typically keeps their emotions to themselves, was extremely unusual. I felt myself getting

angry at the film, asking the people around me if they were making any sense of it. It got to the point where I was having an active, one-sided conversation with the unhearing actors. "Why is this happening?" I would question, jabbing my fist at the screen. "Who are all of these people and why do they want to be John Malkovich? What is going *on*?" My stomach began to hurt. My blood seemed to be flowing too quickly through my veins.

I have watched longer films than *Being John Malkovich,* but this film in particular never seemed to want to end. As I watched more and more characters in the film fall in love with the "experience" of being John Malkovich, I became enraged. I wanted to take the main characters by the shoulders and shake some sense into them. Who thought up this plot in the first place? Why in the world did someone think this plot was a worthy story, something regular people would want to watch as entertainment? It wasn't as if the acting was poorly done. It was actually quite well done. But my anger reached beyond the quality of the film. It was directed towards the puppeteer, the orchestrator of it all. I wanted to find the person responsible for making this movie and give them a piece of my mind.

It wasn't until a week later — I was still thinking about it, even then — that I realized the film wasn't as terrible as I made it out to be. Perhaps the film was quirky and infuriatingly illogical, but that was the point, and I had completely missed it. While I desperately wanted to put the blame on the director and his "poor taste," after enough time thinking about it I came to realize that I had approached a shamelessly absurd film from the wrong angle. I had postured myself before a comedy-drama with the wrong expectations and assumptions. I was thrown for a loop, infuriated about a film for way longer than any one person should be. The blame for my anger was my own.

In retrospect, this is what makes the film so brilliant. It makes people like me feel like a moron a week after they watch it. The revelation of comedy and the joy and freedom of its absurdity hit you like a delayed brick, falling from a high perch above. While I'm sure there's many people out there who have watched this film and have automatically "gotten it," I have come to see that while I am still not a fan of the film, I can appreciate

the intense emotions that it was able to extract out of me. The confusion and anger that I felt while watching the film turned out to be so memorable that I still think about *Being John Malkovich* daily. Of course, there are themes that could be pulled from the film, such as the awareness of other people's self-consciousness in comparison to our own, but that wasn't what struck me. What sticks out in my mind is the horror I felt watching a film that makes the audience feel completely out of control. The plot is preposterous, but it's meant to be and that's what makes it so great. Nothing is expected, and being someone who very much likes to be in control of herself and her current situation, one can only imagine how the erratic nature of the film made me want to pull my hair out.

At the time I was watching the film, the world had just recently shut down due to the outbreak of Covid-19. I was stubbornly stuck in denial of my situation: I was back home in rural Vermont, surrounded by my family, mountains still covered in snow, and trees. I was still trying to convince myself that I had life under control. I would be heading back to school soon, and life was going to get back to normal, or so I would tell myself. Sitting on the edge of my seat watching this film, I felt the anger that had been multiplying inside me bubble up to the surface. The wild, out-of-control, illogical nature of the movie made me want to scream. My own life was out of my control, even though I was working very hard to convince myself otherwise. Nothing made sense, and I was exasperated. Why couldn't a movie just make sense? Most movies I watched made sense. There was a resolution, a clean cut ending. But this film just made me feel more untethered. These feelings, tied to my current circumstances plus the wrong assumptions I was bringing to the film, sent me over the edge. I was in the midst of catharsis, perhaps much needed at the time.

Will I ever watch *Being John Malkovich* again? Probably not. But I will always remember this film as something that had a significant impact on me. While that impact may not be exactly positive, I am secretly delighted that something as simple as characters on a screen can provoke intense reactions from such a mild-mannered person as myself. It also, oddly enough, served as a mirror to my own life at the time when I felt

like nothing was going my way. Life can just seem irrational and pointless at times, and there's not much you can

do about it except sit tight, grab a good snack, and wait until the credits roll.