

Document Citation

Title	[Being John Malkovich]
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Source	<i>Vogue</i>
Date	1999 Oct
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	228
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Being John Malkovich, Jonze, Spike, 1999

Vogue
10/99

From the sly intelligence of *Rushmore* and *Election* to the rude glee of *Austin Powers* and *South Park*, Hollywood movies are now funnier than they've been in years. This comedy boom takes an utterly fantastic new turn in *Being John Malkovich*, a post-modern riff on *Through the Looking Glass* that deserves to be a cult classic. It stars John Cusack as Craig Schwartz, a failed street puppeteer, caught in a routine marriage to Lotte, an eco-loving pet-store employee played by a frumped-down Cameron Diaz. But when he lands a filing-clerk job on the seventh-and-a-half floor of a Manhattan office building (the ceilings are so low that everyone has to bend nearly double), Craig has two life-changing experiences. He falls for a coldhearted colleague, Maxine (a marvelously bitchy Catherine Keener), and stumbles across a hidden passageway that leads directly into, of all places, the mind of John Malkovich. Pass through this portal and you can literally be Malkovich—sharing the actor's vanity as he preens in the mirror, enjoying his physical pleasure while he makes love to a woman, relishing his fame when he instantly gets the table he wants in a crowded restaurant.

The movie starts slowly, and at first I feared it was going to be about Craig and Lotte's many struggles. But *Being John Malkovich* quickly knocks our expectations for a loop. Although few actors are more likable than Cusack and Diaz (she's our gamest movie star), Lotte and Craig prove far more slippery than we anticipate. And their story spins off in directions so deliriously unpredictable that we feel like we're walking over a series of trapdoors. The movie's filled with fabulous bits, such as two women making love using Malkovich's body as their medium and the narcissistic nightmare when Malkovich is plunged into a world in which every single person, from waiters to pearl-necklaced socialites, has his own face. Playing himself is a savvy move at this point, for he's already fallen so deep into self-parody (for instance, *Con Air*) that the only cure is to deliberately spoof his own image. And that's what he does here—sending up his glowering self-importance, his odd effeminacy, his reputation as a lizardy roué, even his ballooning paunch. When the scheming Craig starts using the actor as his personal puppet, Malkovich does a spastic, half-naked dance so hilariously unflattering that you have to be impressed by the actor's daring.

Being John Malkovich is the long-awaited first feature by 29-year-old Spike Jonze, the maker of legendary videos for (among others) the Beastie Boys, R.E.M., and Björk. Most MTV guys prefer to make big action pictures like *Armageddon*, so they bombard viewers with gaudy images and deafening explosions. But Jonze is too confident to rely on flash. His style has a classical lucidity. He gives his actors room to act, uses a moody musical score by Carter Burwell instead of larding the sound track with pop songs, and lets the hallucinatory events speak for themselves. The movie's bursting with ideas about celebrity worship, the fluidity of gender, the commercialization of everything, even miracles; perhaps it's a parable about Internet culture. But Jonze doesn't hammer away at his themes. He gives them an elegant tap, like Lionel Hampton playing the vibes. So does rookie screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, who committed the heroic folly of writing a script so prankishly original that it defied any rational expectation of ever being made. I can only imagine what it must be like to pitch such a plotline to a studio executive.

"So what's your movie about, Mr. Kaufman?"

"It's like *The Matrix*, but instead of going into cyberspace you slip into John Malkovich's brain."

"The brain of that old ham?" Bzzzz. "Millie, could you please call security? And have them bring a straitjacket." □ *pata* ▶ 230

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