A Psychanalytic Interpretation Essay, Research Paper

Research Paper

A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Being John Malkovich

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The idea of wanting to be someone else, the development of a child’s character, and the repression of certain traumatic childhood experiences are all at the heart of Freud’s psychoanalytic approach. Through my interpretation of Being John Malkovich I will discuss how these ideas have been represented in the movie.

Being John Malkovich, by Spike Jonze, is the tale of a young struggling puppeteer who takes a job as a filing clerk in the downtown firm of LesterCorp. Behind a filing cabinet in his office he discovers a small portal that takes him inside the mind of actor John Malkovich. John Cusak plays puppeteer Craig Shwartz. Craig’s wife, Lotte Shwartz, is played by Cameron Diaz and is an attendant in a local pet store.

Craig falls in love with Maxine Lund, played by Catherine Keener, who also works at LesterCorp. After being rejected by Maxine, Craig informs her of the portal that he has found and the two begin a business venture of selling trips into Malkovich’s head for $200.00 a trip. Lotte takes a trip into Malkovich’s head and is immediately addicted to it. She wants to BE Malkovich all the time. Through her experience inside Malkovich, Lotte realizes that she is a transsexual and that she too is in love with Maxine. Maxine eventually tells the two that she is not attracted to Craig and that she is “smitten” with Lotte, but only when she is in Malkovich. The rest of the movie deals with the trials and tribulations associated with both Lotte and Craig competing for control of Malkovich to ultimately win the love of Maxine.

The first aspect of Freud’s psychoanalytic approach I will discuss is that of child development. Freud discusses the three stages of child development: the ID, Ego, and Super Ego. The id is man’s (generic meaning, referring to both sexes) instinctual, primitive, and hedonistic urges for pure pleasure, which the Id is bent on experiencing, without regard to any consequences.

The super-ego is man’s senses of morality, first brought on by experiences with authoritative figures and parents, which basically hold ideas of what is right and wrong, and is almost a direct paradox to the id. The ego, which can be seen as the mediator between the Id and the super-ego, takes into account the activities of the external world, and attempts to invoke some balance among all three parts of the mind, with failure resulting in neurosis of some kind.

For Craig, his instinctual drive for sex with Maxine cannot be fulfilled because his Ego will not allow him to (at the beginning) due to the fact that the costs outweigh his benefits. Because of this Craig develops a Maxine puppet, which he uses in unison with the puppet form of himself, to act out these desires in a safe, cathartic manner. He gets temporary gratification of his urges without actually receiving any of the negative side effects.

For Lotte, on the other hand, she finds a much more fulfilling way to satisfy her urge for Maxine’s love. She uses Malkovich as her “puppet” and experiences Maxine’s love through making love to her in Malkovich’s body. This is the same basic method of gratification that Craig chose but Lotte gets to actually sense the gratification on a physical level rather that simply on a mental level.

For Maxine the answer is much simpler. She claims to love Lotte but only as Malkovich, she hasn’t overcome the social taboo of same sex relationships being unacceptable so she views making love to Lotte in Malkovich’s body acceptable. In her (Maxine’s) mind there is nothing wrong with this because technically speaking it is a heterosexual experience, eventhough she is making love more to Lotte’s mind and soul rather than to Malkovich’s body. This is her way of satisfying her ID desires by bypassing her super-ego.

Next I will discuss Freud’s Oedipus and Electra complexes. First the Oedipus complex. In the first five years of a boy’s life he wants to possess his mother sexually and he resents his father. After a while the boy realizes the difference between himself and females and undergoes a sense of castration anxiety. With this castration anxiety the boy enters a period of primary repression and becomes sexually null. During his latency period the boy represses his sexual desires and views his father as a strong male role model. He then uses his father as a model for his actions and wants to be like his father. Terms such as ” you ought to be more like your father” (The Ego and the Id, 34) help to further this world view. After the latency period the boy focuses his sexual attention towards another female role model such as a teacher or the like and than eventually to one of his peers. This formula leads to the “healthy” psychiatric development of the boy.

For Craig the experience of being John Malkovich is much likes that of a boy entering into his latency period. He sees Malkovich as a positive male role model; powerful, successful, and capable of receiving Maxine’s love. Rather than put in all the hard work to change himself to better fit his image, Craig decides to take the easy way out and use Malkovich as “an expensive suit that he enjoys wearing”. This way he can use all that Malkovich has built for himself to fulfill his own selfish demands. He uses his looks to obtain Maxine’s “love”, he uses his fame to help launch his puppeteering career, and he uses his bank account to support himself and Maxine. Through his theft of Malkovich’s body, Craig has transformed himself from a poor, unemployed puppeteer in a bland lifeless marriage to a rich, successful, happy puppeteer married to a woman that he passionately loves. Eventhough it sounds as if he has got everything he has always wanted, he has obtained it all through lies and trickery and he is nothing more than a sophisticated illusion.

The Electra complex is very similar to the Oedipus complex but with one drastic difference. Like boys, girls are also first attracted to their mother sexually, but since this is the same sex parent for the girl, she must switch her sexual affection away from the mother and re-direct this affection towards her father. Since the girl is without a penis there is no castration anxiety, but rather she develops an inferiority complex or penis envy. It is this very idea of penis envy that successfully transfers the erotic attention away from the mother and towards the father. Without the castration anxiety, also, the female child is more likely to be hostile towards the mother and more fixated on the father. Since the first object of erotic affection, for the girl, is also the same sex parent; females are more likely to be homosexual or bi-sexual.

With that being said, let us now focus our attention on Lotte. Lotte is a perfect example of Freud’s Electra complex. After Lotte’s first visit into Malkovich she is almost completely convinced of her bi-sexuality and is seriously considering an operation to become transsexual. Immediately following her first experience as Malkovich, Lotte says she “knew who she was” and that “everything made sense.” While inside Malkovich, Lotte had made the comment that she felt “sexy” and “powerful”. This expresses Freud’s notion that women are more likely to be Homosexual. She also says that the Malkovich portal “is sexy-it’s vaginal, it’s like his feminine side. It’s like he has both a penis and vagina.”

The last point I will discuss is the repression of certain traumatic childhood experiences into the subconscious. Freud believes that traumatic childhood experiences get repressed into the subconscious and that without confronting and resolving these issues individuals will become neurotic and develops neurotic behaviors.

There are two clear cut and distinct examples of primary repression in Being John Malkovich. The first may seem a bit silly but is still an example. Lotte’s one pet, a chimp named Elijah, has been acting strangely and even depressed. His neurotic behavior has led Lotte to believe that he has repressed chimphood memories that she needs to help him work through. In one scene Lotte has been locked in Elijah’s cage, tied up and duct taped, and rather than talk Elijah through his repressed memory she unknowingly re-enacts it for him. In a style of psychotherapy, Elijah sees the ropes and Lotte’s hands tied and it jars Elijah’s memory of when his parents were being captured and their hands were tied and he couldn’t undo the ropes. He was than subsequently captured and his parents, along with himself, were taken from their home in the wild and forever confined to cages.

Seeing Lotte tied up similar to the way her parents were tied, Elijah once again tried to undo the ropes and knots; this time with success. Through helping Lotte, Elijah was able to overcome his neurosis.

The second example of repressed experiences is when Lotte chases Maxine into the Malkovich portal while Craig is in and the two are women are forced into Malkovich’s sub-conscious. While chasing Maxine through his sub-conscious the two run through a series of his repressed memories. The first in the series is the typically repressed experience of a young Malkovich who walked in on his parents engaged in sexual intercourse. Freud states that ” the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the unconscious” (Repression, 147). The second repressed memory is when Malkovich was walking through a gym locker room and all the other boys are teasing and harassing him. The third scene is the picture of Malkovich sitting in his basement repeatedly saying ” I am bad”. After this Malkovich is seen kneeling down in a bathroom smelling women’s underwear. Following this is a college aged Malkovich sitting on a couch with a young woman. All the woman says is “you’re creepy”. The last scene is a school aged Malkovich who wet his pants and all the kids on the bus are singing ” little Johnny Malk-I Pee”. Eventhough none of these issues are dealt with in the movie, it is blatantly clear that there are repressed memories in the human psyche.

To describe the prominent film techniques used in Being John Malkovich I am going to use the most unforgettable scene in the movie; the scene when Malkovich enters his own portal. The scene starts with an extreme zoom in of the portal door from the inside. Craig opens the door and the two fill the entire frame. This stresses the importance of the door and the fact that door is probably only 3 + feet tall. From the left of the frame Malkovich’s head and shoulders fall into the frame as he gazes into the door. This shot is zoomed out some and shows the great depth of the portal. When Malkovich enters the portal it is a series of shot/reverse shots and also a lot of eyeline matching. It will show Malkovich crawling forward, than a shot of his view down the tunnel, than a reverse shot of him crawling. This series repeats itself once or twice and then a very intense fast forward of the cut of him crawling and a zoom on the end of the tunnel takes place. This is a very affective technique used to show the powerful sucking of the portal. Once inside his portal a pan up reveals a woman’s’ body with Malkovich’s face. This leads the viewer to believe that he is seated with a big breasted woman and than suddenly you realize that it is Malkovich with a woman’s body. Then a waiter with Malkovich’s head appears. The entire sequence is a series of eyeline matchings of Malkovich and what Malkovich sees. When Malkovich looks around there is a fast pan which indicates him rapidly turning his head. While he is rushing out of the restaurant a camera man is following him with a hand held camera. This technique is used to imply a hectic rapid movement of the actor. Throughout the entire movie there is mellow classical music playing which tells the viewer how to feel emotionally.

The review I chose was from the Internet movie database. It stated that Being John Malkovich was “one of the most ingenious films to come our way in a long, long time”. I also believe that this was a very creative movie but as my paper shows, anyone with even a limited background in philosophy or even just Freud would know that these ideas are not new. It was a clever idea to make a movie incorporating these ideas into a movie, but it’s not ingenious. His review even backs up my theory by further stating that Diaz “brings Lotta to life she connects with the audience while ably conveying Lotte’s sense of confusion and repressed yearnings.” Overall I believe this is a very good film that embodies many of Freud’s psychoanalytic ideas and I would recommend you to show it in your class.

—–Just my own personal insight

It dawned on me while viewing this film that there is a strong likeliness between Malkovich and people with multiple personalities. It is a far fetched idea but imagine that if all the people the we think are crazy for having multiple personalities could have their own portals, with many different people jumping into their head. It’s not very likely, if not at all, but it made me think.