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BEING JOHN MALKOVICH AND THE PHILOSOPHY
OF CYBERSPACE ADDICTION

A b s t r a c t. The present article discusses a possible instance of a symbolic interaction between cyberspace and real-life space, analysing the plot of Spike Jonze's 1999 film *Being John Malkovich*, and arguing that it may be interpreted as a philosophical account of an addiction to cyberspace. The analysis focuses on the main characters of the film, discussing various forms of their relationship to John Malkovich, who, as it is claimed, personifies cyberspace in the film.

Key words: cyberspace; cyberspace addiction; cyberculture; Spike Jonze; film; *Being John Malkovich*.

Cyberspace is undeniably one of the most interesting and widely discussed concepts of the last three decades. As "the space created through the confluence of electronic communications networks such as the Internet which enables computer mediated communication (CMC) between any number of people who may be geographically dispersed around the globe," (Bell 2004, 41) cyberspace is now the ubiquitous environment in which various instances of cyberculture are performed. New media users interact with cyberspace whenever they play a video game, use an online dictionary or engage in discussions on social media. The most immersive aspect of cyberspace is virtual reality, usually mediated by various types of Virtual Reality sets, ranging in price and available performance.

However, before cyberspace appeared on the technological level, created by the interaction of people and technology, it had existed as an environment envisaged by science fiction writers and directors as a technospace, in which

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the plots of their stories were taking place. In 1982, William Gibson used the term cyberspace in his short story "Burning Chrome" and two years later, he described it in *Neuromancer* in a quotation that has become an indispensable part of any work dealing with the notion of cyberspace. For Gibson, cyberspace was:

> [a] consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding . . . (Gibson 2000, 51)

Thus, apart from its technical aspect anchored in widely understood computer and information technology, cyberspace exists also as a purely literary concept. As such, it is a representation of the world emerging on the plane of the interaction between people and technology. The disembodied minds of operators need a familiar environment to interact with; thus, they create a landscape, or datascape, resembling the real world. With the progress of new technologies, cyberspace has become varied and now seems to exist as video game worlds, numerous Internet spaces and virtual reality, all of which try to hypermediate or immediate the technical aspects of digital interactions, converting the programming accessible to few into familiar environments, encoded into a symbolic cyberspace, available for exploration without the prerequisite of extensive knowledge of computer technology or programming.

Interestingly, as the symbolic, Gibsonian cyberspace originated from science-fiction narratives, it frequently returns to fiction as a source of inspiration for writers and filmmakers. The representations of cyberspace in cinema are especially interesting as film seems to have ready visual and formal devices and techniques to create and recreate various visions of cyberspace. Currently, apart from the portrayals of people engaging in cyberspace while using the Internet, there seem to be two major trends in cinematic visions of cyberspace, at least in American cinema. The first one involves reproducing the already existing cyberspaces and encompasses a large collection of video game adaptations; the other one consists of creating original representations of cyberspace or visualizing literary representations.

However, narrative motifs and conventions usually employed in the representations of cyberspace seem to have gone beyond cyberpunk science fiction and exist independently of it. In fact, as I argue below, they are pre-

sent in Spike Jonze's 1999 fantasy drama *Being John Malkovich*, which does not explicitly refer to cyberspace, but utilizes the same motifs and conventions in order to present the alienating effect of abandoning one's own personality in favour of becoming someone completely different. In other words, the present article does not aim to prove that *Being John Malkovich* is a film about cyberspace mediated as virtual reality, but that it uses the same relationships between spaces, realities and characters as films that present this subject and, if analysed in the same semantic field as such productions, may be understood as a philosophical account of a person addicted to cyberspace. This, in turn, may point to a more universal character of the motifs and conventions used to represent cyberspace in film, which shows an interesting connection between the old and the new media, existing on the level of a paradigm.

In order to place *Being John Malkovich* in the semantic field of cyberspace and in the context of films explicitly concerning cyberspace, I will discuss the examples of such productions. Following on from this, I will analyse of the plot and motifs used in the studied film in order to prove that these motifs and their realization in the plot are similar, if not identical, to their use in explicitly cyberculture-related films, also taking into account the issue of identification and the shift of self-perception connected with playing the role of a different person within the context of cyberspace.

CYBERSPACES IN FILM

As it was said above, there seem to be two major trends in representing cyberculture in cinema: reproducing the already existing visual representations in video game adaptations and creating new ones. In the present article, I argue that *Being John Malkovich* may be regarded as a philosophical contribution to the latter trend, as it employs narrative patterns and themes similar to those used in films representing visions of cyberspace. Examples of such films include those taking place almost entirely in cyberspace, such as *Tron* (1982), directed by Stephen Lisberg, *The Matrix* (1999) directed by the Wachowskis, *eXistenz* (1999), directed by David Cronenberg, and *The 13th Floor* (1999) directed by Josef Rusnak, as well as productions in which the representations of cyberspace exist in the background, e.g. *Hackers* (1995), directed by Iain Softley and *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), written by William Gibson and directed by Robert Longo. Interestingly, the majority of

films portraying visions of cyberspace were produced in the 1990s, which may be considered the peak of filmmakers' interest in cyberspace as a novel and then largely unexplored territory.

The examples differ when it comes to representing cyberspace and the means of accessing it. In *Hackers*, cyberspace is mediated by computer screens; however, the operating system of "Gibson," a supercomputer which becomes the target of a group of white hat hackers, is visualized as a cybercity consisting of skyscrapers built of data, which resembles the classic Gibsonian cyberspace. In the remaining examples, cyberspace is portrayed as a virtual reality, mediated through various types of technology, e.g. VR headsets in *Johnny Mnemonic* with cyberspace portrayed as a cybercity; in *Tron*, produced and released before the era of Gibsonian datascapes accessed by disembodied minds, cyberspace is accessible by means of a scanner able to transfer the user's body into a digital world easily distinguishable from the real one by both the viewer and the main character. In the three remaining examples, the distinction between cyberspace and real life is blurred to such an extent that neither the viewer not the main characters are able to decide what is real and what is virtual. *The Matrix* and *The 13ᵗʰ Floor* represent cyberspace as cities, with the latter film clearly defining the boundaries of virtual reality as city limits. The portrayal of cyberspace in *eXistenZ* includes various locations, involving different levels of virtual reality experienced by the characters. The three films also differ significantly when in the way in which virtual reality is accessed; the main characters of *The Matrix* access the virtual cyberspace by means of an interface attached to their skulls via implanted access ports; in *eXistenZ*, the access ports are biological implants and virtual reality devices are attached to the spine, while later in the film, the characters are shown using a variation of a VR headset. The equipment used in *The 13ᵗʰ Floor* seems to be the most complex, as it involves a large device linking the user's brain to a supercomputer, but later in the film, the characters are also seen using high-tech variations of VR sets. Therefore, the way of accessing cyberspace is not fixed in films and there are different devices that mediate between the user and cyberspace.

Another difference between the six examples given above is the way in which they present the interaction between the characters' real and virtual selves. For *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Hackers*, accessing cyberspace is purely visual and auditory, while their other senses anchor them in the real life. At the other end of the spectrum is *Tron*, in which the main character has his

own physical body transferred to the virtual space and transformed into a computer program. Thus, his body and mind at no time exist separately, and it is the body, not the mind, that becomes altered. In *The Matrix*, humans live in a simulation of reality built by machines and, while the consciousness exists in the virtual world, bodies remain unconscious in the postapocalyptic real world. The virtual expression of consciousness and the representation of oneself in the world of Matrix resembles the physical body of a person, with some minor differences, such as their hairstyle. A similar approach is adopted by *eXistenZ*, in which the characters also appear in the cyberspace as themselves, although with some minor differences in their appearance. An interesting idea is presented in *The 13th Floor*, in which the characters have their minds transferred into a simulation of a city populated by artificial intelligences; those entities, whose physical appearance is modelled on real world-people, are unaware of the fact that they only exist in the virtual world. Thus, each user is supposed to have his or her counterpart in the virtual world, bearing a physical similarity, but a completely separate personality. When interacting with the virtual world, the user's personality replaces that of the virtual being, while the latter's mind remains stored in the unconscious body of the operator.

EVERYBODY LIKES *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH*

Being John Malkovich seems to fit well into the context of the films discussed above, as it appears to employ narrative motifs present in these films. By doing so, it embraces the issues usually discussed in the context of cyberspace, especially video games, offering a deep insight into the psychology of a person engaged in the interaction with cyberspace. It is also worth mentioning that, unlike many other films which employ these motifs, it is very successful in doing so. Upon its release in 1999, the film received critical acclaim, and it currently holds the 93% approval rate on rottentomatoes.com review aggregator, with the average score of 8.1/10 on the basis of 125 reviews, out of which only nine were negative, ("Being John Malkovich — Rotten Tomatoes Review") and 90% on metacritic.com, on the basis of 36 reviews. ("Being John Malkovich") Roger Ebert finished his enthusiastic review stating that the film should be "nominated for best picture." (Ebert 1999)

Gilbert Adair of *Independent on Sunday* called it a production of "jaw-dropping originality" (Adair 2000); David Rooney's review in *Variety* was similarly positive, but the reviewer also pointed to the fact that "the film should see smart urban audiences turning out in force but may be too dark and eccentric to conquer a broader marketplace." (Rooney 1999) In fact, the audience's reviews were slightly less enthusiastic than the critics', with rottentomatoes.com citing the audience score of 87%, or 3.6/5 on the basis of 262,052 inputs.

The film establishes the main themes of alienation and separation from life early in the first scene, in which the main character, Craig Schwartz (John Cusack), gives the audience a display of his mastery as a puppeteer. The spectacle he presents for the viewer consists of a puppet resembling Schwartz himself performing "Dance of Despair and Disillusionment." The puppet is in a room and walks slowly to a mirror. Upon seeing its reflection, it starts to violently throw itself across the room until it spots strings attached to its hand and arm. The puppet looks up and sees Schwartz the puppeteer — a godlike figure towering above and being in complete control of the situation. However, just like his puppet, Craig Schwartz does not control his own life, he can only control the figures he himself makes. He considers himself an artist and, initially, opposes searching for employment, trying instead to live off his art. As an artist, he seems to despise, but probably secretly envies, another puppeteer whose flashy performances attract attention of large audiences, both live and on TV, while Craig's own performances are limited to street shows, which apparently nobody wants to see. Schwartz's wife, Lotte (Cameron Diaz), works in a pet shop and takes care of traumatized animals that she keeps in the couple's cramped flat. However, the couple do not seem to share any intimate connection with each other.

Craig's life changes when he decides to search for a job. He answers to an offer and attends an interview in a company located on a strange Floor 7 ½ of one of New York office buildings. There, he meets the elderly Dr Lester (Orson Bean), the company owner, who employs him. While taking part in an orientation program, Schwartz also meets Maxine (Catherine Keener), to whom he is immediately attracted, but she rejects him as she finds his puppeteering utterly pathetic. Disdained, Schwartz creates a puppet resembling Maxine and performs a scene in which Maxine is impressed with Craig, both represented by puppets. It is only through this simulation that he is able to exert any control over his life. Otherwise, Craig is a frustrated, unhappy man, increasingly disillusioned with his private and professional life.

This all takes a surprising turn when he finds a small door leading directly to the mind of the actor John Malkovich (John Malkovich as himself). At first, Schwartz is only able to observe the world through Malkovich's eyes with the actor completely unaware of the puppeteer's presence. The voyeuristic experience is only temporary as, after fifteen minutes, Schwartz is literally thrown out of Malkovich's mind and, inexplicably, lands on New Jersey Turnpike. Craig tells his wife about the experience and Lotte enters Malkovich's mind herself, thus discovering that she may be transsexual as she felt better having the body of a man. Craig, Maxine and Lotte begin selling tickets to Malkovich's mind so that people can experience fifteen minutes of life as the famous actor, even if they have never heard of him before.

A twist happens when Maxine becomes romantically involved with Malkovich. However, as their relationship develops, it turns out that Maxine is attracted to the actor only when Lotte is present in his mind. Extremely jealous, Craig traps Lotte and enters Malkovich's mind in order to have sex with Maxine. When he does that, he discovers that he is able to fully control the actor's actions, using his puppeteering experience. Craig takes complete control over Malkovich, and Maxine, who is aware of that, decides to stay with him as she is now impressed with his abilities as a puppeteer who can control a living person. Using Malkovich's fame, resources, and persona, Craig becomes a successful puppeteer, gaining recognition. He also marries Maxine and the two are expecting a baby. Maxine, however, is still secretly in love with Lotte, who, in turn, conspires against her husband with Dr Lester. The three coerce Craig into leaving Malkovich, and when he re-enters the portal, Craig is transported to Maxine's and Malkovich's daughter's mind; being unable to control her, he is forced to look at Maxine and Lotte living a happy life together.

JOHN MALKOVICH'S LIFE AS CYBERSPACE

Being John Malkovich shares a number of characteristics with the films mentioned above. The most important one is probably the clear division between the real and virtual reality, with the two divided by the degree of control the main character has over them. Similarly to some of the films mentioned above, *Being John Malkovich* presents characters who are unable to adjust to the real life but thrive in cyberspace they are able to control to

some extent. This is a direct reference to Gibsonian cyberpunk hackers, social outcasts from the real world. Craig Schwartz seems to be an example of such a character. Puppeteering may be his passion, but it also represents his longing for a different life, one that he would be able to control. As he uses his skills to display a personal feeling of longing, the realization of these skills is also too personal for anyone else to be even remotely interested in his art. The first space that Craig enters which allows him to exert some control over his own life is Floor 7 ½. This space exists not only between the floors of the office building, but also between the real and virtual reality. Therefore, accessing the mysterious half-floor, Craig traverses the boundary between the two spaces. It is also where Craig's abilities are first appreciated as, because of his dexterity he may use for sorting and arranging documents, he is employed by Lester.

These abilities and the degree of control he is able to exert over the characters and the reality itself are enhanced when Craig enters John Malkovich's reality, which represents the cyberspace as virtual reality. This cyberspace is mediated through the portal and Malkovich's mind. The way it is accessed is never fully explained, as the user enters the Malkovich's reality not only with the mind, as a disembodied entity, but with the whole body. However, once inside, the person becomes seemingly disembodied and converts into a part of Malkovich's mind, experiencing what the actor experiences. In Malkovich's reality, Craig is initially an observer, unable to control the situation. The mise-en-scène emphasizes the degree of separation of the main character from Malkovich with the use of a black oval frame limiting the character's field of view in point-of-view shots. While inside Malkovich's mind, Craig's field of view is limited to the centre with the peripheral vision unavailable. This seems to mimic the functioning of a VR set and distances the main character from the reality he is observing through Malkovich's eyes.

Interestingly, the way in which the film depicts the relationship between Craig and Malkovich first resembles the identification of the viewer with the film character and later shifts to the relationship between the player and the game character. The viewer's response to the film character is a process based on empathy. This, according to Berys Gaut, means that when the viewers respond to the characters on the screen, they do not imagine being the characters, but rather envisage themselves in a situation the characters are in. (Gaut 2010, 260) The process may take place on four usually interacting levels: perceptual (based on the sensory input; imagining what the character

sees), affective (identifying with the character's feelings), motivational (sharing the character's desires) and epistemic (sharing beliefs with the character). (Coplan 2008, 101) When it comes to the player's identification with video game characters, it seems to be deeper. In their article devoted to experiencing video games, Christopher Klimmt, Dorothée Hefner and Peter Vorderer point to the fact that due to their interactivity, video games engage players as agents rather than observers. Therefore, the player's interaction with the game environment should be perceived as their identification with the controlled character. (2009, 352) This, in turn, involves a shift of the player's self-perception as "the cognitive associations between character-related concepts and the players' self are activated." (Klimmt, Hefner, and Vorderer 2010, 326) In other words, players acquire certain features of the character they control, thus, adopting the character's identity as their own. (Klimmt, Hefner, and Vorderer 2009, 356). In the studied film, Craig becomes Malkovich, and, at the same time, Malkovich is no longer himself when he is possessed by Craig. The actor becomes the vehicle for fulfilling Craig's dreams and desires.

Malkovich, unlike Craig, is an accomplished artist. The fact that he is not immediately linked to any of his roles in film even by people who recognise him as an actor, proves that he is not a typical film star or a celebrity. He is successful both in the private and professional sphere of life. As such, Malkovich's reality of accomplishment is separated from Craig's reality of failure. However, while inside Malkovich's mind, Craig is able to identify with the actor similarly to the way in which film viewers may identify with film characters, i.e. through empathy. The identification is first and foremost perceptual, as Craig is able to experience the stimuli processed by Malkovich's senses. With time and experience, the identification deepens, reaching the affective and motivational levels. Therefore, Craig's initial experience of Malkovich's reality may be compared to watching a film with the use of a VR set. Malkovich's reality is a space that is accessible through the portal and allows Schwartz to experience Malkovich's life and, what follows, the actor's success.

The type of relationship between Craig and Malkovich changes when the former is able to exert complete control over the actor. The relationship between the two characters becomes identical to the relationship between the gamer and the game character, as described above. On the one hand, Craig experiences a shift of self-perception, becoming Malkovich; in interactions with other characters populating Malkovich's world, he is recognized as

Malkovich and refers to himself as such. On the other hand, he also affects the character with his own personality; Craig's Malkovich is no longer an actor, but a puppeteer. Importantly, the dominant feature of Malkovich's reality, i.e. success, affects Craig. His complete detachment from the real life may be seen as the gamer's addiction to a video game he or she is obsessed with. As a gamer, who can now experience what he has always craved for, Schwartz abandons his real life, preferring to remain continuously engaged with the virtual Malkovich's reality. This is best emphasized by the status of his two relationships: in the real life, he is married to Lotte; in Malkovich's reality, he is married to Maxine. However, just as the life Craig lives as Malkovich is not real, neither is the apparent happiness of his marriage.

Lotte is another character who is able to exert some degree of control over the virtual reality of Malkovich's life. Whereas Craig's experience is dominated by the puppeteer's envy of Malkovich's success, Lotte's is sexual. When she first enters the portal, Malkovich is taking a shower. Lotte is overwhelmed by the sensation of having a male body, which makes her consider the possibility that she is transsexual. Thus, Lotte's interaction with Malkovich's reality is presented not in terms of a film, but rather a more immersive experience, as she also seems to undergo a temporary shift of self-perception, which is typical of the video game player's interaction with a video game character. This is also emphasized by the fact that Lotte can actually influence Malkovich's actions, telling him, while inside his mind, to accept the invitation of a mysterious woman, who turns out to be Maxine. Lotte falls in love with Maxine and is able to experience sex with her while being John Malkovich. In Lotte's case, the experience of Malkovich's reality is, therefore, limited to sexual interactions. If Craig is a gamer addicted to the video game he plays, Lotte is more a casual video game player, as she never plans to stay in Malkovich's reality indefinitely and only engages with the virtual reality for pleasure.

The third character able to exert control over Malkovich's reality is Dr Lester. At first, he appears as an eccentric old man, obsessed with sex and willingly sharing his fantasies with Craig. However, in reality, he is an almost immortal being, as he is able to transfer his consciousness, probably along with his body, from one human vessel to another. Each of these vessels represents a new life and new reality and Lester abandons the previous life to move to the next one. Lester himself is a representation of the power that governs cyberspace, which, in turn, guarantees its continuous

existence. This is emphasized by the fact that he owns the portal leading to Malkovich's reality, and the actor is his new vessel over which he is preparing to take complete control; Lester is also aware of the rules guarding the functioning of the portal. In a way, Lester is the equivalent of the machines enslaving humans in *The Matrix*, the Master Program from *Tron*, the users of simulations in *The 13*^{*th*} *Floor* or Eugene Bedford, an ex-hacker turned system security specialist in *Hackers*. What is important, in the aforementioned films, the force controlling the cyberspace recognizes the skills the main characters, representing Gibsonian hackers-cyberpunks, possess when it comes to controlling and modifying the cyberspace and takes actions to protect itself. Similarly, Lester admits that Craig is too powerful to be overcome when the puppeteer is inside Malkovich's virtual reality. Therefore, he coerces Craig to leave it and enters it himself, thus exerting total control and preventing Schwartz from returning to being John Malkovich.

The main twist embedded in the construction of the film plot is the function of John Malkovich. The actor appears in the film as a version of himself; therefore, from the viewer's perspective, Malkovich is the only real person in the film. However, from the perspective of the film world, Malkovich is not a real human being. Instead, he represents the other side of the portal existing on Level 7 ½ and, as such, he serves as the gateway to another reality, in which he is the most important character. When a person enters the tunnel, he or she is transferred into Malkovich's reality as his user. In Malkovich's solipsistic reality, (Weinstein and Seckin 2008, 40) every aspect of life is subordinated to Malkovich, and even regular actions, such as taking a shower or ordering products over a phone acquire a special significance for the users, including people who pay for the possibility to spend fifteen minutes observing Malkovich's life. Their individual experiences are not presented to the viewer, but their reactions of gratitude towards Craig and Maxine, as well as long queues of people waiting for their turn to enter the portal, prove that being John Malkovich is, in fact, appealing.

What is more, the solipsistic nature of Malkovich's reality is probably best seen in two sequences taking place in what appears to be the actor's subconscious and, in terms of the context of cyberspace, the deep structure of the system in which Malkovich's reality exists. The first time this level of Malkovich's reality is seen by the viewer comes when the actor himself enters the portal. As the virtual space of Malkovich's life is mediated both

by the portal and Malkovich himself, the actor's presence in the other element of the medium results in the overlapping of two realities, which may be compared to a failure of a computer system. When the users enter the portal, they emerge in Malkovich's reality, which they are able to observe through the actor's eyes. Malkovich, on the other hand, cannot see Malkovich's reality, as he is currently in the portal; therefore, instead, he is able to perceive the deep structure of his reality, the paradigm of which is Malkovich himself. This results in a twisted world in which every person has his face, including women and children. What is more, the people populating this space use a language consisting of just one word, "Malkovich," but they seem to be quite successful in communicating in it. To add an additional degree of the unreal character of the experience, the actor observes the scene through the black frame, identical to the one seen by the users of Malkovich's reality. He is terrified and leaves the space as quickly as possible, returning to real life.

The second sequence presenting the actor's subconscious and the building blocks of his reality shows infuriated and jealous Lotte chasing pregnant Maxine through the portal. As Craig is in control of Malkovich, they are unable to enter Malkovich's reality and find themselves on the level of the paradigm. However, it is different for them than for Malkovich; it consists of a series of spaces, rooms, in which scenes from Malkovich's life take place, representing his memories, fears, traumas, feelings, and fetishes; as Lotte and Maxine move through them, they witness the story of Malkovich's life. Together with the scene presented in the previous paragraph, the present sequence depicts the underlying structure of Malkovich's reality. All the elements constituting the rooms are building blocks from which Malkovich's reality is constructed and, together, they form its mechanism, or engine, guarding the rules and the overall character of experiencing Malkovich's life. The paradigm of Malkovich's reality is the actor himself and, without him, the reality would not exist, and the portal would lead nowhere.

Another important character whose function for the plot cannot be overstated is Maxine. She is the only main character who does not experience Malkovich's reality mediated by the portal as she only enters the mysterious door on Level 7 ½ when being chased by Lotte. However, she crosses the boundary between the two realities on her own, engaging with John Malkovich directly and becoming a part of his life. As she is a strong and independent woman, living a full life, she does not need or want to become someone else. She already belongs to the world of success and

control and does not need to experience these feeling by a proxy. Therefore, as a person in control of her own self, Maxine does not require a portal to become a part of Malkovich's reality. When Maxine is first introduced, Craig is immediately attracted to her, not only because of her looks, but also the inner strength. Lotte becomes infatuated with her for similar reasons. Maxine does not reciprocate Craig's attraction and tells Lotte that she is genuinely interested in her, but only when she can sense Lotte's presence in Malkovich. Her approach changes as she is drawn further into the actor's reality and she decides to stay with Malkovich when Craig takes complete control over him. She is impressed with the power Craig possesses. Maxine's interest facilitates Craig's transition from real life to Malkovich's reality and allows him to shift his self-perception to Malkovich.

Importantly, Maxine bridges the two realities in one more significant way, i.e. she becomes pregnant with Malkovich's child. However, as she and Malkovich only have sex when the latter mediates Craig or Lotte, the child's father is both Malkovich and his user. In a twist, Maxine claims that it is Lotte who was Malkovich's user at the moment of conception, making her the baby girl's "father." When the girl is born, with Malkovich's reality now sealed by Dr Lester, she becomes a medium and paradigm for a completely new reality. As Craig is transferred by the portal to this new infant reality, he loses his ability to control the new medium and becomes a powerless fragment of the girl's subconscious, constantly tortured by the images of Maxine's and Lotte's happy life together.

Therefore, Craig's ultimately tragic story, analysed in the semantic field of cyberspace and in the context of films representing cyberspace, may be seen as a non-direct and philosophical representation of the psychology of a person obsessed with virtual reality. Similarly to hackers present in other films, Craig feels alienated from the real life. Constantly craving for success, he neglects his wife and her needs. However, although he seems to see success in terms of achieving recognition for his art, all he truly wants is to be in control, just as when he controls his puppets. With the ability to create stories and, by extension, new transient realities with his puppeteering, Craig escapes from the reality in which his life is meaningless and his art considered pathetic and vulgar; this is reminiscent of the onset of an addiction to video games. Inside Malkovich's reality, the skills he possesses suddenly become precious. Similarly to hackers in cinematic representations of cyberspace, Craig is now where he seems to belong and just like them, he can influence this virtual reality, when others are just observers. Drunk with his

newfound power over the virtual yet appealing reality, Craig becomes addicted to being John Malkovich. The actor's life becomes a role-playing game in which Craig performs the role of the main character, becoming Malkovich, but also modifying the actor's life with his own experience and skills. He neglects his work, abandons his wife, and disappears from the real life. When he briefly returns to reality, he is not able to withstand the brief period of relapse and attempts to return to being Malkovich. Finally, Craig is unable to return to reality, forever trapped in the virtual world as the life around him continues.

The stages of Craig's addiction to Malkovich's reality bear a striking resemblance to the experiences of Ryan Van Cleave's account of his own addiction to digital entertainment. In his memoir, *Unplugged: My Journey Into the Dark World of Video Game Addiction*, Van Cleave, an American poet and university teacher, describes his addiction to a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*, which he refers to as "digital heroin." (Van Cleave 2010, 170) Van Cleave's complete devotion to the game resulted in his neglecting his real life and gradual detachment from reality. Finally, however, he was able to return from the digital world, back to his wife and his job. Craig Schwartz represents a person whose addiction ultimately resulted in complete alienation and inability to return to being himself.

CONCLUSION

Although *Being John Malkovich* is not a film explicitly concerning cyberspace, it employs the same motifs as films which do so. Therefore, when analysed in the semantic field of cyberspace and in the context of the films representing cyberspace, it may be understood as a philosophical account of a life of a cyberspace addict. This is emphasized by the fact that the film exhibits the features of video games; these include: the reliance on spaces in storytelling, which was noted by Henry Jenkins, (2006, 123) presenting the characters' temporary shift of self-perception when interacting with the main character in contrast with emphatic identification of the viewer with a film character, as well as the paradigm of typical cinematic representations of Gibsonian cyberspace in its most immersive form: as virtual reality. What is important, the film is successful in presenting addiction to cyberspace also because it does not explicitly refer to it; therefore, it is

able to transcend the viewer's expectations and deeply rooted preconceptions involving the representation of cyberspace, and still tell its story.

Such an interpretation of the film puts it in the context of narratives representing various aspects of cyberspace. Importantly, the representation it offers is indirect, in which it resembles a parable, in this case focused on a contemporary person's problems with identity and self-perception in a success orientated world. These, as Craig Schwartz's story proves, may result in a desire to become someone else, which is possible now more than ever because of technological progress. The gradual addiction to being someone else and exerting control over reality contribute to already-existing detachment from reality, which the film skilfully presents, leaving the viewer with a lasting impression. It is this powerful story that makes Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* a timeless work, meaningful and up-to-date after twenty years that have passed since its premiere.

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BYĆ JAK JOHN MALKOVICH I FILOZOFIA UZALEŻNIENIA OD CYBERPRZESTRZENI

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Niniejszy artykuł omawia możliwy przykład symbolicznej interakcji cyberprzestrzeni z przestrzenią rzeczywistą. Jego tematem jest analiza fabuły filmu Spike'a Jonze'a *Być jak John Malkovich* (oryg. *Being John Malkovich*) z 1999 roku, a przedstawiona teza dotyczy możliwości interpretacji filmu jako filozoficznej alegorii uzależnienia od cyberprzestrzeni. Analiza filmu skupia się na jego głównych bohaterach oraz różnych formach ich relacji z tytułowym Johnem Malkovichem, który stanowi w filmie uosobienie cyberprzestrzeni.

Słowa kluczowe: cyberprzestrzeń; uzależnienie od cyberprzestrzeni; cyberkultura; Spike Jonze; film; *Być jak John Malkovich*.