

Original article

***Being John Malkovich* and the deal with the devil in *If I were you*: two destinies for excessive projective identification**

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A puppet looks at itself in the mirror and dislikes the image it sees. It then breaks into a dance, fast and furious, destroying all the objects in the set. Totally out of control, it punches and kicks the air, makes some acrobatics and collapses, abandoned, loose, and dismantled.

This is one of the first scenes of Craig (John Cusack) in the movie. He is a puppeteer who expresses himself through his marionettes and who is the typical loser of the North-American society: someone who does not succeed in his career and is always failing. His undeniable talent is not acknowledged, and he is not able to succeed in the marionettes field. It was not casually that he baptized the initial puppet ballet as the “Dance of Despair and Disillusionment.” Craig is the protagonist of *Being John Malkovich*,<sup>1</sup> an American movie from 1999 directed by Spike Jonze.

Artistic works have always served as good illustrators of psychoanalytical concepts. Freud appreciated applied psychoanalysis, and the work he developed with Leonardo’s paintings, in 1910, evidenced he made good use of it. In 1957, Racker carried out a brilliant psychoanalytic study based on Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, in which he analyses the primal scene. In 1994, during a scientific meeting in the city of Gramado, RS, Brazil, Kernberg claimed that cinema is the artistic sector that shows human conflicts in the richest form. I believe any kind of creation is filled with unconscious fantasies, however, in cinema there are more fantasies involved, not only from a single creator, like it happens with a painter and his or her canvas, but from many people: the original work’s author, the screenwriter, the director and the actors, who convey their emotion and can be taken as identification objects. In this sense, the cinema gets even more close to fables and myths, which embody unconscious human fantasies.<sup>2</sup>

This article is intended to help the reader practice the understanding of mechanisms involved in projective identification, which is one of the pillars of the Object Relations Theory. Being able to recognize projective identification and manage it in a way that can help the patient to advance in his treatment, instead of letting such an identification manage him or her, is a challenge for analytically-oriented therapies. The narrative of *Being John Malkovich* and the destiny of the movie’s characters illustrate some aspects of this mechanism, which, in my opinion, is the movie’s

central theme. On the other hand, Fabian, another protagonist I will introduce later, is a counterpoint to Craig. Both have similar life course trajectories, but which end in different ways.

Since her first writings about children's psychoanalysis in the mid 1920's, Klein cites fragments of sessions in which she describes that her little patients placed parts of the self and impulses into the exterior world. About 20 years later, in 1946, the concept of projective identification was fully described, and in the reprint of the text *Developments in Psychoanalysis*, Klein coins the term "projective identification" to describe this phenomena.<sup>3</sup>

In the classic description of "Notes on some schizoid mechanisms,"<sup>4</sup> the projective identification is the prototype of an aggressive object relation, an anal attack to an object, in order to put parts of the ego into it with the aim of controlling or possessing its content. As a result of this process, in which ego pieces are believed to be separate, the individual feels as if he or she was empty; the self and the sense of identity are weakened, coming even to a state of depersonalization.

In "Being John Malkovich" the initial "Dance of Despair and Disillusionment" expresses the puppeteer's depersonalization. The marionette, which is a sculpted puppet version of Craig, looks at itself in the mirror as if it did not recognize its own image. It then explodes in anger in the following scene, and, at the end, collapses on the floor, dismantled. We can imagine it as an empty body. Craig's self dismantling and emptiness lead him to a mad attempt to restore the self by controlling objects. As some parts of his self were excessively projected into the other, they can only be controlled by controlling the other.

In the novel written by the French writer Julien Green, *If I were you*, published in 1947, the devil offers Fabian, the protagonist, the power to inhabit and undertake the body and life of another person. In *On identification* (1955), inspired by this novel, Klein<sup>5</sup> analyzed the experience of living in another person's body, enlarging the concept of projective identification, which she had already coined in 1946. In several passages, the comments she makes on Fabian's history can be applied to Craig as well, although the destiny of these two protagonists are very different.

Summing up the protagonist's plot, Fabian is a young worker, not satisfied with himself, with his poverty and lack of success with women. His father died soon and his mother is a very demanding person. He had some resentment against his father, who deprived him of concluding his studies, and, thus, of having a more promising future. These feelings were the source of his envy and hatred against other people's good fortune. One day, the devil closed a deal with Fabian, and convinced him with false promises of happiness. Fabian was taught a formula to be able to enter other people's body and mind only by whispering some words, which include Fabian's name, into their ears. No matter what happens, the devil says Fabian must not forget his own name. And so the protagonist starts his three-day trip into other people's minds. His unconscious body remained under the care of his mother while he experienced being another person. He always find, however, the experiences are unfulfilling, making successive changes, ending up resented, because he discovers people he is transformed into are not worth a damn. Each time he changes body, it is more difficult for him to remember his true self. At the end of the third day, Fabian recovers consciousness, and when he wakes up he sees his mother sit beside him. He is then assaulted by a desire of being loved by his mother and loving her; he wants to embrace her, but feels that she would not respond to his affection. It dawned on him, however, that if his love for his mother had been stronger, she could have felt the same. It is such an overflowing affection that he feels an intense love for all the humanity and an unexplainable happiness. His mother suggests that he prays, but he is only able to remember the words "Our Father." He feels that mysterious happiness again and dies.

Fabian's fear of emptiness resulting from the excision and projection of his parts into other people's body is expressed in the novel by the way how he looks to his clothes heaped up on a chair. He seemed to be looking at himself dismantled: the empty and limp sleeves of his coat were a despaired sign of tragedy. Craig's fear is similar and as significant as Fabian's: instead of the limp, empty and heaped clothes described in the novel, the marionette Craig collapses, as limp as the

clothes, at the end of the “Dance of Despair and Desillusionment,” which foresees the coming tragedy.

Ogden,<sup>6</sup> analyzed Klein’s original work *On identification*, and highlighted how she shows what projecting oneself in another person, controlling and inhabiting him or her is. This does not mean that the personal identity is totally lost. The experience of visiting another person changes the visitors’ life as well. Klein shows how the process of projective identification impoverishes and empties the individual’s psychology. This will only stop when there is a successful reinternalization of the projected part. The huge effort to control the other and make him or her act according to one’s own fantasies requires vigilance and a great amount of mental energy. The final state is a psychic debilitation.

The internal state of extreme debility is perfectly in accordance with the Craig puppet dismantled at the end of the “Dance of Despair and Disillusionment.” The central focus of everything that takes place from this moment on in the film is the poor self dismantled, which is a consequence of the excessive projective identification.

Craig makes his living as a puppeteer in the streets of New York, and even this activity causes him some problems: in one of his marionettes performances, while featuring the story of Abelard and Heloise, he was punched by an irate father who realizes his daughter was watching the sensuous movements played by the puppets’ in a “hot” part of the story. The rendered love story contrasts with the coldness of Craig’s own marriage: his beautiful wife Lotte (Cameron Diaz) dedicates her attention to the animals of her pet shop, where she has a chimpanzee who makes psychotherapy, which is her dearest one - even more than her husband is.

Pause in Craig’s life narrative for a brief comment on the story of Abelard and Heloise, which has a relevant meaning for the movie. It is a true story, based on the lover’s letters and Abelard’s autobiographical writing. Heloise (1101 – 1164) had been educated in Paris by her uncle Fulbert, having a far superior culture as compared to other women of that time. Peter Abelard (1079-1142) was a philosopher, considered one of the greatest thinkers of the 12th century. His ideas were

controversial, and for many times he was tried for heresy. He was also a theologian and a scientist. Their tragedy can be summed up as it follows: willing to come closer to Heloise, Abelard convinces Fulbert that he can be the young girl's teacher; he is about 22 years older than her. The two fall in love and Fulbert betrays their secret love. Abelard and Heloise separate, but Heloise is pregnant and runs away from Fulbert's house, finding shelter with Abelard's sister until their son, Astrolabe, is born. Abelard begs Fulbert's forgiveness and asks permission to marry Heloise. They marry secretly and Abelard sends Heloise to a convent. Believing Abelard was casting off his niece, Fulbert takes revenge on him by having him castrated, and Heloise takes vows and becomes a respected Abbess. Feeling shame and horror, Abelard obliges Heloise to stay in the convent and become a monk.<sup>7</sup>

Back to the puppeteer's life, Craig is unhappy with his life, his marriage is unfulfilling and, driven by the lack of money, he is compelled to find a job as a filing clerk – perfect for a nimble-fingered puppeteer – at Lester Corp. Dr Lester's (Orson Bean) company is located at the 7½ floor of an office building in New York. The floor is half-height, so that everyone is forced to walk bent over. There he meets Maxine (Catherine Keener), his co-worker, and finds out she is the woman of his dreams. However, she humiliates and spurns him. One day, looking for a folder that fell behind a filing cabinet, Craig discovers a small door that leads to a dark and small tunnel full of a brown slimy sludge, where he has to crawl through to come in. Surprisingly, the tunnel is a portal into the head of John Malkovich, the actor, which is interpreted by Malkovich himself.

When Fabian, the character analyzed by Klein,<sup>5</sup> starts his adventure in foreign bodies and minds, he feels just like Craig does: unhappy, unsatisfied with himself, personally and professionally frustrated. At this moment, the devil proposes the deal to Fabian, and he accepts it soon. Klein considers the devil is the personification of the destructive impulses of a frustrated baby, who reacts through projective identification. Fabian envies people he invades the same way as Craig envies Malkovich's talent.

The tunnel that leads to Malkovich's mind is narrow, dark and covered with a viscous brown sludge, a clear anal invasion, an evacuation of parts of the ego into the actor. The camera testifies this idea, when it closes Craig from behind, when he is crawling into the tunnel, in an "anal framing".

An important contribution to the topic was Rosenfeld's<sup>8</sup> classification of projective identification into projective identification used for defensive purposes and projective identification used for communication. The first type comprises the omnipotent intrusion that leads to the fusion with the object, the fantasy of living within the object (parasitism), the belief in a single feeling (symbiosis) and tension release by someone who suffered violent intrusion during childhood. Under this point of view, Craig uses the parasitic projective identification: the defensive fantasy of living within Malkovich, built through an omnipotent intrusion. As a result of this massive projective identification, his self experiences a number of feelings: the sensation of being cut into pieces, the confusion with other people because of identification with the object, depersonalization for losing parts of the ego, feeling as if he was not a person, and a sensation of claustrophobia, because parts of the ego were withdrawn. Meltzer<sup>9</sup> says that the intrusive projective identification is followed by unconscious fantasies of entering the mother's rectum. It's a confusion the child makes with exploring his or her own body and exploring the mother's body. The tunnel that leads to John Malkovich's mind represents the fantasy of such anal invasion.

The ideas of Blomfield<sup>10</sup> regarding parasitism are very close to those of Rosenfeld.<sup>8</sup> Blomfield suggests that in parasitism one lives at the expense of the other. The price that the parasite pays for this type of living is the deterioration and dissolution of those features that allow him to live in an independent way. This kind of Faustian bargain, the deal with the devil, is repeated in the form of neurotic defenses that aim at reaching a short-term primitive satisfaction (a feeling of security and fulfillment) through the promise of freedom and creativity at longer term. In his deal, Fabian is compelled to believe in the fantasy of fusion with his idealized mother if, on his turn, he promises himself to the devil-father. Blomfield believes that Fabian's successive transformations into other

people, which are possible because of the deal closed with the devil, will make him conquer his mother's love. Craig, bewildered between the non-continent dwarf-mother and the idealized Maxine-mother, also believes that if he is another person, just like the famous actor Malkovich, he will conquer, eventually, mother-Maxine's love.

Craig is allowed to remain in the actor's mind for 15 minutes, then he is spit out into a ditch on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike. When Lotte listens to her husband's story, she is excited to try entering the portal as well. After 15 minutes in the Malkovich's mind, she discovers herself a homosexual. We may consider Lotte as another excised part of the self that Craig wants to expel. Maxine, on her turn, quickly sees a business opportunity in the portal, and decides to make money from it. They both form a society and charge 200 dollars of those who want to try the experience.

Fabian – just like Craig and the patients that excessively use the projective identification – goes deep into the objects he invades and loses the memories of the original subject he was. Craig's and Fabian's feelings that they have really expelled part of their selves and that they are really distant is a fantasy, obviously, just as pointed out by Klein.<sup>5</sup> However, it is a fantasy that has wider consequences, which affects the ego structure and make those distant parts not accessible at that moment, both for patient and therapist.

Whilst Maxine and Craig's business succeeds, and people line up to get into Malkovich's mind, Lotte falls in love with Maxine, who only accepts having a sexual intercourse with Lotte when she is under Malkovich's skin. They arrange the exact hour when Maxine should seduce Malkovich, so that they have a sexual intercourse when Lotte is within the actor's mind. A bizarre triangle is formed, and Maxine is pleased to be an object of desire of two people behind the same pair of eyes. Suspecting there is something wrong with himself and Maxine, Malkovich goes to the Lester Company and discovers the tunnel into his own head. What he sees when he arrives at the portal is a bizarre world: he sees himself in a restaurant where everybody – waiters, clients, children and women – are John Malkovich. This may be corresponding to the fantasy of the object's madness resulting from an excessive projective identification, which has led to the object's



fragmentation and explosion into tiny pieces of the self. Just like a fragmented image we see in a kaleidoscope, reflected in bits of colorful glass, the partitioning of Malkovich in a number of individuals like him is the reflection of Craig's self fragmentation.

Analyzing this situation, Bion<sup>11</sup> says that in the patient's fantasy, each expelled particle of the self has an independent life, which is not controlled, containing or being contained by external objects in which they perform their functions. When projected in those objects, they increase and so does hostility toward the mind that expelled them. As a consequence, the patient feels as if he or she was surrounded by bizarre objects. Each expelled particle is seen as a real object, encapsulated within the personality of the container.

Spillius<sup>12</sup> describes three different ways of using the concept of projective identification. The first corresponds to Klein's point of view, which focus on the effect of projective identification on the way how the patient sees the analyst. The second is the way how Bion understands the phenomena. He emphasizes how the patient induces the analyst to feel what the patient, unconsciously, wants him or her to feel. And third, the way how Betty Joseph conceives projective identification, which going beyond the two previous approaches, is centered on the way how the patient, constantly though unconsciously, instigates the analyst to act out.

Maxine's fantasy of being desired by two people through the same pair of eyes is analogous to the fantasy of seducing the therapist, with the intention of being desired not only for him or her, but also for another pair of eyes which was introduced by means of the projective identification in the therapist's mind. The way how Joseph approaches the concept of projective identification seems to fit better the case herein approached. Malkovich acts firstly according to what was projected, but later on, when he realizes he is different because of invasions he suffered, it realizes that there is a portal that leads to his mind. Joseph believes it is inevitable that the therapists act out sometimes, until they realize their mind is invaded through the "portal" of projective identification.

Note how Craig, initially, admires and idealizes Malkovich; but his admiration hide a growing and destructive envy – the failed puppeteer envies the well-succeeded actor. Once envy and

projective identification are connected in their origin, the inevitable takes place: due to an excessive projective identification, with too many projections of the self – brilliantly depicted in the movie by the “line” of people who want to enter Malkovich’s mind – the actor becomes dangerous and retaliator, chasing Craig until he finds the portal to his own mind. The scene has a great visual impact, transforming the external and internal worlds into an environment full of chasers, all of them looking like John Malkovich, a fragmented image, just like the image reflected in a fly’s eye. In Klein’s<sup>4</sup> words, the sadistic-oral fantasies transformed him into something fragmented.

Another interesting aspect of the movie is the 7½ floor, whose existence is explained to all new workers in an orientation movie. The video explains that the floor was especially designed by an Irish captain, Mertin, who felt in love by a dwarf. As she complained that the world was not prepared for people her size, he built a special floor in between the seventh and the eighth floors that was dimensioned according to her height.

Klein<sup>4</sup> has reported on a vast amount of clinical material presented by Joan Riviere, in which fantasies of forcing the self into an object, with the objective of controlling and possessing it, generate a fright of retaliation that may lead to claustrophobia. Craig is afraid of retaliations because of the massive invasion into the actor’s mind, which provokes the persecuting claustrophobic anxiety that takes place in the 7½ floor. Meltzer<sup>9</sup> associates the intrusive projective identification to the claustrophobic patient’s character structure. The fantasy of invading Malkovich’s mind sparkles the babies’ fantasies of entering the mother’s body, bringing consequent paranoid anxieties. Klein<sup>4</sup> shows that the fear of being imprisoned within the mother’s body and having the penis flattened is a very important etiology for male impotence. The dwarf woman, origin of the claustrophobic 7½ floor, represents the repressive mother who flattens genitals. We may assume that Craig’s monastic sexual life is a result of such an experience during childhood.

All through the movie’s narrative we identify several signs of the consequences of excessive projective identification described by Rosenfeld.<sup>8</sup>

(a) The scene in the restaurant, where all actors are Malkovich: waiters, pianist, singer, customers, etc, expresses the splitting of the ego into multiple pieces.

(b) The act of undertaking other person's body and mind is evident in the entire movie, but it exacerbates at the end, when Craig "refuses" to get out from his "container." Fabian undergoes an identical process: every time he invades people's minds and bodies, he finds it more difficult to remind of his own self, which seems more distant and obscurer.

(c) Depersonalization is shown since the first scene of the movie by means of the puppet resembling Craig. The feeling of not being a person anymore, or of being empty, is perfectly represented by the figure of a puppet.

(d) Claustrophobia resulting from splitted parts of the self is represented by the narrowness of the 7½ floor. In a parallel with the story of Abelard and Heloise, Craig has a monastic life. He does not have sexual intercourse neither with his wife nor with Maxine. Craig is, just like Abelard, castrated. However, Craig's castrators are his own sadistic aspects, which are transferred to the perverse Maxine, who toys with Craig. There are other similarities between the two couples. Heloise's and Astrolabe's misfortune began when their baby was born, ending up in tragedy and reclusion. Craig fears his wife's pregnancy, as if he could be victimized by tragedies resulting from the birth of his revived Astrolabe, which represents the baby's invasive and voracious fantasies that play a retaliatory role.

Dr. Lester also revealed his real identity to Lotte: he is captain Mertin within Dr. Lester's mind and body, constantly changing bodies in order to extend his life by inhabiting other people's minds. Malkovich was only the next in the list of people that Dr. Lester and a group of other travelers intended to inhabit in a few days, on Malkovich's 44's birthday. If they are not able to make Craig get out of Malkovich's body they will be compelled to invade a newborn's mind, however they will not be able to control it. They will be fated to look the world through another person's eye for the rest of her or his life. Lester-Martin and the troop of invaders represent the fear of some reintrojection with violent and revengeful characteristics from those parts of the self that

were excised and projected. According to Bion,<sup>13</sup> this type of fear suggests that objects expelled through projective identification during the patient's childhood became immensely worse, and patients feel as if they were invaded, attacked and tortured by this return.

The 7½ floor and the dwarf woman who marries the Irish captain Mertin, originating the narrow floor, are two aspects in the movie that I consider have a special meaning. The couple from the past may very well represent parental figures in Craig's fantasy. They would be Craig's "familial novel in *statu nascendi*", paraphrasing Klein's writing of 1919.<sup>14</sup> The dwarf woman and the very low floor are concrete and metaphoric expressions of small places, which can not be good containers. Bion,<sup>15</sup> in 1959, makes reference to the mother's ability to cope with the baby's fear, which is transmitted to her through projective identification. He reports the experience with a patient whose mother could not bear experiencing such feelings, and reacted by preventing herself from feeling them. She is a "dwarf" mother, a metaphor for a mother that is not a good enough container. The same metaphor can be applied to the narrow 7½ floor. When Craig finds the portal that leads to Malkovich's mind, he has a defensive attitude in order to free his self from undesirable parts.

What comes up is that Craig does not want to leave Malkovich's mind anymore, because he is able to dominate it and to remain inside it more than the initial 15 minutes. Together, Craig-Malkovich and Maxine change John Malkovich's career from a consecrated actor to a puppeteer. This way, Malkovich becomes the best puppeteer in Hollywood, and Craig – within him – is not a loser anymore.

Klein<sup>4</sup> says that envy is closely related to the projective identification: another person is invaded in order to have their qualities destroyed. Craig envies Malkovich's talent and success both as an actor and as a man. By entering Malkovich's mind, Craig changes the actor career and annihilates the original virtues to have his own characteristics introduced.

Bion<sup>15</sup> clearly identifies the normal and abnormal projective identifications. While the normal projective identification aims at communicating a mental state to the object, by introducing this

mental state within the object, the second represents a violent and omnipotent evacuation of a mental state. Rosenfeld<sup>8</sup> says that the object loses its independency, and this works as a shield against envy and separation. Craig felt Maxine's indifference, which sadistically humiliated him. When he enters John Malkovich's mind, a fusion with the object is generated, firstly for 15 minutes and later on, when his omnipotence was increased, for the period he wants. This way he is able to escape separation, envy and the need for an object.

Grotstein<sup>16</sup> draws the attention to the risk of the total projective identification: the subject becomes neither dead nor alive, just as the mythical vampires, once he suffers a pathologic metamorphosis that makes him lose the way back to his self, which was denied. At this point, Fabian's and Craig's experiences start to assume different directions. Fabian almost loses the way back, whilst Craig's self is lost at the end.

The only way Dr. Lester can devise to take out Craig from Malkovich's head is by kidnapping Maxine. And they did so, pressing Craig to get out the "container" as a ransom for Maxine's liberty. Lotte chases Maxine, who during the pursuit enters Malkovich's mind and ends up finding unconscious records in the actor's mind. Craig's intense feeling for Maxine makes him abandon Malkovich's mind. The movie ends with Craig inhabiting a girl's body, who is Maxine's and Malkovich's daughter, conceived when Lotte was within the actor's body. This way, Craig is allowed to remain forever close to his platonic love, looking at Maxine through the Maxine's and Malkovich-Lotte's daughter eyes.

Fabian was also seduced with the idea of living within a 6-year-old boy's body, and did not go ahead because he was not allowed by the devil to do so. At the end, he is also assaulted by the wish to become a woman. Klein<sup>5</sup> claims that Fabian fluctuated between a repressed homosexuality and an unstable heterosexuality. We may assume that Craig's homosexual feeling, expressed by her wife Lotte, and his love for the father figure, represented by Malkovich, culminates in the transformation of Craig in that "daddy's girl."

Klein<sup>5</sup> suggests that Fabian develops a feeling of compassion for his victims and that this feeling is a precondition for meeting his old self again, this means a precondition for integration. Included in the search for the lost self, she says, it is the search for lost ideal objects, prototypically represented by the bond between the baby and the mother. Fabian was able to get his feeling for his mother back, and reconciles with her because while he invaded other people's minds and bodies he was able to elaborate the schizo-paranoid depressive positions. On the other hand, Craig's destiny was not so bright.

The puppeteer's destiny, whose self was decomposed, was different. The excessive projective identification, resulting from the envy he nourished against Lotte's desired baby, and from the creativity and success of Malkovich, did not reintegrate. From an initial anxiety concerning dismantling, a sign of his future empty self by means of excessive excisions and projections, Craig starts to suffer persecutory anxieties during the projective process – however, he does not elaborate the schizo-paranoid position – and ends in a regressive situation with psychotic nature. Craig enters a state of confusion and fusion and ends up as the “daughter” of his own wife, of Maxine and Malkovich at the same time.

Would this be a worse – or better – solution than the initial dismantling and empty state?

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#### ABSTRACT

*The author describes two possible destinies for excessive projective identification. In one case, the outcome is loss of the original self and immersion in a regressive state of psychotic fantasies; in the other, the ultimate result is the elaboration of the schizoparanoid and depressive positions and the reintegration of the projected parts of the self. The author illustrates the first destiny with the movie Being John Malkovich, directed by Spike Jonze, where the main character Craig finds a portal that allows access to the actor's mind. The second destiny for excessive projective identification is illustrated with the novel entitled If I were you, which was used by Klein in On identification, written in 1955, and with her analysis of the deal the main character (Fabian) has made with the devil, which allows him to invade other people's bodies and minds.*

**Keywords:** *Excessive projective identification, envy, splitting, projection, reintegration of self parts.*

**Title:** *Being John Malkovich and the deal with the devil in If I were you: two destinies for excessive projective identification*



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