

# Reading JOHN MALKOVICH

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Juni 2014



# Preface

The space of the not yet known exerts a strong desire to know. To know - for instance - why a film that is so reluctant to fulfill its hermeneutic promise kept me fascinated for the duration of this writing process. As a preliminary answer to that ultimate question I offer, as preface and afterthought, Agamben's following meditation, whose final lines tie a fascinating knot between the affective strength of not knowing, the movement of dance, and von Kleist's puppets.

Ook het weten verhoudt zich, in de laatste analyse, tot een niet weten. Maar het doet dat op de wijze van verdringing of, efficiënter en sterker, van vooronderstelling. Het niet weten is datgene wat weten veronderstelt als het onontdekte land dat er is om veroverd te worden; het onbewuste is het duister waarin het bewuste zijn licht heeft binnen te dragen. In beide gevallen wordt iets gescheiden, om vervolgens doordrongen en herenigd te worden.

De relatie tot een zone van niet weten echter waakt over datgene wat blijft als het is. Niet om de obscuriteit ervan te exalteren, zoals de mystiek doet, noch om het verborgene te verheerlijken, zoals de liturgie doet. Evenmin om haar te vullen met fantasmen, zoals de psychoanalyse doet. Het gaat niet om een geheime leer of een hogere wetenschap, noch om een weten dat zichzelf niet kent. Het is mogelijk dat de zone van niet weten in feite niets bijzonders bevat; dat, als het mogelijk zou zijn erin te kijken, wij slechts - maar zeker is dit niet - een oud, achtergelaten sleetje zouden vinden, niet meer - maar duidelijk is dit niet - dan het uitdagende gebaar van een meisje dat ons uitnodigt om te spelen. Misschien bestaat er zelfs geen zone van niet weten, bestaan er alleen haar gestes. Zoals Kleist zo goed begreep is de relatie tot een zone van niet weten een dans. (Agamben 185)<sup>i</sup>



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# Introduction

This thesis is the result of my attempt to read and interpret *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* (Jonze, 1999).

Three scenes of this film present itself to me as a tripartite *mise-en-abyme*. For the sake of simplicity I will offer a loose definition: the *mise-en-abyme* is a miniature of the work, contained by the work itself (in chapter 5 I will do more justice to the complexity of this figure in a discussion involving the commentaries of Gide, Dällenbach, Bal, and Ron on the subject). My analysis started as a loose attempt to justify and substantiate my intuition that the opening scene of the film – featuring a puppet executing a choreography titled ‘Dance of Despair and Disillusionment’ – is a miniature version of the whole film. This analysis did not work well as a result of my failure to grasp the film’s meaning in a satisfying totality. I could not find an answer – both satisfactory and comprehensive enough – to the questions: “What is this film about?”

On the one hand, the *mise-en-abyme* extends a serious hermeneutical promise, the fulfillment of which, however, is actively prevented by the film’s ironically playful whole. So far, my formal analysis did not seem to resonate with the temporary stability of meaning that is promised by Frans-Willem Korsten’s definition of the *mise en abyme*:

“Niet elk onderdeel leent zich daarvoor [lezing als *mise en abyme*, JK]. Je weet eigenlijk pas welk onderdeel relevant is, wanneer je de gehele tekst hebt gelezen. Je kunt dan pas proberen deel en geheel aan elkaar te relateren. Dat lukt nooit na één lezing, want elke herlezing leidt tot herziening. Zodoende ontstaat er een dialectisch proces. Wanneer je erin slaagt een betekenisvolle synthese te vinden tussen deel en geheel, stopt dat proces tijdelijk. Door deze dynamiek is *mise en abyme* in het Postmodernisme een populair vormgevend principe geworden.” (198)<sup>ii</sup>

I found myself increasingly frustrated by the film’s many ironies, by its endless self-reflexivity, and the plotlines that simply would not integrate into a comprehensive narrative. These aspects of the film put me on the trail of Paul de Man’s analysis of an old German Romantic text about puppetry, also a dominant theme in *Malkovich*. Whilst increasing my understanding of how the film worked to emphasize the impossibility of attributing a single meaning, it did not help me in any way to come to a satisfactory interpretation of the *mise-en-abyme*. In order to work with that hermeneutic promise I needed to read up on hermeneutics. Which is what I did.

Chapters 1 functions as a general introduction to this foray into Gadamer’s hermeneutics and its negative; Paul de Man’s deconstruction. These two methods are discussed in depth in chapters 2 and 3, and subjected to a comparative analysis in chapter 4. The combined insights of that last chapter form the theoretical backdrop for my discussion of the *mise-en-abyme* in *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* (chapter 5). In the conclusion I will begin with a reflection on my own reading process (‘what kept me enticed?’), before briefly summarizing the insights and observations gained from writing this thesis.

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<sup>i</sup> I chose the Dutch translation because the possessive pronouns in the penultimate sentence ('haar gestes') refer in Dutch both to the little girl and the zone of nonknowledge, and because it was in this language that it struck me in the middle of my writing process with a chance reference to Kleist, both unexpected, enlightening, and puzzling: an invitation to play. Translation from English publication (listed in bibliography): Even knowledge, in the final analysis, maintains a relationship with ignorance. But it does so through repression or, in an even more effective and potent way, presupposition. The unknown is that which knowledge presupposes as the unexplored country to be conquered; the unconscious is the darkness into which consciousness will have to carry its light. In both cases something gets separated in order to then be permeated and attained. The relationship with a zone of nonknowledge, on the other hand, keeps watch over this zone so that it will remain as is. This is done not by exalting its darkness (as in mysticism), not by glorifying the arcane (as in liturgy), and not even by filling it with phantasms (as in psychoanalysis). At issue here is not a secret doctrine or a higher science, nor a knowledge we do not know. Rather, it is possible that the zone of nonknowledge does not really contain anything special at all, that if one could look inside of it, one would only glimpse - though this is not certain - an old and abandoned sled, only glimpse - though this is not clear - the petulant hinting of a little girl inviting us to play. Perhaps a zone of nonknowledge does not exist at all; perhaps only its gestures exist. As Kleist understood so well, the relationship with a zone of nonknowledge is a dance.

ii Not each part of the text is suitable [for a reading as *mise en abyme*, JK]. You can only really know which part is relevant, once you have read the entire text. Only then can you try to relate the part to the whole. This never works after just one read, since every re-reading leads to a revision. As such a dialectical process follows. When you succeed at finding a meaningful synthesis between part and whole, this process is temporarily suspended. Because of this dynamic movement the *mise en abyme* has become a popular organizing principle in postmodernism. (translation mine, JK)



# I Two Modes of Reading

In order to introduce the reading methods of Gadamer and de Man, I will expound here on two analogous examples of how Gadamer and de Man tackle an interpretive problem. As typical examples I have chosen two cases involving a choice between reading the meaning of a phrase or sentence literally or figuratively. Gadamer responds to this problem by trying to stabilize his choice in the semantic context, and thus to legitimate his choice for a literal or figurative reading. De Man on the other hand is not afraid to take seriously all the possible readings, even if - or particularly if, as in the example cited below - one of the two readings is explicitly warranted. This is where a distinction between Gadamer and de Man becomes clear in terms of their objective: Gadamer's objective is semantic: he wants to understand what the text means (to say), and assumes the presence of such a meaning. De Man's objective is semiotic: he wants to understand how the signs in a given text signify, and in the case of rhetorical figures (such as metaphor, symbol, metonymy) his aim is to know how these figures proliferate meaning, and how these meanings contradict each other. In the following example of de Man reading the last lines of a famous poem by W.B. Yeats, this rhetorical aspect of his method becomes clear: he questions the degree to which we, as readers, can decide between the literal meaning of a phrase, and its rhetorical meaning.

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossom  
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance  
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?<sup>iii</sup>

A more extended reading, always assuming that the final line is to be read as a rhetorical question, reveals that the thematic and rhetorical grammar of the poem yields a consistent reading that extends from the first line to the last and that can account for all the details in the text. It is equally possible, however, to read the last line literally rather than figuratively, as asking with some urgency the question we asked at the beginning of this talk within the context of contemporary criticism: not that sign and referent are so exquisitely fitted to each other that all difference between them is at times blotted out but, rather, since the two essentially different elements, sign and meaning, are so intricately intertwined in the imagined "presence" that the poem addresses, how can we possibly make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error of identifying what cannot be identified. (de Man *Semiology* 30)

We can see here quite clearly that against a very clear semantic intention, de Man is prepared to read a rhetorical question literally. Gadamer would have wanted to retain the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the relation between poetics and meaning. For de Man it is exactly this self-sufficiency that he wants to question. The example of Yeats's poem is carefully chosen because it thematizes 'the possibility of convergence between experiences of consciousness such as memory or emotion - what the poem calls passion, piety and affection - and entities accessible to the senses such as bodies, persons or icons.' (ibid.) It is exactly the belief in the possibility of such a convergence, between the visible signs of language (accessible to the senses) and the experiences of consciousness that makes up the backbone of Gadamer's mode of reading. This means that Gadamer asks a different question than de Man. De Man suspiciously asks: "can we really know what is meant here?", finds the answer undecidable and decides to shift to: "how is meaning produced here?", to zoom into a confrontation between a literal and a figurative reading. Gadamer on the other hand asks the question: "can we understand what is meant here?" As conditions for answering the questions he posits the requirement that the text (and in a wider sense, the artwork) is self-sufficient and autonomous. In other words, Gadamer wants a unity in which all the poetical aspects, all the signs are geared towards the transmission of 'an experience of consciousness,' to use de Man's phrase.

As such, Gadamer would probably object to de Man's reading of Yeats that the final sentence's rhetorical "meaning" as de Man calls it, is not the same as the intended meaning, and rather a function of the text as communication effort. The rhetorical function of the text works to stabilize (as a self-sufficient, and as such autonomous context) the transmission of meaning. This is Gadamer's requirement of the truly aesthetic text. Such a text works to establish a language situation between the text and its readership, which is based not on suspicious questioning, but on the assumption of good will on the part of the author, and the autonomy of the work: so there would be no need to connect the work to larger ideological questions, if there was no explicit reference, if the ideological question is as such, not thematized by the poetic functions of the text. This is not to say

that for Gadamer meaning is stable, meaning is the result of the temporary suspension of the dialogue that is continuously going on with the historically situated reader, who as such has historically informed preconceptions ('oordelen-vooraf') which will evolve throughout history. (Wijzenbroek 22)

As an example I will now discuss Gadamer's reading of a crucial phrase in a poem by Mörike. The poem describes a beautifully adorned lamp, which hangs in a quiet abandoned room.<sup>iv</sup>

The line reads: "Was aber schön ist, selig scheint es in ihm selbst." [...] I am interested here only as an exemplary case. In this verse one encounters two apparently trivial and commonplace words: "scheint es." This can be understood in the sense of "anscheinend" [apparently], *dokei* [Greek: it appears], "videtur" [Latin], "il semble" [French], "it seems," "pare" [Italian], and so forth. This prosaic understanding of the phrase makes sense and for this reason it has found its defenders. But one also notices that it does not obey the law of verse [Gesetz des Verses]. This will allow us to show why "scheint es" here means "it shines," or "splendor" [Latin, radiates]. In this case, a hermeneutical principle can be applied: In cases of conflict [bei Anstöße] the larger context should decide the issue. Every double possibility of understanding, however, is an offense [Anstoß][emphasis mine, JK]. Here it is decisively evident that the word beautiful in the line is applied to a lamp. That is what the poem as a whole is asserting and is a message that should be understood throughout the poem. A lamp that does not light up any more because it has become an old-fashioned and bygone thing hanging in a "Lustgemach" [pleasure room] ("Who notices it now?"), here gains its own brightness because it is a work of art. (Text 50)

A number of aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutical method become quite clear here. I would like to point out some of the consequences for his particular conception of language that are present in this short fragment of poetry analysis. First, there is the implicit idea that a number of similar words from different languages can function as timeless synonyms. It is not that Gadamer simply ignores the subtle differences that might occur between the respective meanings of these words, but he starts from the assumption that it is well possible to distill the essence of the other person's communicative intention. From this it follows that words can, in essence, be synonymous.<sup>v</sup> From such a perspective it becomes also quite clear how Gadamer frames his 'law of the verse.' In chapter 2, dealing with Gadamer's theatrical metaphor for the essence of aesthetic being, I will come to speak of his notion of the autonomy of the artwork. This is already present here: the hermeneutical interpreter needs to respect 'the law of the verse,' which means that the work itself creates its own context in reference to which interpretive uncertainties ought to be stabilized. It is always in reference to this context, that a work ought to be interpretable, and as such this requirement functions as a criterium for aesthetic being (which Gadamer is in the process of defining, in his theatrical metaphor). In chapter 2 I will elaborate on this metaphor, but it is important to take note here that the metaphor is a visual description of the relationship that inheres ideally between artwork and addressee. The artwork is like a theatre play, in that it addresses itself to an audience, whilst promising the possibility of being understood through its unity between structure and meaning (much like W.B. Yeats's dancer). For Gadamer, the whole notion of consciously reading the meaning of a word differently than what it obviously *appears* to mean is a breach of this autonomy, this unity. He assumes a relationship of trust between reader and work, which works as a double bind: the literary work does not function through irony, is not secretly ideological, but is an aesthetic structure which provides a meaningful experience. On the other hand, the reader does not take liberties, such as those Paul de Man takes. I will now proceed to use an important literary analytical tool - the notion of the language situation - to frame the difference between Gadamer and de Man as differently envisioned relations between the work's spokesperson, and her addressee.

## 1. Language Situation // Mode of Address

Van Alphen explains in *Op Poetische Wijze* that every instance of language can be read as taking place within a particular language situation. The easiest way to explain what he means is to say that every text creates more or less implicitly a virtual space within which the utterance takes place. This situation or space is immanent in the text, so it is quite explicitly not a description of the communicative transaction between the sender and receiver of the text (say the author and the reader of a book). Rather, it concerns the communicative transaction between what he terms the 'spokesman' (woordvoerder) of the text and addressee. The subtle difference here becomes very clear in the language situation of the lyric, characterized as an apostrophe by van Alphen, in reference to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. What this particular language situation boils down to, is that the lyrical subject (the poem's spokesman, or -woman) addresses an entity other than the reader, who is as such witness to the utterance from behind the back of the lyrical subject. The addressee can be a range of agents: abstract ideas (inspiration), divine entities, a lover. This situation is immanent in the text - and can be inferred by asking of the text the questions "who speaks?" and "to whom?"

In the study of literary texts van Alphen makes a distinction between the lyric, the dramatic, and the narrative language situation. It is not my point here to make an exhaustive range: what I wish to point out is that it is crucial to realize that any text implicates a particular relation between the spokesperson and the addressee. This is important because the two thinkers that make up the theoretical framework of this thesis (Gadamer & de Man) have two radically different conceptions of what it means to interpret a work, and this is manifest in their respective conceptions of the language situation between spokesperson and addressee. They are fundamentally divided on the question of both the basis and the nature of this relationship: for Gadamer the aesthetic is defined as a very particular language situation (the nature of which he defines through the metaphor of the theatre, cf. chapter 2), which ensures the possibility of meaning, the transaction of which can then proceed on a basis of good will between performer and audience. De Man, on the other hand, does not seek to define the aesthetic by the yardstick of a particular language situation, but is interested in the way the artefact's immanent language situation is conflictual with the meaning it supposedly produces (in chapter 3 I will discuss an example of this).

In chapter 2 I will work out how Gadamer envisions a relationship between the artwork and its audience in a theatrical metaphor. In Chapter 3 it will become clear that for de Man the language situation could never be captured in a single metaphor; because for him each text constructs its own particular language situation, which relates to a mode of knowledge production. De Man distinguishes, for instance, between the way a dramatic situation lays claim to truth and the way lyric does this. In the case of a dramatic language situation this claim is substantiated, so argues de Man, on the basis of mimesis or semblance. De Man observes that in the text by von Kleist he discusses, a semblance of plausibility is created by the dramatic dialogue in which persuasion takes place. De Man focuses not on what is said on the diegetical level, but how the language situation itself works to persuade the reader. The fact that one of the actors in the language situation is persuaded by the other, leads to a greater semblance of plausibility.

The differences between these two modes of reading will inform my analysis of BEING JOHN MALKOVICH in chapter 5, by supplying me with different sorts of questions one can ask of an artwork. Working from a hermeneutical perspective we are invited to look for what the work tries to tell us. We work from the trust that the aesthetic structure is in and of itself meaningful. This mode of questioning allows one to stick close to the direct experience of the artwork: even if it is fraught with irony, parody and self-reference. De Man's set of questions allow us to look into the particular relationship the work constructs between itself and its readership: this leads me, as a reader, away from the direct experience of the work, to a 'meta-analysis' of how the work plays with its own status as artwork, its very credibility. As such it leads to a typically postmodern reading of the film's emphatic instability of meaning. In chapter 5 and the conclusion I will also address how the two different approaches - although seemingly opposed - can work with and through one another in a final analysis of how the film invites both Gadamer's hermeneutical, and de Man's deconstructionist approach.

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iii No reference supplied in source text, other than the title and author of the poem. W.B. Yeats first published this poem, "Among School Children," in *The Tower*, in 1928.

iv Entire poem supplied in source text, p298.

v This notion of the essence of different words also returns in chapter 3: note 4, when we find that Gadamer, in his discussion the the theatre play, distills the essence of the word 'play' from the variety of its meanings and usages.

## 2 Gadamer's Theatrical Metaphor

In this chapter I will try to find out how the various aspects of his theatrical metaphor reflect on what Gadamer wants to define as aesthetic ontology (i.e. the mode of being of art, or artifacts) and the hermeneutical model. We will find out that Gadamer's metaphor envisages an ideal language situation in which a transaction of meaning can take place between performance and audience. The possibility of this transaction (from performance to interpretation) is based on the trusting presupposition that there is nothing outside of the aesthetic structure that the audience requires to experience meaning. This notion of aesthetic autonomy and the ideal of communication of meaning, as developed in Gadamer's metaphor are particularly enlightening with regard to de Man's thinking, because for him the structure is never autonomous, but always intertwined in a societal, historical, and necessarily ideological context, thus making any notion of autonomy very problematic, resulting in a suspicious stance towards Gadamer's hermeneutics - with its ideal of autonomy. I will discuss these differences between Gadamer and de Man in depth in Chapter 4: "Comparing Textual Models."

### I. From Play to Art

Gadamer discusses a number of essential aspects of play and games, which bound together in the theatre play allow it to cross the threshold into becoming a metaphor for aesthetic being. In reference to the difference I just referred to between Gadamer and de Man I address here first one general aspect of play, which Gadamer takes as exemplary for the artwork's autonomy. This is what he terms the *primacy of the play* over the players, and it is a point he develops by starting with the etymology of the verb 'to play.'<sup>vi</sup>

If we examine how the word 'play' is used and concentrate on its so-called transferred meanings, we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of a component in a bearing-case, the inter-play of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is the to-and-fro movement which is not tied to any goal which would bring it to an end. (Truth 93)

In the different usages of the word play Gadamer points to the aspect of autonomy that is the common denominator. The play is not determined by the players, but it is a particular movement which is inherently independent and repeatable. "*It is the game that is played - it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays. The play is the performance of the movement as such.*" (ibid.) What this means for the theatrical metaphor is that the theatre is seen as such an independent and repeatable structure, and that as such it has an autonomy; as Gadamer says it, the play has '*primacy over the players.*' (ibid. 95) This translates into an ideal of total mediation, in demanding complete disappearance of the identity of the players:

Play itself is, rather, transformation of such a kind that the identity of the player does not continue to exist for anybody. Everybody asks instead what it is supposed to be, what is 'meant.' The players (or poets) no longer exist, but only what of theirs is played. (ibid. 100)

The convergence of different aspects of general play into the particular form of theatrical play is the development he refers to in the following, crucial fragment which further emphasizes the importance of the notion of structure. "*I call this development, in which play finds its true perfection in being art, 'the transformation into structure.'* Only through this development does play acquire its ideality, so that it can be intended and understood as play" (ibid. 99) What becomes very clear here is that Gadamer, in developing an aesthetic philosophy, is positing a selective criterium (what is art and what isn't?) on the basis of the willingness to be 'intended and understood as play.'<sup>vii</sup> This means that the play is meaningful in and of itself, which I referred to above as its autonomy, while simultaneously the play is dependent on being performed, being played:

Play is structure - this means that despite its dependence on being played it is a meaningful whole which can be repeatedly represented as such and the significance of which can be understood. But the structure is also play, because - despite this theoretical unity - it achieves its full being only each time it is played. (ibid. 105)

This double bind between play and structure is crucial in grasping that hermeneutical understanding takes place as an event, in the experience of the text. This reflects Gadamer's phenomenological outlook, and his emphasis on the experiential aspect of the aesthetic is further confirmed by the notion of the structure's autonomy. The

performance ought not to attract attention to itself, the meaning passes through the experience of the performance, and the aesthetic structure is different from other structures in that the procedure it prescribes (as a choreography) is fitted to transmit the meaningful experience of human consciousness. In other words, there is a unity between poetics (the structure of the work) and its hermeneutics (the meaning of the work).

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"Thus the concept of transformation characterizes the independent and superior mode of being of what we called structures. From this viewpoint 'reality' is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up of this reality into its truth. (ibid. 102)

## 2. Understanding the Human Condition

What this unity between poetics and hermeneutics safeguards is the work's capacity of being understood, it promises the possibility of the transmission of meaning. What this means becomes clear once we try to answer the questions of the subject or theme of art: what is it that gets transformed into structure, what is the work about? For Gadamer this can be only one thing, even though it is very large and hard to define: the human condition. To understand what he means by this it is good to keep in mind that Gadamer works within the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which strives to understand and describe the experience of being (human). This activity of understanding of the human being and its position in the world, vis-a-vis community, history, death, is what Gadamer calls hermeneutics.

The ability to understand is a fundamental endowment of man, one that sustains communal life with others and, above all, one that takes place by way of language and the partnership of conversation. In this respect the universal claim of hermeneutics is beyond doubt. (*Text 21*)

What this means for our topic here - understanding Gadamer's theatrical metaphor - is that hermeneutics, or acts of interpretation are everywhere. Meaning, experience of the human condition, and acts of trying to understand this - or, hermeneutics - are inextricably bound together. As a 'fundamental endowment of man,' hermeneutics is the cognitive activity in which humans continuously engage, hence the 'universal claim.' This notion makes its way into the metaphor of the theatre as the requirement that there is a continuity between the world presented on the stage, and the essence of the lifeworld of the audience. Staying within the metaphor and taking tragedy as our example: what the playwright does is to capture the tragic aspects from the big chaotic world, and rework these aspects into a structure, which can be repeatedly performed: a tragic play. Examples of such universal thematics would be the confrontation between protagonists and death, the machinations of higher forces, meaningful relationships, life-events.

The spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate. [...] The tragic emotion is not a response to the tragic course of events as such or the justice of the fate that overtakes the hero, but to the metaphysical order of being that is true for all. To see that 'this is how it is' is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusion in which he lives. (*Gadamer Truth 117*)

What is key here is to note that this is an act 'recognition,' which emphasizes a degree of familiarity, between my condition and that of Antigone or Oedipus. This familiarity, this re-cognition, must thus be based on an assumption of universal (both timeless and shared by all of) humanity. For Gadamer, what secures the sustained fascination of the tragedy are the manifold ways in which there can be given expression to this self-knowledge, which '*deepens the spectator's continuity with himself*' (ibid.). This expression takes place through language, and rather than think of language as a transparent medium to express these metaphysical issues as clearcut messages, Gadamer rather emphasizes that the inherent difficulty of this act of expression accounts for the enduring mystery of art. The inherent limitations of language (for instance, in giving expression to the realization of one's mortality, or the difficulties of truly understanding another human being) are so fundamental for Gadamer, because he conceives of language as a human being's sole access to the world and the others inhabiting it.

On the other hand, however, the linguisticity of the event of agreement in understanding [*Verständigungsversuchen*], which is in play between people, signifies nothing less than an insurmountable barrier; the metaphysical significance of which was also evaluated positively for the first time by German romanticism. [...] For] the romantic consciousness it meant that language never touches upon the last, insurmountable secret of the individual person. (*Text 21-2*)

The repeated use of terms connoting limitations (insurmountable, barrier, secret) underline Gadamer's sense of awareness of limitations that to him are part of the human condition. The reason that literary texts and interpretation are so crucial becomes clear now: for Gadamer the literary (as an instance of the aesthetic) is understood as attempts to fix in written words a lingual attempt to deal with the human condition within the universe. As such the literary is not so much about metaphysical limitations inherent in language, but it is itself an instance of running up against such limitations, whilst accepting this as a given of the human condition. Hermeneutics as practicing humanity. It is important to include this insight in my discussion of Gadamer's aesthetic, because over and against de Man it is seductive to think of Gadamer as naive in his trust in art as communication of meaning. But I would argue that rather than think of it in terms of it solely in terms of suspicion, trust and naivety, the respective philosophical frameworks should be taken into account to broaden the basis for understanding the origins of the differences. For indeed, here lies a crucial difference with de Man. Whereas for him the epistemological limitations of language are a lamentable source of mystification, misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and multi-interpretability, for Gadamer the inadequacy of language is simply a given fact of the human condition - and one that accounts for the necessity of interpretation, the mystery of the beautiful. He accepts a certain undecidability of meaning, and moreover, in his view de Man's epistemological doubts (based on his nearly mechanical semiotic focus) pale by comparison to the meaning of the experience of, for instance, our very mortality.

The Being-toward-the-text from which I took my orientation is certainly no match for the radicality of the limit experience found in Being-toward-death, and just as little does the never fully answerable question of the meaning of art, or the meaning of history as that which happens to us, signify a phenomenon that is as primordial as the question put to human Dasein of its own finitude. (Gadamer 1989, 26)

For Gadamer it is thus the value of the aesthetic, that it enables the audience to experience the limits of the human condition. This transmission of experience already suggests the importance of the audience in Gadamer's aesthetic ontology. In fact, the assignment of the structure to an audience is 'constitutive of the being of art.'

A religious rite and a play in a theatre obviously do not represent in the same sense as the playing child. Their being is not exhausted by the fact that they represent; at the same time they point beyond themselves to the audience which is sharing in them. Play here is no longer the mere self-representation of an ordered movement, nor mere representation, in which the playing child is totally absorbed, but it is 'representing for someone.' This assignment in all representation comes to the fore here and is constitutive of the being of art. (Gadamer 1979, 97)

The spectator is the focal point in which the play reaches its ideality as metaphor for Gadamer's aesthetic ontology. This allows us to return to the question of Gadamer's particular language situation, and answer more fully the question of what . He differs from van Alphen in that behind the concrete language situation of the given artwork there is, *in essence*, always the same mode of address, assignment to the audience, which is '*constitutive of the being of art.*' The opposite holds true too, if an 'artwork' deviates from this mode of address it will not be considered proper art by Gadamer. A good example of this is his notion of the pseudo text, which he coins in "Text and Interpretation." Through this notion Gadamer speaks out firmly against the work having an external goal-orientedness (the transmission of accidental knowledge, the reference to communicative circumstance through irony, ideological slant, etc...). All events that are not structured autonomously, for instance an ideological pamphlet (which is geared towards persuasion), an instruction manual (which transmits information rather than universal humanist truths), a joke (ex-/inclusion of those who (don't) understand), are not categorized as aesthetic - because they possess a goal-orientedness which lies outside of the transmission of universal truths of human experience.

### 3. Conclusion

For Gadamer art expresses a universal truth of the human condition. This truth takes the shape of a structure (a choreography, a score, a play) which can be performed so as to create a situation of direct address to an audience. Gadamer's ideal language situation takes shape as a performative event. The structure of the play is autonomous in essence; as it demands submission of the players, but it must be played to come into its ideality; so in practice it is also dependent on the players. This is a double bind in which the play takes primacy over the players. This autonomy also translates into self-sufficiency, which means that understanding is independent of external references, and that one may assume that all interpretive difficulty should be resolved in reference to

the work's own context, or the '*law of the verse*.' (cf. chapter 1) With all this in mind, there is an ideal unity between the meaning and the structure.

"what we have called a structure is one insofar as it presents itself as a meaningful whole." (1979, 106)

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vi For Gadamer the multiplicity of a word's meanings are no reason for alarm - in contradistinction to his deconstructionist contemporaries, among whom Paul de Man. They do not destabilize the meaning of a word, quite the opposite: the proliferation of metaphorical meanings are for Gadamer an aspect of language which helps conceptual thinking: "If a word is applied to a sphere to which it did not originally belong, the actual original meaning emerges quite clearly. Language has performed in advance a work of abstraction which is, as such, the task of conceptual analysis. Now thinking needs only to make use of this advance (sic) achievement." (Gadamer 1979, 92)

vii This implies that there might be many exceptions to this rule, and in the text "Text and Interpretation" he indeed defines many types of text ('pseudo-texts') which for some reason do not measure up to this ideality.

viii We will return to this unity in our discussion of de Man, whose criticism of the hermeneutical model is aimed at this notion of unity between poetics and meaning.

### 3 De Man's Formalization

In contrast to Gadamer's aesthetic of unity, de Man posits a wholly different notion of the aesthetic. To illustrate this I will be discussing a chapter from his book *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, titled "Aesthetic Formalization". This text is a discussion of Kleist's "Über das Marionettentheater." In the introduction of this chapter he quotes a fragment from a text by Friedrich Schiller, who sketches an English dance - with its complex, strictly patterned choreography, which keeps the dancers from bumping into each other - as the perfect metaphor for the aesthetic society: *'the perfect symbol of one's own individually asserted freedom as well as of one's respect for the freedom of the other.'*<sup>x</sup> (Schiller qtd in *TeFormalization* 263) This perfect unity, between choreography and aesthetic grace - a unity which, as we have seen in the Yeats example, is anything but evident for de Man, though exemplary for Gadamer's ideal - is exemplary for 'the tautology of art,' in the words of Schiller's translators. They designate with this a capacity in art which is - like that unity - strongly reminiscent of Gadamer's universal, humanist approach to the meaning of art as the truth of human experiences: *"its (i.e. 'art', JK) tendency to offer a hundred different treatments of the same subject, to find a thousand different forms of expression for the thoughts and feelings common to all men."*<sup>x</sup> (Wilkinson & Willoughby qtd in *Formalization* 264) Juxtaposing these notions de Man makes a very concise analysis of the possibly tense relationship between an all-embracing humanism, and the ideal of aesthetic unity, expressed in the notion of tautology. Reflecting on the notion of thoughts and feelings common to all men he observes of this aesthetic ideal:

"As the privileged and infinitely varied mode of expression of this universality, art is in fact what defines humanity in the broadest sense. Mankind, in the last analysis, is human only by ways of art. On the other hand, as a principle of formalization rigorous enough to produce its own codes and systems of inscription tautology functions as a restrictive coercion that allows only for the reproduction of its own system, at the exclusion of all others." (*Formalization* 265)

The restrictive coercion that de Man refers to must be understood within a somewhat larger frame, of which the notion of rhetorical tautology is exemplary. Considering de Man's emphasis on the undecidable meaning of the sign - which we found already in his reading of Yeats - it is not surprising to find him in opposition to the notion of a double sign (the tautology) in which the two separate signs designate exactly the same thing. To load the expectation on art, that it functions in optima forma as a tautology, is to submit it to an ideology which is in direct conflict with what I conceive to be de Man's primary semiological axiom. Although he never states explicitly, I paraphrase it as follows: no sign means the same as another; in fact, no sign means the same as itself, twice.

In direct opposition to the tautological conception of art's universality, de Man posits an aesthetic of disagreement, based on his typical approach, which I will discuss below. I will look into a concrete example, which is also thematically close to BEING JOHN MALKOVICH, namely de Man's analysis of von Kleist's text on the puppet theatre. My reading of this reading will take a few steps. First I will illustrate how de Man - in contrast to Gadamer - works from the presupposition that each text constructs its own particular language situation between textual agent (the narrator; the lyrical subject, the embodiment of the textual voice) and addressee. In Kleist's text, de Man analyses, there is a blend between the narrative and dramatic language situation. Secondly, I will address how de Man distinguishes between different textual models on the basis of this particular language situation. For de Man, the textual model relates to the question of how a textual object forges a connection between the aesthetic and the epistemological: how does the aesthetically pleasant produce truth? In the case of the Kleist text this leads him to analyse how the aesthetic aspects of narrative (a well constructed story, a reliable narrator), and drama (a scene of persuasion, rather than persuasion itself) leads to a greater sense of credibility and plausibility, whereas these might not be warranted, for he disagrees strongly with the theses the text endorses. This is where we come to the core of de Man's critique of a hermeneutic reading of Kleist: according to him it ignores the way in which this particular language situation, with its appearance of plausibility, might conceal dubious truth claims.



## I. Articulation of the Aesthetic with the Epistemological

De Man's approach becomes already quite clear when in the introduction he describes the text of Kleist as being concerned with an 'articulation [in the transitive sense of the word articulate: to forge a connection] of the aesthetic with the epistemological.'<sup>xi</sup> (*Formalization* 267) The fragment in which he further elaborates this notion is worth quoting in full:

In the Kleist text, however, we are dealing, from the start, with the compatibility of narrative (which is aesthetic) with epistemological argument, or, to be somewhat more specific, with the possibility of a system of formalization that narrative and argument share in common. (ibid. 273) [*italics mine, JK*]

De Man observes in the case of the Kleist text that it is a series of three short narratives which are embedded in the dramatic situation of two interlocutors having a discussion or argument about the aesthetic grace of puppets (which they harmoniously judge to be superior to that of human dancers). His basic question here is thus, whether the formal characteristics of narrative (which, he points out, is also aesthetic in nature) can be merged with the formal characteristics of an argument (which is obviously epistemological, concerned with the finding of knowledge or truth).

What de Man sets out to do in the first instance of his analysis, is to point out that while most critics of Kleist have taken "Marionettentheater" to be a text with a clear thesis (that puppets possess more grace as dancers than their human counterparts), they were misguided to buy into this 'enclave of familiarity.' (268) This enclave refers to a commonplace within the Romantic worldview, in which the puppet (as metaphor) takes centre stage of discussions about determinism and artistic genius that typify Enlightenment and Romantic thinking. It is indeed so that in the text two interlocutors arrive, harmoniously, at the thesis that puppets (normally emblems of determinism) are more capable of artistic expressiveness, grace, than human beings, because they are not hampered by painful human self-awareness (another Romantic commonplace, which also applies to the painfully self-conscious puppeteer in BEING JOHN MALKOVICH). What de Man objects to, is that the text as a whole is not structured as an argument, but is rather set up as a 'scene of persuasion,' in which an argument takes place. And he is quick to add that it is a rather dodgy argument in which a clear authority (Herr C. the first dancer of the local opera) mystifies his interlocutor with bizarre stories the pertinence of which to the argument is anything but evident.

The core of de Man's argument is that commentators should pay mind to the means by which the thesis is arrived at within the story. For instance, just after Herr C. has told the story of the fencing bear, which was infallibly (miraculously) able to tell feint from thrust in a fencing match, the conversation proceeds as follows: "*Do you believe this story, he asked. Absolutely, I replied with encouraging approval; it is plausible enough that I would have believed it had any stranger told, but it is even more plausible coming from you.*" (Kleist 26) This scene of persuasion that takes place in Kleist's text gains its plausibility partially from the fact that on the level of the staged events (between two dramatic characters, involved in an argument) there is the semblance of plausibility, even though from a distance the argument itself seems shaky, hardly worthy of credit. This strange connection between a pleasant aesthetic experience (the mimesis of an interlocutor being persuaded by another) and the knowledge that therein is produced, opens up an awareness of the strength of the illusion mimesis creates.<sup>xii</sup> For de Man the work thus thematizes, through the tension in its formal structure, the 'wavering status of narrative, when compared to the epistemologically sound persuasion of proof.' (*Formalization* 276) Thus, he measures the rigour of a text that dresses up as an argument to its own epistemological pretensions: those of a logical argument.

In general this is true of de Man's method. He looks for a possible tension between the hermeneutics (an identifiable thesis) and the poetics (the structure, or procedure through which the thesis is reached). Narrowing down to the mathematical pretensions of von Kleist's interlocutors he posits the following.

In a computation or a mathematical proof, the meaning and the procedure by which it is reached, the hermeneutics, if one wishes, and the poetics (as formal procedure considered independently of its semantic function), entirely codetermine each other. But in another mode of cognition and of exposition, such as narrative, this mutual supportiveness cannot be taken for granted, since it is not the only generative principle of the discourse. (ibid. 268)

The important point to retain is that formalization refers to a degree (higher or lesser) of pertinence of the textual model; which is the combination of a truth claim (hermeneutics) and an aesthetic structure (poetics). In the case of the text of Kleist, de Man tries to show that the aesthetic structure is not able to sustain its purpor-

ted meaning, or truth claim, which as such is destabilized. The possibility of a hermeneutical interpretation, based on unity between aesthetics and meaning, is as such problematized here.

## 2. Generative principle(s)

In the previous paragraph we saw that de Man concluded that a narrative of persuasion, in contradistinction to logical proof, has more generative principles than just logical coherence. Still using the logical model as a contrast for the textual model of narrative, he puts one of those additional generative principles in high relief. This principle is mimesis – other principles mentioned are plausibility and exemplification. What he objects to in mimesis as a generative principle of discourse is that it produces the illusion that it replaces the sign with the referent. This mimetic illusion, de Man argues, governs the dramatic frame that is the basis of von Kleist's text. It is at the highest diegetic highest level, in which the two gentlemen discuss puppetry. The dramatic language situation is created by explicit descriptions of their movements, the usage of direct discourse; indeed, at times the text reads as a theatrical script. The epistemological status – or in simpler words, the credibility of the truth claim of this text is then not determined by the internal self-sufficiency of argumentation (which would be Gadamer's presupposition), but by a semblance of plausibility, which in turn is produced partly by the success or failure of the mimesis of the dramatic situation.

Imitation, to the extent that it pretends to be natural, anthropologically justified to the point of defining the human species and spontaneous, is not formalized in the sense that mathematical language is; it is not entirely independent of the particular content, or substance, of the entity it chooses to represent. "One can conceive of certain mimetic constants or even structures but, to the extent that they remain dependent on a reality principle that lies outside them, they resist formalization." (*Formalization* 273-4)

What this means for de Man is not that every text should strive for the highest degree of formalization possible. What it merely means is that its degree of formalization decides the transparency of its pretensions to truth. Take for instance his favored example of Baudelaire's lyric. Of his poetry de Man asserts that the epistemological problems of mimesis are not at stake in lyric, because in there *'the claim is that of a voice addressing entities or conceptually generalized expressions of particular entities.'* (ibid. 273) [emphasis mine, JK] In other words, lyrical poetry constructs a radically different language situation. Where Kleist's narrative tries to create a voice that inspires credibility and plausibility, and does so mimetically (by creating the illusion of a harmonious conversation) lyrical poetry does something different, and its referential truth claims (i.e. mimesis) are not of interest, because there is not such a claim made by the lyric. What becomes clear, is that de Man does not hold an extrinsic yardstick, to which a text has to live up, but rather that de Man gauges the epistemological claim of a text (that is – in normal diction – the answer to the question: "what knowledge does this text produce, and how is it related to its aesthetic/poetic/formal/structural dimensions such as the language situation?"), and tests the text to its own claim. This also qualifies his distrusting attitude (limiting it to a particular class of texts): he distrusts the production of credibility and plausibility: he is not necessarily a distrusting reader, but rather a distrusting reader of narrative.

## 3. Conclusion

In summary, it is important to mark the distinction, in de Man's methodology, between the language situation, and his notion of the textual model. The language situation is the work's mode of address; this can be dramatic, lyrical, narrative, but also logical, or technically discursive: all of these have ramifications for its claim to knowledge production, as we have seen above. Then there is the textual model, which is close to the claim to knowledge production: it is defined by de Man as the "articulation of aesthetics and epistemology," or in a similar conceptual couple: "poetics (procedure) and hermeneutics (meaning)" #REF(). Language situation and textual model relate like address and interpretation. For Gadamer these are ideally the same. De Man makes a point of keeping them separated. His criticism of Gadamer's model (exemplified by von Kleist's text) follows two stages: first he analyzes the tension within the text's entire language situation (narrative encapsulated in dramatic situation: three embedded anecdotes related by two interlocutors) in order to destabilize its claim to truth, knowledge or meaning. In the following chapter I will compare the textual model that de Man works with (in which the aesthetic structure works to disagree with the work's meaning), to that of Gadamer (in which there is unity between aesthetic and meaning), and work out some of its more philosophical consequences.

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ix Reference supplied: Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, ed. and transl. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1967), p.300. De Man indicates that he has modified the translation of the quote.

x Reference supplied: *Ibid.*, pp. cxxxi

xi De Man's usage of the word articulation (connoting both the expression of ideas, and the jointing of two (body) parts , and disarticulation (with its connotation of violent dismemberment) is exemplary of the way in which he uses a word to resonate with its various meanings, whereas this ambiguity of the word and its different meanings (i.e. its tropological movements), is a source of disarticulation of meaning. Gadamer finds that in the different usages of the verb 'to play' there can be found the essence of what it means 'to play.' The word articulation also suggest a naturalness of the joint: it is ostensibly not one that is created arbitrarily, but which has a definite function: a place within a functioning body, a system that can dance.

xii In my analysis of *Being John Malkovich* I will return to this important notion of the semblance of plausibility, because this film plays with scenes that in their formal aspects are recognizable as scenes of explication - quite common in Hollywood films, whereas what they make plausible is simply absurd. The tension this creates is crucial for my reading of the film.

## 4 Comparing Textual Models

In this chapter I will compare the insights we can gain from the previous chapters, and we shall see that the metaphor of the puppet is particularly enlightening. For Gadamer, meaning is produced in an ideal aesthetic event - in which an audience takes part. The aesthetic event achieves a unity between poetics and hermeneutics. The image of a functional system, in which every element serves its purpose comes to mind, de Man's notion of articulation reflects interestingly here, because of its connotation with the body and limbs. In a sense the notion of unity between meaning and structure reflects a desire for a meaningful world about which it is possible to articulate truths in aesthetic structures meaningful. The subservience to function in Gadamer's conception of language is, comparable to an ideal conception of the human body, which makes itself entirely subservient to its role in the aesthetic performance. When Gadamer reflects on the task of the actor, it is an image of a puppet that comes to mind:

Play itself is, rather, transformation of such a kind that the identity of the player does not continue to exist for anybody. Everybody asks instead what it is supposed to be, what is 'meant.' The players (or poets) no longer exist, but only what of theirs is played. (1979, 100)

It is indeed as an emblem of perfect unity between structure and meaning that the puppet figures in the text of Kleist. The metaphor of the puppet functions as a symbol for aesthetic grace: the dancing puppet - in comparison to his human counterpart - has lost all manner of hesitation, painful self-consciousness. It is completely subservient to the movements it has to perform, and as such an embodiment of Gadamer's ideal of total mediation. This is where the greatest difference between de Man and Gadamer comes to the fore, and it can be explained by using de Man's conceptual pair articulation/disarticulation. The organic unity described above can be connected to what de Man calls the 'articulation between the aesthetic and the epistemological.' (*Formalization* 267) Recapitulating in plain English: the one-on-one connection between a work's structure (it's style of phrasing, the storyline, the metaphors, etc...) and its meaning (the experience it seeks to convey). This notion of connection is tied in with the other two senses of the word articulation: first, its sense of clarity in communication, secondly, its transitive usage as a connection, deriving from the Latin diminutive for joint (dim.: *articulus*, from *artus*). This is how the puppet functions as a metaphor for organic unity (as a collection of neatly cooperating limbs) and aesthetic unity at the same time in Kleist's text, and in the thesis that its protagonists appear (!) to defend. As we have seen in chapter 3 de Man reads this defense ironically; as an absurd thesis embedded by narrative, mimetic, and dramatic conventions. The result of this is that the plausibility is put into question, a process which he calls disarticulation, or somewhat closer to the metaphor of organic, corporeal unity and quite morbidly: dismemberment. Besides being a metaphor for the perfect execution of a given role, the puppet is also a mere collection of limbs, loosely connected (articulated), with a tremendous freedom to make its own, surprising movements: it stands as a metaphor for the possibility of disarticulating a work's meaning, by pointing out the irreconcilable tension between the multiple possible interpretations, which we have seen in Chapter 2/3 to be typical of De Man's mode of reading.

The puppet as such is a double-sided metaphor. One commentator on Kleist's *Marionettentheater* makes this duplicity very clear, and he frames his comment in the Romantic tension with Enlightenment, of freedom & nature, versus the deterministic mechanisms of cold rationality

Presenting it as the position of Herr C., "On the Puppet Theater" ambiguously conjectures that the perfect unity of being, that is, the identity of freedom and nature, or the grace of the puppet, is achieved by mechanical means, i.e. by the loss of freedom. [...] What the two characters in the essay ponder is how the dancer - or the actor - can achieve the effortlessness, the transparency of art. (Block 69-70)

Block tries to salvage Kleist, by saying that, really, the essay is about performances (and could be read as a Gadamerian theatrical metaphor, *avant la lettre!*). By determining what the work means (is it in fact an essay as Block decides, or is it, as de Man argues, a set of hardly coherent or related narratives, embedded in a dramatic setting?) Block attempts to fix the work to a single position to which he allocates Kleist, now safely labelled an Enlightenment Romantic, 'that is, a Romantic aware of the issues and implications that Emmanuel Kant and the Enlightenment had for subsequent thought. [...] In his non-fiction prose as well as his plays, Kleist often juxtaposes - and thereby creates almost irreconcilable tensions between - idealistic notions of freedom and a nightmare suspicion of determinism born of Enlightenment dreams of total, rational order. (ibid. 65) The difference with de Man would

be reducible to the insertion of the word 'almost.' De Man's reading of Kleist tries to play out tense elements against each other: on the one hand the puppet metaphorizes idealistic notions of aesthetic grace (in absolute unity between performance and meaning), and on the other there is the reading in which the puppet is a mere automaton, dead unless determined otherwise - by external forces. He seems to say that you cannot just wish away the unwanted implications of the puppet metaphor. By focusing on the unintended multiplicity of meaning de Man opposes the aesthetic of unity with an aesthetic of discord, which bases itself on a conception of language that is described by Laclau as figuring signification as material events, in which the expression 'unmediated reference' designates the unity of signifier (for instance, the puppet metaphor) and signified (in this example, aesthetic grace).

"De Man had always insisted that any language, whether aesthetic or theoretical, is governed by the materiality of the signifier, by a rhetorical milieu that ultimately dissolves the illusion of any unmediated reference. (Laclau 229)

The materiality of the sign is a metaphor, because there is nothing literally material about it. What does it mean? It seems to connote the instability of matter, in its inherent transience. Whereas Gadamer sees the lingual sign as limited vis-a-vis the inexpressibility of the sense of our mortality - but valuable as the sole source of understanding we have, for de Man mortality is already inherent in the sign itself. Gadamer and de Man do not differ so much in terms of their awareness of historicity of text and the transience of interpretations, but Gadamer is a sort of adversary of death, whereas de Man is its reluctant companion, but on a different level: Gadamer is a philosopher, and his focus is thematic. He is interested in Eros/Thanatos, the big themes: how are these fundamental, universal aspects of the human experience manifested in literature?, how does human experience fixed in art transcend the life of its creator? De Man resists such an attempt to master death as inherently futile, as for him language contains the very mortality (the rejection of what is organic, alive, and in a sense, human) it tries to conquer. Literature is not the vessel for an immortal, human voice nobly facing death, because language is itself inhuman; outside of the scope of human instrumentality:

The „inhuman“ is not some kind of mystery, or some kind of secret; the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur; possibilities which are inherent in language - independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have.... If one speaks of the inhuman, the fundamental non-human character of language, one also speaks of the fundamental non-definition of the human as such. (qtd. in Johnson 219)

I could not think of a stronger answer against the universality of Gadamer's humanistic claim, and indeed this quote gives us full view of de Man's distinct anti-humanism. Gadamer attempts to find a philosophical explanation and definition that does justice to the phenomenon that language can give marvelous aesthetic experiences, in which identification or recognition of a carefully articulated insight takes place. Using de Man's anti-humanism this ideal of recognition suddenly strikes me as the mere self-congratulatory gesture of humanists that want to appropriate the beautiful as being an inalienable aspect of the shared humanity: paradoxically recognized solely by a hermeneutical elite of humans. Returning to the words of Schiller's commentators, 'the tautology of art' does seem to suggest this self-congratulatory gesture of identifying oneself with the aesthetically pleasing, as the pinnacle of our common humanity. De Man counters this humanism with an anti-humanist aesthetic that emphasizes not unity, but discord, duplicity and disarticulation (and he would from upon this alliteration).

Still, the interpretation of the enigmatic little text continues and, under the salutary influence of contemporary methodology, the readings have become increasingly formalized.<sup>xiii</sup> They allow one to reach the true aesthetic dimension of the work, the uneasy mixture of affirmation and denial, of gracefulness and violence, of mystification and lucidity, of hoax and high seriousness, that characterized it and accounts for its enduring fascination. [...] That this happens at the expense of stable and determinable meaning is a fair enough price to pay for the mastery over form. (*Formalization* 272)

De Man's praise of the true aesthetic dimension of the text, is based on his claim to be happy to trade mastery of meaning, for mastery over form. But it is a trade that only goes one way: first there must be some mastery of the work's meaning, before a fruitful deconstructive analysis can be made. Going back and forth, between a desire for an aesthetic of unity, and the critical distance from this unity that follows from deconstruction, is the movement that is caused by the *mise-en-abyme*, but it is sustained by the desire for meaning only. Deconstruction as such, is a negative hermeneutics, a reaction: and in that sense it sustains what it dreams of destroying.

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xiii De Man's footnote refers to analyses of Marionettentheater by Helène Cixous, and H.M. Brown. (de Man 314)

## 5 Analysis of BEING JOHN MALKOVICH

In this chapter I will analyse the film BEING JOHN MALKOVICH using the insights of Gadamer's hermeneutics and de Man's 'negative hermeneutics.' My analysis is structured as follows. The lead question is how the *mise-en-abyme* functions in this work. This figure will require a short methodological introduction, which I will supply. It will be my claim that the *mise-en-abyme* is emblematic of the film's play with extending what I call hermeneutic promises, whilst actively preventing the fulfillment of these.

### 1. *Mise-en-abyme*

BEING JOHN MALKOVICH continuously emits signs that signify the possibility, a sort of promise, of unity between form and meaning. The emission of these signs bespeaks a desire for meaning, and this desire - being present in the first scene - frames the entire film. A rereading of the film puts this desire in ironical relief, but not to such an extent that one forgets the desire for meaning entirely. The willingness to read meaning, particularly through the *mise-en-abyme*, keeps the movement of the interpretive process in permanent suspension between the absurd and the articulated. As an emblem of this suspension stands the absurd portal into John Malkovich's consciousness, at the heart of this narrative. The notion of the *mise-en-abyme* finds its origin in a text by André Gide, who tentatively defines and evaluates the *mise-en-abyme* as follows.

"In a work of art, I rather like to find thus transposed, at the level of the characters, the subject of the work itself. Nothing sheds more light on the work or displays the proportions more accurately." (Gide, qtd. in Dällenbach 7)

From the perspective of Gadamer, who wants the aesthetic structure to transmit universal experiences of human consciousness, it is very well possible that a small symbolic entity (such as a play within a play, or the presence of a manuscript within a book, etc...) represents the essence of the experience of human consciousness, for Gadamer indeed 'the subject of the work itself'. As such, a symbolic relation inheres between the abyssal part and the whole, as between a concrete sign (i.e. within the diegesis) and an abstract referent: the thematic subject of the work is (as in Gide's definition of the *mise-en-abyme*) reflected on the level of the diegesis. In this view the ability of the *mise-en-abyme* to represent in a unified symbol the entire subject of the work extends a strong hermeneutical promise. This, however, is not the only interpretation of the word subject that can be given, as this transposition of the subject of the work of art, might refer to the thematic subject of the work, or, to the narrating subject, as Mieke Bal points out:

Cette exploration révèle l'ambiguïté gidiennne du mot sujet, qui se laisse interpréter comme le contenu thématique ou comme le sujet narrant.<sup>xiv</sup> (Bal 117)

Interpreting the word subject as 'narrating subject,' the transposition becomes a notion which is much closer to the deconstructive capacity of the self-conscious narrator. As such, it is a prime example of irony in de Man's framework. For de Man, irony works to signal the constructedness of language and as such maintains 'the radical difference that separates fiction from the world of empirical reality.' (de Man *Temporality* 217) De Man's assertion comes in the middle of a text in which he asserts the role of irony in countering the text's tendency to mystify its fictional nature.

Friedrich Schlegel knew this very well when he defined irony, in a note from 1797, as 'eine permanente Parabase.' [reference supplied] Parabase is understood here as what is called in English criticism the "self-conscious narrator," the author's intrusion that disrupts the fictional illusion." (ibid. 218-9)

As becomes clear, the strongest example of irony for de Man is what is referred to as the 'transposition' of 'the subject of the work' on 'the level of the characters,' in André Gide's coinage of the notion of *mise-en-abyme*, quoted above. Whereas in a great number of texts the transposition of the author on the level of the diegesis is a claim to a hermeneutic control of the artist over the articulated meaning of his unified artefact, there is a lot to be said for the option that rather than achieving such transcendence, the figure achieves its opposite: a radical irony cast on the fixity of the text's meaning, as the presence of the narrating subject emphasizes the fact of its narration, its construction - and thus its capacity for disarticulation.

"Niet elk onderdeel leent zich daarvoor [lezing als *mise en abyme*, JK]. Je weet eigenlijk pas welk onderdeel relevant is, wanneer je de gehele tekst hebt gelezen. Je kunt dan pas proberen deel en geheel aan elkaar te relateren.

Dat lukt nooit na één lezing, want elke herlezing leidt tot herziening. Zodoende ontstaat er een dialectisch proces. Wanneer je erin slaagt een betekenisvolle synthese te vinden tussen deel en geheel, stopt dat proces tijdelijk. Door deze dynamiek is *mise en abyme* in het Postmodernisme een populair vormgevend principe geworden." (198)<sup>xv</sup>

In my analysis I will focus on how the three abyssal parts appear to extend a hermeneutical promise, which is disarticulated by the whole. In Korsten's terms, the film prevents the viewer from achieving the synthesis that the *mise-en-abyme* (as a figure in general) promises.

## 2. Three Abyssal Parts: Dance of Despair and Disillusionment

It is not hard to read the opening scene as a *mise-en-abyme*. The opening credits coincide with the opening of the curtains of a puppet theatre. In this theatre a puppet performs a dance: a combination of choreographed dance movements, and the aggressive destruction of the furniture within the room. The mirror in which the puppet steals a meaningful look at himself is shattered, and the puppet looks up - whether with despair, anger, sadness we don't know - into the eyes of his master of strings, before sitting down in a corner, slumping over his knees. This dance is repeated in exactly the same form, or choreography, by the body of John Malkovich which is under the control of Schwartz, (the puppet master of the first scene). This second time it is not a solitary performance in a puppeteer's workshop, but rather it is a mating ritual in a hotelroom shared with Craig's lover Maxine, who is duly impressed by Schwartz's measure of control over Malkovich. He tells her the dance is called "Dance of Despair and Disillusionment." This is what I refer to as the second instance of the *mise-en-abyme*. The pompous title returns as the title of a documentary about Malkovich/Schwartz's puppeteering career, which I read as the third instance of this *mise-en-abyme*. My choice to do so is motivated by the return of that title, but additionally the opening scenes of the documentary (a performance within a performance) feature images from a puppet dance which are strongly reminiscent of the first instance of the *mise-en-abyme*. The fact that the puppet in the first scene is a miniature of John Cusack (a transposition of the master of puppets), and the coincidence of the opening credits and the parting of the curtains actively signal the scene as a miniature of the film, an embedded miniature performance. The exact repetition of the choreography reinforces the autonomy of this miniature performance, and the frame of Malkovich's television screen also seems to posit the "Dance of..." as an autonomous sign (a screen within a screen). These three instances single themselves out as parts reflecting on the whole.

### *Promise: Disarticulation of Articulate Meaning*

What does the *mise-en-abyme* appear to promise? Particularly the first scene seems to signal unified reading in the form of tragedy, in the most basic sense of the term, offered by Korsten: "a deterioration of a previously stable situation." (Korsten 28) We see a puppet, in his homely habitat, coming to a realization when looking in the mirror. This insight creates a terrible anger, which is only emphasized by the nearly convulsive intensity with which the master of strings is sweating and working when we see him from the puppet's perspective: the puppet's desperate look is answered by a look of empathic understanding. The scene breathes hermeneutic promise, strong human emotions countered with empathy, and the tragic redemption of the slumped puppet, after its beautiful dance has been completed. This sense of an invitation to read for tragedy fits nicely with Gadamer's insistence that the tragic (as well as the comic) are exemplary for the theatrical ontology of art. In reference to chapter 2 I recall here that for him recognition in the audience is crucial. I will look at how the film answers this Gadamerian requirement of recognition. So much for the hermeneutic promise of articulate meaning. Because in the second instance, the *mise-en-abyme* consciously thematizes the relationship between artist and artwork, and emphasizes the constructedness of the work. The fact that the puppet makes somersaults, in a choreography which is impossible for a puppet (so constructed by digital means) seems to emphasize this point. In the following paragraph (§3) I will observe how the film's whole structure frustrates any attempt at a unified reading. Thus, my final reading of the *mise-en-abyme* (§4) centres on my observation that the figure works as a tragic lament of the deterioration of artistic sincerity in the two main protagonists: Schwartz and Malkovich.



### 3. The Whole: Narratological Structure

In this film there are several plot lines developing at the same time. The film can be read fairly straightforward as Craig Schwartz's tragedy, an unsuccessful puppeteer, who seizes the ultimate chance to become famous by appropriating John Malkovich's body, botches it, loses love and fame and suffers the painful consequences. A second reading emphasizes the tragedy of John Malkovich, playing himself, who struggles against the invasion of his consciousness by other individuals through a portal into his mind. He tragically loses his fight against a host of paying customers, Craig Schwartz, and finally Dr. Lester; the owner of the portal who ultimately seizes full control over his brain from Schwartz. The third complementary storyline is that of Dr. Lester. He is in possession of all the secrets of the portal, and uses his knowledge to his own advantage. He awaits the right moment to strike, enters the portal, gains control of the host-body, and intends to repeat this trick into infinity. To the extent that he is successful where both Malkovich and Schwartz fail in their respective struggles we could think of the film as two tragedies and one comedy. The pattern that appears in this observation is that the film features a number of protagonists, engaged in continuous antagonism with other protagonists. Although their individual storylines are continually interweaving with those of the others, these others are hardly anything more than helpers (borrowing from Mieke Bal's narratological vocabulary) in the development of another protagonist's struggle. An attempt to integrate all these story-lines into a comprehensive story, results in a rather bleak collection of wins and losses, of comic and tragic elements - without resulting in a meaningful tragedy or comedy in Gadamer's sense: there is no sense of recognition that film fosters. I would argue that this narrative structure reflects the rampant cynicism of the personal relations in the film. Already here, the puppetry theme is pervasive: everyone tries to manipulate everyone else in attempts to be, or to be with, John Malkovich. Craig Schwartz wants to control him like a real life puppet, Maxine takes shameless advantage of Craig's obsession for her, and capitalizes on his control of the portal with their enterprise J.M. Inc, and later on as John Malkovich's (or, Craig Schwartz's?) spouse, as she helps his career as puppeteer skyrocket. Dr. Lester keeps Maxine hostage to force Craig Schwartz out of the portal. All the while, John Malkovich (mostly as the mere shell of his body) is at the centre of the storm - for the greatest part unaware.

#### *Whose Story Is This?*

This presence of the empty shell of John Malkovich at the center of a film whose title suggests that it is about the experience of "being John Malkovich" already signals the void which is at the heart of this film: the hermeneutic promises that are made are all consciously left unfulfilled. Whilst the mysterious portal has enormous potential, the film tells us virtually nothing about what it is like to be John Malkovich, and it seems to make a point out of it. The insights offered by the portal into Malkovich's private life show him choosing furniture from a catalogue, brushing his teeth, showering, and boringly rehearsing lines. The scene in which Malkovich himself enters his own portal might have offered some deep humanist insights, but instead it is a hilariously narcissistic nightmare inside a restaurant where each person wears Malkovich's head, and uses only one word: "Malkovich." In another scene, two women chase each other down the portal where they are shoved into Malkovich's subconscious. What follows is a quick scan of Malkovich's childhood trauma's, a painful love experience, etc... However, this functions not as an attempt to gain insight in Malkovich - in a way which relates meaningfully to the events in the film - but merely as a backdrop for a chase scene of the two women. One of the most bizarre and original chase scenes I have ever seen, it must be admitted, but nothing more hermeneutically satisfactory than that. In summary, Malkovich struggles against the invasion by Schwartz and later Lester, and he loses. But the film gives us little leverage to experience this tragedy as truly tragic or meaningful, because the absurdly banal scenes relating to the portal make it impossible to relate to the fate of Malkovich, which is laughable rather than tragic.

There is a remarkable analogy between the two main protagonists: both are middling artists, whose seriousness exceeds their fame (although Malkovich is already a bit higher on Hollywood's ladder), but testifies to their artistic sincerity. Both characters thus extend a promise of depth: Schwartz as the desperate, but sincere puppeteer: whose opening dance speaks of anger, disillusionment, strong passions, and whose art is geared not towards profit, because he chooses to 'raise issues.' Malkovich in his turn, is seen to practice Shakespeare lines, and rehearse these on stage as part of a Broadway theatre company. Malkovich is clearly on his way to fame, and soon this fame becomes the stepping stone for Schwartz, whose increasing control over Malkovich's body allows him to launch a puppeteering career, straight into the heart of Hollywood. This appropriation of Malkovich's body signifies the flatness of both characters in a disillusioning way: Malkovich - although struggling - cannot prevent becoming an empty vessel, whilst Schwartz - in his new position of power - turns into the me-

dia-gimmick he vowed never to become in one of the first scenes, in which he sees a successful puppeteer on the news, only to call him a 'gimmicky bastard.' Although his main drive seems to remain artistic - he pays for it at the expense of everything else: as a successful artist he turns out to be a cynical narcissist, whose marriage to Maxine is based on little more than his sexual obsession for her and her financial benefit from his technical control over Malkovich.

When Dr. Lester finally coaxes Schwartz to release his control over Malkovich and the latter finds out that Maxine left him for his ex-wife Lotte (both turned lesbian), he desperately attempts to regain control of the portal, but ends up shutting himself away in the subconscious of the child of John Malkovich (to whose brain the portal has reverted - by some immutable law of the story - on the 44th birthday of Malkovich). The film ends with a scene of his solitary suffering: a restless point-of-view shot through the eyes of the girl, watching her parents, the two ex-lovers of Schwartz. We hear Schwartz, as a voice-over, imploring the girl to look away. He has been locked into the consciousness of the little girl, without any possibility of exerting control over the subject whose life he is suffered to witness. This tragicomic ending of near-Sisyphean proportions is kept from being truly tragic only by the absurdity of the (laws of the) portal, which bars the alienated viewer from identification.

*I think this is a film both wacky and profound. Would you believe, there is a hole in the wall, a "portal," a long tunnel (a birth canal?) on the 7 1/2th floor (!) of a building and, if you crawl into it, there is suction and weird music, and you find yourself inside John Malkovich's head, seeing through his eyes and hearing through his ears. Then, after fifteen minutes, you are dumped out into a ditch alongside the New Jersey Turnpike. Give me a break! (Holland)*

### ***Suspended Dis/ Articulation: The Absurd Portal***

Before I come to my final reading of the *mise-en-abyme* I will argue that it is the mysterious portal, and the way it functions as a narrative device that obstructs both identification (Gadamer's requirement for a tragic reading) and more in general it obstructs meaning from becoming articulated. One could easily conceive of a hermeneutic interpretation of this portal as a metaphor for the influence of others, of the invasion of the mind by external forces, ideas, or the acquired convictions that determine the course of a life. What I mean in a more general sense is that a narrative device can be absurd, without hampering the progress of the narrative. It is exactly this capacity of narrative plausibility that leads de Man to analyse narrative in its capacity for mystification. In the case of *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* however, I notice that the portal and its laws are made far too concrete, far too factual, to function as a plausibly absurd [oxymoron intended] narrative device. In short: its concreteness makes its absurdity painfully tangible. This becomes evident in the scene in which Dr. Lester explains to Lotte (Schwartz's girlfriend) how the portal works. In this scene several cinematic narrative conventions are quoted to give the explanation quasi-scientific allure.<sup>xvi</sup> The scene supplies pictures of the portal, and Dr. Lester cites literature on the topic to substantiate his explanation of the portal. It is on the authority of laughably simplistic schematic images, and quasi-scientific discourse that the semblance of plausibility is created. This explanation and the curiously understanding response of Lotte is strongly reminiscent of the interaction between the two interlocutors in von Kleist, cited in chapter 3, as part of de Man's analysis of the semblance of plausibility created in that text.

The portal, we learn, obeys to all sorts of laws: the host body is ripe at its 44th birthday, on that day it must be entered and submitted, because after that moment the portal reverts to a new host body. If this host body is entered in an early stage, the person entering it will be locked up into infinity in the host's subconscious. As we have seen in the discussion of the narratological structure (§3), these 'laws' of the portal are crucial for the proceeding of the story: the film's action culminates on the 44<sup>th</sup> birthday of John Malkovich, who is by then definitively colonized by a group of geriatrics led by Dr. Lester who aim to continue their lives inside a younger body. As a result of these events Schwartz gets locked up in the subconscious of Malkovich's daughter. This is just to point out that the explanation scene is crucial for understanding the final events of the film. As such the portal is essential for the unfolding of the narrative; we can understand the final scene, because we have learned the laws of the portal. However, in terms of representational meaning, the scenes of explication just emphasize the portal's absurdity and artificial constructedness (together with the fixity of its laws) and has an effect which is alienating rather than integrating. Whereas many films and narratives use devices that take part in the fantastic or absurd (cf. time travel in *DONNIE DARKO*, all of the magic in the *HARRY POTTER* series) without any consequence for their plausibility (as narrative!), this device has the effect of making the viewer aware of its very absurdity, because of the reasons I have stated: the attribution of immutable (but entirely arbitrary) laws to the portal, and the conscious parodying of Hollywood narrative conventions in the process.

This absurdity has a double effect: besides fixing attention on the artificiality of narrative in general, it cancels the hermeneutic promise extended by the tragic and comic elements in the film, by keeping the viewer away from a process of recognition, which is the basis of Gadamer's experience of the tragic. The absurd Sisyphian punishment caused in me a laughter which marks the opposite of recognition. In the case of John Malkovich, recognition of his fate is also rather difficult. While the film stages J.M. Inc's clientele's desire for identification - people cue up for fifteen minutes inside John Malkovich - it frustrates any desire for identification with Malkovich we - as viewers - might have. As a way of further emphasizing the point, there is a scene in the film, in which the psychologically troubled chimp of Schwartz's wife Lotte, transcends his childhood trauma by releasing the bonds of Lotte who has been put inside the chimp's cage, bound and gagged. While she begs the monkey to undo her bonds, we witness - in stereotypically melodramatic fashion - how he revisits a memory of his parents trapped in the hunter's nets, summoning him (like Lotte) to release them in subtitled shrieks. So much for recognition and catharsis. In the concluding paragraph of this chapter I will argue that if we want to read *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* as a tragedy (which I propose to do) it is as the abstract tragedy of artistic sincerity, which dwindles to cynicism in Schwartz and Malkovich.

#### 4. The Part: An allegorical reading of the *mise-en-abyme*

Whereas one can observe this play with the frustration of a unified reading (which hampers a hermeneutic as well as a deconstructionist approach), the film also explicitly parodies an aesthetic which is remarkably Gadamerian - as was already clear from the chimp's catharsis in the previous paragraph. I will discuss two examples, which occur in the third instance of the *mise-en-abyme*: the documentary entitled "Dance of Despair and Disillusionment." In it we witness Malkovich, now completely under Schwartz's sway, as he instructs puppeteering novices in his art.

(Documentary voice over): Malkovich's rise to fame brought about a Renaissance in the art of puppeteering.

[cuts to auditorium with a puppeteer on stage, Malkovich/Schwartz is among the audience]

(Malkovich/Schwartz to pupil): No no no no. What are you doing?

(pupil): I'm making him weep, John.

(Malkovich:/Schwartz): You're making him weep but you yourself are not weeping. Don't ever [...] with your audience. Until the ... the puppet becomes an extension of you, it's a novelty act.

What becomes prominent here is Malkovich/Schwartz's endorsement of an aesthetic which demands the submission of the player to the performance, which we encountered in Gadamer (cf. chapter 2 §1). On the other hand, the words 'Renaissance' and 'novelty act' can be interpreted ironically: because the documentary shows us exactly how the puppetry *hausse* is nothing but a temporary hype in which all of Hollywood suddenly begins to dabble in puppetry, in order to have a share of Malkovich's fame. This becomes very clear in the cameo appearance of Sean Penn (acting as himself), who ironically declares - with a badly concealed smirk on his face - to consider a move into puppeteering near-inevitable. Or consider the following eulogy of Malkovich's work by critic Christopher Bing (an uncredited performance by David Fincher), which clearly parodies Gadamer's universal humanist discourse (cf. chapter 2 §2) for a second time.

(Christopher Bing): Malkovich shows us ... a reflection of ourselves, our frailties, and our , you know, desperate humanity. That's what makes him one of the most relevant artists of our time.

What we see is that besides making a hermeneutical reading impossible (prevention of tragic recognition, ironic destabilization of narrative devices, narratological structure which does not integrate into one meaningful whole) this very hermeneutical approach is explicitly thematized and ridiculed in the third manifestation of the *mise-en-abyme* (the documentary named *Dance of Despair and Disillusionment*). What about the first and second *Dance*. can I somehow integrate my reading?

I would argue that Gadamer's aesthetic is used as a nostalgic lure in the first scene, in which the first abyssal *Dance* takes place. We encounter Schwartz, a seemingly sincere puppeteer, who works very hard in his workshop with themes of despair, sadness, destructive anger. The scene stages a (dance) performance within the performance (of the film itself) and as such seems to invite a meaningful transposition of terms in which the meaning of this scene is transposed to stand for the meaning of the film as a whole. An attempt at this would direct us to the tragic struggle of the *Dance's* protagonist (with despair and sadness, etc...); a lifelike copy of Craig Schwartz. This struggle, as we have seen, takes place in the remainder of the film, but the cynical flatness

of Schwartz's character, and moreover the abundance of different elements which add to the experience of the film, prevent us from reading the first scene as a transposition of the meaning of the film as a whole. By the time we encounter the choreography of the first scene for a second time, and hear Malkovich/Schwartz declare with pompousness that its title is "Dance of Despair and Disillusionment" any notion of his artistic sincerity has dwindled to the recognition of his cynical manipulations. The second *Dance* is nothing but a (successful) attempt at impressing his lover with his technical prowess as the puppeteer of a living body. This dwindling of his artistic sincerity coincides with the submission of Malkovich's body, who first appears in the film as a sincere, albeit slightly boring, Broadway actor; rehearsing Shakespeare lines. If I would have to come, finally, to an integrated reading of these three abyssal scenes, I would ask (inspired by Gadamer): who is the protagonist of the tragedy that the film's opening *Dance* seems to signal? The answer is that the *mise-en-abyme* signals an abstract tragedy, that incorporates the two incomplete tragedies of Schwartz and Malkovich. Contrary to those two incomplete tragedies (for they offer no recognition, or catharsis), the tragedy I have in mind is one that I can relate to in the sense that qualifies Gadamer's notion of tragedy. The *mise-en-abyme* laments the decline of artistic sincerity, by showing how Schwartz and Malkovich's apparently sincere artistic intentions are figuratively and literally hollowed out: respectively by the manipulative drive in Schwartz, and the colonization of Malkovich's body. Of course this lament is not without irony, because of the way in which it reflects on the film's makers own sincerity. Furthermore, the conscious parodying of Gadamer's aesthetic prevents any attribution of nostalgia for a romantic aesthetic of unity to the film. What I think the work signals - and this, is the limit of this thesis, and the subject of another - a desire that Lee Konstantinou terms postironical. He identifies this desire in the wider cultural movement called the New Sincerity, which seeks to move through postmodern irony and doubt, towards a renewed artistic sincerity. Just across the scope of this thesis I offer Konstantinou's horizon:

By postirony, I mean the use of metafictional or postmodernist (usually narrative) techniques in the pursuit of what amounts to the pursuit of humanistic or traditional themes: the desire to "really connect" to other people, the project of cultivating sincerity, the wish to move beyond systems-level analysis of the world toward an analysis of character, the new centrality of "narrative" and "storytelling" in experimental works.

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xiv "This exploration [Dällenbach's text on Gide's *mise-en-abyme*, JK] reveals the Gidean ambiguity of the word subject which allows itself to be interpreted as the thematic content, or the narrating subject of the work."

xv See note 1 for translation.

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xvi The film makes several such gestures. Lester Corp., the firm of which Schwartz is an employee, is located on a half floor, which is crammed in between two floors of an office building. On his first day, Schwartz is sat down in front of a TV-screen on which an introduction video is played which explains the origin of this remarkable office. This short video abounds in parodies of historical documentary. According to this 'mockumentary' the founder of the office building is a captain, speaking in archaic English (which gives the video a hilarious fake historic ring), who - out of pity for a 1 meter high woman's complaint that all buildings are constructed to suit the needs of tall people - commissions a half floor to be constructed in his new office building.

# Conclusion

In this conclusion I will begin with a reflection on my own reading process ('what kept me enticed?'), before briefly summarizing my insights and observations. I will argue with van Alphen's critical vocabulary, that the affective strength of this film is its outright refusal to facilitate any sort of allegorical reading with which I have just - with such apparent comfort - rounded off my analysis. In his article, "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," he calls such an allegorical reading, "a transposition of terms" in reference to Attridge's critical dismissal of such a mode of reading (van Alphen 26). Attridge's argument is that many modes of reading are allegorical, in that they transpose a selection of signs from a work to a different context. As a classic example of a work which emphatically invites such a reading one could think of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which is normally read as an allegory for the Russian revolution. This would be a historical allegory: the work's meaning is made whole and unified by transposition into a historical context. A different type of transposition would be to read the work of art in the context of an abstract notion of the human condition. Whereas de Man is on the one end of the allegorical spectrum reading for the text's secret ideological nature, Gadamer is reading for the universal human condition on the other end. Both are working from the hermeneutical stepping stone that *'the point of an art-work is to say something.'* (Attridge 37)

Attridge observes that both these modes of reading have their merits, but cannot be used in all cases. He opposes allegorical reading with literal reading. *'What I am calling a literal reading is one that is grounded (sic) the experience of reading as an event.'* (Attridge 39) The differences with de Man and Gadamer are smaller than Attridge makes them appear - for he contrasts his method explicitly with de Man's deconstruction, and implicitly with the allegorical humanism of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Gadamer also works with a performative notion of the artwork as theatrical event. Their difference is that Gadamer believes in the transmission of a universal humanistic message (however difficult to interpret) which only aesthetic structures are fit to perform. De Man, as we have seen, also works with the notion of the sign as (material) event to underline his position that no sign can mean the same thing exactly twice, because in time meanings will change. The difference resides in de Man's strategy to read every text as an allegory for the interpretive difficulties it creates (as we have seen in the example of von Kleist's text). What is innovative - or at the very least, useful - about Attridge's approach is that it shifts the question from what the text is trying to say, to what it is trying to do. Van Alphen singles out this useful aspect of Attridge's work (my citation begins with a citation within a citation):

It (cq: reading, JK) is an experience I can repeat, though each repetition turns out to be a different experience and therefore, a new singularity, as well. (Attridge, 39)

Such a "literal" reading, or what I would like to call affective reading, not only deals with the text (or the image) in a different way, but also deals with more textual elements. (van Alphen 27)

It is exactly this challenge posed by BEING JOHN MALKOVICH, that helps me to move from an attempt to integrate all the disparate 'textual elements' of the film into one interpretation, to an acceptance that the film does something to me, without necessarily allowing of the unification of a disparate collection of signs into one mise-en-abyme.

## I. An affective reading of BEING JOHN MALKOVICH

Whereas Attridge and van Alphen are discussing approaches of artworks, I intend to turn their arguments around and argue that it is part of BEING JOHN MALKOVICH's structure that it frustrates any hermeneutic, whilst inviting an affective approach. It is exactly such a reading that is given by Norman Holland.

Screenwriter Charlie Kaufman and director Spike Jonze have been insanely inventive in making this film. And they have even, I think, been profound. Yet this mix of wackiness and profundity creates a problem for critics, and not just me. I find it terribly hard to see this film as a unified work of art because it goes off in so many weird directions. That's the astonishing inventiveness of it. (Holland)

What the affective strength of this work did to me is lure me in with the promise of a mise-en-abyme: an intricate connection between three separate, though somehow related scenes. This intuited relation aroused my curiosity, a fascination that -luckily- lasted. It extends the promise of what Gadamer thinks of as an ideal unity

between structure and meaning. What ensues is the dialectical movement, back and forth, as described in Korsten's definition of the *mise-en-abyme* between one's understanding of the part and of the whole. The *mise-en-abyme* is in general a figure which propels this movement between knowing that there is a sign, and not knowing yet what it means, until the movement lessens into a temporary suspension of reading. In the case of *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH*, my reading of the *mise-en-abyme* as signaling the abstract tragedy of the film's depiction of the deterioration of artistic sincerity is - for me - a satisfactory ending point of my thesis, a suspension of the reading process. Nevertheless it is only in full view of the realization that in arriving at this allegorical reading, it is not about the allegory, but rather about the reading process itself.

A hasty flight to (allegorical) meaning can only end up in the already known, in the recognition of conventional meanings, whereas the affective operations and the way they shock to thought are what opens a space for the not yet known. (van Alphen 30)

What, in conclusion, I have come to appreciate about the film, is Holland's '*mix of wackiness and profundity*,' The promise of depth and its absolute shallowness, which results in an extension of the reading process until this very moment, in which -still- the disquieting feeling of a very incomplete reading ('*allegorical reading [...] has to leave out a lot in order to be efficient*' (ibid. 30)) will not subside.

## 2. A Matter of Asking the Right Question

What helped me in coming to grips with the interpretive difficulties and the affective force exerted by it was framing the differences between Gadamer and de Man in terms of the different questions their methods allow me to ask. De Man's aesthetic of affirmation and denial, and his attempt to deconstruct the textual model's articulation between poetics and hermeneutics, make his questioning suspicious. He asks of a text, or of any other artwork: "what sort of a truth claim does this text make?" His questioning proceeds to find an aspect in the formal structure of the work that is somehow at odds with this claim, to show that the text deconstructs itself. Often this oddity is found in the work's particular language situation - as was the case in his analysis of Kleist's *Marionettentheater*. The deconstructive analysis of the formal structure of the work - including its particular language situation - is extremely useful, but only to the extent that some claim is made. De Man's method works particularly well on the texts that Gadamer's aesthetic describes, a text that strives for a close unity between structure and meaning. It is against the enticement of such a unity that de Man's method works as potent antidote. However, in my analysis of *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* I ran into the trouble of not being able to substantiate my intuition that the film made any claim to unified meaning - and still, after almost a year of thinking through this film, it does not feel quite substantial. I came to the limits of de Man's framework, because the film yields little to no answer to the question: "what claim does this text (film) make?"

Gadamer's trust in aesthetic unity allows him to approach the text differently. "What is this text trying to tell me?" The relation between text and addressee is one of a communication between peers, a transmission of human experience, through aesthetic means. Initially, coming from an academic background in which the critical postmodern insights of the text's ideological opacity and differential poststructuralist thinking (dominated by de Man's own Yale School) have taken firm ground, it feels slightly uncomfortable to work with Gadamer's aesthetic philosophy. It is not hard to shove him aside as an elitist, naive aesthete, who is out of touch with what has happened in the arts and criticism since the end of modernism. But I would have done him a great injustice if I would have staged his insights simply to shove them aside on those grounds; as a straw man for a deconstructive analysis. I did not start reading him as a mere foil for de Man - whose methodology I am far more comfortable with. I started reading up on hermeneutics, because of my first intuition that something interesting would come from a hermeneutical analysis of the *mise-en-abyme* in *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* - the dialectical, hermeneutical movement implied by Korsten's definition of this figure (cf. "Introduction" of this thesis) strengthened me in this resolve. If trying to answer Gadamer's trusting question entails an uncritical appreciation of the aesthetic experience that a work gives me as member of the audience, then I would soon have started to feel uncomfortable indeed. But *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* is not a film that allows the viewer to wallow in an aesthetic experience of unity between structure and meaning. Quite the opposite, the film - even after long analysis - gives me the feeling of expressly creating a continuous disjunction between the structure and any stable meaning. There are many disparate modes of reading the film - as a reflection on stardom, as an ode to puppetry, as the meaning of John Malkovich's life, or that of Craig Schwartz, the desire for immortality, or simply as an absurd thought experiment- but the film's many ironies keep it from making any substantial claim on which a deconstructive analysis would hinge. Whilst I was already not even expecting it to make a single unified claim, it somehow succeeds at voiding each and every claim, each possible reading. Asking the question, with

some good faith, "what is this film trying to tell me?" has been most productive at this impasse. It has allowed me to start thinking about the structural void at the heart of this film, and how this void is itself capable of producing meaning. At this junction it has helped me to think of this through the notion of affect, because the narrative void exerted such a strong appeal on me, even though my familiar critical paradigm (deconstruction) did not yield anything the film did not already flaunt.

### 3. Conclusion

I have finally come to a reading of *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* as a collection of semantic promises that the film actively prevents to fulfill. The *mise-en-abyme*, being a very particular form of such a promise, stands as a prime example of this. Its three steps (the three Dances) show first the ostentatious artistic sincerity of Craig Schwartz which reflects a Gadamerian desire for aesthetic unity. The hotelroom scene shows how this sincere desire is perverted into a complete instrumental submission of the body of Malkovich, and the third *mise-en-abyme* reflects ironically on how exactly this act of appropriation leads to the fame of John Malkovich as a puppeteer, a career move which is eulogized as the Renaissance of puppetry - with strong humanist repercussions. Thus, the *mise-en-abyme* shows in a very concise manner the way in which the film makes semantic promises, deconstructs them through irony, leaving the reader of the film suspended between the absurd and the articulated, without having done a claim to truth. As such both the modes of analysis of Gadamer and de Man are simultaneously invited and incapacitated, which forces me, as a critic, to strike a middle ground between the two approaches. I was led to van Alphen's notion of affective reading, because it acknowledges reading as an event, which is not necessarily reducible to the meaning arrived at in the eventual act of interpretation.

As such I acknowledged that the event of viewing and interpreting *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* signals more than just the 'wavering epistemological status of narrative;' its playful zero-claim aesthetic creates a void in which any meaning eventually disappears. The affective force of this is that it kept me, as a nosy literary critic, propelled by the promise of an allegorical transposition of signs, looking for a definitive answer. By extending its semantic promise, whilst detaining its fulfillment, it made the desire for meaning tangible in me as a reader, precisely because the desire is never fulfilled. To achieve a suspension of the endless movement between part and whole, it helped to ask the question, with Gadamer's hermeneutics focus in mind: "whose tragedy is this?" In answer to this I observed that inside the hollow eulogy of Malkovich/Schwartz's 'desperate humanity' hides an elegy for a deceased artistic sincerity. And it is exactly this abstract allegory for the loss of artistic sincerity, which allows me as a reader to finally, but still temporarily, suspend the reading process and transpose this disparate collection of signs into the context of wider cultural reflection on artistic sincerity. Naturally this answer only begs more questions, which I cannot begin to answer here. The first and foremost of these questions, which I would like to leave here as a recommendation for further research is the question of how this reading reflects on Kaufman and Jonze's own artistic sincerity, and I think that their other work (particularly *Adaptation* and *Synecdoche, NY*) provides fertile ground for such further questioning.



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