

Transnational Cinematic Production and the Emergence of John Malkovich as a Transnational Actor

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“The Yanks have colonized our subconscious.”
-*Kings of the Road*, Wim Wenders

With the ever-increasing ease of travel and communication, questions of national identity and iconography have come to the forefront of scholarly debate, especially in that of “German” films of the last two decades.¹ Through the reduction of state-sponsored programming and the increased desire for profitability in world markets, state-sponsored films have broadened their definition of what makes a film inherently “German.” In his essay “German Film *Aufgehoben*: Ensembles of Transnational Filmmaking,” University of Rochester professor Randall Halle examines the identification of *House of Spirits* (1993) as a German film:

The director of the film, however, is Bille August, a Dane, and its narrative derives from the novel by Chilean author Isabel Allende. Furthermore, the film features an international cast with Meryl Streep, Glenn Close, Winona Ryder (American), Antonio Banderas (Spanish/American), Vanessa Redgrave and Jeremy Irons (British), and Maria Conchita Alonso (Spanish). Significant in fulfilling FFA [German Federal Film Board] requirements for funding was the presence of eminent German actor Armin Mueller-Stahl among the cast albeit in a supporting role... The presence of Mueller-Stahl and the site of the premier were enough to qualify the film for FFA funding.²

Despite the fact that the majority of the cast members were not German, the FFA still dubbed *House of Spirits* a “German” film, providing it with funding.

The use of an international cast in transnational productions is nothing unique to Germany, however, as the film *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (2000) demonstrates. The French company Le Studio Canal+, the American company Miramax Films, as well as the British company Working Title Films produced the film, which was shot in Greece by a British director. The film also features Spanish actress Penélope Cruz, American actor Nicolas Cage, and British actor Christian Bale. These ensembles were for the large part lambasted by critics because of their international cast:

This is one of those films where the cast seems to go through their paces without really inhabiting their roles and where everybody has a different accent: Spanish for Cruz, Brit for Hurt and Bale and cheesy Italian organ grinder for Cage, not to mention the babel generated by an international stew of supporting players.³

In the same review, critic Robert Butler mentions the Oscar-winning film *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) as an example how a good actor (John Malkovich) should be malleable enough to play any part.

Dangerous Liaisons is a film nationally produced by an American company that retells a French play written in the 19th century that was later made into a movie in 1959 by French director Roger Vadim. It should be no surprise that Warner Bros. was able to bring popular and expensive Hollywood stars to the film, such as Glenn Close, Michelle Pfeiffer, Keanu Reeves and Uma Thurman. Transnational films brought together by international production companies, however, have much more limited budgets than that of Hollywood, and often have to rely on lesser known actors who may be more cost effective than bigger Hollywood names.

In the midst of transnational filmmaking, Peter Falk, David Hasselhoff and Udo Kier have all emerged as transnational actors through their unique ability to generate ambiguous identification across international borders. In the majority of their roles, these actors have been able to simultaneously encourage and deter identification with the characters they play. The American Falk, internationally recognized for his role as Lieutenant Columbo, has starred in transnational films such as *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* (1993), which is a film by German Wim Wenders that featured various German, Swedish and American actors while being distributed by various other nationalities. Before launching into his singing career in 1995, German cultural icon David Hasselhoff starred in the sci-fi film *Starcrash* (1979), which was directed by Italian Luigi Cozzi and featured Canadians, Americans and Britons. German Kier, for example, has starred in transnational

films such as Andy Warhol's *Dracula* (1974), which was produced by Italian Compagnia Cinematografica Champion and French Yanne et Rassam and features an ensemble of German, Italian and American actors. Through their abilities to blur their national identities and generate ambiguous identification, these actors have emerged as transnational actors.

In the context of transnational cinema the Chicago-born Malkovich plays an interesting role. Acting in over forty-nine films and made-for-TV movies since 1981, Malkovich is an international sensation whose celebrity is only slightly rivaled by Falk and Kier. As of April 2003, more than thirty-two of Malkovich's films could be considered transnational films — films that involved the collaboration of more than two different nationalities.⁴ Malkovich has emerged as a transnational actor, a status highlighted by both his filmography and his personal life. After graduating a star high school football player, Malkovich joined Gary Sinise's theater troupe, named the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, in 1976.⁵ Seven years later, Malkovich won an Obie award for the Steppenwolf production of "True West." In 1984, Malkovich appeared alongside Dustin Hoffman in a revival of "Death of a Salesman," later winning an Emmy when it was turned into a made-for-TV movie directed by German Volker Schlöndorff. In his debut film *Places in the Heart* (1984), Malkovich played a blind lodger, earning himself an Academy Award nomination. "Though he has tried his hand at comedy (*Making Mr. Right* 1987), Malkovich excels at limning aloof, amoral, generally unsympathetic characters such as the black marketeer in *Empire of the Sun* (1987), the Vicomte de Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), the bored intellectual in *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), and the desperate, materialistic yuppie in *The Object of Beauty* (1991)," film critic Leonard Maltin wrote, while mentioning Malkovich's nomination for his second Oscar in 1993 for his role as a psychotic would-be assassin in the film *In the Line of Fire*.⁶ Malkovich

himself admitted to his frequently dark roles while traveling to his farmhouse in Southern France in the Bravo Profile filmed shortly after finishing production on *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), quoting a famous Hitchcock adage — "A film is only as good as its villain."⁷

In 1999, Malkovich played a role that had fascinated a worldwide audience for decades — himself. *Being John Malkovich* (1999) is one of his most successful films to date, grossing over \$22 million in the U.S. alone.⁸ Malkovich received praise both domestically and abroad for his work revolving around a person's irrational obsession with becoming Malkovich by travelling through a hidden tunnel on the seventh-and-a-half floor. While bizarre, the film touches upon the worldwide fetish with Malkovich, stemming from Malkovich's ability to keep audiences identifying with him while remaining distant. This seemingly paradoxical relationship viewers have with Malkovich is the reason for his international appeal. In the films *Der Unhold* (1996) and *Shadow of the Vampire* international audiences continually experience moments of ambiguous identification with the characters Malkovich plays.

In his essay "Star and auteur: films with Bergman" in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, Robin Wood outlines six factors in the construction of identification, which work universally. For Wood, identification with the male gaze is a key factor in identification, although it should be noted that the term "male gaze," as Wood uses it, presumes an assumption of "maleness" by all viewers, regardless of gender and sexual identity. Wood also believes that the audience identifies with the victim, as it does with any character to the extent in which moviegoers are encouraged to do so. The sharing of consciousness, like the use of point of view shots from a character, also encourages the audience to identify with a character. The use of cinematic devices such as editing, shot angles and lighting, among other examples, make the viewer identify with certain characters. His last point is that the viewer identifies with the star of the film as well.⁹

Shadow of the Vampire

As it is with many of Malkovich's films, the audience only identifies with him to a limited extent in *Shadow of the Vampire*. American Nicolas Cage's Saturn Films, two Luxemburg companies, and British BBC Films and Long Shot Films produced the film, while Briton Eddie Izzard, German Kier and American Willem Dafoe starred in it. The plot also has its transnational leanings as it bases its premise on the fact that actor Max Schreck in F.W. Murnau's classic *Nosferatu* (1922) actually is the part he plays — a vampire. From this, the characters of Murnau (Malkovich) and "Count Orlock" (Dafoe) have various battles over control of the film and its production, telling a story of obsession, loyalty and power.

Throughout the film, there are shots that mimic those of *Nosferatu*. These shots use the iris, are black and white, and feature Murnau giving directorial voiceovers to the actors in the frame. These shots can be called point of view shots, as Murnau stands by the camera and, along with the sound of the camera winding, provides the audio while remaining offscreen. After the titles, the film opens with an extreme close up of Murnau's eye that begins out of focus and racks focus. After a shot of the camera lens, the frame irises in to a medium shot of Greta Schroeder dangling a ball of string in front of a cat sitting in a windowbox while Murnau talks offscreen. The next shot is a close up of Murnau, who meows while wearing black goggles over his eyes. After a few similar shots in which Murnau tries to set the mood for the actress, there is a low angle full shot that shows Murnau and the rest of his crew wearing white lab coats and black goggles, watching the scene while the bright lights used in film production shine toward the camera (see Shot-by-Shot Description).

In this opening sequence, the viewer is unsure of how to feel about Murnau. While the audience shares consciousness with Murnau in the point of view shots, the viewer also gains identification with Murnau because Malkovich, as the main character of the film, plays him. The

close-up of Murnau encourages the audience to identify with him, but the slight low angle and the goggles over his eyes distance moviegoers. Additionally, the sterile, white lab coats and Murnau's voiceover discourage identification with him, as they portray Murnau as an uncaring manipulator. Malkovich's actions, as well as the setting around him, place the character in the gray area of ambiguous identification.

When Murnau confronts Orlock after the vampire preys upon Wolf the cameraman, another instance of ambiguous identification occurs. While the audience identifies with Murnau because of Malkovich's star power, it is questionable with whom the audience connects with more — the vampire or the director. In the scene, Murnau berates Orlock for killing Wolf. As Murnau directly addresses the camera in fast-moving shots and thrusts his finger toward the camera, the audience feels that he victimizes the vampire. In the scene, however, Orlock makes demands of his own, such as not sailing and suggesting other people he could eat. Because Murnau attempts to satisfy his demands, viewers see Murnau is at least practical if nothing else. Additionally, all of Orlock's shots are static while Murnau's are erratic and quick moving, making the audience interpret Murnau as the perpetrator of the actions. The audience, however, does gain some identification with Murnau as a result of repeated point of view shots in the scene. Because Orlock is a vampire, however, moviegoers continue to seek identification with Malkovich more than Orlock, placing him in a nebulous area of identification (see Shot-by-Shot Description).

In the final scene of the film, the audience loses a great deal of identification with Murnau as he focuses completely on his film instead of his cast and crew. After Greta, while laying on the bed wearing a white nightgown in a medium shot, notices that Orlock does not have a reflection, Murnau, wearing a white lab coat, sits down on the bed next to Greta in a 3/4 shot and forcibly administers drugs to her. Murnau then begins filming again, while

Orlock, wearing black, leans down and places his arm over Greta, resting his head by her neck. In a medium shot, Murnau watches the action, while wearing black goggles over his eyes (see Shot-by-Shot Description).

Murnau's actions, as well as his attire, distance the audience from the character. The audience, however, identifies more with Murnau because of Orlock's overpowering bloodlust. As a result of Orlock's straightforwardness, the audience may feel that Murnau's action is not as bad as Orlock's bloodlust, causing the audience to identify with the director more. Additionally, Murnau, through his calmer and more rational attitude in this scene, embraces these human qualities, making the viewer identify with him in stark contrast to Orlock's visceral desires.

As it is in the rest of the film, the audience fails to fully identify with Murnau in these three scenes. While viewers identify with Murnau due to his juxtaposition against a vampire and the casting, the dialogue and various aspects of mise-en-scène and camera movement all prevent the audience from completely identifying with Murnau. This is, however, the reason why Malkovich can be dubbed a transnational actor: he is able to play a character that generates ambiguous identification.

Der Unhold

The audience largely remains distanced from Malkovich in *Der Unhold*, directed by German Volker Schlöndorff. The film represents a different sort of transnational filmmaking, as there was no direct influence by Hollywood from American production companies. Instead German companies Studio Babelsberg, Universum Film A.G., and Westdeutscher Rundfunk worked together with French companies Le Studio Canal+, France 2 Cinéma, Renn Productions and British company Recorded Picture Company in making the movie. In the film, Abel (Malkovich) has a strange preoccupation with children and allows fate to guide his life in Germany during WWII after he is captured as a French prisoner of war.

When Abel "discovers" the sexually

abused girl in the beginning of the film in France, for example, the audience fails to completely identify with him, setting up the mixed reactions to him that follow throughout the entire film. The scene begins with Abel walking towards the camera in a fast-paced medium close-up from a low angle, which is then followed by a tight low angle close-up of Abel ducking and looking down to enter the room. The girl, who is wearing a uniform with a bright, untarnished white collar, is then shown in a high angle full shot, with her weeping and curled into a ball among a dark background. Abel then crouches down into a medium shot and asks what is wrong, and the police then respond to the girl's wailing in a deep focused full shot. Abel is shown again in a medium shot, crouching by the girl, explaining that the person who did this must still be close by. The police then grab Abel, dragging him away into the shadows in a full shot, as the girl continues to sob, "He hurt me." Abel is then shown outside being dragged into a waiting police car in a shot that moves from a full shot to a medium close-up (see Shot-by-Shot Description).

The audience reacts with mixed feelings during this scene, as viewers do not fully identify with Abel. In this instance, the audience does not

Malkovich as Abel in *Der Unhold*.



see any negative action that Abel may or may not have taken; Abel's "concerned" actions preserve the viewer's identification with him. In this scene, however, the audience identifies with the girl to a certain extent, as she is the obvious victim, which is highlighted by the fact that she is shown from a series of high angle shots. The audience fails to be encouraged to identify with the darkly dressed Abel, both because viewers are uncertain about his possible sexual molestation and because he emerges from dark shadows. Some viewers may sympathize with his "concerned" actions, but ultimately the filmgoers are uncertain of his actions. The close shots of Abel, as well as what could be termed point-of-view shots of the girl, however, encourage the audience to identify with Abel. From Wood's theory of identification, one presumes that because Malkovich is the most prominent actor in the film, spectators identify with the character he plays to a greater extent. Due to Abel's questionable actions and sympathy with the victim, the audience maintains its mixed feelings for Abel, as it does for the remainder of the film.

In another scene in the film, the audience initially identifies with Abel, but, at the end of the scene, becomes distanced from the character. In the first shot, a close up of Abel entering the cabin from the darkness outside, the tight frame and Abel's action of squinting as his eyes adjust to the light encourages the audience to identify with him. Moviegoers also gain identification with Abel through the use of the point of view shots and repeated tight close-ups during the scene. Viewers and Abel also share a sense of consciousness as they discover the fate of the birds at the same time. The repeated shot/reverse shots between Abel and what he is looking at also encourage identification. While the audience also identifies with Abel because Malkovich plays him, viewers lose some identification with him when he attacks the captain. Instead of playing the victim, which would further audience identification with Abel, he initiates an attack from which other prisoners of war have to drag him away. In the end the

audience feels distanced from Abel due to his reaction (see Shot-by-Shot-Description).

After Abel begins caring for the Hitler youth, he begins roaming the countryside, looking for other children to join the movement. In a full shot, for instance, Abel, wearing a black cape with a black skullcap, moves toward the camera, towed by his fierce black dogs who are on leashes in front of him. In the scene, children run away from Abel with expressions of fear on their faces. In a close up shot, viewers see the legs of a child running left as the camera tracks with the movement. Immediately afterwards, a similar close up is shown, except the black legs of a horse run to the left this time, chasing after the child. In this scene, there is very little identification with Abel, as he victimizes the children through pursuing them. Abel's all-black attire and the color of the animals around him also cast Abel as the predator in this scene, as does Abel's movement toward the camera.

Malkovich once again generates ambiguous identification with the audience in the film *Der Unhold*. Throughout the entire film, Malkovich wears dark clothing and emerges from darkness in many scenes, portraying himself as a villain of the film. While he helps support the Nazi movement and may have sexually abused a girl, Abel does some admirable things as well, such as attempting to save the children's lives when the Russians approach and rescuing a fallen Jewish boy from certain death. The use of point of view shots and lighting also help encourage identification with Abel. The audience is uncertain of how to feel about Abel.

In the new era of cinematic globalization, Malkovich has become one of the most successful transnational actors to date, with box office grosses and worldwide fascination far beyond that of others. In both *Shadow of the Vampire* and *Der Unhold*, audiences fail to fully identify with Malkovich. This, however, is exactly what makes him a successful transnational actor — his ability to simultaneously encourage and discourage identification with the characters he plays. Generated

through the hybridization of classical Hollywood and European Arthouse film styles, ambiguous identification has led to a form of filmmaking seeking broad transnational appeal, often at the expense of the film itself.

Abridged Shot-by-Shot Description of *Shadow of the Vampire*. The full version can be found at jur.rochester.edu.

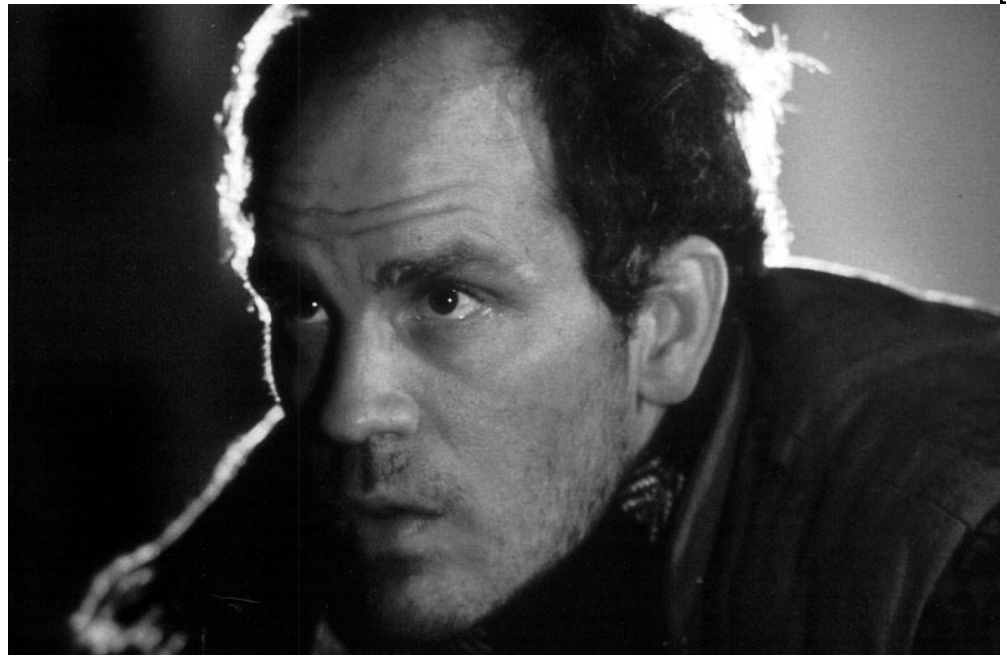
First Scene

1. (ECU) Out of focus shot, straight on angle. Rack focus to in focus shot of green eye. -cut
2. (ECU) High angle of camera lens. The camera moves up and left, rotating around it. -cut
3. (3/4 shot) Iris out. Black and white. High angle. Greta dangles ball of string in front of kitten. Murnau does a voiceover. -cut
4. (CU) Slight low angle. Murnau looks toward camera, talking. -cut
5. (3/4 shot) as 3. Murnau continues to talk. -cut
6. (CU) as 4. -dissolve
7. (MCU) Low angle. Eddie Izzard ties his tie -dissolve
8. (CU) as 4. -cut
9. (Full) Low angle. Murnau stands next to the camera, as the rest of the crew looks toward the camera. -cut
10. (CU) as 4. -cut
11. (3/4 shot) as 3. Iris in, shot turns to color. Camera moves up. -cut
12. (Full) as 9. Murnau looks right, towards Wolf. -cut
13. (CU) Straight on angle. Wolf looks toward the camera, leaning on his. -cut

Second scene

1. (MCU) Slight high angle. Camera tracks right with Murnau's movement. Murnau approaches the camera to a CU while yelling at Orlock. -cut
2. (MCU) Slight low angle. Point of view shot. Orlock stands in the center of the frame. -cut
3. (MCU) Slight high angle. Murnau moves toward the camera. Camera follows movement, tilting up, then down and pans left. -cut
4. (MCU) as 2, but Orlock stands on the left side. -cut
5. (MCU) Slight high angle. Murnau paces left and right, and camera pans to the movement. -cut
6. (MCU) as 4. -cut
7. (MCU) as 5. Murnau turns toward the camera. -cut

8. (MCU) as 4. Orlock laughs. *-cut*
 9. (CU) Straight on angle. Murnau yells toward the camera and points his finger at it. His finger is out of focus. *-cut*
 10. (M) Straight on angle. Orlock looks down and left as watery light reflects off his face. *-cut*
 11. (MCU) as 7. *-cut*
 12. (MCU) as 4, but Orlock looks right, then turns left, recoiling. *-cut*
 13. (CU) as 9, except his finger is in focus while his face is not. *-cut*
 14. (MCU) as 12 ended. *-cut*
 15. (CU) Slight low angle. Profile of Murnau looking left in the right side of the frame while Orlock stands in the background, out of focus. *-cut*
 16. (MCU) as 4. Orlock discusses ship. *-cut*
 17. (CU) as 15. Murnau looks at Orlock, then focus changes to Orlock. *-cut*
 18. (MCU) High angle. Murnau, looking shocked, questions Orlock. Golden watery light reflects on his face. Camera pans left. *-cut*
 19. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 20. (MCU) as 18 ended. Murnau shouts. *-cut*
 21. (M) Slight low angle. Murnau, facing away, shouts at Orlock. Orlock looks down. *-cut*
 22. (MCU) as 16, looking down. *-cut*
 23. (CU) as 9. *-cut*
 24. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 25. (MCU) Slight low angle. Murnau yells, points his finger. *-cut*
 26. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 27. (MCU) as 25. Murnau moves toward camera. *-cut*
 28. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 29. (CU) Straight on angle. Murnau continues to talk, camera pans left with movement. *-cut*
 30. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 31. (CU) as 29 ended. *-cut*
 32. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 33. (MCU) Slight high angle Murnau continues to shout. *-cut*
 34. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 35. (CU) as 29, camera pans left and tilts up as Murnau approaches the camera. *-cut*
 36. (Full) Slight low angle. Orlock in left side shudders. Murnau faces away on the right side. *-cut*
 37. (MCU) as 16, Orlock hisses at Murnau, recoils a bit. *-cut*
 38. (MCU) as 33. *-cut*
 39. (MCU) as 37 ended. *-cut*
 40. (MCU) Slight high angle. Murnau paces left, then right. Camera pans



Malkovich as Basie in *Empire of the Sun*

movement. *-cut*
 41. (Full) as 36. Murnau paces across frame. *-cut*
 42. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 43. (Full) as 36. Murnau faces right in a profile shot. *-cut*
 44. (MCU) as 16. *-cut*
 45. (CU) Straight on angle. Slightly closer than a CU with Murnau's face on the left side. *-cut*
 46. (MCU) as 16, Orlock facing left. *-cut*
 47. (MCU) Slight high angle. Murnau turns away, moving offscreen right. *-cut*
 48. (MCU) as 46. Orlock reaches down, then camera pans right with his movement to a CU. *-cut*
 49. (ECU) High angle, point of view shot. Orlock holds the locket of Greta in his hands. *-cut*
 50. (MCU) as 48 ended. Long take as Orlock holds up the locket and discusses love. *-cut*
 51. (Full) Orlock turns away and moves down in his cave *-fade*

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Chadwick Schnee is a senior who is majoring in Film Studies and English Literature. This article is the culmination of Professor Randall Halle's course on New German Cinema, which was offered in the spring of 2003. In the future, Schnee plans on furthering his understanding of identification and film theory.

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