A Tug of War with Silky Strings: Struggles for Power Between Human Puppets and their Puppeteers

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Movies like *Being John Malkovich* or *Stranger than Fiction*, and books like *Slow Man* by J. M. Coetzee confront us with the idea of human puppets – which in itself, of course, creates a conflict of logic and feasibility. Additionally, however, these real-life marionettes are always part of a far graver conflict with their human puppeteers; they fight for power, control, and for independence. Connected by strings and emotions, it is often the puppet masters which end up getting caught in the ties that they established, dependent of the thing they created. This swap of dominance, of course, poses a challenge to the standard narratological settings: questions of authorship and narrative authority arise and points of view shift dramatically. The main conflict is a metaleptic one as borders between diegetic worlds are annihilated and redefined in very paradox ways. This article explores these clashes by applying concepts of puppeteering, as well as metalepsis, to the media of film and literature. The analysis of key scenes will illustrate that underlying the superficial levels of absolute dominance and submission, we can, in fact, find a twisted *mise en abyme* – mirror-images where the reins have quite literally been grabbed by the once enslaved marionettes.

Humans as puppets are an ancient motif throughout many cultures, myths, religions and ages. The notion of ultimately being only a helpless figure on a string, pulled, controlled by, and at the mercy of forces greater than oneself, is a frightening one, yet at the same time so intriguing that over the centuries, many artists have used it as a strong motif of their works (cf. Drux and Gross 6f.) – in books and also on screen. Fa-

mous metaphorical examples of human puppets, of course, include legendary films like *The Godfather* (1972) or the *The Truman Show* (1998) as the ultimate filmic representation of the Big Brother nightmare. In recent years, however, stories about very literal human marionettes, as well as fictional characters, caught in a struggle with their creators, have found their way into popular culture. These real-life puppets and their puppeteers present us with an array of new psychological, physical, and contextual challenges. It is essentially, as also Brian McHale argues, a very postmodernist theme, as they all play with the desire to put characters "under the irresistible control of some other human being" (257).

This article will analyse three such works in detail: Spike Jonze's film *Being John Malkovich* (1999), Mark Forster's film *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), and John Maxwell Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* (2006). All of them present us with the concept of human puppeteering, spinning their strings through storylines full of mindboggling twists and turns. Most importantly, however, in doing so, they produce an often intricate layer of conflicts, rooted deep in questions of dependency, dominance and control. Very strikingly, this often results in traditional narratological concepts being challenged, even reversed: authors become caught in their own plotlines, dependant characters emancipate themselves into confident narrators, and points of view become almost absurd as, for instance in *Being John Malkovich*, the storyteller physically merges with his main protagonist. The paradox nature of these goings on is hard to grasp – however, the narratological concept of metalepsis does provide a crucial means of interpretation and understanding: ultimately, in each of these works, diegetic borders are strangely crossed, blurred, often even brutally violated. Indeed, it becomes very tricky to define where reality ends, and where fiction starts – and to pinpoint which of the characters the extradiegetic force is that actually controls the plotline. In order to analyse and fully understand these developments and struggles, it is necessary to move away from the media of film and literature as such – and resort back to the original source of inspiration: puppetry. Applying both scholarly theories and concepts, as well as observations by experienced puppeteers, the films' and book's conflicts for power and [in]dependence unfold. It becomes apparent how such (dis)connections can arise in the first place, what maintains them, and what breaks them in the end. On closer inspection, it shows that it is not always the puppeteer pulling the strings. In all cases, the puppet masters (or mistresses) themselves turn out to be governed by an abundance of aversive forces: inner conflicts, desires – and not least surprisingly, by the very marionette they once thought to control. "I am sick of being a puppet," exclaimed the famous marionette Pinocchio already in 1881 (Collodi 87). "I want to become a real boy." This basic – very

metaleptic – wish has prevailed. Whether in a movie, or in a book – we can still witness the puppets struggling free from their ties, determined, and gradually more empowered by the wish to become an independent individual.

In *Being John Malkovich,* Craig Schwartz, an unemployed puppeteer, takes on a new job in a curious company. One day, as he moves office furniture, he discovers a secret door that teleports him into the head of actor John Malkovich (played by the very one himself). Taken aback at first, Craig soon sees the potential of the strange discovery. He begins to nest inside Malkovich like a parasite: at first only occasionally, but slowly for extended periods of time, ultimately using him as a life sized puppet, and putting on a real-life show. After all, he says, "it is sort of like puppeteering." As strange as this story may sound, it is not entirely unique, as seven years later, *Stranger than Fiction* made its appearance on screen with a similar theme. In this film, protagonist Harold Crick starts hearing the voice of a female narrator. He soon realises, with horror, that he seems to be only a figment of author Karen Eiffel's imagination, as he turns out to be the main character in the new book she is working on. Every word she types becomes real for him, and Harold has to struggle against the literally lethal storyline that he seems to be a part of. Interestingly, in the same year as this movie was released, Coetzee published his book *Slow Man* which deals with the very same dilemma: a fictional character, Paul Rayment, encounters his author, Elizabeth Costello, and although he does not quite understand it, he realises their complicated entanglement. "All the time," we learn, "he thought he was his own master he has been in a cage like a rat, [. . .] with the infernal woman standing over him, observing, listening, taking notes, recording his progress."

But how do seemingly normal human beings achieve such god-like power over these individuals? And why do the latter find themselves as helpless victims in their predicament? Most importantly, and very logically, this dependency is created by the direct physical connection – the strings. In the art of puppetry, they are an immediate extension of the puppeteer's hands, attached to both the puppet, as well as the puppeteer's paddle. Consequently, they transfer even the slightest of movements from the hand of the player to the played, representing thus the essential means which, in an almost metaleptic fashion, bridge the gap between the worlds. Originally, the term "metalepsis" stems from Greek rhetoric, denoting a figure of speech. However, in 1972, French literary scholar Gérard Genette adapted the concept for a phenomenon in narratology. What he calls metalepsis is the "passage from one narrative level to another" (243), it is the transgression "between two worlds: the world where narration takes place and the world which is narrated"

(245) – the extradiegesis and the diegesis. When it comes to puppeteering, of course, these two realms would be the world of the puppeteer and his theatre, and the puppet's world that unfolds on stage. As already hinted at, these levels are bridged by the physical connection. In other words: the strings alone make it possible to influence, and indeed create, the action in the diegesis from an extradiegetic position. Physically, of course, the puppet master usually remains outside the story world, which is why we cannot talk about a real case of metalepsis yet. However, through his tools, she or he nevertheless retains a direct link to the diegetic marionette: "[Y]ou feel the puppet's life extending backward into the impulses of a living body, becoming a gesture of that body that itself presses forward into the puppet," (55) argues Kenneth Gross. "What you feel is the presence of a composite or double body, animate and inanimate at once, a relation perhaps echoing some image of a soul within a body" (ibidem). The strings are like veins bringing life from the metaphorical heartbeat of the player's hands into the puppet's dead limbs. Indeed, as Gross points out, "the ancient Greek word for marionette is *neurospaston*, 'pulled by strings'" (56) – the term *neuron* being also used to denote "sinew, tendon, nerve" (ibidem).

At the same time, however, this physical connection of strings creates a narratological paradox: while the puppeteer is well-aware of them, they are normally not part of the diegetic world as such. The audience can often clearly see them, the puppet master can as well, but the unspoken rule is that in normal puppet plays, they are non-existent in the marionette's diegesis. It cannot "see" or "feel" them, even though they are clearly there. Addressing them would severely disrupt the story world ("surprised" puppets which try to cut these strings are, nevertheless, a curious idea that many puppeteers do play with, often even due to this, again, metaleptic element – cf. Gross 55f.). In the case of *Being John Malkovich*, puppeteer Craig is extraordinarily trained at operating his puppets on a string: Already in the first opening scenes, we witness an impressive example of his skills, as he puts on a complicated and very intricate dance with a replica puppet of himself. As he, however, discovers the path into Malkovich's head, he has to employ another, very different, control mechanism, also taken from puppetry. He gains power by replacing the usual strings with a literal physical, i.e. bodily, connection, slipping into the actor like into a ventriloquist's dummy. The puppeteer, so to speak, melts into the puppet, merges, literally becoming a part of it. Gross calls this concept the "separate whole" (51):

The simple glove puppet, the hand puppet, shows the hand's power here most immediately. [. . .] The hand, the extension and tool of our will, becomes the moving force – physical and spiritual – of a thing with a will and life of its own, a will that yet remains tied into the bodily, psychic motion of the manipulator.   (ibid.)

In Craig Schwartz's case, of course, it is his whole body that becomes one with the puppet's "shell." This, indeed, presents the first very clear case of metalepsis – in Genette's sense, and as redefined and expanded by Austrian scholar Werner Wolf who called it "a usually intentional paradoxical transgression" (91). The paradox in the above example is obvious: While remaining the narrator, the puppeteer also embodies the main character, as he simultaneously also physically steps from his extradiegetic position into the puppet's story world. Of course, the environment technically remains the same: Both Craig and (the movie's version of) Malkovich are real humans who live in the real world (of the film). However, at the same time, they gain an artificial quality: as the actor becomes controlled and ultimately fictionalised, also his surroundings are no longer only a part of normal reality. Although there are no visual changes to the setting, it nevertheless turns into a backdrop for the plotline that Craig has decided on. This, indeed, presents a very novel type of metalepsis which has not been explored before: The actor and the puppeteer live in the same world. Craig does not shrink John Malkovich down, or magically turn him into a lifeless doll and put him on a puppet stage. Instead, he makes the world around him one large stage, and he fictionalises John Malkovich right then and there. Malkovich remains in the real world, and is yet at the same time a character in Craig's play.[1] At the same time, Craig remains the controlling puppeteer, while simultaneously being inside the controlled marionette. In Gross's words, the puppeteer "becomes both object and source of animation" (51).

Similar ties also exist in *Stranger than Fiction* and *Slow Man*, even if they are not as extreme. In both of those examples, the connection and thus means of control is the typewriter. One of the key scenes of *Stranger than Fiction* shows a close-up of Karen Eiffel's hands as she types the letters, delicately moving her hands over the keyboard. At first glance, this is a plain visual reference to literary practice. However, on closer inspection, Karen's movements are not unlike the dance of Craig's fingers when he

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[1] For a discussion of a different kind of performance-based metalepsis which, however, equally reunites fictional and non-fictional characters in the same, real world, see my article on "Holographic Projections of the Cartoon Band 'Gorillaz' as a Means of Metalepsis."

puts on a puppet show. It is, yet again, not the spoken word that governs the life of the characters, but the art of puppeteering:

> The madness lies in the hidden movements of the hand, the curious impulse and skill by which a person's hand can make itself into the animating impulse, the intelligence or soul, of an inanimate object – it is an extension of that more basic wonder by which we can let this one part of our body become a separate, articulate whole, capable of surprising its owner with its movements, the stories it tells.   (Gross 1)

Whenever the author affirmingly ends a line with a full stop, the content of the sentence manifests itself in reality – and protagonist Harold experiences it (literally) first-hand. It is as if this punctuation mark is the final twitch in the metaphorical wires and strings that have an instant effect on the main character's life.

In Coetzee's *Slow Man,* a typewriter is also a crucial connection between author Elizabeth Costello and her character Paul Rayment. On the first few pages, when Rayment is in an ambulance after a severe accident, drifting in and out of consciousness, Costello seems to be typing directly into Rayment's mind. It is as if he assumes her point-of-view as she sits at her desk:

> Something is coming to him. A letter at a time, *clack clack clack*, a message is being typed on a rose-pink screen that trembles like water each time he blinks and is therefore quite likely his own inner eyelid. E-R-T-Y, say the letters, then F-R-I-V-O-L, then a trembling, then E, then Q-W-E-R-T-Y, on and on.   (3)

"Q-W-E-R-T-Y," of course, is the exact sequence of letters found on an English keyboard – or, in Rayment's words, on some sort of "occult" (19), "celestial typewriter" (123). Additionally the main character – like Malkovich – feels like something is inside of him:

> ["] I have always felt myself to be a ventriloquist's dummy. It is not I who speak the language, it is the language that is spoken through me. It does not come from my core, *mon coeur.*" He hesitates, checks himself. *I am hollow at the core,* he was about to say – *as I am sure you can hear.*   (198)

"[Y]ou cannot even walk," the author agrees. "[Y]ou are nothing but a lump of all too solid flesh" (ibid.).

Slow Man and *Stranger than Fiction* are also strong examples for metalepses: the authors, Karen Eiffel and Elizabeth Costello, are in an extradiegetic setting, and from this position, they create fictional, hypodiegetic worlds which are inhabited by equally fictional characters, Har-

old and Rayment. Then, suddenly, the metaleptic conflict of logic happens. Harold hears the narrator's voice, resulting in him contacting and ultimately visiting Karen. Rayment, too, catches a glimpse of his narrator's storytelling, before he finally meets the author face to face. In *Stranger than Fiction*, however, as with *Being John Malkovich*, the metalepsis is not clear-cut – in the sense that we do not witness a literal physical transgression, nor does the film really elaborate on the crossing of the diegetic boundaries. Harold simply realises that he and his author live in the same world – and so he calls and meets her. He does not have to crawl out of a written page or a book to do this. He and Karen Eiffel are both humans, part of the same universe – and yet, at the same time, he is a fictional creation of hers. We never learn how this is possible. Both movies seem to hint at the possibility of a sort of same-level metalepsis. The environment remains the same, while simultaneously being a fictional backdrop for a story, as well as the actual world of the author. Yet the paradox act of real-world puppeteering makes it possible, that a metaleptic crossover can take place, and that reality mixes with fiction – on seemingly the same level.

Slow Man is essentially another example of metalepsis, but a more straightforward one. Elizabeth Costello hints at the fact that here, indeed a physical transgression has taken place, that she has come from a world different to Rayment's. This fact, however, is the source of other kind of problems and conflicts, which will be discussed later in this essay.

For now, one can conclude that whether it is Craig Schwartz, Karen Eiffel, or Elizabeth Costello – and whether they manipulate their puppets with strings, hands, or words as means of direct control: With great power comes great responsibility. Puppeteer Craig clearly abuses his influence. Although married, he tries to impress his attractive co-worker Maxine who, however, is only attracted to him when he is inside Malkovich's body. After a few failed attempts, Craig manages to remain inside for an endless period of time. "It's all about making friends with the Malkovich body," he tells his lover with pride. "Rather than thinking of it as an enemy that has to be pounded into submission, I begun imagining it as a really expensive suit that I enjoy wearing." Even though one links the notion of total auctorial control to the art of puppetry, the professionals of the trade argue that the relationship between the puppet and its puppeteer is not as clear-cut, as one of them, John Bell, wrote:

Puppeteers are often asked, "Oh, don't you love *Being John Malkovich*?" [. . .] This has nothing to do with real puppetry, and is instead a misdirected metaphor about puppets: the idea that the goal of puppet performance is complete control of the object. Nothing could be further from the truth.

> [. . . P]uppeteers again and again describe a process of figuring out "what
> the puppet wants to do." (17)

Bell stresses a certain "lack of control" inherent to the trade. A lack, that
is, which makes puppeteering interesting as well as challenging. What
Bell also expresses is the idea that puppeteering is a constant "give-and-
take" (ibidem), resulting in a special kind of interdependency. Similarly,
Gross refers to puppeteering as "the hand's power and pleasure in giv-
ing itself over to the demands of the object" (1). Puppeteering, to him,
is like the symbiosis of a soul and a body – a beneficial cooperation for
both parties. When Craig first starts his act of human puppetry, he
seems to adhere to this rule. His intentions are, nevertheless, deeply ma-
nipulative from the very start. Not unlike a virus, he settles in carefully,
so as not to be attacked and rejected by Malkovich's "immune system"
– namely his consciousness. During these first "occupations," Malk-
ovich does not sense the invader. Soon, however, his routine of playing
Malkovich becomes the very opposite of the gentle, equal relationship
of perfect puppeteering. Indeed, the process feels incredibly brutal and
violent to the abused victim. When briefly regaining consciousness,
John Malkovich exclaims in horror: "I was so freaked out [. . .] Some-
body was just moving all the way through me. Moving my arms, moving
my hands, talking for me [. . .] Someone was talking through my
mouth!" He consequently tries to fight the invader, and so Craig, while
puppeteering him, has regular "fits" of Malkovich trying to come
through – but to no avail. Malkovich remains trapped, and Craig only
comments on the actor's rebellious efforts by referring to him as a "self-
ish bastard," claiming the body for himself, not intending to ever give it
back to its real owner.

One can, at this point, hardly ignore that acting and actors them-
selves are often linked to the idea of marionettes, and have been for a
long time (cf. Rosenberg and Olf). Actors, to put it simply, could be
seen as human puppets. They are, after all, put into a costume and onto
a stage or a film set, and utilised to play out a story that is usually not
their own. They not only play a character, but – to a certain extent –
become a character. Like Craig Schwartz can simultaneously be the pup-
peteer, as well as (at least physically) the puppet, actors take on two
identities at the same time. Of course, there is nothing metaleptic about
this practice, as, according to Werner Wolf's definition, the paradox
element is missing. They simply do their job. In doing so, however, ac-
tors adopt an almost puppet-like quality: They behave how the director
of the play or movie wants them to, and, like a ventriloquist's dummy,
speak the words the playwright or screenwriter puts into their mouth.
Indeed, there are many accounts of actors taking on this kind of passive

role – or rather: being forced into it. Austrian filmmaker Fritz Lang, for instance, was notorious for exercising a despotic kind of control over his actors, using them like puppets, controlling and dictating their every move, and every gesture (Lang X, also cf. Drux 11).

In *Being John Malkovich*, the actor loses all his power and freedom to the puppeteer, his new, personal director, his narrator, so to speak. After playing him for a while, Craig decides to change Malkovich's career, quit acting, and turn him into a puppeteer as well. In a TV special, we see a fictional *People* magazine cover, showing the converted superstar John Malkovich, and quoting him as stating: "I will act no more." Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth, as he essentially becomes a permanent actor in his own life. This aspect is especially noteworthy, when one considers that after all, the real actor John Malkovich had also been casted to play his movie-self, as imagined by the film's screenwriter Charlie Kaufman. The metaphor, so to speak, extends into the real world – and thus ultimately concerns the cast of the film as much as the plot itself.

When comparing acting and puppeteering, a notable name is Edward Gordon Craig, a celebrated English puppeteer from the early decades of the twentieth century. The fact that the puppeteer in *Being John Malkovich* has the same name is no coincidence – as the real and the fictional Craig have many things in common. Craig, indeed, saw the similarities between actors and puppets, but did not put them on even levels, as director Fritz Lang would have. In Craig's opinion, humans lacked important qualities, which only puppets could offer. In his controversial 1907 manifesto "The Actor and the Über-Marionette" he demands:

> Do away with the actor and you do away with the means by which a debased stage-realism is produced and flourishes. No longer would there be a living figure to confuse us into connecting actuality and art; no longer a living figure in which the weakness and tremor of the flesh were perceptible. The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the Über-Marionette. (159)

Craig suggests eliminating real actors all together, replacing them with the puppet instead, and calling it a "faithful medium for the beautiful thoughts of the artist," which enables total control and reliability. He was convinced that only a marionette could be the ideal actor, never inappropriate, never emotional, never physically limited – a perfect vessel for the director's phantasy. The German poet Heinrich von Kleist explored very similar ideas in his 1810 essay "Über das Marionettentheater" ("On the Marionette Theater"): The narrator meets a ballet dancer who he has often seen in the audience of a marionette play. Grace, the

dancer explains, "appears most pure in the sort of body which either has no consciousness at all, or infinite consciousness, i.e. the puppet, or God."[2] Interestingly, also the German medical author Justinus Kerner shared some of Craig's thoughts. He, however, despite being a medical doctor, saw the puppets' biggest potential in their paradoxical natural-ness: "It is strange, but to me, marionettes seem a lot more effortless, more natural than live actors. They manage to deceive me better [...] Marionettes [. . .] do not have a life outside the theatre"[3] (Güntter 232; cited in Taube 122). Fellow contemporary puppeteer Joan Baixas sec-onds this notion: Puppets, he confirms, ultimately are "the imaginary incarnate, in bodily form."

In the movie, Craig Schwartz fully realises what his namesake only dared to dream about: by gaining literal physical control over Malkovich, he manages to "do away" with him, imprisoning him inside his own body, and replacing him with a life-sized Über-Marionette. No longer is the actor able to express his emotions – which is not a bad thing in David Mamet's view, a contemporary playwright, director, and acting teacher:

> Nothing in the world is less interesting than an actor on the stage involved in his or her own emotions. [. . . O]pen the mouth, stand straight, and say the words bravely – adding nothing, denying nothing and without the intent to manipulate anyone . . ." (24)

". . . but be manipulated instead," one wants to add – according to the wishes of her or his director, author, narrator, keeping still, a voiceless dummy. Craig Schwarz has succeeded in implementing this wish and the vision has become reality.

In *Stranger than Fiction*, author Karen Eiffel handles her character a lit-tle more gently, never intending to follow Edward Gordon Craig's sug-gestion. At first, the level of control seems minor. Harold wakes up one day, to hear a voice commenting everything he does. He does find it very off-putting, but not yet frightening: "The voice isn't telling me to do anything," Harold confesses to his psychiatrist. "It's telling me what I've already done. [. . .] I'm somehow involved in some sort of story. Like I'm a character in my own life." Soon, however, it dawns on him

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[2] My translation. The original reads: ". . . in demjenigen menschlichen Körperbau am reinsten erscheint, der entweder gar keins, oder ein unendliches Bewußtsein hat, d. h. in dem Gliedermann, oder in dem Gott."

[3] My translation. The original reads: "Es ist sonderbar, aber mir wenigstens, kommen die Marionetten viel ungezwungener, viel natürlicher vor als lebende Schauspieler. Sie vermögen mich viel mehr zu täuschen. [. . .] Die Marionetten [. . .] haben kein außer-theatralisches Leben."

that the outcome might not be a positive one. As he resets his watch, resulting in the time being slightly off, he can hear the narrator comment that "this simple, seemingly innocuous, act would result in his imminent death." Harold, now panic-stricken, asks a professor of literature for help, who, however, recommends him to "do nothing." Total apathy, he reckons, could stop the plot from developing, as Harold will not do anything to move the story forward. The plan, however, fails miserably, and a giant bulldozer "accidentally" starts demolishing his apartment. "Harold," the professor concludes drily, "you don't control your fate."

Coetzee's *Slow Man*, brings similarly bitter realisations for main character Paul Rayment, who furiously confronts the author, Elizabeth Costello:

> "You treat me like a puppet," he complains. "You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you. You should open a puppet theatre, or a zoo. [. . .] Rows and rows of cages holding the people who have, as you put it, *come to you* in the course of your career as a liar and fabulator. . ." (117)

Although, in contrast to Harold, he is not quite able to put his finger on it, Rayment feels "hollow at the core," as already mentioned (198). Something essential is lacking – and he is convinced that the author holds this missing piece. Rayment is outraged by the idea that another human being might have such a strong influence on him. He begs the author to release him from her control, which seems to have him dangling from her strings: "Drop me, I beseech you," he pleas. "[L]et me get on with my life" (ibidem). The solution, however, seems to be more complicated than this. "'If I left you alone," the author replies "[. . .'] what would become of you?'"

Indeed, this is the very question that haunts all human marionettes as they try to struggle free from their oppressors, fighting against their status as mere "Über-Marionettes," and reclaiming their independence. At one point in each story, the roles are reversed, and the power is shifted. Malkovich, as discussed earlier, has little luck with breaking free from Craig's control – as much and as desperately as he tries to. At the same time, however, Craig himself becomes somewhat of a marionette, at least metaphorically (and not in the extreme, metaleptic way as Malkovich became one). In countless scenes, we see Craig playing with a miniature-puppet of himself: In the opening sequence, he puts on an emotional dance with his puppet. As the story unfolds, he uses marionettes to act out his desires for Maxine. Later on in the film, when Craig is already controlling Malkovich, we see the former actor (now puppet-

eer) manoeuvre a large, life-sized puppet replica of Craig – an "Über-Marionette" by Edward Gordon Craig standards. He moves it on a large stage, acting out dramatic moves as he makes it interact with real ballet dancers. Eileen Blumenthal notes that, indeed, a fairly popular current phenomenon in modern puppet theatre is "teasing the audience into guessing and second-guessing which actors are really alive [and which are fake]" (80). Later, he does a similar thing on a smaller scale, as he plays a small Craig-puppet, which in turn holds a Malkovich-puppet: The puppeteer plays the actor who plays the puppeteer who plays the actor, so to speak. In this very scene, the intricate *mise en abyme* structure of the story really becomes visible. Roles are duplicated, reversed, mirrored and twisted.

At this point, it is very clear that Malkovich is not the only one that is under foreign control, as it is really Craig's love interest Maxine who is in charge. She forces him to stay inside Malkovich's body because only then can she love him. When Craig, the parasite, has made Malkovich a famous puppeteer himself, we see a documentary about Malkovich's surprising new choice of career. A large amount of airtime is dedicated to Maxine, now pregnant with his child and called "the woman behind the man." – "Pulling the strings," one wants to add. Craig becomes a metaphorical puppet himself, driven by her will – and ultimately, also by the obsession of "[b]eing John Malkovich" in order to please her. In the end, however, the story takes a puzzling turn: a large group of elderly people, the boss of which is the owner of Craig's company, want to enter Malkovich, hoping to gain eternal life by using the younger body as a vessel. As long as Craig occupies the puppet, they will only get deported into Malkovich's subconscious, so they trick him into thinking they will kill Maxine if he does not leave. Indeed, this works – and Craig gives in and exits. When the movie ends seven years later, Maxine's child has grown up, and as she sits and watches her mother, we see the scene from the girl's eyes. In the background, Craig's voice desperately calls: "Maxine, Maxine, I love you, Maxine. Oh, look away. Look away. . ." It seems, Craig has entered the secret door again – only to be now forever trapped in the child's head, suffering eternally, as he can only watch, but not interfere and puppeteer anymore.

In a similar way, Harold, the puppet in *Stranger than Fiction*, tries to struggle free from the author's influence. Blumenthal refers to this phenomenon as "puppet mutiny" (80): "Puppet insurrectionists," she writes, can "even assault their handler" – often even leading to the staged death of the puppeteer (83) – a notion which conjures up the image of Frankenstein and other homunculi. In the film, the character's intervention takes place to prevent death – if not that of the puppet master, then his very own. Once he has learned that he is destined to

die, Harold visits Karen and forces her to change the ending: "Now, since we've met and you can see that I exist," he asks, "you're not gonna kill me, right?" The author, however, hesitates, as she has already written an outline, which Harold gives to the professor to read. The expert's conclusion is simple: "You have to die [. . .] it's a masterpiece." Harold, shocked but also encouraged, now dares to read about his own death, resulting from being hit by a bus when he is saving a child. Author Karen Eiffel, on the other hand, is in a serious crisis. "How many people, do you think, I have killed?" she asks her assistant in tears. She decides against the continuation of the book, but Harold visits to give his consent. By now, the roles have clearly been reversed, the puppet has emancipated itself. It is now the main character who writes the plot, deciding that (and how) the story should end, and the author only unwillingly giving in. Indeed, Harold lives his last remaining days very consciously. The knowledge of his time and manner of death empowers him, enabling him to do many things he had always wanted to do. Karen, on the other hand, suffers tremendously. As she puts down the final words, rendering him dead on the paper, she breaks down crying. A close up shows that she has typed "Harold Crick was de" – the rest is still missing. As it turns out later, Karen decides not to kill Harold after all: He is badly injured, but survives. Karen even rewrites the rest of the book to fit with the new ending. "I just realized I couldn't do it," she concludes. "It's a book about a man who doesn't know he's about to die." Consequently of course, learning about his fate had changed this whole idea. Harold had turned from the unsuspecting, helpless puppet into an enlightened, independent, and, most importantly, real character. And this is what irked Karen: "[I]f the man does know he's going to die, and dies anyway, dies willingly, knowing he could stop it, then. . . I mean, isn't that the type of man you'd want to keep alive," she wonders. Originally having set out to end her book like all her others, with the death of the main protagonist, she changes her mind and reverses the roles. Ultimately, it is Harold and his involvement that decide the story's ending, Karen is only the marionette that types the words.

Coetzee's book also shifts the attention from the despair of the helpless, puppet-like main character to the seemingly equally desperate author. As Paul Rayment asks Elizabeth Costello to leave him alone, her answer reveals her as a very insecure writer, at the end of her tether:

> I myself am not exactly rejoicing, I assure you [. . .] the sooner you settle on a course of action and commit yourself to it, the sooner you and I, to our mutual relief, will be able to part. What that course of action should consist in I cannot advise, that must come from you. If I knew what came next there would be no need for me to be here, I could go back to my own life

[. . .] But until you choose to act I must wait upon you. You are, as the say-
ing has it, your own man.   (136)

These, indeed, are strange words to come out of the mouth of the in-
ventor of the storyline. One would, naturally, assume that she has it all
figured out, knows the plot, and is in charge. From the above example,
however, it is clear that the author is actually very dependent on her
"puppet." While Harold was not, at first, expected to influence the de-
velopment of the storyline, Rayment has to. It appears that the lack of
ideas and progression have drawn the author into the fictional world or
diegesis; an environment, however, which Elizabeth Costello does not
seem to be made for, as she gets weaker by the day: "The tiredness I
refer to has become part of my being. [. . .] I feel, to use Homer's word,
unstrung. A word with which you are familiar, I seem to remember. No
more tensile strength," she complains (160). Her choice of words is, of
course, strongly reminiscent of puppeteering. Costello is like a limb
marionette, unstrung from any kind of controlling device that could
help her gain back movement and vitality. The ends of the strings are
connected in a dependency of life and death, and with such entangle-
ment it is hard to tell who the puppet is, and who the puppeteer, author
and protagonist: "For me alone," the writer states, "Paul Rayment was
born, and I for him. His is the power of leading, mine of following; his
of acting, mine of writing [. . .]" (233). In the very end, Rayment decides
to abandon Costello, finishing the plotline along different lines than she
had imagined. In a way, this final act almost gives her back her inde-
pendence, her ability to decide her fate as the puppeteer of her own life.
"['W]hat am I going to do without you?'" the author asks anxiously, and
Rayment answers: "That is up to you, Elizabeth" (263).

As all these examples show, human puppets and puppeteers bring an
interesting potential for different conflicts into the old theatrical art.
While lifeless marionettes are literally just objects on a string, gaining all
their lifelikeness from the puppeteer's manipulation, the story becomes
clearly a very different one when playing and controlling people.

Firstly, the biggest source of struggle lies in the suppression of the
individual. While actual puppeteers insist that a successful performance
is based on a sort of "negotiation" with the marionette, and characters
like Karen Eiffel or Elizabeth Costello seem to be at least partly able to
follow this rule, figures like Craig Schwartz opt for a very totalitarian
approach. Schwartz does, indeed, fully realise his (real-life) namesake's
fantasy of the "Über-Marionette," by eventually replacing the actor with
a malleable version of Malkovich.

Secondly, however, the maybe even bigger conflict lies in the puppets' rebellion against their puppet player's control, the "mutiny" (Blumenthal 80). Characters like Harold Crick and Paul Rayment regain their confidence, ultimately turning against their authors, cutting themselves free – or at least pleading for a change in the storyline. In the same vein, the once almighty puppet players can find themselves trapped, tied by invisible strings that, in many ways, the puppet seems to hold. In Craig Schwartz's case, of course, the ultimate puppeteer is not Malkovich, but Maxine, who has taken complete control over her lover's life.

Thirdly, and probably most importantly, all of these examples put a strong focus on the main narratological concepts and paradoxes, concerning author(ship), narrators, characters, plotline, and point-of-view. While in the beginning of each story, these aspects are introduced in their conventional form, they soon become twisted and alienated. In *Slow Man* and *Stranger than Fiction*, both female protagonists seem to be both, the authors and the narrators of the plotline, only to gradually lose the influence that is connected to both of these statuses, as soon their main characters take over these roles, and with them control. In *Being John Malkovich*, Craig, the "author," and simultaneously narrator, of the play redefines the common conception of "point-of-view," when he can literally see the story unfold from Malkovich's eyes, having physically become his main character – a paradox which is only possible through a physical, metaleptic crossover. As discussed, it is also metalepses that both create and solve the essential paradox of human puppeteering. In a novel form of this phenomenon, fictional characters are united with their puppet masters, in most cases, however, (apart from *Slow Man*) without stepping out of their diegetic worlds. Instead, the diegeses and extradiegeses inhabit the same setting, and, defying all logic, the invented protagonists share the same space as their extradiegetic creators. No clear-cut boundaries exist, no explicit transgression has taken place, and yet, the impossible becomes reality. One can definitely say that however different and varied these cases are, they do have one thing in common: Through the motif of "human puppeteering," they both confirm as well as playfully apply the rules and relationships in puppet theatre to new fields and media such as film and literature, even narratology. In the end, the silky strings might be so twisted that no one can tell anymore for sure who the puppet is, and who the puppeteer. Never, however, are these strings without any tension.

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