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## Melancholia in Polanski's movie *The Tenant*

“Indeed the scream is the most basic sonorous vibration that attempts– not quite to break a silence–but more precisely to make it heard. When we hear a scream we realize it is silence itself that cries out in pain. The pain of not being able to take leave of oneself, is this not the effect of that share of the signifier that, in a state of inexorable suffering, condemns an accursed share of the subject to remain in exile in a place absolutely inhospitable to the word?” *Alain Didier Weill*

In 1976, Roman Polansky released his movie to mixed reviews. Polansky himself was displeased with the manner in which the plot of his movie unfolded. And yet, almost 30 years later, *The Tenant* remains an intriguing, complex and haunting film about a young man driven to suicide. The questions evoked in this very carefully crafted movie are related to the unconscious mechanisms at play that lead to his tragic end.

*The Tenant* is based on a French novel by Roland Topor entitled *Le Locataire Chimerique*, which translates into *The Fanciful or Imaginary Tenant*. The story line of the movie revolves around Trelkovsky, a young French man of Eastern European descent, who moves into an apartment shortly after the previous tenant has committed suicide by jumping out of the window. As soon as he moves in, the neighbors and landlord demonstrate an unusual intolerance to noise. Faced with continuous complaints, our protagonist becomes increasingly paranoid and concludes that his neighbors are pushing him to suicide as he believes they did with the prior tenant.

In the first part of the film, Polanski introduces us to the main characters. Subtle cues in cinematic language provide the elements that will become significant as the plot unfolds. For example, as the credits unfold at the beginning of the movie, we see a shot of a woman standing at the window of an apartment, superimposed by another shot of our protagonist at the same place. This image suggests, even before the movie has begun, a merging between the two characters.

In the opening scene, a polite, rather meek young man is in search of an apartment. He has heard

of a vacancy through one of his friends and he appears at the concierge's loge to inquire about the apartment. With the help of a few francs, the concierge reluctantly shows him the place, which still appears lived in. During the course of the visit, she tells him that the previous tenant is in the hospital and very badly injured with little hope for recovery after having jumped out of the window. The concierge eagerly shows him the broken glass roof. Putting her arm around his body in an ominous embrace, she invites Trelkovsky to look down from the apartment window. The audience sees, along with Trelkovsky, the hole in the glass made by the tenant when she fell. The image of the hole in the glass with sharp edges is enigmatic and reminiscent of a broken mirror.

The apartment is dark except for the light coming from the window. The contrast between dark and light in many of the subsequent shots creates a feeling of unease, of vulnerability, as one would inexplicably be drawn to the open space represented by the window. The communal bathroom window is symmetrically located across from the window of the apartment. The concierge does not fail to make a sarcastic comment about the unusual sight our potential tenant will be confronted with on a daily basis. The position of the window right across from the tenant's apartment functions like a screen on which Trelkovsky will see the hallucinatory reflections of the many characters he encounters in the course of his stay in the apartment. Mirrors and windows will become the recurrent point of entry into Trelkovsky's impossible interrogations.

The concierge reminds him that in spite of the many inconveniences, the apartment is a good deal (*une bonne affaire*). Trelkovsky agrees with her. Once his visit with the concierge is over, Trelkovsky is very eager to meet with the landlord in order to negotiate an agreement and take possession of the apartment should it become available. When he rings the doorbell of the landlord's apartment, he is confronted with an irascible woman who immediately declares that they do not give to charity. Interestingly, Trelkovsky will be made to feel that he is being given a favor when he is accepted as a tenant in the building.

Mr. Zy, the landlord, has an unusual name composed of the two last letters of the alphabet; a name that seems rather bland in contrast with Trelkovsky. In the ensuing exchange between the two men, Mr. Zy portrays himself as the incarnation of bourgeois respectability, not interested in money per se but only interested in tenants that will promote his good name and reputation. He insists that the apartment is a good deal indeed (*une bonne affaire*) and he demands a deposit of five thousand francs. Noise, girlfriends and sex will not be tolerated. While Trelkovsky agrees with Mr. Zy about the importance of having a respectable and quiet tenant, he does want to negotiate the amount of the deposit and pay only four thousand francs in cash. In a submissive tone, Trelkovsky explains how it would be a good deal for the landlord as well (*une bonne affaire*) to receive the money in cash and thus avoid declaring it as income. In spite of his apparent air of respectability, Mr. Zy succumbs to his greed while Trelkovsky is betting on the death of the current tenant in order to obtain the apartment.

Shortly after his visit with Mr. Zy, Trelkovsky decides to visit Simone Choule, the current tenant, at the hospital. What motivates Trelkovsky to visit the young woman is unclear. However, in contrast with the

movie, Topor's novel depicts a compassionate Trelkovsky who experiences pain over Mademoiselle Choule's fate. He is tormented by his decision to take the apartment and not sure that he is getting such a good deal after all. Polansky, on the other hand, presents us with a much more aloof and detached character who acts and experiences the world with little insight.

Trelkovsky arrives at the hospital with oranges in a bag, a rather puzzling gift given the circumstances. He awkwardly stands by the side of the bed with the bag of fruit in his hands. The sight of the woman lying in bed overwhelms him. She has bandages all over her body. One of her legs is elevated. One eye is covered, the other eye is wide open and she is staring straight ahead without blinking as if she were dead. Her mouth is open. As the camera moves closer to her face, we notice a missing tooth, which serves as a reminder of the violence she has inflicted on herself. While Trelkovsky stands by the bed in shock, a young woman, Stella, appears by his side. She asks him: "Are you one of her friends?" Trelkovsky is startled and drops the bag of oranges; some of them roll under the bed. Again, the novel gives us additional details about Trelkovsky's reaction to the unexpected appearance of the woman. "Trelkovsky was startled, he did not notice the other visitor. His already sticky forehead got covered with more sweat. He felt he was in the skin of a culprit in danger of being denounced by an unexpected witness." <sup>[1]</sup> What could he be guilty of? Was he in the hospital under false pretense? Did he wish her dead? Or was he in the throws of a voyeuristic impulse? He is paralyzed. He cannot tell a lie convincingly nor tell the truth. He is unable to take a stand, in both trivial and important matters. Stella does not wait for an answer. She is too distraught about what happened to her friend. She leans over the bed and calls out her name: "Simone, don't you recognize me?" After a short pause, a long and harrowing scream comes out of the mouth of Mlle. Choule which resonates in the whole room. The unbearable sound conveys something of the order of the unspeakable which creates shock in the spectator and the characters witnessing the scene. The scream has effectively frozen the two people in their tracks. They are precipitously escorted out of the room. The next day, Mlle. Choule dies and shortly after Trelkovsky moves into the apartment.

In his seminar, *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis*, Lacan refers to Munch's painting "The Scream," to talk about the relationship between silence and the scream. He argues that it is the scream that brings on silence and not the other way around. "The scream seems to provoke the silence so abolishing...The scream resembles an abyss in which the silence dashes into." <sup>2</sup> Other authors have spoken of the relation between the scream and the silence. Georg Buchner's *Lenz*, cited by Paul-Laurent Assoun in his book *The Gaze and the Voice*, says, "Don't you hear? Don't you hear the dreadful voice that roars all around the horizon and which we commonly call silence." <sup>3</sup> In *The Tenant*, Mlle. Choule's scream will come to represent the relationship between an impossibility to speak and an unbearable silence.

The inability of Mlle. Choule to speak her mind baffles Stella, who does not understand why her friend would commit suicide. She wonders what could have caused Simone Choule to commit such an act in spite of being in good spirits just a few days before. Trelkovsky responds: "I will never understand why people commit suicide." His answer is indicative of the dissociated nature of his character considering that his life will end in suicide. Again, contrary to the movie in which Trelkovsky is mainly concerned with

comforting Stella, the novel is more explicit in telling us Trelkovsky's state of mind as he is leaving the hospital. "Trelkovsky was disappointed. He was unable to speak to Simone Choule and the fact that she was so close to death was no consolation. He was not a bad man, he would have preferred to be without an apartment, if this could have saved her."<sup>4</sup> Remorse and regrets begin to emerge as determining factors in Trelkovsky's descent into madness.

It is tempting to relate Trelkovsky's fate to autobiographical elements in Polanski's life and most probably to Topor's life as well. Topor, Polanski and Trelkovsky share the same background: they are all from Poland. Topor and Polanski are Jewish. We can posit that the main character in the movie is Jewish also, but this information is never made explicit. The subtext of the movie deals with the experience of being *other* within a particular French societal context. To be identified as a foreigner in this context is viewed with suspicion and disdain and it is often associated with hatred and exclusion.

The kinship that exists between Stella, Mlle. Choule and Trelkovsky is best understood when we examine how their lives interconnect based on some of the elements/signifiers present in the story. The characters' names, for example, inform us about their relation to each other. The tenant is Simone Choule. The name *Choule* sounds French, especially when we can read how it is spelled. But *Choule* resembles another *Schul* which is spelled differently and which means the place of study for Jews, the synagogue in Yiddish. Trelkovsky is identified only by his last name, which indicates his place of origin. Yet distance and mystery are maintained about the character on a more personal level. In fact, we know nothing about his past and his family or friends. Except for his colleagues at the office, Trelkovsky is completely alone. He is not associated with anything or anyone in the past or in the present. Trelkovsky's detachment from any sense of history within a community or family contributes to a sense of absolute exclusion. In addition, Trelkovsky's otherness stands as a signifier of difference. This difference is experienced as disruptive and disquieting and, in this case, which alludes to the unleashing of sexual and aggressive drives.

The first part of the movie closes a circle of events that began in the first sentence of the novel: "Trelkovsky was going to be thrown out on the street when his friend Simon tells him about a vacant apartment."<sup>5</sup> We now know that Trelkovsky will not be thrown out on the street because Mlle. Choule has thrown herself out the window instead. In other words, Trelkovsky's good luck depended on somebody else's demise. Even though he did not overtly wish Mlle. Choule's death, he has benefited from it and he has happily moved into her apartment. The landlord and the concierge reinforce Trelkovsky's notion that he is getting a good deal (*une bonne affaire*) on the apartment when they tell him that Mlle. Choule's family will not claim the furniture back. Trelkovsky must deal with his unconscious guilt. We are shown his guilt by his inability to admit to Stella that he has taken the apartment. As an illegitimate heir, he lives in Mlle. Choule's apartment among her possessions and furniture.

Again, the information we are given in the movie is more ambiguous than in the novel. While Polanski shows a character that is detached and confused while clearly disturbed and troubled about the

turn of events, Topor gives voice to Trelkovsky's grief: "He felt an inexpressible regret for not having known her... He felt as if he had lost someone really dear to him."<sup>6</sup> The combination of regret as well as Trelkovsky's sense of loss for someone he did not know is reminiscent of Freud's point in his article "Mourning and Melancholia" "...One can feel a loss without being clear about its nature...[the patient] knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him."<sup>7</sup> Trelkovsky's statement in Topor's novel upon Mlle. Choule's death (as if he had lost someone really dear to him) implies that this death, unbeknownst to him, has far reaching consequences.

In the same article, Freud describes mourning as the reaction to the loss of a loved object. The reality of the loss demands that the subject detaches himself from this object. This libidinal detachment takes time and the mourner does not readily abandon his involvement with the object. The process of holding on while letting go is the process of mourning. Freud tells us that the ego is free to find a new object once the mourning is completed. The main characteristics of mourning and melancholia are "... a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss in the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity..."<sup>8</sup> Contrary to mourning, melancholia is characterized by extremely low esteem accompanied by self reproaches and delusional expectation of punishment. While in mourning, the world becomes impoverished and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself that is dispossessed. In the case of melancholia, the self reproaches are addressed to the love object with which the subject holds an ambivalent relation. Through identification, the reproaches that were addressed to this loved object are shifted from this object on to the patient's own ego. The ego has become the target of the hostility coming from the superego. The relationship between the love object and the subject is thus maintained through this psychic operation.

Trelkovsky's move into his new apartment is contingent upon the injunction: You shall not make any noise. What does it mean not to make any noise? And what noise are they referring to? His neighbors reproach him for being disturbed at all times of the day and night by noises associated with sexual pleasure, and socializing. For example, shortly after he moves into his new apartment, he invites his friends to celebrate. There is loud singing and drinking; women are present. The party is disrupted when an outraged neighbor comes to the door and complains about the noise even though it is Saturday night, as Trelkovsky points out, a time for relaxation and fun. On another occasion, he is asked by the landlord to remove his shoes after ten, just like the previous tenant used to do, so that he will not disturb the neighbors.

Finally, he gets accused of making noise even when he is being burglarized and not even in his apartment. Even though he is the victim, he is made to feel like he is the culprit. The prohibition on noise making extends to Trelkovsky being dissuaded from reporting the burglary in his apartment to the police. The landlord is concerned that any report about such an occurrence would discredit him and his building. The landlord's demand is an injunction to be a lifeless, noiseless, bodily presence. Almost like a corpse.

How can we begin to understand the cruelty and intransigence of this injunction? Trelkovsky is

treated as if he were guilty for simply being who he is. Despite his French nationality, he remains a foreigner in the eyes of the others. His landlord does not fail to remind him of this fact when his apartment is broken into. When he tries to dissuade him not to alert the authorities, he uses the excuse that his foreign name would arouse suspicion with the police. Indeed, on another occasion, upon being summoned to the police station following a complaint by one of his neighbors, the police inspector asks him questions while examining his identification card about his legitimacy as a French citizen. Because of his origins, he is automatically relegated to being guilty regardless of who he is as an individual, or how he acts.

I will use Alain Didier Weill's book *Les Trois Temps de la Loi*, in which he analyzes man's relation to language and the Law, to help us understand the structural underpinnings of Trelkovsky's predicament. Alain Didier Weill argues that the speaking subject is asked to justify himself in his status of speaking. "What have you done with the word that was given to you? You who are speaking because you have access to speech, have you forgotten that I am yours because first you were mine? Have you forgotten that you are my subject?"<sup>9</sup> In other words, the subject is questioned not in terms of what he says but whether or not he holds the right to speak.

To be a speaking subject is to occupy a place which implies recognition from another in one's singularity and specificity. This is precisely what is denied to Trelkovsky. For example, every time he goes to the bistro near his apartment he is served a hot chocolate with toast when in fact he has repeatedly asked for a cup of coffee. When Trelkovsky goes to buy cigarettes and requests Gitanes, the bistro owner suggests that he buy Malboro instead, a foreign label. Later, his concierge insists that he take the mail that is addressed to Mlle. Choule. The persistence with which this occurs throughout the film is striking until Trelkovsky, in a desperate attempt to hold his ground, blows up and refuses to drink the chocolate, eat the toast or smoke the Malboros. However, his revolt falls on deaf ears. Trelkovsky remains transparent and absent as a subject. His desire is disregarded and his fate is sealed. No matter what he asks for he gets Malboros, toast and hot chocolate. He does not have the right to speech (Il n'a pas droit a la parole). To be denied in one's speech is to be denied in one's humanity since desire borrows language to find its expression. In the eyes of the bistro owner, Trelkovsky is nothing but the new tenant that took the place of the previous one. He is not a separate individual. Trelkovsky is unable to escape from how others are treating him. The sense of alienation and hopelessness that stems from Trelkovsky's inability to be heard by the bistro owner, no matter what he says, confines him in a borrowed identity that is totally foreign to him.

If you remember the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the accompanying movies, evil is represented by a gigantic eye. The Medusa head fixates her victim with a stare. Based on the idea of a primordial superego that holds an absolute power over the subject not unlike the evil eye, Alain Didier Weill develops his ideas about different superegos. He distinguishes three superegos. The command of the first superego, the archaic superego, introduces an absolute silence which can be translated as "Not a word." The second superego is related to censorship and is best illustrated in an example taken from Freud's

essay on dream interpretation. “Let’s suppose a king who wants to maintain his power and fight public opinion. His subjects revolt against one of his appointees and demand that he be removed from his post. In order to mask the fact that the king has to take public opinion into account, he gives this appointee a high distinction that was not motivated by anything in particular.” [10](#) According to Alain Didier Weill, the King must pretend that he does not need public opinion. His persistence in ignoring his subjects and acting contrary to their wishes is defined as censorship. Censorship is effective in that it strips the subject of the possibility of insisting on being heard. If in spite of the action of the King his subjects continue their revolt we deal with a third level of the superego. At this level, the superego realizes that the subject has transgressed censorship and that he is insisting on being heard. As a result the subject is confronted with his own insistence, and an anxiety that signals a new relation with himself. That is the path of the assumption of one’s desire, a hard choice that demands a payment of sort. The subject is confronted and has to resist a collective superego that demands him to conform.

Trelkovsky faces a persecutory superego embodied by the neighbors that demands absolute silence and submission. The effectiveness of this superego comes from the fact that it is tied to a gaze that fixates the subject, as an absolute, a last judgment. Trelkovsky tries to protest only to be rebuked and silenced. He is confronted with an intransigent other that declares: “You are a foreigner because of your name and in spite of your protests. In addition, you are guilty for disrupting our lives with your noise making. And, finally, you are to become Mlle. Choule.”

Alain Didier Weill uses the following story to illustrate the subjective position in which the subject cannot say “yes” to the Symbolic command, “Where it was, there will be speech.” Yet the subject cannot say “no” to the command from the superego which says, “Do not become.” This is the story of the madman who was hospitalized because he thought he was a kernel of wheat. After being stabilized the man was released. However, shortly after his release he returned to the hospital in a panic. The psychiatrist who treated him asked what had happened and he said: I know that I am not a kernel of wheat but does the chicken know it? Alain Didier Weill concludes that the madman’s evaluation of his situation is pointless. Once he is faced with the chicken he cannot invoke what is true because the judgment coming from the superego, represented in this case by the chicken, is absolute. If it was a matter of bad judgment, one could protest it but would not be annihilated by it. We are without recourse in the face of this superego. This absolute knowledge comes from the Real. [11](#)

What makes the chicken a representative of the power of the superego is not related to truth or untruth but it is related to the fact that it incarnates an absolute knowledge over the part of the subject that is Real. In other words, the part of the subject that is outside the Symbolic, outside the domain of the signifiers in as much as signifiers allow for the possibility of truth. In order for the subject to take responsibility for truth, he has to say “yes” to what in him is of the order of the Real and say “yes” to what in him contradicts this Real. We all carry our kernel of wheat in us. If the subject is not able to take on the responsibility for being “the kernel of wheat” he will be stuck in *remaining* this kernel of wheat rather than *existing* as such. “He will become this purely material thing, identical to itself, devoid of difference and as

an object ...will be submitted to only one Law that of the Real– the law of gravity; he will become this body, heavy, with depression, in being just that, a kernel of wheat...The madman's inability to speak with the chicken leaves him in a silence from which he doesn't come out, his terror proves the fact that even if he escaped from the chicken he has not separated from it...If he had truly separated from the chicken , he would have stopped being under the spell of its gaze."[12](#)

In addition to Freud's elaboration on the superego, that it is the encounter of the id with the reality principle, the ensuing repression and advent of the ego; Alain Didier Weill argues that the origins of this critical faculty does not belong to the ego but is part of the subject which has fallen out of the Symbolic. This part will come back in the Real in the form of a gaze that will have some affinity with hallucinations. Where the subject is not able to use the signifier as a point of reference, he incorporates the gaze as a substitute.

This remarkable description by Alain Didier Weill brings us back to Trelkovsky. He stands helplessly accused whether the judgment is true or not. He is faced with an implacable Other, an archaic superego that has transfixed him with no recourse. In this instance it is not a chicken or a kernel of wheat, but a hostile environment that insists that Trelkovsky remain in the position of otherness. From the foreign cigarettes to his name, Trelkovsky is reminded of his origins as a way to dispossess him of his right to exist. He is shy and vulnerable, somewhat hesitant in his interactions with others. He seems to carry the world that surrounds him on his shoulders. He tries to equally fend off the verbal assaults from his neighbors, and the rude and vulgar comments from his colleagues at work who make fun of his inability to stand up to his landlord. He has no friends, no attachment of any kind. We know nothing of his past. He is just a last name, Trelkovsky, and he works as a clerk. The closeness that he may develop with a woman as we saw in his interaction with Stella, is immediately followed by an experience of reproach or the onset of punishing delusions. He is increasingly driven to the brink of despair.

Overall, Topor has presented us with a character that is much more insightful and self reflective than the one portrayed by Polanski. Trelkovsky, as played by Polanski, is mostly aloof and silent and he tends to act out his emotions but not speak. This alludes to Polanski's approach to life.[13](#)How can we begin to understand such a character? He seems to appear out of nowhere. The only reference to his past is a package of photographs that we see him unpack and quickly put aside early on in the movie. And yet, through Trelkovsky's daily interactions with the world, we are given glimpses of his struggles and anxiety. With limited resources Trelkovsky tries to put the pieces of his life together and we witness his journey to its tragic end. As spectators, we, too, are trying to make sense of this man's destiny by looking for logical sequences of events.

Upon having moved to his new apartment, Trelkovsky unpacks his belongings and puts them away. He opens the door of the armoire and discovers a dress that used to belong to Mlle Choule. He pauses, and then takes it out as if he were going to get rid of it. He suddenly hesitates, examines the dress, touches it as if it was alive and places it back in the armoire. It is as if he had been confronted with the



ghost of Mlle. Choule and was unable to let it go. Following the encounter with the dress, Trelkovsky washes his hands, as one would do after having touched a corpse. Even so, he is inexorably attracted to the armoire again. He stands in front of it and stares at his image. We, as spectators, accompany him and see his reflection in the mirror. It is a disconcerting moment because the reflection looks both familiar and foreign at the same time. It is similar to an encounter with the uncanny which elicits anxiety. The specular image has broken down. Another presence is in the mirror: a double in the form of the ghost of Mlle. Choule. Again, he opens the armoire and looks at the dress as if he was looking for an answer, then he goes to the window, opens it and looks down to see the trace of Mlle. Choule's fall through the glass roof. The camera, simulating a plunge, takes us closer to the hole through which Mlle. Choule fell. As he looks up he sees a neighbor in the bathroom and he stares at the man in his privacy for a bit before he closes the window. Trelkovsky's encounter in the mirror with a double in the person of Mlle. Choule sets the stage for his growing preoccupation with the dead woman.

As you remember in Alain Didier Weill's depiction of the superego, the subject is silenced by a superego that transfixes and immobilizes. Trelkovsky is constantly trying to compromise and make deals with this superego as personified by his landlord and other people that appear in his life. He is not secure. In a mild and apologetic tone, he tries to make a small place for himself and in this effort he is repeatedly relegated to the place of waste and refuse. The concierge does not fail to tell him about the bathroom that is directly facing his apartment, a humiliating prospect. Throughout the movie, Polansky suggests how Trelkovsky's status is connected to shit. He is often the object of rudeness and insults. There are scenes in which he steps on shit, and one in which a garbage truck drives right by him.

Another instance of such a scene is the morning after Trelkovsky's house warming party. After cleaning up his apartment, Trelkovsky brings the trash to the courtyard. He runs into his landlord who complains about the noise he heard the previous night alluding to the drinking, the loud voices and, of course, the women. Again Trelkovsky apologizes profusely. After placing the trash in the large cans, he returns to the stairs to pick up garbage that has overflowed but it has disappeared. Trelkovsky is perplexed and confused and he wonders who could have taken care of the matter. We wonder if Trelkovsky is losing his grasp on reality as a result of the reprimand he received from his landlord for the pleasure he might have experienced the night before. The recurrent theme of trash, garbage, shit and waste with which he is associated point to his melancholic identification.

Another time, while Trelkovsky is making out with Stella in the movie theatre, he is suddenly confronted by the gaze of a fellow spectator who is staring at him in a reproachful manner. Sheepishly, he stops what he is doing. While standing outside the theater with Stella after the end of the movie, Trelkovsky is confronted again with the inquisitive and reproachful stare of the man from inside the theater. Trelkovsky takes notice of him and, while showing signs of discomfort, he tries to dodge the persistent gaze.

In a subsequent scene, he sees Stella at Church during Mlle. Choule's memorial. Happily, he tries to

get her attention and he moves from his seat to get closer to her. We hear the priest in the background conducting the eulogy. As he is looking around, Trelkovsky's attention is caught by the sight of a bloody crucifix on the wall, which makes him feel uncomfortable. Presently, we notice that the content of the speech by the priest has shifted. Trelkovsky is hallucinating the harsh and insulting words that he hears: "You will not go to paradise, you are garbage, carrion ..." Trelkovsky gets sweaty and has trouble breathing. Finally in complete panic, he stumbles out, initially unable to find the right door to exit. To his great relief, he finds a side door that takes him out of the edifice. The auditory hallucinations clearly follow an experience of attraction for Stella. Sexual pleasure is forbidden as well as any sign of a budding relationship. He is to remain an outcast excluded from others. Why a hallucination when Trelkovsky is confronted with a prohibition? If we posit that Trelkovsky is psychotic, Trelkovsky is confronted with a prohibition coming from the outside, from the Real rather than a symbolic prohibition. As such, Trelkovsky occupies the place of an object, of waste, garbage or shit to be gotten rid of.

As Trelkovsky becomes more and more the object of hallucinations, the spectator is left questioning his own perceptions like our protagonist. For example, the mirror on the armoire in Trelkovsky's apartment functions like an eye that gazes around the room every time he opens and closes it. As the mirror glances around the room, the spectator is made to feel that he is about to witness an unexpected and jolting scene.

After having lived in this apartment for a while, Trelkovsky decides to move the armoire across the room. The camera makes us follow the eye of the armoire glancing throughout the apartment. Hidden in the wall where the armoire used to be, Trelkovsky discovers a tooth wrapped in cotton. The tooth is long and pointy. He is startled and frightened by his discovery. The missing tooth presumably belonged to Mlle. Choule. With no possible explanation for its presence, he places it back in the wall. Later on while he visits Stella, he confides to her his discovery and then wonders out loud: "When we lose a tooth, it is a part of ourselves, our personality?" He then goes on to say: "A man lost his arm and he wanted to have it buried but they refused. They cremated it and refused to give him the ashes. So if I lose my arm, is it me and my arm? If I lose both arms is it me and my arms? If I lose my head, is it my body and my head or is it my head and my body?" In this lack of an organizing principle, that of a symbolic identification, Trelkovsky is unable to anchor himself with signifiers.

As the pressure mounts and Trelkovsky is besieged by his neighbors, the hallucinations increase. On one occasion, while he is sick and tormented by his preoccupations, Trelkovsky gets up in the middle of the night, dizzy and sweaty to go to the bathroom. He is startled to discover hieroglyphs on the bathroom wall as if he were in a tomb. Then, looking out the window into his apartment, he sees himself from the side of death looking back at himself as a living being. He stumbles back into his apartment in complete terror, looks out the window into the bathroom and sees a mummy peeling off her wraps. The face of a woman resembling Mlle. Choule appears, looking back at him. Of course this sight is reminiscent of the scene at the hospital when he first saw Mlle. Choule and was overwhelmed by her appearance, her gaze, her mouth and her whole body wrapped in bandages. In that instant, he is confronted by her image

returning from the dead to haunt him as an expression of his guilt. By making use of the positioning of the two windows diametrically opposed to each other, Topor and Polanski create the impression that Trelkovsky has been looking at himself from the other side of the mirror, the deadly achievement of an impossibility.

Trelkovsky wakes up the next morning to the noise of workers fixing the glass roof. He opens the window and hears laughing in his direction. Looking into a mirror, he is shocked to discover that he has make-up on his face. He is wearing lipstick and has painted nails. The combination of the laughter and his transformation confirm his conviction that he is being driven to suicide by his neighbors who are trying to turn him into Mlle. Choule. The glass window being repaired below his apartment resembles the preparation of the gallows for his execution. "I'll show them," is his reaction as he goes out to buy a woman's wig and a pair of cheap high heels.

The following morning, he notices blood coming out of his mouth. One of his teeth has been pulled out. He finds the missing tooth tucked away in the wall with the other tooth which presumably belonged to Mlle Choule. It is likely that Trelkovsky pulled out his own tooth, but in his delusion he experiences it as an action committed by others. As he becomes more and more disorganized, Trelkovsky sits in front of his window at night dressed as a trashy Mlle. Choule and watches, like in a theater, the horrifying hallucinations that engulf him. Trelkovsky's delirium is organized around guilt and persecution. In this melancholic identification, he takes the place of the discarded object, of shit. His guilt is tied to his ambivalent relation to Mlle. Choule.

His guilt is also tied to who he is: a displaced man, a foreigner, a man who does not belong anywhere, who lives his life as if he did not have a history. He is relegated to the status of a second rate citizen and he has identified with that position while meekly protesting its injustice. The only time he takes a stand for what is right concerns another tenant who has been unjustly evicted. However, his protest is followed by retaliation from the other neighbors. When the tenant in question shits out of anger in front of everyone's apartment, she spares him. However, he is quick to take the shit and put it in front of his door so that he does not attract the neighbors' wrath, a twist on the story of Passover. [14](#)

The gradual transformation of Trelkovsky into Mlle. Choule follows a series of reversals. As a man, Trelkovsky experiences himself as essentially passive. He is the faulty one, always ready to appease, apologize and compromise while facing an intransigent authority. In the first reversal, Trelkovsky is convinced that he is the object of a conspiracy in which his neighbors are trying to turn him into Mlle. Choule and drive him to suicide. He claims that this so-called suicide is in fact an assassination. At this point, his guilt has disappeared. Increasingly, Trelkovsky becomes active and turns into a subversive and defiant Mlle. Choule. His transformation into Mlle. Choule is provocative and vulgar. He looks like a whore. This reversal is accompanied by an unleashing of aggression. For example, during one of his hallucinations he takes a homeless woman who has sought shelter in the entrance of his building for one of his despised neighbors and he tries to strangle her. In another scene he hallucinates that the man who

rings the door bell at Stella's apartment, where he sought refuge, is his landlord. He is now convinced that Stella is an accomplice. This leads him to express his rage and sense of betrayal by trashing her apartment and stealing her money. Finally, while sitting at the Luxembourg garden, Trelkovsky witnesses a scene in which a boy is crying because he has lost his boat in the middle of the pond. A young woman comforts him. As she steps away from the boy to take care of the matter, Trelkovsky brusquely gets up and walks towards the crying boy. He stares at him with utter contempt and violently slaps him across the face while insulting him by saying "you little shit," before briskly walking away. The scene is jolting because of its violence on a small and defenseless child and also because the spectator becomes keenly aware that the slap is really a self destructive gesture, an expression of his self hatred.

Finally, in the last reversal, Trelkovsky finds revenge through self immolation. He becomes his own executioner. In the final scenes of the movie, Trelkovsky hallucinates a scene in which the courtyard has become a theater. The spectators, who are his neighbors and Stella, are waiting for the show to begin. The eyes are directed towards Trelkovsky's window that is now representing the stage. He jumps out of the window a first time but he survives the fall. As his neighbors and landlord gather around him to come to his rescue, he accuses them of being assassins and torturers and of trying to keep him quiet. While fighting back their attempts to provide help, he hallucinates that they are trying to catch him with a net. He yells in disgust: "You want blood, I'll show you...this is going to be dirty...this is going to be unforgettable ...I am not Mlle. Choule." Trelkovsky wants his suicide to be shocking and loud and prove to his neighbors that he is not a quiet Mlle. Choule who dies without protest. By pronouncing these words, Trelkovsky tries to assert his place in the memory of his persecutors in contrast to the invisible and noiseless Trelkovsky that he felt relegated to. However, this defiance is accomplished at the cost of his life. His suicide embodies the contradictory elements of conforming to the others' wishes and a protest against them. He crawls back in his apartment and jumps a second time. This time, he is severely hurt and hospitalized.

The story has gone full circle. In the final scene, Trelkovsky is lying in bed just like Mlle. Choule watching himself and Stella standing by the side of his bed. The scene is shot from Trelkovsky's point of view as he is laying down looking up. He is now looking back at himself and responds with a deafening scream when his name is called out by Stella. In trying to capture what he had lost with Mlle. Choule's death, and like the fascination of Narcissus with his image, Trelkovsky has effectively gone through the mirror to reach an impossible image.

#### Footnotes:

1. Roland Topor. *Le Locataire Chimerique*, p21. (my translation)
2. Jacques Lacan. March 17, 1965. (my translation)
3. Paul Laurent Assoun. p5. (my translation)
4. Roland Topor. p23. (my translation)

5. *ibid.* p9.

6. *ibid.* p29.

7. Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, p.245.

8. *ibid* p.244.

9. Alain Didier Weill p.9. (my translation)

10. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* p.342

11. Real defined as what remains outside symbolisation.

12. Alain Didier Weill. p42.(my translation)

13. In writing about *The Tenant in Roman by Polanski*, Polanski only speaks of the technical aspects of the filming and nothing about the story and the characters, and shows same kind of detachment that we observe in Trelkovsky.

14. Passover commemorates the departure of the Jews from Egypt. It also refers to how

God spared (passed over) the houses of the Jewish first born and only killed the Egyptian first born as punishment for the Pharaoh's refusal to let the Jewish people leave his land.

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