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## MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Roman Polanski's treatment of mutable identity in his film, *The Tenant* (1976)

Martin R. Hall<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper explores the identity anxieties evident with Roman Polanski's 1976 film *The Tenant*. From psychoanalytical to gender perspectives this paper decodes Polanski's film and argues that this work demonstrates a sense of identity that it is associated with one's physicality. From clothing, demeanour and physiology and even to "teeth" this film is one which demonstrates the gradual degradation of its protagonist's existential identity through his own physical change. Focussing on cross-dressing and exploring the controversial consideration of clothing as gendered, this paper explores how one man's change in to "women's" clothing leads to his eventual death. There are questions of nationality, border crossing and of course those of gender which all accumulate in this author's reading of *The Tenant's* powerful and menacingly macabre message.

**Subjects:** European Cinema; Gender & Cinema; Gender

**Keywords:** gender; European cinema; Roman Polanski; identity; cross dressing; transgender

One can argue that Roman Polanski uses the physical body as a representation of one's existential identity and in so doing permits himself, through altering and to a point abusing that body, to ultimately alter, abuse and deconstruct identity in itself. Polanski demonstrates a potent link between the physical body and one's existential identity and establishes that when one's physical body is altered, so too, does one's identity transmute. Focussing on his 1976 film *The Tenant* this paper explores how, through his use primarily of cross-dressing, Polanski represents a gradual dissolution and a destruction of personal identity. Methodologically adopting the framework of a

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Martin R. Hall is a lecturer in Film and Media studies at York St. John University. His research focusses primarily on the areas of European and British art cinemas, comedy and the American independent cinema. Since completing his PhD in the field of 1960s British and European Art cinema he has published on the works of François Truffaut, Ray Bradbury, Roman Polanski and Woody Allen. His recent publications have centred on the work of Woody Allen, a paper concerning Allen's use of magic realism in his films, and a book chapter which constitutes an exploration of the referentiality and intermediality of Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* (1997).

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article explores Roman Polanski's (1976) film *The Tenant* looking specifically at the way in which this director deals with the concept of identity. I argue that Polanski demonstrates a potent link between the physical body and one's identity, arguing that Polanski establishes that when one's physical body is altered, so too, does one's Identity change. Polanski does this by tracing a gradual dissolution of one man's identity through the gradual dissolution of his body. Through cross dressing, through the alteration of habits, through the removal of a tooth and ultimately through extensive physical harm, one man's body is gradually destroyed until his identity, too, is shattered.

psychoanalytical understanding of an existential identity, this paper will provide close, textual analysis by which Polanski's treatment of identity politics may be measured.

This article considers Polanski's treatment of identity, but, whilst the significance of gender is extensively explored, the question remains one of identity. *The Tenant* explores a body out of control, and indeed, does explore notions of cross-dressing as indicative of identity anxiety; however, the film's central question comes down to an existential understanding of one's own identity as anchored to a physical locus. Interestingly, the "identity" which the film's protagonist adopts is that of a woman and, as such, the sense of gender does yield some interesting considerations.

Considering the argument that gender and identity are inexorably linked, it has been posited that it is feasible that one might in fact personally construct a sense of one's own gender. Indeed, Judith Butler tackled this concept when she suggested that, "the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law" (2006, p. 12). Significant for the consideration of Polanski's specific use of the physical body in constructing identity, Butler observes the physicality of gender in her understanding of physical markers, or bodies as recipients of tradition or "law". Furthermore, it seems that "construction" suggests a notion of control, but, of course, what is most relevant for Polanski's portrayal here is the idea that *The Tenant* presents a transformation which is both unwitting and unwilling, removing any sense of control whatsoever.

Moreover, Butler's work also explores the difficulty of gendered identity, questioning, specifically, the consistency of gender. Butler suggested that:

if one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently. (Butler, 2006, p. 6)

In this film, it can be perceived that by manipulating the body in this way, Roman Polanski symbolises the fragile, temperamental and mutable nature of individual identity. Hinging on the central concept that identity is not fixed nor fully formed, but rather in-process and capable of change, this paper will analyse the manifestation of identity anxieties with a primary focus on *The Tenant* and supporting investigation of both *Repulsion* (1965) and *Cul-de-Sac* (1966).

In backing this study and the exploration of cross-dressing in particular, one ought to explore the significance of clothing as a signifier for identity, understood as an alteration of the body and used as an instrument depicting the destruction of his characters' individual identities. Regarding *The Tenant*, there has been little attention turned towards the film's masterful exploration of identity. Katarzyna Marciniak has argued for reading *The Tenant* as, "a cinematic narrative of exile [...] a passionate critique of phobic nationalism and the obsessive desire to guard national borders against strangers-foreigners" (Marciniak, 2000, p. 3). This is true of his film. Nevertheless, although Polanski's use of cross-dressing as a physical representation of altered identity, of which *The Tenant* is a prime example, has attracted some comment, it has been largely underplayed as a significant aspect of his films.

Throughout this film, it becomes evident that the protagonist, Trelkovsky, is extremely concerned with his own body. Beyond one's natural and patent concern for one's own person, the film's protagonist immediately appears to be overly obsessed, to the point even of suspicion and fear, with his own body. He is an awkward character and from the outset appears to not be in control of his own motor skills. There are a great deal of instances in which Trelkovsky's lack of control and patent ungainliness can be seen: from slipping in dog faeces to dropping his groceries and bashing his head as he collects them to carrying too much rubbish out to the bins, littering the stairs with refuse and trying to pick up a fully laden table and smashing a full bottle of wine. This man, as it becomes obvious, is not confident in his own body.

As Helen Goscilo has suggested, “*The Tenant* projects the existential terror of an identity transferred not through reproduction but through gradual self-annihilation and a replication articulated through the body” (Goscilo, 2006, p. 27). This is a film which explores the idea of “the body” and “identity” as concepts which are inextricably linked. Polanski articulates what Goscilo calls “self-annihilation” in many ways, and not only here but within his other films too.

In his 1966 film *Repulsion*, he employs a form of bodily invasion through the film’s protagonist Carol’s nightly visions of rape. This acts as an ultimate abuse of identity through the invasion of one’s body. Presupposing that the “repulsion” of this film is sexual, there is a suggestion here too of childhood sexual abuse at the climax of the film, where Carol’s deathlike trance gives way to a long, slow zoom into a family portrait with the protagonist standing behind the father figure, looking somewhat disturbedly and disconcertingly his way.

In addition, *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), perhaps his best known narrative of bodily abuse, acts as a demonstration of invasion too, though here the idea of a parasitic narrative is introduced as Rosemary is forced to “house” an identity not of her own. This, of course, is something which we also see in *The Tenant*.

There is a sequence here in which Trelkovsky visits his friend Stella’s apartment; Stella, who is, of course, one of Simone Choule’s old friends. Here we see how Trelkovsky links his identity to specific parts of his body. Referring to a man who wanted his amputated arm cremated and buried, he questions, “At what precise moment does an individual stop being who he thinks he is?” In his existential anxiety, deriving from the sense of constant preoccupation with his physical body and the ramifications it presents in terms of identity, he ponders over the nature of one’s existential identity as associated with a physical locus. He suggests:

You cut off my arm, I say me and my arm. You cut off my other arm I say me and my two arms. Take out my stomach, kidneys, assuming that were possible, and I say me and my intestines [...] If you cut off my head would I say me and my head or me and my body?

He concludes this paranoid pondering by, almost accusingly asking, “what right has my head to call itself me?” This most strongly demonstrates Trelkovsky’s untoward consideration of his own body and the nefarious and suspicious air he affords this physical locus for his existential identity.

This sequence brings together several of the film’s major central concerns; the idea of “body as identity”, a perception of “clothing as identity” and also the contentious suggestion of “clothing as gendered”. Clothing as a constitutive part of identity is an important aspect linked specifically to Polanski’s use of cross-dressing as a signifier for the alteration of identity. Here Stella, wearing a nightgown, is free, jovial and unrestricted, whereas Trelkovsky, wearing a shirt buttoned up to the collar and a tie, traditionally linked with constriction and inhibition, is much more morose and less free. Interestingly, in demonstrating the inhibiting effect of Trelkovsky’s dress, Stella uses his tie to lead him, subservient and leash-like, across the room. This clearly demonstrates how his clothes are a threat to his freedom but also, more tellingly, shows how his clothes, despite their culturally masculine connotations, effectively emasculate him by placing Stella in the position of sexual aggressor. In addition to highlighting his subservience by leading him, dog-like, by his tie, Stella removes his trousers—perhaps the most traditionally masculine of Trelkovsky’s items of clothing—thus stripping him, overtly, of his masculinity and his male identity. This initiates the fracturing of Trelkovsky’s pre-conceived notions of that which constitutes his existential identity.

As Kelly Oliver has suggested in her book *Subjectivity without Subjects* (1998), this film is centred on the fear of a body out of control. This is something which Trelkovsky directly experiences when he finally and wholly submits his identity to that of Simone Choule, the previous tenant. He evidently experiences a kind of black-out during the evening’s transformations, as when he dons her clothes it is always at night and the morning brings revelation to Trelkovsky. Thus, as demonstrated by his

complete lack of knowledge of these nocturnal activities, when “being Choule” he completely loses control of his body. One of the key ways in which Trelkovsky’s identity fades is demonstrated through his incremental adoption of Simone Choule’s lifestyle habits: smoking the same cigarettes as Choule; visiting her hangouts and drinking her “usual” drink at her regular bar. Interestingly, however, despite Trelkovsky’s loss of self through the gradual cessation of his personal habits, it is the sight of his own physical self across the courtyard that marks the final and complete destruction of his personal identity. When Trelkovsky visits the bathroom across the courtyard he gazes back toward his apartment to have his gaze returned by none other than himself. Here, one can read his being stripped of his physical body as tantamount to being stripped of one’s very identity.

Returning home to his apartment late one evening, Trelkovsky is startled by a homeless woman sitting in the entrance hall. He sees her as Madame Dioz, a suspicious and meddling tenant who is trying to have his neighbour and her disabled daughter evicted. Madame Dioz begins to strangle him and yet the audience see that he is imagining an invisible attacker, and as such this act scares away the homeless woman, leaving Trelkovsky tussling with himself in the hallway. What is significant about this powerful sequence is the revelation that, not only is Madame Dioz not there, but Trelkovsky is actually strangling himself with his own hands. His body has, quite literally turned against him. This sequence exhibits an interesting and telling effect in that Trelkovsky, whilst struggling on the floor, stops kicking and evidently gives in, suggesting that he has in fact died here.

The evident idea of the body as a threat here is something which demonstrates Trelkovsky’s very lack of control over his own identity. This in turn augments the sense of his being completely lacking in confidence and individuality. The timid Trelkovsky’s identity as an extension of his body is frail, changeable and mutable; or rather more importantly, it is something over which he has little to no control to the extent that another’s identity eventually manages to overthrow his own. Here, Trelkovsky’s identity is clearly defeated, and one can read his figurative “death” in the hallway as his final submission to the Choule identity; this is a powerful and telling exchange in which her identity overpowers his. Following this, Trelkovsky’s body, and therefore his identity, further deteriorates as the film continues and his previously conceived notions of “self” diminish beyond recognition.

At the film’s climax, Trelkovsky, whilst dressed as Choule, watches as his own disembodied head bounces up past his window. His identity, it seems, has become irreparably fragmented to the point of physical distortion. This is a realisation of his existential anxiety as expressed by his previous concerns about which part of his physical body houses his identity. Furthermore, Trelkovsky/Choule, as he has now become, sees his neighbour’s daughter, a young disabled girl, a girl with whom Trelkovsky has so identified, dressed up as himself. His identity has become so fluid as to have found itself some other physical locus. What is clearly demonstrative of the menacing nature of his body here is the fact that even when the Trelkovsky identity is no longer associated with his body, it is still a threat to him. This new and equally outcast Trelkovsky points a condemning finger at him shouting “There he is!” The body, then, even when not his, is persistently a threat to Trelkovsky.

Building further upon the concept of a threatening body, the apartment itself can also be read as a “body” of a menacing kind for Trelkovsky. This idea strongly echoes the sentiments of Polanski’s earlier film, *Repulsion*, in which Carol’s apartment functions as an extension of her psychological turmoil. Here, however, Trelkovsky’s apartment is imbued with an organic and anthropomorphised quality. This use of space as an extension of body is a question of the body’s ability to effectively function as this physical locus for identity. As Le Cain quite rightly posits, within Polanski’s film, “The boundaries of the self have dissolved and drifted beyond the body” (2006, p. 128). Le Cain goes on to qualify this idea, suggesting that the organic quality of this apartment space is enforced by the tooth Trelkovsky finds in the wall, a tooth which the gap in Choule’s mouth suggests is hers. Le Cain writes that “the reinsertion of the tooth in the wall implies that the ‘making whole’ of the room is as important as him altering his physical appearance in ‘reincarnating’ her” (2006, p. 127). Trelkovsky then replaces this tooth in the wall with one of his own whilst wearing the dead Choule’s dress. Trelkovsky confides in Stella that he considers that, “a tooth is a part of ourselves like a bit of our

personality". This symbolic and once more submissive gesture functions twofold, firstly as a further demonstration of the destruction of Trelkovsky's identity through his body's genuine physical fragmentation and, secondly, as an all-encompassing assimilation of the Choule identity by Trelkovsky; yet another instance in which the two come closer to becoming one. Much like *Rosemary's Baby*, the apartment itself here becomes the agent of Choule's parasitic narrative.

It becomes patently evident that genuine physical fragmentation and destruction of the body is a motif strongly enforced by the use of cross-dressing within *The Tenant*. Carol Tulloch, upon discussing the idea of one's dress as an indicator of one's identity, suggests that this concept is, "fraught with hidden meanings and questions", questioning, "what is the identity of the clothed body in relation to the clothing and styling it adopts, and does it bear any relation to the wearer's real cultural identity?" (1999, p. 72). The argument as it pertains to Polanski's film suggests that clothing does indeed bear relation to the wearer's cultural identity and that this is a potent relationship too. Polanski's film evidently demonstrates this and subsequently employs the use of clothing in order to extend the metamorphosis of his characters' identities through the alteration of the body and, as we see here, through clothing as an extension of the body. Within this film, Polanski uses clothing to demonstrate Trelkovsky's subservience and weakness, suggesting the frailty of his identity in-process. As Gail L. Hawkes, in her article "Dressing-Up: cross-dressing and sexual dissonance", writes, "appearance contains messages for self and others which signify not only one's biological sex but one's gender characteristics (masculine/feminine), and one's sexual orientation" (1995, p. 261).

Stella Bruzzi has highlighted the power of the social presence of clothing, claiming explicitly that, "gender conventions can be subverted "through clothing itself" (1995, p. 258). This, indeed, is precisely what Polanski demonstrates within this film and others. Polanski uses clothing to castrate and emasculate Trelkovsky in the ultimate deconstruction of his personal identity. This effect has been similarly achieved within his other films, most significantly in *Cul-de-Sac*. Here, in quite jovial fashion, Teresa dresses her husband George in her nightgown and makes up his face before then subsequently ridiculing his appearance. As Helen Goscilo suggests, this too effects an emasculation:

While their game announces itself as such and therefore suspends "conventional time", it nonetheless concretises George's bleating submission to his uxorial dominatrix, coding his existential identity as feminine. (2006, p. 26)

Goscilo suggests that here, Polanski's use of cross-dressing in effect not only alters George's appearance but also, by extension, his identity. Evidently, Simone Choule's clothing in *The Tenant*, acting as a further agent of the Choule parasitic narrative, is an element that quite clearly demonstrates Trelkovsky's loss of identity. What is interesting is that Trelkovsky dons Choule's clothes incrementally. That is to say that he first wears only her dress and make-up, the next time he adds a wig and high-heeled shoes and then, finally, with Choule's clothes comes Choule's identity, effecting a more gradual and permanently damaging dissolution of his previous self. Whilst admiring himself in the mirror, he quite nonchalantly says, "I think I'm pregnant".

Furthermore, the clothes also begin to affect Trelkovsky in a number of other ways; he not only begins to look, act and "feel" like Choule, but, in addition to playing the role of subservient lover to Stella's sexual aggressor, he also begins to identify with other female characters.

Trelkovsky identifies with the young girl who lives upstairs. Both are outcast as "others", she for her leg-brace disability and he for his awkwardness and "othered" nationality. Both are weak in their countenance, her for her rigid silence and he for his timidity and passivity. As Trelkovsky gazes out of his window, he sees the building's tenants dressing the girl up as himself and forcing her to wear a "Trelkovsky mask". As this iconography demonstrates, physicality also plays a part in his identification with the girl. She is the character with whom he most identifies within the film and so consequently his imagination dresses her up as himself to the point that her face physically resembles his own. Evidently, the idea that the body is a physical locus for identity rings true as the girl with whom

Trelkovsky most identifies takes on his physical form, linking the Trelkovsky identity with the Trelkovsky body/image once more. This image of the girl-as-Trelkovsky acts as a doubling in the same way that the Trelkovsky/Choule duality does.

This kind of fragmentation through mirroring and doubling goes on to play a large part in the turmoil of identity anxiety within this film. Mirrors surround Trelkovsky; there are seven mirrors in his two-bedroom apartment alone. He is often seen looking in mirrors and one can link this narcissistic, self-gazing obsession with his identity anxiety as associated with specific parts of his body. Gazing into mirrors, Trelkovsky constantly tries to affirm his own identity by analysing the reflection of his appearance. This sense of failed affirmation through a disappointing response from the mirror is an essential tool in understanding the demise of Trelkovsky's identity. The problems caused by Trelkovsky's concern with his own identity are echoed by the monstrous effect of seeing himself across the courtyard and, subsequently, seeing another's appearance in his own mirror. As previously explored, when one's bodily appearance mutates beyond recognition, one's identity, in effect, does the same. Therefore, failing to recognise, or at the very least appreciate, what he sees in the mirror, is enormously damaging to Trelkovsky's identity. Anne Hollander has proposed that:

a man face to face with his reflection, seeking to find out how he looks is participating not in an empirical test but in an imaginative event [...] While it is being observed, the image reflected in a mirror is a visionary self-portrait which has been generated in the imagination beforehand, and which may be created and recreated at will. The materials of which it is composed are visual facts, but the total image is a fiction. (1971, p. 489)

This concept cements the idea that the image which the mirror represents is a construct of the gazer's imagination. Understanding this, Trelkovsky's identity crisis is further augmented as even his own imagination fails to affirm his identity and thus provides an unsatisfactory response. Clearly, the inability to affirm his identity in the "idealised" reflection demonstrates how tentatively Trelkovsky's identity teeters on the brink of destruction from the beginning. Despite the Choule parasitic narrative, Trelkovsky's identity is one which wavers and hangs in the balance. His own identity attempts to resist but ultimately falls into submission.

Discussing *The Tenant*, Kelly Oliver explores Lacan's theory of the mirror stage as a basis for her psychoanalytical framework. Oliver had observed similar conclusions when she posited that "the infant's own experience of fragmentation and incompetence and the mirror image of unity and agency produces the experience of alienation fundamental to self-consciousness" (1998, p. 43).

For Trelkovsky the mirror image certainly isn't one of unity, nor of agency. And so for Trelkovsky's psychological turmoil to be understood, it is crucial that one recognise that he is fundamentally lacking in this element of the development of the ego. In acknowledging the possibility of one's ability to adopt or refuse different and varied identities at any given time, Judith Butler, too, explores, within identity politics, a notion of a coalition politics, in which "identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them" (2006, p. 14). It is significant here that Trelkovsky's identity changes as his habits evolve and, as such, it is remarkable that his identity is somewhat constructed by his "concrete practices". These practices would in principle allow for a kind of identity politics which "will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand" (Butler, 2006, p. 14). However, the problem at hand for Trelkovsky is that there is patently no coalition in his identity. He moves from Trelkovsky into the Trelkovsky/Choule but then, in keeping with the more parasitic reading of identity evident within Polanski's work, the Trelkovsky identity is destroyed, both figuratively in the disabled neighbour's lynching and literally in his twice throwing himself from the window.

If one is to understand that one's identity is rooted in one's physicality, then this final destruction of the Trelkovsky body demonstrates the complete destruction of his identity as he knows it. Polanski's confirmation of the gradual dissolution and destruction of personal identity through the

alteration of the body, firstly through cross-dressing but then ultimately through physical harm, demonstrates the significance of the symbiosis between identity and the physical. What the film refuses to answer is to what extent Trelkovsky, bound and bandaged in the hospital bed, unmistakably anguished by the sight of his previous physical body and thus his previous identity, launches the anguished scream which ends the film.

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