
The Impact of Mass Media Representations of Body Image on Personal Identity in Lise Tremblay's *La Danse juive*

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Governor General's award laureate *La Danse juive* provides a very pertinent reflection on individual identity within the context of contemporary popular culture and mass media paradigms. Quebec author Lise Tremblay tells the story of an anonymous female narrator living in Montreal who contemplates her obesity vis-à-vis numerous image-conscious characters and media figures such as her father and her friend Alice. As the novel progresses, the narrator delves into an exploration of the origins of her obesity and tries to establish a connection between her body, her father, and the media-oriented consumer society in which she lives. The psychological tension and the narrator's internal rage build up progressively and almost imperceptibly, culminating at the end of the novel when the narrator kills her father with a Swiss Army knife and then devours cookies before calling for help. Jean Baudrillard's work, *The Consumer Society*, illuminates the portrayal of identity in *La Danse juive* through discussion of mass media and popular culture, body image and self, and the consequences arising from mass media representations of body image standards.

Media influence permeates every aspect of the lives of every character in this book. According to Tremblay, contemporary identity is defined by popular culture standards perpetuated by the media, and also by the degree to which one believes in and adheres to these standards. The narrator's parents, when they were first married, would consciously adapt their identity to media images, trying to act like characters in old Hollywood movies: "Ils jouaient aux couples américains qu'ils voyaient dans les films des années cinquante" (82) ["They were acting out the American couples they saw in '50s films" (82)].¹ The narrator's friend Alice intentionally chooses lovers who resemble those in illustrated novels: "Alice ... se vante d'avoir des amants beaux comme dans les romans-photos, amants qu'elle n'arrive pas à conserver plus d'un mois mais dont elle est en mesure de décrire le corps comme un médecin légiste après une autopsie" (92) ["Alice ... brags about

having lovers as handsome as the men in the illustrated novels, lovers she can't keep more than a month but whose bodies she could describe in as much detail as a pathologist after an autopsy" (92)]. These characters all strive to imitate popular culture models, evident here in the trying on of roles, as expressed in the use of "jouer à." Through this imitation, they attempt to ensure that they live up to social and class expectations. However, as Joanne Finkelstein says in *The Fashioned Self*, the media simultaneously imitates life and influences it (196), and their endeavors have more far-reaching repercussions than just social inclusion; the narrator's parents and Alice all demonstrate a predilection for mass media images over real life, and as they long to become someone else, these characters define their identity not in terms of reality, but rather, in terms of an imaginary world based on ludism, imitation, and fantasy.

In the case of the narrator's mother, conformism results in an identity that strictly follows pre-established models and that is ultimately homogeneous, thus leading to a loss of individual identity:

La vie de ma mère peut se résumer en trois phrases; phrases répétées tous les après-midi dans les émissions télévisées qu'elle regarde avec madame Dufresne.... L'image s'impose. Une femme, ma mère, se lève à l'arrière de la salle, la caméra fait un gros plan. La femme est trop maquillée, elle porte un chandail tissé de fils d'argent qui font des reflets désagréables à l'écran. Elle dit que son mari l'a quittée pour une femme plus jeune, l'émotion monte, elle retient un peu ses larmes. Son groupe d'entraide l'a soutenue. Applaudissements. C'est pour cela qu'elle est venue aujourd'hui: pour témoigner. (11-12)

[My mother's life can be summed up in a few sentences; you hear them every afternoon on the TV talk shows she watches with Madame Dufresne.... There is an image I can't forget. A woman, my mother, gets up at the back of the audience; the camera moves in. The woman is wearing too much makeup, and a sweater shot through with silver threads that scintillate unpleasantly on the screen. She says, her voice trembling, fighting back tears, that her husband left her for a younger woman. Her support group is what saved her. Applause. That's why she's here today: to share her story. (11-12)]

Individual identity in this excerpt is replaced by a standardized formula for identity depicted on television. The narrator's mother is interchangeable with any woman, with a stereotypical, virtual woman, as is evident in the movement from the use of "ma mère," whereby the possessive adjective designates a specific individual, to that of "la femme," the definite article in French referring both to "ma mère" and also to women in general. In this novel, popular culture leads to a generalization of identity, since, as Baudrillard remarks in *The Consumer Society*, mass media

has precisely the effect of neutralizing the character of the world and of lived experience, substituting these with a homogeneous media universe (123).

The fusion of the narrator's mother's world and that of television also indicates that the mother is no longer aware of any boundary between her life and life as described on television; for her, real life is simplified to the point that it is placed into a broad, repetitive mold applicable to anyone and to everyone. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard discusses a 1971 American TV vérité experiment, not unlike the so-called "reality" shows that became popular during the 1990s, whereby a television crew films and broadcasts footage of a family's "real" life. Through this example, Baudrillard delineates the process leading to the collapse of the distinction between reality and television. According to Baudrillard, the boundary between television and real life breaks down and television is ultimately diffused in the real; because of this "dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV ... we are all ... doomed not to invasion, to pressure, to violence and blackmail by the media and the models, but to their induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence" (*Simulacra* 30). Baudrillard's discussion highlights a confusion of the real and the medium (*Simulacra* 29), which is exactly what happens to the narrator's mother; only the world of television exists for her, and she watches television repeatedly and to such an extent (*every* afternoon) that it subordinates real life to become her very own reality. The mother's identity is thus localized in the realm of simulation, indicated in this passage by a repetition of vocabulary highlighting the loss of the real; "image," which is by definition a representation or a reproduction, a synonym of illusion, and "l'écran," which not only refers to a television screen, but which, in this context, draws on another meaning, that of a screen used as a means of separation, much like the television screen which separates the mother from reality.

Not only is the media a way for characters to imitate and conform to on-screen images, but also, characters who do not fit these models are considered anomalies. Tremblay's portrayal of the media reveals that contemporary identity is largely defined by physical appearances, since the media creates an artificial division that opposes fat and skinny. Because she is obese, the narrator is excluded from the anorexic, Barbie-doll body ideal perpetuated by the mass media, an exclusion which Shelley Bovey examines in her study *The Forbidden Body: Why Being Fat Is Not a Sin*: "The fat woman watching television will notice ... that she is absent from this portrayal of life" (196), or that if she is present, she is often relegated to stereotypical or derogatory roles (197). Mary F. Rogers takes this notion a step further in her work *Barbie Culture*, indicating that unrealistic images of women in the media, and pop culture icons like Barbie, go so far as to "deprecate overweight,

never mind obese, people” (18). When the narrator tells of reading illustrated novels as a teenager, she describes her reaction to these fictional love stories as such: “Je n’arrivais pas à m’identifier à ces histoires. Déjà ma graisse m’avait mise à l’écart. Les beaux acteurs italiens ne s’intéressaient pas aux grosses filles enfermées dans les sous-sols” (92) [“I didn’t identify with those stories. Already, my blubber’d made me into an outsider. Gorgeous Italian actors weren’t interested in fat girls shut up in basements” (92)]. The narrator’s comments indicate that characters who do not fit the model of the perfect body prescribed by the mass media are marginalized vis-à-vis popular culture’s standards of beauty, since popular culture holds no place for, and rejects, those who do not fit its narrow matrices. This marginalization is further exacerbated as the narrator is unable to find decent clothes in Montréal. She is literally prohibited from buying and wearing attractive clothing and is thus symbolically prohibited from looking good and feeling good about herself: “À Montréal, je n’arrive pas à me trouver de vêtements décents. Il n’y a que quelques boutiques spécialisées où l’on vend à prix fort des vêtements de mauvaise qualité souvent dans des tissus brillants et dans des modèles ridicules. Les grosses sont des clowns” (38) [“In Montréal, I can’t find decent clothing any more. There are only a few specialized stores where they sell ridiculous garish poor quality clothing at impossible prices. Fat women are clowns” (36)]. According to Baudrillard, in the fashion world, and especially when it comes to fashion models, “Irregularity or ugliness ... are excluded” (*Consumer* 134). In this sense, contemporary society treats the obese as outsiders and views them as a source of shame; they are meant to be hidden away, kept out of sight in a culture where skinny denotes beauty and glamor, and fat is a stigma charged with not only the ponderous, physical burden of weight, but also with the psychological implications of indecency and derision.

In *What Have You Got to Lose?* Shelley Bovey writes: “The question of identity has much to do with validation from the society in which we live. We soon learn what is good and what is bad, which is why a strong, anarchic tendency is such a must for a fat person” (63). However, the narrator of *La Danse juive* is not portrayed as a heroic and anarchic figure who rallies against the system and fights to gain social acceptance; she says: “Je ne sais pas me révolter, la révolte est emprisonnée avec le reste, dans ma graisse” (141) [“I didn’t rebel. I don’t know how; my rebellious side is imprisoned in my fat along with everything else” (140)]. Her sense of alienation has a double origin, coming on the one hand from a society that doesn’t tell obese women that they too can look good and feel good about their bodies, and, on the other hand, from the narrator who considers herself as being ugly because she is fat. The narrator deliberately chooses to believe in the

mass media's message on body image, a message which underscores "the disgusting nature of overweight" (Rogers 119) and which emphatically tells her that she does not have the right to engage in the same aesthetic activities as skinny people: "Je finis mon café en silence pendant que ma mère se refait les lèvres. C'est un geste que je n'ai jamais fait, je ne porte pas de rouge à lèvres. Je pense qu'il faut être une petite femme frêle pour faire ce geste sans paraître grotesque. Je l'ai toujours pensé. Les baleines ne se font pas les lèvres, on ne leur apprend pas" (72-73) ["I finish my coffee in silence while my mother redoes her lips. It's a gesture I have never made, putting on lipstick. I think you have to be a fragile little woman not to look weird doing it. I've always thought that. Whales don't do their lips; nobody shows them how" (73-74)].

The mass media images and popular culture standards against which the narrator measures herself are norms which clearly pit winners against losers. She sees herself as a "truie" in comparison to the "belles petites poulettes," on television (57) [as she says about her father: "the director of cheesy TV serials, surrounded by pretty little chicks, has produced this sow" (58)]. And, next to Alice, who is "squelletique et triomphante," she feels like a "baleine échouée" (106) [as she reflects on her childhood friendship with Alice and notes: "She used to be the winner, the winning skeleton. It'd been easy for her to take advantage of a whale beached in a basement" (106)].² Rogers underscores this perceived social and moral "failure" of obese people, remarking that "girls and women learn that fat people are slovenly creatures unable to control their appetites by deferring their gratification. Fat people fail modern tests of character" (119), and Bovey also highlights the moral implications of society's negative view of obesity: "fatness is not really a political or an aesthetic issue. It is seen as a moral issue. At a time when all other excesses ... are increasingly socially acceptable, excess flesh is not" (*What Have You Got* 28). The text is ambiguous as to why one would do something so masochistic like seeing oneself as abnormal and wanting to be excluded by society. Yet, it does nonetheless point to a fundamental problem regarding contemporary identity and demonstrates, in quite a disturbing fashion, to what lengths one is willing to go in order to ensure that one's identity is based on and fits into popular culture standards, even though this means that the narrator is ironically marginalized by these very same paradigms.

The narrator is trapped in the *entre-deux*, in the liminal space between the real and simulation, between the reality of her body and popular culture's artificial norms. This is especially prevalent in the disjunction between the narrator's memories of her adolescent body and the appearances that her parents, especially her father, tried to maintain:

J'ai l'impression que mon corps encombre. Je sais d'où vient cette impression, même si j'arrive presque toujours à éviter le souvenir. Dans le sous-sol de la grosse maison de banlieue, il y a plein de monde que je n'ai jamais vu. Ma mère se tient silencieuse dans un coin parce que mon père lui a dit que son accent était ridicule; il le lui a dit la veille, en même temps qu'il lui a annoncé cette réception.... En même temps, il m'a regardée. Il n'a rien dit. J'étais trop grosse, plus difficile à cacher que l'accent traînant de ma mère. (59)

[It feels like my body takes up too much space. I know where that feeling comes from, even if I usually manage to avoid thinking about it. I am in the basement of the big suburban house, full of people I've never seen before. My mother is sitting not talking in a corner, because my father told her her accent is laughable; he told her that the night before, in the same breath as he announced we were having this party.... As he spoke, he cast a glance in my direction. He said nothing. Too much fat, more difficult to conceal than my mother's diphthongs. (60)]

And further in the novel she says:

C'est encore le souvenir de la réception au sous-sol qui revient. Il y a le regard de mon père posé sur moi, mon père qui ne peut pas me cacher. Je revois la pièce remplie d'inconnus et une grosse adolescente qui fait le tour des petits groupes et parle à des gens embarrassés de découvrir que mon père a une fille comme cela; ils n'en reviennent pas.... Je revois cette adolescente, j'ai honte de son impudeur. On l'avait poussée là.... C'est toute l'adolescence dans le sous-sol qui me revient. J'en ai la nausée. (97)

[Again the memory of that party in the recreation room surfaces in my mind. My father's eyes are fixed on me, my father, who can't hide me. I picture the room full of strangers and an obese adolescent who goes from group to group making conversation with people who are embarrassed to find out my father has a daughter like that; they can't believe it. The fat adolescent talks, behaves coarsely.... I picture this adolescent, and I am ashamed of her lack of modesty.... My whole adolescence in the basement is rushing into my mind. It makes me feel sick. (97)]

This memory is pivotal in the development of the narrator's awareness of her obesity; as she becomes more and more conscious of her body throughout the novel, she begins to perceive a connection between herself and her father. Her memories of the reception in the basement of her parents' house demonstrate that, although her father insists on creating an image of the perfect family for his media colleagues, his daughter's physicality is impossible to hide. The narrator blatantly shocks these colleagues with her obese body, a body that is contrary to both the father's ideals and to the ideals of the television world. Moreover, given that contemporary society "emphasize[s] the *visual*, pointing toward a world of

gazes and mirrors and spectacles where the eye is the central sense and the body its major focus” (Rogers 113), it is the gaze of the Other, that of the father and his colleagues, which contributes to the feelings of shame and embarrassment that the narrator harbors towards her body. The gaze of the Other further reinforces this distinction between socially acceptable and unacceptable during the narrator’s reluctant meeting in a coffee shop with Alice: “Elle m’embrasse sur les deux joues, me regarde avidement, évalue les dégâts. Ses yeux s’attardent à la hauteur de mon front, là où mes cheveux sont le plus clairsemés. J’attends qu’elle en finisse” (99) [“She kisses me on both cheeks, looking me over from head to toe, taking stock of the disaster. Her gaze pauses at the top of my forehead, where my hair is the sparsest. I wait ‘til she’s finished” (99)]. Ever conscious of the judgmental gaze of her friend, the narrator emphasizes Alice’s eyes and her deliberate action of staring. Moreover, the narrator perceives this gaze as not simply an evaluation of her body, but specifically as an appraisal of the *degradation* of her body. As Alice scrutinizes the narrator, she further accentuates the narrator’s own marginalization, affirming contemporary society’s view that obesity equates with abnormality and imperfection.

The narrator’s own belief in her marginalization and her perception of the gaze of the Other also perpetuate her status of outsider: “J’ai souvent envie de ... forcer [ma mère] à me regarder, à regarder mon corps, ce qu’il est devenu.... ma mère pense-t-elle à mon corps, au difforme, au sale?” (52). [“I often feel like forcing [my mother] to really look at me, to look at my body, at what it has become.... does my mother think about my body, about its deformity, its filth?” (52)]. The narrator believes she is deformed and dirty, but, more importantly, she *chooses* to believe she is abnormal, and *wants* to be seen by others as such. Through her need to be viewed in this way, she is expressing a desire to challenge others by embodying certain aspects of their own selves that they would prefer to either suppress or ignore. Just as she longs to confront the world of simulation in which her mother lives with that of the real, she reflects back to Alice that which Alice does not want to become, and represents for her father the rural and obese origins which he arduously strives to leave buried in the past. As Bovey notes, when slender people look at fat people, especially fat people eating, “What they think they see is someone out of control, someone who is not ashamed of excess, and this frightens them as body weight is the only thing people feel is left to them to control in this fragmented society” (*What Have You Got* 8).

The body in *La Danse juive* is furthermore portrayed as a modifiable consumer product and the media stresses the ability to determine external appearances: “in contemporary society,” as Finkelstein writes, “it is the technology of appearance

that is paramount, and being able to shape appearance in order to meet one's desires is what matters" (183). Characters continually alter their bodies in order to achieve a desired form, that form being the skinny, svelte physique which popular culture associates with beauty. For Alice, manipulating her appearance and body at will is fundamentally imperative; the narrator describes Alice's physique as a "corps dur ..., façonné par ses deux heures d'exercice quotidien, un muffin dans son sac à main, muffin qu'elle cuisine elle-même pour en contrôler le contenu en gras" (91). ["Alice's tight body, hardened by her two hours of working out daily, a bran muffin in her bag, a muffin she's baked herself to control the fat content" (91)]. This practice of body-fashioning is an aggressive drive against the body (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 142), and, moreover, given the plethora of fitness clubs, diet programs and aesthetic services available today, "the body increasingly serves as the site of individuals' greatest control" (Rogers 112). Alice exerts a conscious and deliberate effort to contain, control and dominate her body through exercise and diet, ultimately rendering her body hard and sterile, and ironically robbing her female body of its femininity (Rogers 119).³ As a result, her body becomes a passive entity, evident in the use of the passive form "façonné," and is reduced to the status of an object, simply another material possession to be treated as she pleases.

As Baudrillard notes, body fashioning is based on "a wholly fetishistic and spectacular logic, to form it into a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world," and he contends that in creating the perfect body one is ultimately aiming to "extract from it the visible signs of happiness, health, beauty" (*Consumer* 131). Alice's mother, for whom "Un tout petit *liffing* ... a tout changé" (101) ["a little *liffing* that has miraculously transformed her" (101)], has radically transformed her physical self to such an extent that she is not even recognizable as the person she used to be: "Je saisis la coupure de journal ... rien à voir avec la femme austère de mon souvenir" (101) ["I grab the clipping ... she is completely changed from the stern looking housewife I remember" (101)]. Moreover, because she has changed her appearance, and has "visiblement rajeuni" and is "de plus en plus belle" (101) ["visibly younger looking," "more and more beautiful" (101)], she has landed a job doing television commercials and is therefore considered to be more successful and more content. In changing her body, she is perceived as consequently altering not just her image, but her entire life. The narrator's father provides further evidence of this modification of the body and appearances, having lost a significant amount of weight as a means of distancing himself both physically and economically from his obese, rural family (104). In his attempt to differentiate himself from his family, he manipulates his body as a signifier of social

status (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 131), and constructs an identity that is considered urban, bourgeois, *nouveau riche*, and somewhat American, an identity which appropriately reflects his level of success: “Sur l’une des premières pages, mon père pose fièrement avec sa nouvelle flamme. Derrière eux, une maison blanche avec une véranda. Le kitsch américain dans toute sa splendeur” (13) [“On one of the covers, my father is posing proudly with his new heartthrob. Behind them, a white house with a verandah. The epitome of American style kitsch” (13)]; and, “Paul dit que c’est mon délire: les émissions de mon père ne sont pas pire que les autres. Je dis qu’elles sont plus américaines, plus nouveau riche. Paul finit toujours par dire que [mon père] réussit. C’est le mot ultime. Mon père réussit: il n’y a rien à redire” (18). [“Paul says it’s me who’s talking nonsense: the programs my father makes aren’t any worse than any others. I say they’re more Americanized, more nouveau riche. Paul always ends up insisting my father is a success. He has the last word. My father is a success: what more can you say?” (18)]. These examples both demonstrate what Erving Goffman calls “impression management,” a conscious or unconscious attempt to control, through costume and body language, how one is seen by other people (Rogers 16).

Although contemporary society sends a message that body fashioning and impression management can lead to a better life and an enhanced degree of success or happiness (Finkelstein 185), the characters in Tremblay’s novel end up creating not true happiness itself, but simply the *image* of happiness. Since he is a television celebrity, the narrator’s father constantly changes his appearance to please his spectators: “j’ai eu le temps d’apercevoir le visage de mon père sur la publicité du téléhoraire, affichée à la porte du dépanneur.... Il misait sur l’image du père maintenant” (34-35) [“I was gone fifteen minutes, time enough to catch a glimpse of my father’s face on the TV guide ad stuck to the corner store’s door.... He was projecting a fatherly image these days” (33)]; “C’est l’heure des *talk shows*. [Mon père] raconte pourquoi il a décidé d’écrire et de produire cette histoire. Il explique la vie, habillé en prêtre” (52-53) [“It’s time for the talk shows. [My father] is talking about why he decided to write and direct this drama.... My father is telling us what life is all about, dressed like a priest” (52-53)]. These examples emphasize social roles, and these roles are tied to appearances and understood as malleable. They can be donned or removed, not unlike an article of clothing, in order to project a very specific image. As Finkelstein notes, “images are selected by the individual in much the same way that items of apparel or purchasable objects are selected, and then these images are employed as statements of one’s character” (184-185). Appearances are also used to disguise one’s true identity. In the second example, “habillé” not only has the meaning of putting on a particular

style of clothing, but it also means to put on a costume or a disguise. In popular culture, therefore, identity is not only equated with the body, but this identity is modifiable just as the physical body and appearances are modifiable, as is the case with Alice, who dresses to look younger in the hopes of becoming successful (99), and with the dancers at the school where the narrator works, who literally starve themselves to be skinny, successful, and superior (41).

When the body is used for advertising purposes, it “constitutes itself as an object that is the equivalent to the other sexless and functional objects purveyed in advertising” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 134). Since the narrator’s father and Alice’s mother both work in television, the narrator sees her father’s face on an advertisement (34), and Alice’s mother appears in local television ads (101). The contemporary body is thus not only shaped by consumer markets (Rogers 112), but it *participates* in, and is a driving force behind, the consumer market. Transformed into a commercial object, removed from the everyday world and re-positioned in the sphere of consumption and the superficial *par excellence*, the body is not simply reified in this novel; it becomes an object of consumption, and is displayed and promoted for the public, reduced to being just another consumer product to be bought and sold amidst thousands of other products. The body becomes thus the ultimate commodity, shaped and controlled not only to sell other products but to sell itself and to sell its own image, much like the narrator’s father, who sells his fatherly image in advertisements.

The association of identity and the body is not just a tendency of skinny characters, or of those directly involved in the world of television. The narrator is as much preoccupied with physical appearances as are the other characters in this novel, designating others only by the shape of their body and their appearance; she describes a woman in the Chinese restaurant as “une grosse femme aux cheveux sales et au visage huileux” (46) [“a fat woman with greasy hair and oily skin” (45)], and she leaves her mother’s house on her way to “une classe avec la chanteuse maigre à dix heures” (85) [“a class with the skinny singer at ten o’clock” (85)]. Moreover, she identifies herself in relation to her body, especially when she sees herself in the mirror, a symbol that, according to Chevalier and Gheerbrant’s *Dictionnaire des symboles*, reveals one’s identity (636). The mirror thus exposes an identity that is completely invested in the narrator’s obese body: “La femme dans le miroir m’a fait peur. Une vision de moi dans dix ans, transpirant au moindre mouvement et le cheveu mou et rare comme en ont les femmes obèses” (64) [“The woman in the mirror frightened me. She was a vision of me, ten years from now, the smallest gesture causing her to sweat, her hair limp and sparse like fat women have” (65)]; “dans le miroir de la salle de bain, la même vision qu’au café des

Arabes: une femme obèse fatiguée aux cheveux mous” (79) [“in the bathroom mirror, the same face I saw at the Café des Arabes: an obese tired-looking woman with limp hair” (79)]. She also says: “Je suis affamée. Je dis à Paul que je suis une vraie obèse. Je n’ai qu’un café dans le corps depuis le matin” (21) [“I am starving. I tell Paul I am typical of fat women. I have put nothing in my mouth but a coffee since this morning” (21)]. These three examples show that the narrator considers her identity to be her fat body, and this association of identity and the body is further demonstrated by the fact that the narrator’s personal evolution is limited solely to her body: “Dès l’adolescence, je suis devenue grosse comme ma grand-mère et ma tante; une obèse rose avec un beau visage” (45) [“As soon as I hit adolescence, I began growing fat like my grandmother and my aunt; a pink little fattie with a lovely face” (44)], and she also contemplates what her body has become (52). For the narrator, there is no spiritual or psychological becoming; it is only her physical body that evolves and exists. The rest of her life is characterized by personal, professional and psychological stagnation. She has a dead-end job that she doesn’t enjoy, a boyfriend whom she doesn’t love, a relationship with her mother that is limited to instant coffee and magazines. Furthermore, she has essentially remained an adolescent in her mind. Once relegated to the basement of the family house as a teenager, she has remained emotionally stuck in that basement, represented physically by her obesity, throughout her adult life: “Je suis une grosse adolescente qui a remplacé le sous-sol de banlieue par sa graisse” (124) [“I am a fat adolescent who has replaced the suburban basement with layers of blubber” (124)].

Since the characters and the narrator in this novel notice only the physical level of being and becoming, their identity is no longer multi-faceted, composed of a union between inner self and body. Rather, their identity is based precisely on a dissociation of the inner self and the body. Beneath the appearance of the perfect suburban woman, an appearance modeled after television shows and interior design magazines, lies the narrator’s mother’s true identity, one that does not fit the image she projects: “tout cela ne dit rien, rien de la grimace de ma mère pour remettre ses dents, rien non plus des deux verres de Southern Comfort qu’elle boit tous les soirs avant de dormir. Rien du fait qu’elle n’achète jamais sa bouteille dans la banlieue où elle habite” (12) [“Except all it tells us is nothing, nothing about the face she makes when she puts in her teeth, nothing about the two glasses of Southern Comfort she drinks every night before going to bed. Nothing about how she never buys her bottle in the mall near her house” (12)]. The narrator’s mother, despite her impeccable, bourgeois appearance, has managed only to repress her inner self, but not erase it. Her identity, therefore, is made up of a divergence

between the physical self that she presents to the world, and the internal self that must be hidden so as not to blemish her external perfection.

The narrator also dissociates her body from her inner self, making a deliberate effort to distance herself from her mind, her thoughts and her emotions. As she says goodbye to her infant niece at a farewell dinner for her brother and his family, she becomes emotional: “Je suis émue et je trouve cela un peu ridicule” (47) [“I am moved which makes me feel a little ridiculous” (47)]. When she learns of Mel’s hospitalization, she has no reaction (54), beyond the resonance with her own obesity and the fear that he will die in her apartment and dirty her couch in the process: “Cette histoire d’infarctus m’effraie. J’ai peur qu’il finisse par mourir sur le divan de mon salon, du *ginger ale* répandu sur lui et des miettes de biscuits partout dans les draps” (60) [“The whole business of thrombosis terrifies me. I’m afraid Mel will end up dying on my living room sofa, with ginger ale spilled all over him and the sheets full of cracker crumbs” (61)]. Not only does she shun emotions and consider showing emotion ridiculous, but in the extreme case she shuts down and has no emotions whatsoever. It is even more alarming that the narrator constantly repeats the phrase “je ne sais pas” [“I don’t know”]: “Je ne sais pas pourquoi, mais j’ai décidé que je ne reverrais plus Mel cet après-midi-là” (62) [“I don’t know why, but I decided I wouldn’t see Mel again after that afternoon” (63)]; “Je ne sais pas pourquoi, j’ai tout raconté à cet homme” (62) [“I don’t know why I did it, but I told this man everything” (63)]. The narrator’s behaviors are dissociated from the thought processes that would normally control her actions. There is no real deliberation preceding her actions, but simply the deed and the acknowledgment after the fact that she has no idea why she does certain things. This disjunction shows that the inner self is incomprehensible for the narrator; she has effectively lost touch with her internal self since the only thing she seems to understand and identify with is her body and her insatiable desire to feed this body.⁴

The replacement of genuine, altruistic values in this novel with “Hollywood” values (110), with “American kitsch” (13), and with what Baudrillard refers to as an “aesthetics of simulation” (*Consumer* 111), entails dire consequences, both social and individual. The social consequences of mass media and popular culture portrayals of body image include a breakdown of traditional relationships between family and friends. The narrator says of her relationship with her mother: “Mon lien avec cette femme est éternel et impossible. Il en a toujours été ainsi. Nous sommes condamnées à ces vingt minutes par mois et à ces cafés instantanés” (110-111) [“My bond with this woman is eternal and untenable. It’s always been like that. We are condemned to these twenty minutes a month and instant coffee” (111)]. Family relationships have become dehydrated consumer convenience products,

much like the instant coffee the narrator drinks with her mother. They are seen not as a source of joy or support, but are interminable, intolerable, and time spent together is a punishment, not a pleasure. Furthermore, the narrator maintains no close friendships, with the exception of her friend Paul, who acts as her confidant and her sole support system. However, Paul is absent throughout most of the novel, away on a European concert tour; when he announces his departure, the narrator feels abandoned, alone, and afraid: “Je suis effrayée de devoir finir l’hiver seule à Montréal” (43) [“I am alarmed at the thought of spending the rest of the Montréal winter alone” (42)]. He returns only at the end of the book, and upon his return, the narrator remarks that they are growing apart (141). Without Paul, the narrator is engulfed in an isolating and hermetic solitude. She describes her relationship with Yvonne, her neighbor, as such: “Nous nous parlons seulement sur le palier. Elle n’entre jamais chez moi et je n’ai jamais mis les pieds chez elle. C’est comme un code.... Je sais peu de choses d’elle” (26) [“We only ever speak to each other on the landing. She never comes into my apartment and I never set foot in hers. It’s a code.... I hardly know anything about her” (25)]. Her relationship with Alice is much the same: “Alice et moi nous n’avons plus grand-chose à nous dire, nos rencontres sont de plus en plus espacées et de plus en plus silencieuses” (103) [“Alice and I no longer have anything much to say to each other; we meet less and less, and the silences get longer and longer” (103)]. These relationships are characterized by neither affection nor tenderness, but by a communication that is either reduced to the bare minimum, or that is quite simply non-existent. The restricted communication between characters is underscored on the narrative level of this novel by a lack of direct discourse; as Daniel Chartier notes: “la forme romanesque se campe dans des dialogues rapportés et intérieurs qui excluent toute prise de parole. En fait, la voix de la narratrice ... qui ressent douloureusement les silences et les non-dits de ses proches, semble elle-même issue de la pression du silence et elle se confond souvent en dialogues intérieurs” (413).⁵ In Tremblay’s representation of contemporary consumer society, relationships are thus no longer anchored in traditional values such as open, honest communication, mutual love and respect (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 123). Rather, these relationships are maintained at a superficial level only and are defined by a perversion of traditional values and even by the very absence of these values.

Individual consequences are just as serious as these social consequences. Whether one is successful in the quest for the perfect life as mediated by the perfect body image, as is the narrator’s father and Alice’s mother, or unsuccessful, like Alice, whether one conforms to popular culture standards, or whether one is marginalized, these consequences are directly related to the complete investing of

identity in the body and in external appearances. As Baudrillard very pertinently signals, “in the self-centered image or the code-centered message, the signifier becomes its own signified, a circular confusion between the two arises to the signifier’s advantage, and we see the abolition of the signified and the *tautology of the signifier*” (*Consumer* 124). The fusion of images and identity has the effect of subverting the true, inner self, and the narrator underscores both her father’s, and Alice’s, loss of self when she says: “Mon père s’est perdu dans cette quête. Il est épuisé de perfection comme Alice le deviendra sans doute” (117) [“My father has lost himself in this quest. Perfection has worn him down and it will no doubt wear down Alice” (117)], and she describes herself by saying: “Je me sens épuisée. Mon corps me fatigue” (124) [“I feel exhausted. My body is wearing me out” (124)]. The choice of the word “épuisé” in both these examples is significant, since it not only means to tire, or to wear down, but more importantly, it means to empty or to deplete. This total loss of interiority leads thus to an internal void.

Baudrillard notes that because of the complete investment of identity in the physical self the body “substitutes for the transcendence of the soul the total immanence, the spontaneous self-evidence of the body” (*Consumer* 136). The characters in this novel, like the narrator’s mother, are no longer capable of evolving and they eventually fall into a state of total, and inescapable, stagnation: “Je pense souvent que ma mère ne comprend pas sa vie. Quelque chose lui a échappé, il y a longtemps. Elle s’est endormie dans les musiques sirupeuses des centres commerciaux qu’elle a trop fréquentés. Ma mère est enfermée dans sa banlieue et dans sa fausse politesse. Blindée, indestructible, le vocabulaire farci de propos insignifiants dans ses magazines féminins” (51) [“I often think my mother is out of touch with the world she lives in. Something slipped out of focus, ages ago. She’s been lulled asleep by the saccharine music of the shopping centers where she spends too much time in. My mother is trapped in her suburb, in strained politeness. She is armoured, unreachable, her vocabulary bloated with meaningless phrases from women’s magazines” (51-52)]. Popular culture and consumerism have contributed to the mother’s stagnation, both expressed by “endormie,” and “enfermée.” As a direct result of consumer society, the mother is completely removed from reality and from herself; she is hardened and protected, imprisoned by and in her false images. Alice also falls into a state of stagnation: “Alice qui souhaitait désespérément voir son image à l’écran de télévision, qui travaillait son corps depuis des années et qui n’avait réussi qu’à parler de garanties sur les voitures et des consommateurs abusés” (102) [“Alice who desperately wanted to see her own face on the TV screen, who’s been working on her body for years and who could do no better than commentaries on car warranties or consumer abuses” (102)].

In her attempts to contort her body to fit an ideal dictated by mass media, Alice has become herself a victim of consumerism, exploited as much by the television industry as the consumers she defends on her show. Unsuccessful, yet relentless in her quest, she is relegated to the back burners of the television industry, with no possibility of evolution; despite all her body fashioning she has only managed to land a dead-end job, and, moreover, a dead-end job directly related to unfavorable and pejorative aspects of consumerism.

The narrator is the only character who attempts to overcome this sense of stagnation,⁶ and to do so she tries to understand the origins of her obesity and her marginalization by visiting her father's family: "Le chaînon manquant, ces mots me viennent, mais je ne sais pas pourquoi. Je revois la petite maison entourée de sapins de la famille de mon père, mes oncles qui parlaient d'une voix forte et toujours du même sujet, ma mère qui se tenait debout près de l'évier et qui attendait" (82) ["The missing link, I don't know why those words pop into my mind. I get a picture of the little house in the firs belonging to my father's family, of my uncles speaking in loud voices, always saying the same things, of my mother standing by our bungalow kitchen sink, waiting" (82)]. This voyage to the north of Quebec places her outside the urban space of Montreal, city which represents consumer society and mass media influences in this novel: "L'autoroute file jusqu'à une route sinueuse bordée de sapins. Il reste de la neige dans les fossés et sur les montagnes. Je regarde dehors, je ne reconnais rien" (130) ["The autoroute becomes a windy road lined with firs. There is still snow in the ditches and on the mountains. I look out, see nothing familiar" (130)]. Once she arrives at her grandparents' house, she realizes that she is now in a world regulated by a social code which is completely foreign to her: "Je suis dans un monde dont je ne connais pas les codes, j'ai du mal à suivre les propos de ma grand-mère. Je ne sais pas ce que je suis venue chercher ici" (136) ["I don't know the codes in this world. I am having trouble grasping what my grandmother is saying. I don't know what I expected to find by coming here" (136)]. Despite the feeling of *étrangeté* that she experiences at her grandparents' house, the narrator finds here a space where she fits in on a bodily level. Within this community, the narrator is finally able to feel at ease, especially given that this rural, familial space is completely devoid of the artifices of consumer society: "Je n'ai aucune trace des douleurs que je ressens parfois avec Alice ou ma mère. Pendant tout le temps qu'elle [sa grand-mère] m'a regardée, je n'ai pas eu envie de me dissimuler. Il me semble qu'il y a des siècles que je n'ai pas pensé à ma graisse" (138-139) ["There's none of the aching in my limbs I get with Alice or my mother. Nor, when she looked at me, did I get the urge to run and hide. Centuries seem to have gone by since I thought about my fat" (138-

139)]. Even if the narrator does not entirely understand the motivation behind this visit, she nonetheless reconnects with the origins of her identity: “[ma grand-mère] me dit: maintenant que les hommes sont partis, tu vas me dire pourquoi tu es venue. Je dis: pour voir. Elle se lève. La conversation ne va pas plus loin. Je sais qu’elle a compris” (138) [My grandmother “says: now that the men have gone, you are going to tell me why you came. I say: to see. She gets up. The conversation ends there. I can tell she’s understood” (138)]. She thus comes to understand her obesity and also the association between her body and her father’s obsession with appearances: “je sais que l’histoire de ma graisse a commencé là [dans la petite ville du Nord], comme l’histoire de l’angoisse de mon père” (116) [“I know the story of my fatness starts there, just like my father’s anguish” (116)].

Even though the narrator’s newfound feeling of ease and belonging that she finds in the northern village is but temporary, the visit does strongly influence her. Paul notes upon his return that his friend has changed (140), and to such a degree that she is finally able to challenge her father through her brutal act of patricide. In her article “The Other Family Romance: Daughters and Fathers in Québec Women’s Fiction of the Nineties,” Lori Saint-Martin notes that through the murder, the narrator “punishes [her father] for his pretensions and for his contempt for her, but she destroys herself in the attempt” (182). However, this gesture, the narrator’s single, and final, revolt is not only aimed at her father but is also directed toward consumer society, as the moments leading up to the stabbing are fraught with references to both her father’s quest for perfection, and to the mass media. Having learned of her visit up north, the father barges into her apartment with the intention of confronting her. At the same time, he is talking on his cell phone, realizing that the perfect world he has constructed is falling apart, and that the media, which he had so often used to create and transmit that image is now the instrument of his demise: “Il dit que tout lui tombe dessus, sa douce moitié a accordé une entrevue à un con de petit journaliste et elle lui a parlé de sa relation de couple. Elle a même dit qu’ils consultaient un thérapeute. Il est au téléphone depuis le matin pour empêcher que cela soit publié” (141-142) [“He says everything happens to him; his better half, in an interview with a little twit of a journalist divulged things about their relationship. She even said they were seeing a couple’s therapist. He has been on the telephone since early this morning trying to keep it from being published” (140)]. He also throws a folder of casting headshots on the table, some of which fall to the floor, the metaphorically beheaded images foreshadowing the action of stabbing her father in the neck (142). Furthermore, the father’s last moments will be exposed in the tabloids: “Mon père ferait la une des journaux à scandals” (143) [“My father will be on the

first page of the scandal sheets” (142)]. Despite that the narrator’s story ends on a bittersweet note as her only recourse to liberate herself from the hold of her father’s machinations is through his murder, she does find a certain satisfaction and a sort of cathartic release, knowing that the media will record her father’s downfall for posterity. The narrator is left with a feeling of peace and contentment, ready for a new beginning, free from her father and from the hold of the media. This symbolic rebirth is evoked by the reference to dawn in the last lines of her story when she thinks of the Jewish distributor of scandal sheets whom she had seen earlier in the novel (48-49): “J’ai pensé au Juif qui chargeait des camions, à la lumière de l’aube. Je me suis souvenue de sa paix” (143) [“I thought of the old Jewish guy loading his trucks in the light of dawn. I thought of the peaceful look on his face” (142)].

Through her portrayal of a morbidly obese narrator Lise Tremblay sheds light on the inner workings of a deeply troubled and complex character who negotiates her identity within a society that marginalizes fat people. Tremblay’s well-crafted and sensitive narrative of the main character’s suffering and alienation lends a human face to the difficulties of living with obesity. Moreover, the narrator’s physical and emotional struggles are rendered all the more acute through the juxtaposition of her overweight body with mass-media produced, homogeneous images of beauty and success, images that have become the standard for personal identity in consumer society. Herein lies the absurdity of the contemporary quest for self gone wrong. The narrator remarks at her mother’s house that she is “déplacée dans cette salle de bain” (80) [“displaced in this bathroom” (80)] and that her mother is also “déplacée” (51) [“displaced” (51)]. The narrator’s story attests to the contemporary displacement of the search for self, since this search is directed towards the body and appearances, and not towards the inner self. The self thus becomes an elusive entity, and as Finkelstein notes, “our efforts to cultivate the self and acquire self-knowledge are activities which have had the unexpected effect of distancing us from the articulated object of our desires, namely, a developed sense of self. It is as if the more we have pursued a sense of identity, in the twentieth century, the weaker that identity has become” (188). Since the complete investment of identity in the body emphasizes solely the external, it leaves an internal void in place of the inner self. This constitutes the most dire aspect of the search for self in Tremblay’s work: since artificial and superficial values replace traditional, genuine values, the self is ironically lost amidst a plethora of images that have arbitrarily come to be associated with identity. As a victim of both the media’s representation of body image standards and of her father’s pursuit of the perfect image, the narrator is caught up in her own self-destructive identity crisis, as her body hides her longing for approbation. Just as her father’s riches and extravagant lifestyle are

a manifestation of his need to be valued and accepted by his family, beneath the narrator's fat lies hidden an impossible and draining quest for love (117), a quest which, in consumer society, is tragically always already lost. ✱

Notes

¹ Original French quotations are used in this article. Quotations from the English translation, *Mile End*, are included in brackets.

² The double entendre in the use of "échouée" is certainly not gratuitous in this example.

³ Body fashioning points to an inherent and ironic contradiction in contemporary society's expectations of what constitutes the ideal feminine form. As Rogers notes, "women striving for lean, mean bodies often find that their breasts shrink as their body fat diminishes.... Nevertheless, the feminine body par excellence requires a flat stomach, boyish hips, and slim, firm thighs, together with sizable breasts" (119).

⁴ Bovey underscores the disjunction between inner self and body as she tells the story of a woman named Hilary who gained a significant amount of weight after giving birth to four children in ten years. As a result of her obesity, Hilary is left with a distorted sense of identity: "She doesn't know who she is because she grew up and lived part of her adult life as 'normal' Hilary. Unless she can reconcile 'normal' and 'fat' Hilary -- or lose weight -- she will continue to live with what she clearly sees as a split personality and this can only be destructive" (*What Have You Got* 52).

⁵ For example, the narrator reports a conversation with Mel: "Mel me montre la chambre [d'hôpital], le téléviseur que le comité des bénévoles fait installer aux malades qui n'en ont pas les moyens. Mel dit: pour les Juifs pauvres. il dit: ça existe. Il guette ma réaction. Je dis qu'il est en forme" (56) ["Mel shows me the [hospital] room, shows me the TV that the volunteer committee provides for people of limited means. Mel says: for poor Jews. He says: they exist, you know. He looks to see if I will react. I say he looks good" (57)]. Later in the novel when she visits her grandparents she recounts a conversation with her aunt: "Ma tante me demande s'il y a encore de la neige, je dis que non. Elle dit: derrière la maison le banc de neige n'est pas entièrement fondu. Puis, le silence retombe" (134) ["My aunt asks me if we still have snow, and I answer no. She says: behind the house the snowbank is not completely melted. There is silence again" (134)].

⁶ As noted earlier, the narrator has remained an adolescent in her mind, has no significant relationships (with the exception of Paul), and has a job she does not enjoy.

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