

Delusions of The Living Dead

Transcript

It is 1949 and AUDINT's Slepian, Arnett and Morton are discussing how those with extreme psychological disorders might react to the tests carried out on their engineer Eduard Schüller, which has resulted in him conversing with the dead. Meetings with Theodore Reik who is researching for his book *The Secret Self* have been rich and varied. One line of enquiry involves the work of French neurologist Jules Cotard into a condition that renders those afflicted believing they have no blood and that their body is without organs. Ultimately, it causes them to think that they are dead.

When Reik tells of hushed rumours alluding to a notebook containing instructions on how to induce Cotard's syndrome, AUDINT are captivated. They speculate on deploying their two-ring table on those who believed they were already deceased. Would this alter the dynamics of communication with the otherworld voices? Could they transform carriers into necromancing drones by playing hooks from regular vinyl records?

Having spent months unearthing stories that corroborate a rumour which locates the notebook in Paris, it is decided Slepian will return to France for the first time since the Ghost Army departed after World War 2. His nomination due to a patchy knowledge of the language, garnered from reading Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Onboard a TWA Lockheed Constellation he sits down, heaves a trepadatious sigh and prepares for the 20-hour trip from New York's Idlewild airport. His

journey's reading consists of texts pertaining to Cotard but it is a single sheet of paper concerning a buyer of esoteric medical documents that absorbs him.

His information about Isabelle Chimay is scant, consisting of a home address and the name of the *Melac bar a vins* in the 11th arrondissement that she is known to frequent on weekends. That his trip is solely based upon a feigned serendipitous meeting with her here seems wildly optimistic but it is all he has. It is early Thursday evening when he touches down on a cheaply perfumed bed in the illustriously shabby Alba Opera Hotel in the centre of Paris and Slepian is bone-weary from the din of sleep repelling propellers. Still exhausted, he spends Friday recovering, mulling over his plot to hornswoggle an unsuspecting collector of texts.

Whilst his knowledge of Cotard's work is his first weapon of seduction, his second is a vial of Amobarbital, otherwise known as truth serum, a drug used by the US military to treat shell shock so that soldiers could return to the front-line. On Saturday night Slepian's front-line is the Melac doorway, which he crosses at 6.35pm with a distorted gait due to the bottle of wine he has already consumed. Inside, he sits close to the door in order to hear the verbal exchanges between patrons and staff for he has no idea what Miss Chimay looks like.

Three glasses of a 1945 Pomerol Bordeaux in and Slepian, from behind a glazed patina of nerves, observes the entrance of a serenely upright lady. With a staccato sophistication fleshed out by rapid steps, her presence demands action. The maître D snaps to attention, as do Slepian's senses upon hearing the greeting to Madame Chimay. Hands gesture towards a table that has obviously been kept for her. Slepian's plan was to wait for an opportune moment but alcohol has sequestered his guile so in broken French he brazenly introduces himself. With a confident quizzical smile Miss

Chimay invites him to sit and so the ersatz encounter begins.

They talk politics, music, and finally perceptual disorders – the phantom topic haunting Slepian’s every word. Isabelle Chimay is forthright and passionate when revealing her penchant for rare medical documents. She states that her ability to speak English is due to long hours spent translating letters from the 1860s. Ruminating on Phantom Leg Syndrome the dispatches formed a small part of the Civil War correspondence between American poet Walt Whitman whilst he dressed wounds at Union hospitals and Silas Weir Mitchell ‘a doctor of nerves’ from Philadelphia.

Penned after having worked an emotionally wrought three years consoling dying and recovering soldiers, Whitman iterated to Weir his belief that he was of most use when he healed parts that doctors could not touch; psychological extremities he called the ‘deepest remains’. What particularly gripped Chimay however was an exchange from the Battle of Bull Run. Weir reported that a number of the amputees talked at length about ‘sensory ghosts’, feelings that incorporated painful missing limbs; a revenant flesh that haunted soldier’s severed bodies.

Slepian clinically pitches the conversation towards Cotard and to research undertaken in Vanves. Isabelle parleys but does not air ownership of his writings. He cogitates on whether he should be more amorous but in truth he does not have the charismatic ordnance to pull it off. Instead he expresses his desire to see her collection. Apprehensively Isabelle agrees but organises for a visit to her apartment the following afternoon. Her next move is more categorical though as she stands and promptly leaves.

It is an overcast September Sunday afternoon and yesterday’s excesses have rendered Paris a German expressionist painting, a dark humour

not lost on Slepian, even in his angular state. His senses customarily function as portals, converting external stimuli that are processed to engage and orient his body. Today though, they wheeze like decrepit vacuum cleaners, lethargically sucking up information and sending it to the grotty grey bag of fuzz that is his brain.

In sharp contrast, a resplendent Isabelle Chimay, attired in sheer black buttoned down dress, ushers him into her apartment. As a gift, Slepian hands her records that he speciously relates as coming from an open-air market – Charlie Parker’s *Bird on 52nd St.* and *In The Beginning* by Milt Jackson and Sonny Stitt. He was unsure whether she would like them or not but more importantly, for 45 minutes or so, the gesture assuaged Slepian’s guilt for what he was about to embark on.

Chimay invites Slepian to sit in an uncomfortable art deco iron chair and asks whether he has heard of the recently deceased French theatre director Antonin Artaud. He has not but motions for her to carry on. Whilst interested in his work it is his Gnostic beliefs that intrigued her. She proposes that he was in fact held in the grips of Cotard’s syndrome when he declared he had ‘No mouth no tongue no teeth no larynx no oesophagus no stomach no intestine no anus. I shall reconstruct the man I am’.

As the conversation oscillates around the excavated body Slepian’s mind wanders to Thomas Edison and his 1920s work on a valve technology that amplified the vibrations of the departed. Could AUDINT develop techniques to make audible all the words and whispers ever uttered and scored into the vast sound library of the atmosphere. Could they realise Edison’s dream of going beyond recording and instead chasing down sounds in the gulfs of outer space?

A stare rather than a voice triggers Slepian’s re-

entry into the present as he realises that his off-world eyes have betrayed him. Isabelle looks on reservedly but his renewed focus encourages her to continue. She submits that since both Phantom Limb and Cotard's Syndrome echo each other's haunting of the body – one in the extension of it, the other in the negation – our sense of being could be formed from outside of consciousness?

In response Slepian proclaims that he considers all sensory information to be spectral in essence. He adds that there are perceptual mechanisms within us that have been deactivated much like genes that have been trip switched by extreme experiences. After more speculative conversation Slepian is getting that feeling when first discussing the existence of the third ear; an impression that his temporal lobes are being wrapped around his forehead and buttered and fried by the heat of the words fired at his cranium.

Realising he is in danger of giving himself away, Slepian impishly pronounces he is peckish. With a disappointed stretch of the lips and arms Isabelle offers him a drink and makes for her small kitchen. Knowing that they must imbibe something bitter if he is to cover his powdery tracks, Slepian hesitantly requests a Lucien Gaudin, hoping his pronunciation is not as bad as his intentions. With a wry smile Isabelle pulls on the handle of a burgeoning mahogany liquor cabinet. Having mixed the cocktail, she quips that hopefully they will not have similar urges of self destruction to those that caused the demise of the banker their drink is named after.

Slepian wonders how she could have any inkling of what he is about to do. She could not he answers himself. With a bell from the kitchen recalling Isabelle, Slepian thrusts his hands into his pocket and produces the vial of Amobarbital. He has an idea of how much to pour into her drink without causing an overdose

but it is easier said than done when one's hands are guided by the shadow puppet of Delirium Tremens.

Slepian digs into the platter of hors d'oeuvres in front of them and drinks rapidly in an attempt to encourage similar behaviour from Isabelle. She unwittingly complies. Deep into a conversation about cross-cultural eating habits it becomes obvious she is feeling the kaleidoscope flow of the barbiturate derivative. And so the soft interrogation begins. He asks whether she has Cotard's notebook and why she purchased it? After a predictable affirmation Isabelle's explanation causes Slepian to jolt in his chair.

It was reports of information encrypted within its pages that had impelled her to spend a small fortune on the item. Beyond the mere diagnostic it enabled the reader to seed negation delirium into a patient's bed of cognition and mutate it at will. From implanting transformations of the body – shrunken throats and displaced hearts, to beliefs of having no stomach or blood, Cotard had learnt how to manifest the most extreme forms of the disorder by making people believe they were the walking dead.

Surprised at the extent of her knowledge Slepian confirms that she has had little success with decryption. His final question before her stupefaction concerns the notebook's whereabouts. Lifting an arm that appears burdened by the gravity of heavy matter she points towards a room before slumping to the floor. Frustrated that he did not get an exact location he opens the door and scans the dark wooded glass cases and shelves that constitute Isabelle Chimay's library on Delphic panaceas and archaic placebos.

After rifling through numerous books Slepian turns his attention to the locked vitrines and sure enough there it is, pride of place with a handwritten label by its side. Impatience getting

the better of him he pulls an Iranian sofra kilim onto the case. A lumpen wooden radio is unplugged and brought in. He can only hoist it 6 inches above the vitrine but the piercing sound of shattered glass is testament to its weight. Relatively unscathed, the notebook is examined by AUDINT's narcotically aided Lothario. To his bemusement it appears that many pages have short musical scores elegantly drawn onto them.

Slepian jams down the button on his Canon Rangefinder over 120 times. He wants to simply pocket the unnerving journal and run but if he were caught with it at the airport there would be problems. Any remorse he might feel over the mess he has made is overridden by dismay at hearing Isabelle Chimay's narcotic groans from the adjoining room. It is time to go. Film reels in pocket, camera in bag, notebook left on the nearest shelf, he leaves without even so much as a glance at his half propped hostess.

Back in the hotel Slepian locks himself in his room, not even daring to leave for dinner before his early morning flight. Every time he hears a siren a momentary paralysis seizes his body until he perceives it heading away. Other than stewing in a strong sense of regret (at what might have been between himself and Isabelle), the trip back is uneventful. Loaded with bottles of French wine and photographs, he arrives back in New York appearing to have been the consummate tourist. The next task will be to have the films printed before heading back to Cape May and to the debased bunker that currently serves as home.

After two months of searching AUDINT find their man. A stack of seven by five photographs has been couriered to Abraham Sinkov, a cryptanalyst Arnett knew from his Ghost Army days. He is now Chief of the US's first centralised cryptologic unit, the Communications Security Program, which will be later renamed the National Security Agency.

One of Sinkov's favourite past-times is solving arcane ciphers, codes, and cryptograms, hence the package of images from 1887 landing in his pigeonhole.

At home late on a Saturday night, and Sinkov, glass in one hand, bulging envelope in the other, plunges into his seat for some relaxation. Spilling whiskey down his neck and photos on his cherry wood table, a tired and somewhat crestfallen smile adorns his face. There will be no waves of exhilaration carrying him off to sleep tonight for the notated designs constitute musical cryptograms that he should crack before he gets three tumblers into his eight-year old bottle of Pebbleford Kentucky Bourbon.

Much of Sinkov's knowledge of musical languages and cryptograms came from exchanges with the British crypto-analytic service during World War 2. He had studied the more obvious systems whereby composers such as Haydn, Schumann, and Elgar assigned letters to individual musical notes but this isn't one of these ciphers. By midnight he has fathomed out that it is in fact an artificial language called *la Langue musicale universelle*, or *Solresol*. Created by French composer Jean-François Sudre it had fallen out of use by the late 1880s. Cotard, in a final twist of irony had chosen a dying musical language through which to reveal his methods for orchestrating the deceit of the dead in the living.

Although able to recognise Solresol, Sinkov is not fully conversant with it. He puts feelers out into the crypto-community and after three weeks he has hooked young aspiring stenographer Georgina Rochefort who is obsessed with the crafted science of hidden messages. The 66 mini scores take the best part of eight days to translate and by the end of it she is a little disturbed but happy to be in the good books of a possible future employer.

Secretly relieved to have finished the job Sinkov swiftly returns the decoded rites and

procedures to AUDINT. Seated around a scarred table in their fortalice, Slepian, Morton, and Arnett carefully study Cotard's words from beyond the grave. Abstract in parts, due to the languages it has been shuttled through, the principles of engagement are clear enough that AUDINT are confident they can program the delusion into the sentient. For now though, the instructions are catalogued and archived and they will not be opened again until Nguyen Van Phong makes it his business to synthesise the ghost with the machine.

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Toby Heys appears courtesy of: AUDINT Records

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