

Machinal and Society of the Spectacle:

Treadwell's Reply to Society's Spectacularizing of Human Tragedy

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Time and time again, Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal* has been pigeonholed by genre. The scholarly conversations surrounding *Machinal* primarily revolve around three spheres. Many scholars look at the text from a purely feminist perspective as a play written by a woman, about women, and for women. Others study the play in its historical context—tracking the similarities and differences between *Machinal* and the Snyder-Gray murder case, from which the play was loosely based. Still, some consider the play as a flagship of the American Expressionist theatre movement and focus their analysis on Treadwell's use of expressionist techniques. While each of these analyses serve as valid entry points in comprehending aspects of the text, few have researched how *Machinal* comments on American society in general—not just the specific 1920s milieu or the female experience.

Considering *Machinal* in relation to Situationist International theory emphasizes how the play attempts to dethrone the mainstream societal mode of the spectacle. Formed in France, the Situationist International Organization was made up of social revolutionaries and led in part by Guy Debord. From 1957 to the organization's dissolution in 1972, the movement's primary aim was to critique and ultimately halt the degrading effects of modern capitalism. Debord's most famous text, *Society of the Spectacle*, published in 1967, effectively indicted the mass commodification and consumption of spectacle—or mass media—over lived experiences. Despite the fact that Treadwell wrote *Machinal* twenty-nine years prior to and an ocean away from where the Situationist International was formed, her play bears striking resemblance to Situationist theories. *Machinal* directly mirrors Debord's concept of the spectacle society, in which, "modern conditions of production prevail, [...] all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles [...] [and] everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."¹ Ahead of its time, the play portrays

1 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Bread and Circuses Publishing, 1967), Apple Books, 72.

an individual steeping in isolation and in opposition to a society that privileges the spectacle, or “the sector [of society] which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness,” over real, human connection.² Through the protagonist’s juxtaposed relationship with her husband, George H. Jones—a representative of the society of the spectacle—and her lover, Richard Roe—a man whom she perceives as an escape from said society—Treadwell depicts the ultimate risk that people within a spectacle-laden society face when they do not blindly accept their own passivity. By using the events that were hijacked by the spectacle and creating something new with them that effectively critiques the spectacle society’s way of pacifying the public and isolating individuals, Treadwell’s work functions as detournement. A Debordian detournement, or rerouting of the 1927 Snyder-Gray murder case, *Machinal* ultimately indicts the fundamental wrongdoing in deemphasizing the lived experiences of a person.

To fully comprehend how Treadwell metamorphosed the spectacle, one must understand the extent to which the original court case was spectacularized. Although the names Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray mean comparatively little to the average citizen today, they were the highlight of nearly every New York newspaper’s crime section in the late 1920s. Snyder and Gray were extramarital lovers, who conspired to and successfully followed through with the murder of Albert Snyder, Ruth’s husband. After months on trial, both were sentenced to capital punishment and died by the electric chair on January 12, 1928. If the crime itself was not shocking enough (equipped with chloroform rags, haphazard alibis, and a poor daughter caught in the cross-fire), the media coverage that followed was unprecedented. According to critic Katherine Weiss, “There were roughly 180 reporters assigned to the case and within three months over 1,500,000 words had been written on it.”³ All this coverage turned the case into a sort of circus attraction. Scholars Jean Marie Lutes and Jennifer Jones both note that 1,500 spectators came to witness the trial each day.⁴ To further the spectacle, Lutes found that “tickets were required for admission, although at least 120 spots were reserved for members of the press,” and according to Jones, “for the first time in history, microphones and speakers were set up in the courtroom.”⁵ In effect, the trial became a fully-fledged Debordian example of the spectacle society.

2 Ibid.

3 Katherine Weiss, “Sophie Treadwell’s ‘Machinal’: Electrifying the Human Body,” *South Atlantic Review* 71, no. 3 (2006): 4, www.jstor.org/stable/20064750.

4 Jean Marie Lutes, “Tears on Trial in the 1920s: Female Emotion and Style in ‘Chicago’ and ‘Machinal,’” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 30, no. 2 (2011): 365, www.jstor.org/stable/23349339; Jennifer Jones, “In Defense of the Woman: Sophie Treadwell’s ‘Machinal,’” *Modern Drama* 37, no. 3 (1994): 486, doi:10.3138/md.37.3.485.

5 Lutes, “Tears on Trial,” 356; Jones, “In Defense of the Woman,” 486.

Masses were so consumed by the spectacle that the court case began to take on the outward appearance of a show devised solely for entertainment. For those who could not procure a seat for themselves in the courtroom, newspapers covered the case in detail and were delivered “to readers in a decidedly non-intimate form, [...] through easily smudged pages that could be passed from hand to hand or carelessly discarded.”⁶ Accordingly, the treatment of the Snyder-Gray case cheapened the lived, human experiences of the two on trial by prioritizing the spectacle and the sale of the spectacle over their humanity. Jones notes that after the crime was committed, “Newspapers capitalized on the huge market for this sordid courtroom drama [...] reporting everything Snyder and Gray said or did, reviewing their performances on the stand, and keeping running commentary on the ‘audience’s’ reaction.”⁷ In response to this phenomenon, Treadwell re-imagined the case in the form of a play not to placate the mass media’s demand that the case operates like a Broadway production, but to reclaim the story and inspire audiences to feel their sense of humanity again.

Treadwell pushed back against the media’s spectacularizing of the trial by re-imagining the events. To reinvigorate the audiences’ awareness of their humanity, she made a few critical changes to her plot that distinguished it from the actual trial. Although the play maintains noticeable similarities to the Snyder-Gray case (the female protagonist marries a man she does not love, enters into an illicit affair, kills her husband, testifies for herself at court, and is sentenced to death), Treadwell chose to tell the story from the wife’s perspective only—there is no co-conspirator. While Helen Jones (the protagonist) is inspired by her lover to commit the crime, she is never validated by him. By focusing the play on the experiences of a single person, Treadwell avoids writing a misguided love story and focuses on humanizing her protagonist and examining the sort of society that could drive someone to commit such a heinous crime.

Machinal begins with a dilemma—Helen can either marry her boss, who she does not love, or lose her job. The culture that surrounds her is one of conformity—one that derives from the ecosystem of the spectacle, in which those who consume spectacle are expected to passively accept whatever the state, and the spectacle sanctioned by the state, feeds them. While her coworkers seem to accept their place in society with few qualms, Helen struggles to fit into the script that has been written for her. After arriving late to work, the Stenographer asks her why she does not get to work, and Helen responds, “My machine’s out of order.”⁸ When the Stenographer asks why she does not fix her machine, Helen replies, “I can’t—got to get

6 Lutes, “Tears on Trial,” 344.

7 Jones, “In Defense of the Woman,” 486–7.

8 Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1993), 9.

somebody.”⁹ When faced with the broken machine, she has no means of fixing it herself. Like the typewriter, she too is “out of order;” there is a clear disjunction between herself and those around her. Whereas her coworkers seem more or less content to operate automatically within the system, she is anxious and withdrawn and appeals to “somebody” to give her guidance and put her back in order.

Not only does she stand apart from the order of the system, but her appeal for “somebody” also suggests her sense of isolation and desire for companionship. Helen’s isolation directly results from the office milieu, which is founded on principles of the spectacle that completely isolate people from themselves in favor of progressing the status quo. While this scene may not look like the stereotypical spectacle form (e.g. mass media), Treadwell effectively creates a living picture of the type of society that Debord describes in *Society of the Spectacle*. In other words, the individuals have no *real* control over their lives because they are subjugated beneath the system of production. Treadwell captures this by embracing the expressionist practice of casting her characters as “types.” To use the words of scholar Dussia Posner, “Treadwell emphasizes the erasure of individualism by listing the *dramatis personae* by their social function.”¹⁰ Instead of representing themselves, the office workers represent the role that their society cast them in without their consent; the adding clerk adds, the filing clerk files. While some appreciate their roles more than others—for instance, when the adding clerk points out that Helen does not belong in an office, the Stenographer admits, “I do”—it is much harder for Helen to accept her role. Even Mr. Jones, who holds the most power in the office, does not really have control of his identity; instead, popular modes of spectacle do his living for him.¹¹ This is evident in that his words are not truly his own; his language is made up almost entirely of platitudes. When he enters, he tells his workers that “haste makes waste” and “the early bird catches the worm.”¹² While he speaks *at* those around him, using clichés to make his point, he never truly communicates with them person to person.

At the end of episode one, Helen plunges into a stream-of-consciousness style soliloquy. Jumbled and clipped, the words of others intrude her inner thoughts. She hears Jones say to her, “How would you like to marry me—what do you say—[...]—let me look at your little hands—you have such pretty little hands—let me hold your pretty little hands.”¹³ Repeatedly, she meets his words with denial, stating, “no—I can’t—[...]”

9 Ibid., 9.

10 Dussia N. Posner, “America and the Individual: ‘The Hairy Ape’ and ‘Machinal’ at the Moscow Kamerny Theatre,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2018): 9, doi:10.1017/S0266464X17000641.

11 Treadwell, *Machinal*, 3.

12 Ibid., 4–5.

13 Ibid., 11.

don't touch me—please—[...] please don't—[...] don't touch me—please—no—can't."¹⁴ But, as much as she knows what it is she wants (or rather, what she does *not* want), she also knows that if she denies George, “she'll lose her job.”¹⁵ She feels so weighted by the pressure applied by others around her that she recognizes what she must do.¹⁶ Driven by pressure from her co-workers in episode one and her mother in episode two, she decides to marry George and effectively marry into the society of the spectacle in hopes that she will learn to cope with her sense of isolation and find a place for herself in life.

However, the extent to which George H. Jones is a product of the society of the spectacle becomes intolerably clear on their honeymoon in episode three. In his attempt to connect with his wife, he relies on the stories that he has heard from other people to forge a connection with his wife, demonstrating how “the externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him.”¹⁷ Jones tells Helen, “That reminds me of the story of the Pullman porter and the [tart]” as a means to get physically closer to her.¹⁸ As he tries to be intimate with his wife, he relies on someone else's experiences and someone else's words to set the mood.

When he does divulge into his dreams, attempting to tell his wife “all about [himself],” it is obvious that his desires are manufactured around commodities and ideas that have been sold to him.¹⁹ He tells his wife, “Next year maybe we'll go to Paris. You can buy a lot of that French underwear—and Switzerland—all my life I've wanted a Swiss watch—that I bought right there—I coulda' got a Swiss watch here, but I always wanted one that I bought right there...”²⁰ In accordance with Debord's theory,

the alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object [...] is expressed in the following way: [...] the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires.²¹

Steeped in the spectacle, George's only desires are the ready-made commodities afforded as symbols of status or luxury. While he takes his

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 10.

16 Ibid., 11–2.

17 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 87.

18 Treadwell, *Machinal*, 24.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 25.

21 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 87.

dream a step beyond simply buying the product, his dream of pilgrimaging to the *source* of the product only further illustrates his obsession with the product itself in its “purest” form.

His “relationship” with his wife proves to be just another way for him to obtain one more status symbol in his spectacle society. The scene ends with Helen calling out, “I want *somebody*” (my italics).²² While her husband tells her, “You got me, haven’t you?” she continues to seek “somebody—somebody—” because she knows her husband has not truly tried to connect with her as a person or see her for who she is.²³ Because Jones represents a society that privileges spectacle over authentic human connection, he sees his wife as just another object for consumption—yet another product that he can own.

In his feeble attempt to inspire his wife after the birth of their daughter, Jones bombards Helen with platitudes. He tells her, “. . . Make an effort! Pull yourself together! Start the up-hill climb! [. . .] Will power! That’s what conquers! [. . .] Face the music! Stand the gaff! Take life by the horns! Look it in the face!”²⁴ Because of his investment in the spectacle society, he cannot communicate with his wife—or anyone for that matter—since he does not truly know himself. Alone in the hospital and fed up with her husband’s refusal to see her for who she really is as an individual, she vows not to submit any longer.²⁵ Seeking freedom and autonomy after her traumatic birthing experience, she meets Richard Roe in a speakeasy, and they become lovers. Through her relationship with Roe, she circumvents the spectacle and lives her life authentically. Unlike George, Richard’s stories are his own—he tells her of San Francisco and Mexico, of fighting off “banditos” to save his life and find freedom.²⁶ In her eyes, he is a man who goes on adventures and lives by his own accord; he is above the spectacle. With him, she can be self-reflective and curious about the world around her—she asks him what certain Spanish words mean, about the flower he keeps in his room, and about life in San Francisco.²⁷ He gives her a taste of the human connection she has always yearned for but never known how to find—both in the physical and emotional sense. Through her sexual awakening and relationship with Richard, she realizes things about her life and herself. A poignant example occurs when she sings the children’s song “Hey Diddle Diddle,” and admits, “I never thought that had any sense before—now I get it.”²⁸ Now, she feels she can assign meaning to the world around her instead of passively letting the world assign

22 Treadwell, *Machinal*, 26.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, 28.

25 *Ibid.*, 31.

26 *Ibid.*, 40.

27 *Ibid.*, 46, 49, 50.

28 *Ibid.*, 47.

meaning to her.

Unfortunately, Helen's romance with Roe is short-lived, and within a year, he leaves for Mexico. Without Roe to distract her from her husband, she is left alone and feels, once again, submerged beneath the spectacle: unhappy, isolated, and distraught. Once again, in the sitting room with her husband, her life is mediated by the spectacle of mass media. As Jones reads newspaper headlines of production—"record production. [...] sale hits a million— [...] market trend steady—," Helen reads headlines that illustrate the life she wishes she could lead: "girl turns on gas [...] woman leaves all for love— [...] young wife disappears."²⁹ While she is physically near her husband, they spend their time alone together. Treadwell indicates in the scene directions, "they are seated on opposite ends of the divan. They are both reading papers—to themselves."³⁰ Per usual, Jones treats his wife as another object he can own instead of as a person he should seek to understand. He even goes so far as to illustrate the parallel between his property and his wife. He says, "The property's mine! It's not all that's mine [...] I got a first mortgage on her—I got a second mortgage on her—and she's mine!"³¹ In accordance with Debord's theory, George is detached from his life in so much as he is detached from those around him and from himself. George's life, like the spectacle, "is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness, and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation."³² While Helen and George share a culture, a marriage, a family, they experience everything alone. George is just too dense to recognize it.

Operating within the spectacle, Helen is so separated from herself that she looks to the spectacle for a model of how she should live her life. She finds inspiration for murdering her husband in one of the headlines that she reads: "Woman finds husband dead."³³ Within the spectacle society, even her actions are inspired by the media. As Helen's mental health begins to deteriorate, Treadwell employs expressionist techniques to materialize the young woman's inner turmoil. Helen fixates on the voice of her lover, explaining how he killed two men in Mexico to free himself from their bonds by smashing a bottle filled with pebbles over their heads.³⁴ His voice mingles with other, strange voices repeating, "stones—stones—small stones," and Treadwell indicates in the stage directions that "*the music—the voices—mingle—increase—the YOUNG WOMAN flies from her chair and cries out in terror.*"³⁵ If, as Debord says, "the spectacle is

29 Ibid., 53.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 54.

32 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 73.

33 Treadwell, *Machinal*, 57.

34 Ibid., 58.

35 Ibid., 59.

the nightmare of imprisoned modern society” and the “guardian of sleep,” then Helen represents, at this moment, the insomniac hostility that an individual may be driven to should they refuse to be lulled to sleep by their surrounding society.³⁶ In a vicious attempt to refuse the spectacle before her, she murders her husband in his sleep by hitting him over the head with a bottle filled with small stones.

It is within episode eight, “The Law,” that Treadwell’s detournement realizes its most explicit form. On trial for murder, Helen testifies for herself; however, Treadwell overlays her testimony with the interpretations of nearby reporters, who scrutinize her every move. After her defense lawyer completes his examination of her, the first reporter says, “the accused woman told a straightforward story of—,” while the second reporter claims, “the accused woman told a rambling, disconnected story of—.”³⁷ Later, when Helen lies about the murder weapon, reporters intervene once more. The first reporter writes, “Under the heavy artillery fire of the State’s attorney’s brilliant cross-questioning, the accused woman’s defense was badly riddled.”³⁸ The second reporter now portrays the woman in a more positive light, stating, “Undaunted by the Prosecution’s machine-gun attack, the defendant was able to maintain her position of innocence in the face of rapid-fire questioning that threatened, but never seriously menaced her defense.”³⁹ Treadwell’s depiction of reporters disrupting the court proceedings mirrors how the mass media infiltrated the story in real life and *made* it a product for audiences to ingest. The reporters’ biased interpretations serve to comment on the subjectivity of the spectacle that presents itself as objective truth. By portraying the way the media hijacks the protagonist’s experience in favor of creating a story that fits whatever narrative supports their agenda, Treadwell depicts the inauthenticity of the spectacle as the primary societal mode.

While some may argue that it is morally corrupt to empathize with a murderer, Treadwell encourages her audience to see Helen’s humanity by illustrating her deep mental anguish. When she learns that her lover has betrayed her “voluntarily [...] in the furtherance of justice” by writing an affidavit detailing their affair, she is overwhelmed and, in a frenzy, confesses to her crime.⁴⁰ After her confession, the stage directions read, “*Young Woman begins to moan—suddenly—as though the realization of the enormity of her isolation had just come upon her. It is a sound of desolation, of agony, of human woe*” (my emphasis).⁴¹ Once again, she is

36 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 81.

37 Treadwell, *Machinal*, 66.

38 *Ibid.*, 73.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 74.

41 *Ibid.*, 76.

consumed by her isolation, the direct product of her spectacle society. In Debord's words, "*Separation* is the alpha and omega of the spectacle."⁴² Thus, for Helen to be so entranced in her own isolation means that the spectacle has won in its efforts to consume her. By portraying moments of human suffering during the trial, Treadwell detracts from the original spectacle of the crime as a product for consumption and emphasizes the real, human experience and distress behind it.

By the end of the play, the spectacle effectively swallows Helen whole, and she no longer belongs to herself. Similar to the way that mass media infiltrated Ruth Snyder's court case, Helen Jones is inundated with the voices of reporters as she walks to the electric chair. In the final episode, reporters observe Helen as she makes her way to the electric chair, noting minute details and speculating what might happen—"suppose the machine shouldn't work!" the first reporter calls out.⁴³ The second reporter responds, "it'll work—it always works!"⁴⁴ The electric chair operates as the spectacle that always works, always consumes, and always overtakes. While Helen attempts to call out, again, for "Somebody! Somebody—," her voice is cut off by the electric chair, yet another machine. The play closes not with Helen's lamentation for companionship, but with the words of the priest that the state assigned to Helen on her execution day: "Christ have mercy—Lord have mercy—Christ have mercy—"⁴⁵ Ending the play this way emphasizes how closely tied the spectacle is to the state or governmental power since the priest not only represents Christianity but also the entire governmental institution that is complicit in the spectacle's power. Through this ending, Treadwell invites audiences to consider what is lost when an institution has the final say over a human life. As a result, audiences may feel their sense of empathy pricked for the loss of an individual that sought so desperately to be seen, heard, and known. Thus, *Machinal* invites audiences to experience the heart of the Snyder-Gray case in a way that they may not have experienced the case when following the news coverage by way of disposable sheets of inky paper or watching the trial as an audience-member like Romans watching gladiator's fight—waiting to see who would be devoured first.

In turn, considering *Machinal* in relation to Situationist theory broadens the scope of the conversation surrounding the play. The play is certainly about the female experience in a patriarchal society, holds parallels to the Snyder-Gray murder case, and is a prime example of Expressionistic theatre; however, the play breaks the bounds of its immediate context and speaks to deeper issues in the foundation of the spectacle society.

42 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 83.

43 Treadwell, *Machinal*, 82.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 83.

While the popular avenues of analysis are important and valid, the play's other concern, to reject and renounce society's obsession with passively consuming spectacle and thereby isolating people from themselves, is critical to fully understanding *Machinal's* scope. Treadwell's play is not only relevant to 1920s culture or the late 1950s ethos that bred the Situationist International, but also to today's modern American culture, in which media permeates the public's lives more than ever. If audiences and scholars only ever categorize the play as feminist, or biographical, or expressionistic, then they will compartmentalize the text and miss a larger aspect of the work that synthesizes the three components that make it up. If audiences and scholars begin to analyze how *Machinal* speaks to the consequences and dangers of spectacle societies that continues to privilege media intake and state power over human connection and autonomy, then Treadwell's play can further enlighten the human experience.