

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

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.<sup>2</sup> Through the protagonist’s juxtaposed relationship with her husband, George H. R. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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 herself at court, and is sentenced to death), Treadwell chose to tell the story of 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* who she does not love, or lose her job. The culture that surrounds her is 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, the Stenographer asks her why she does not get to work, and Helen responds, “My machine’s out of order.”<sup>8</sup> When the Stenographer

6 Lutes, “Tears on Trial,” 344.

7 Jones, *The Spectacle of the Courtroom*, 10.

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



} [ . &æ } qčĚ+<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> She feels so weighted by the pressure applied by others around her that she recognizes what she must do.<sup>16</sup> 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

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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> He tells his wife, “Next



meaning to her.

Unfortunately, Helen's romance with Roe is short-lived, and within a

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.<sup>36</sup> In a vicious attempt to refuse the spectacle before her, she murders her husband in his sleep by hitting him over the head with

It is within episode eight, “The Law,” that Treadwell’s detournement however, Treadwell overlays her testimony with the interpretations of nearby reporters, who scrutinize her every move. After her defense lawyer



consumed by her isolation, the direct product of her spectacle society. In Debord's words, "*Separation* is the alpha and omega of the spectacle."<sup>42</sup> 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

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.