From Adorno to Rancière: Trying to Understand *Endgame* in the

Aftermath of 9/11

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'In *Endgame,* a historical moment unfolds… *Kaputt.*'[1]

'Art in the face of mortal threat becomes ideology through the harmlessness of its mere form, regardless of its content.'[2]

- Theodore Adorno

A context of crisis was the cradle from which Theodore Adorno's seminal critique of Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* was born. His was a society shattered, a society facing the void. Adorno understood the Holocaust as Enlightenment rationality pushed to it's limit. This established and respected form of philosophical discourse was suddenly mute and could offer nothing in trying to understand the great trauma of the Second World War. *Endgame's* anti-heroes - Nagg, Nell, Hamm, Clov - and the citizens of a society in the shadow of death share a common landscape of incomprehensibility. 'The poverty of the participants in *Endgame* is the poverty of philosophy;' for Adorno, the same is true of the participants in the European Union after Auschwitz.[3] Enlightenment reason, the scaffolding upon which so many Western social, political, philosophical and aesthetic forms were built, had been undermined by tragedy and transformed into farce. Left behind was a

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[1] Theodore Adorno, 'Trying to Understand Endgame' in *Samuel Beckett: Longman Critical Reader*, eds. Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince (Essex: Pearson Education, 1999), 43.
[2] Theodore Adorno, 'Society' in *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004), 325.
[3] Adorno, Trying to Understand Endgame, 40.

heap of redundant vernacular and a mess of empty promises of progress. The 20th Century has since been haunted by the sustained ghost of war; World War II then The Cold War then Vietnam then Afghanistan, to name but a few. War has become the stage upon which we perform the modalities of everyday life. The Holocaust was, for Adorno, different; foregrounded against the general malaise. It was a white flag of defeat to all heretofore accepted theoretical structures and 'the end of human perfectibility and marking the catastrophic identification of life with death.'[4] So society fell, with a sharp thud, to ground zero. Here too lies the site of my proposed reframing of Adorno's logic. 'Ground Zero' is the colloquial term for 'The National September 11 Memorial and Museum,' a monument built where World Trade Centre stood before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Adorno sees the Holocaust as the defining catastrophe of the Modern period, indeed 'after Auschwitz, poetry is barbaric.'[5] Any contemporary recontextualisation of his ideas begs for the identification of another awfully influential moment in human history as a formal requirement. I would like to offer 9/11 as something of an analogous event. It was shocking, irrational, horrific and countless other adjectives which will ultimately fall short of describing the tragedy. Further, like the Holocaust, it asks the question—in what world can such an event take place? The fall of the Twin Towers accelerated the emergence of a new technocratic regime of power. Sometimes hidden, sometimes suppressive, sometimes disorientating; this new order presents us with problems of comprehension and control and freedom. Using Beckett's dramatic work as board upon which these ideas are key chessman, this essay will attempt to understand some of the social effects of 9/11.

The choice of Beckett as a comparative node for a socio-political argument may seem discordant, counter intuitive even. He was associated with the theatre of the absurd, his plays are

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[4] Adorno, Trying to Understand Endgame, 39.
[5] Marguerite M. Striar, 'In Defence of Poetry' in *Beyond Lament: poets of the world bearing witness to the Holocaust* (Michigan: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 4.

often set in a nondescript, atemporal zone which is completely cut off from the everyday here-and-now, his characters often babble rather than speak. None of these components are explicitly 'political,' how then may we read them so? The work of French Marxist theorist Jaques Rancière offers an interesting route into a rereading of Beckett. His 2004 book, *The Politics of Aesthetics* redefines what is required of aesthetic form for it to be considered political:

The essence of politics consists of interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community, thereby modifying the very aesthetico-political field of possibility.[6]

The notion that it is those on the outside who trigger internal structural changes to the political system is particularly noteworthy in terms of Beckett. His characters, across his entire oeuvre, rub against traditional definitions of normality; they are always other, always strange. He seems to write exclusively about what Rancière calls the '*demos*, i.e. the supplementary part of every account of the population.'[7] By giving the peripheral population a platform, Beckett exposes his audience to their particular political potential. Beckett, in many ways, seems to be enacting Rancière's idea of 'disagreement' through his dramas. 'Disagreement' is defined as 'a conflict over what is meant by "to speak" and over the very distribution of the sensible that delimits the horizon of the sayable and determines the relationship between seeing, hearing, doing, making and thinking.'[8] An encounter with the work of Beckett suspends all established modes of comprehension and requires the viewer/reader to look for a different route into the work and surrender to the nonsensical rhetoric and action before attempting to understand it. Rancière found the stage to be an ideal space for

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[6] Gabriel Rockhill, 'Translator's Introduction - Jaques Rancière's Politics of Perception' in *The Politics of Aesthetics (*London: Continuum, 2006), 3.
[7] Rockhill, *Introduction*, 3.
[8] Rockhill, *Introduction*, 4.

redistribution of the sensible since it allows communal activity and fantasy to play out simultaneously.[9] This fact, coupled with the already mentioned intersections between Rancière's theory and Beckett's practice lead to an understanding of his work as desperately political.

In typical Beckettian style, *Endgame* begins with a long list of detailed stage directions. The action, if you can call it that, is set against 'Bare interior./ Grey light./ Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn./ Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture.'[10] The mise-en-scène which Beckett constructs can be understood as a visual representation of the problematics that arise from a culture mediated by technology. Let us first consider the 'Grey light.'[11] Grey light is a dark and mutated form of light, a light with the paradoxical function of both illuminating and obfuscating. There is something confused about the shroud which envelops the drama of *Endgame* and this feeling pervades the techno-communication systems of our society as well as our relationship with technology put to political function. Surveillance is, perhaps, the issue best characterised by this light. The emergence of the Snowden files from June 2013 led to the incomprehensible realisation that the governmental surveillance, both nationally and internationally, had crept into every faction of day-to-day civilian life.[12] From physically watching and listening via CCTV and telecommunications to tracking Google searches and the cyber realities of people engaged in games such as Second Life, security agencies like the American NSA and the British GCHQ have forced us into a blind panopticon.[13] This kind of blanket surveillance collapses the

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[9] Rancière, Politics of Aesthetics, 13.

[10] Samuel Beckett, 'Endgame' in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) 92.

[11] Beckett, Endgame, 92.

[12] Edward Snowden is a former NSA contractor for Dell and Booz Allen Hamilton who downloaded and leaked classified information from the NSA to media outlets such as *The Guardian, The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

[13] The 'Panopticon' is a social theory, originally conceived of by Jeremy Bentham and further developed by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) In Foucault's panopticon the subject is aware of his being watched and behaves accordingly, he thus becomes the 'principle of his own subjection' (202-203). The post-9/11 subject does not have this luxury, or at least didn't before the revelations which followed the Snowden release, and so I would like to suggest that the digitally surveilled community were bound to a 'blind panopticon.'

binaries of private and public, as Tom Stoppard, writing for the Guardian in 2013, so plainly put it, 'The cameras are in public places, they are not in our houses or our cars or even in our gardens. By contrast, the world of surveillance operated by the people we pay to guard us exceeds the fevered dreams of the Stasi.'[14] When black and white are no longer distinct, the indeterminate grey acts as an ideal environment for misinterpretation of institutional and moral codes. Arguably, this is how governmental 'security' agencies have avoided serious disciplinary actions. However, when utilised by the *demos* (or Nagg, Nell, Clove and Hamm in the event of *Endgame*), perhaps grey can be an arena for change, where code are reinterpreted. Grey is also an apt description for the moral reactions to the Snowden revelations. His whistleblowing was a catalyst for polarising responses and he has been hailed 'hero' as well as touted a 'traitor.'[15][16] Opinions on personality and his subjective role aside, the action of exposure alone raises multiple questions, all wrought with contradiction. Have we sacrificed the safety of the state for that of the individual? It is impossible to monitor only the guilty but does that ratify the surveillance of the masses? When is it acceptable to breach privacy in the name of public interest? Any answers here should be dialectically rather than linearly constructed. Part of the problem is the pace at which technology has been assimilated into everyday life. Its subsumption has been fast and whole and thus has not allowed for the emergence of a moral or political framework through which to understand it. Beckett also requires 'high up, two small windows, curtains drawn' for his production.[17] If we read *Endgame* as an analogy of society after the fall of the Twin Towers, then these windows become evocative of the top down, state led surveillance control structures implemented by the NSA, amongst others, which were

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[14] Tom Stoppard, 'State surveillance of personal data: what is the society we wish to protect?' *Guardian*, 10 December, 2013. Accessed 22 February, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/10/state-surveillance-data-tom-stoppard

[15] John Cassidy, 'Why Edward Snowden is a Hero' *New Yorker*, 10 June, 2013. Accessed 22 February, 2015. http://www.newyorker.com/rational-irrationality/why-edward-snowden-is-a-hero

[16] Brett LoGiurato, 'John Boehner: Edward Snowden is a 'traitor'' *SF Gate*, 11 June, 2013. Accessed 22 February, 2015. http://www.sfgate.com/technology/businessinsider/article/JOHN-BOEHNER-Edward-Snowden-Is-A-Traitor-4593261.php

[17] Beckett, Endgame, 92.

invisible until the Snowden release. This interpretation becomes more pertinent when the physicality of the characters is taken into consideration. Hamm is blind, Clov cannot sit, Nagg and Nell are legless in their respective dustbins. Through their ailments they are rendered quite helpless. Denied self sufficiency they must rely on their equally amputated family members in the micro bureaucracy that Beckett penned. Their stunted physicality is evocative of the mood and shape of our discontented society. We cannot see what is being done from above or the proposed means of execution, so any agitation and unrest felt is difficult to act upon since the target of direct criticism is always at one step removed. The pressure of a stare is felt but the subject is impotent; they may want to unmask or shed light but, like Nagg, Nell, Clov and Hamm, they cannot reach to open the curtains.

The narrative of *Endgame* is dictated by closed spaces. Hamm makes this obvious when he instructs Clov to 'Take me for a little turn. [Clov *goes behind the chair and pushes it forward.*] Not too fast! [Clov *pushes chair.*] Right round the world!' [18] The world of the subject has been circumscribed by various forces. There are the obvious exterior sources of constriction—the walls erected on stage, the dustbins which house Nagg and Nell—but there are also personal boundaries to consider. The impaired physicality of the characters, as outlined in the previous paragraph, limits all experience of the sensuous world. They are unable to experience a totality of feeling, even if their totality is nothing but a shard of the unknowable sphere which exists beyond the high windows. Split experience is also a defining feature of drone piloting, an important element of the surveillance operation. A US pilot may be sitting in a dark room in the middle of the desert but the activity he instigates is played out on an entirely separate field. Separation is threefold; landmass, sea and atmosphere all interrupt direct sensory experience. This interchange between Hamm and

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[18] Beckett, Endgame, 104.

Clov offers an apt description of the disembodied action which the drone pilot engages in, 'Hamm: How are your eyes?/ Clov: Bad./ Hamm: How are you legs?/ Clov: Bad./ Hamm: But you can move./ Clov: Yes.'[19]

Adorno understands *Endgame* to be working with the materials of an alienated world, 'Beckett accepts the challenge and uses thoughts sans phrase as cliches, fragmentary materials in the monologue interior that spirit has become, the reified residues of culture.'[20] According to Marx, and Adorno was a Western Marxist, the process of reification involves rationalisation. Rationalisation has multiple meanings but for arguments sake, the most pertinent are the mathematical; the simplification of an expression or equation by eliminating radicals without changing the value of the expression or the roots of the equation, and the practical; systematic organisation.[21] Through technology, and particularly coding, it is possible to enforce rationality on nearly every aspect of life. Personality profiles are built not through experience but through interpretations of metadata; the government can trace where you go, what you spend money on, whom you call and cross-reference this with the activity of those around you. From here an entire social world is constructed but something very important is ostensibly absent—the human element.[22] Arguably it is also 'humanity' which is void in *Endgame*. It was once there and thriving, 'Nagg: Do you remember-/ Nell: No./ Nagg: When we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks./ [they laugh heartily]/ Nell: It was in the Ardennes.'[23] Nagg and Nell had been on holiday, they had enjoyed the couples pursuit of riding in tandem, they had crashed and laughed - all these actions are no longer possible. They are stuck, unable to interact with the outside world, unable even to interact

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[19] Beckett, Endgame, 95.
[20] Adorno, Trying to Understand Endgame, 42.
[21] 'Codify: verb' in Oxford English Dictionary,
http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/35605?redirectedFrom=codified#eid122161729
[22] For a brief description of how metadata is constructed, it is useful to look at 'The Guardian Guide to Metadata' *Guardian*, 12 June, 2013. Accessed 22 February 2015.
http://www.theguardian.com/technology/interactive/2013/jun/12/what-is-metadata-nsa-surveillance#meta=1110011
[23] Beckett, Endgame, 99-100.

with each other on a physical level. They try to kiss, '[*their heads strain towards each other, fail to meet, fall apart again*] Nell: Why this farce, day after day?'[24] In a world of constant surveillance where the subject has been reduced to an amalgamate of calibrated mathematical data, any attempt to live freely is just this; a farce, day after day. Perhaps Hamm is right when he says 'Outside of here it's death.'[25]

The effects of technology on our post-9/11 contemporary capitalist society were not predicted by Samuel Beckett, such a claim would be absurd. However, something of the pervasive confusion and oppression which we encounter in *Endgame* seems particularly relevant today. The ahistoricity of this work leaves it open to reinterpretation and the context exposed by Edward Snowden in 2013 makes for a rich and productive reading. Snowden, who, in our real-world production, plays the role of a vigilante in favour of techno freedom and justice, fits Rancière's description of the *demos*. He comes from the edges of a powerful institution and through his actions disrupts that institution to it's very core. In 2015, two years after the initial release of documents, discussions about possible reforms are still ongoing. In January of this year, the LSE held an event simply named 'After Snowden,' the focus of which was how society should adapt to the information exposed.[26] Snowden has forced a true redistribution of the sensible and so my rereading of *Endgame,* through Rancière's lens and within the social landscape which emerged after the event of November 11, 2001, becomes ever more pertinent. If, as some historians and theorists have claimed, 9/11 marks the end of the post-modern era then what comes next? Walter Benjamin believed that our future lies hidden in the material fabric of our past. As such, our society, a world

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[24] Beckett, Endgame, 99.
[25] Beckett, Endgame, 96.
[26] A variety of issues were covered as well as possible repercussions. A podcast of what was said during this talk is available here,
http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=2827

in process, must reexamine the forgotten alcoves of our near history in order to escape stagnation.[27]

Beckett's play is by no means a forgotten work but we, like Adorno, are still trying to understand it.

Through the course of this essay I hope to have demonstrated that resituating *Endgame*, into a

different historical moment and a new aesthetic regime, transforms the actions of the play into an

encrypted critique of the problematics of todays technocratic society.

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[27] This idea pervades much of Benjamin's work but is perhaps most thoroughly investigated in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

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