

## **The Chamber of Banality: Hell on Earth**

**Rina Arya**

Hell is empty and all the devils are here.

The Tempest Act 1, Scene 2

The depiction of hell as another place, however frightening, is strangely comforting because it is where we are not. In many religious and mythological traditions, it is posed in opposition to heaven where it represents a place of damnation for sinners and is typically terrifying. Something akin to Dante's Inferno in the Divine Comedy springs to mind. Within the confines of the present, hell is temporally and spatially deferred; it lurks as a threat and a reminder of punishment in an afterlife for the unrepentant.

One of the most interesting representations of hell is Jean-Paul Sartre's play Huis Clos (1944).<sup>[note]</sup><sup>1</sup> In this fictive exploration of existentialism, hell is conceptualized philosophically as a state of ontological dependence, and psychologically as a state of interdependence. The manifestation of this understanding is revealed through the conversational exchange between three strangers, Garcin, Estelle and Inez, who find themselves confined to a drawing room deliberating the reasons why they are there, in hell, and have been placed together. Tension mounts, reaching a climax when Garcin decides that he has had enough. The opening of the door offers escape, and in spite of the claustrophobia of being holed up together in a toxic environment, no one leaves when the opportunity presents itself. If 'l'enfer, c'est les autres', as Garcin exclaims (commonly translated as 'hell is other people'), why don't they exit? The answer is simple: they can't -- there is No Exit (to use the English title of the play); this is all that there is.<sup>[note]</sup><sup>2</sup> The play explores Sartre's central philosophical notion of existentialism, propounded in the early 1940s, which asserts that 'there is no such thing as human nature' and that a 'person does not have an inbuilt set of values that they are inherently structured to pursue. Rather, the values that shape a person's behaviour result from the choices they have made' (Webber 2018: 4). Existentialism as a philosophical position advocates the importance of embracing the freedom at the core of human existence in order to live authentically, in the sense of living for the self and not for or through others. Being with others in the world

distracts one from this cause, making it easy to behave inauthentically, what Sartre describes as 'bad faith'. In Being and Nothingness (1943), published a year before the play, we see how the self is alienated from the self and othered, and this anticipates the dynamic of the play, which consists of three people who, in their lives on earth and their encounters on stage, fail to account for their actions, finding themselves ensnared by their own foibles and dependent on the judgement of others. The inability to escape from the trap of others is the conclusion reached in Sartre's conception of hell in Huis Clos.

This article will explore this Sartrean vision before applying it to a current setting, namely, a model of social validation that holds sway in the realm of social media. In the manufactured and fragmented world that has come to define social life for so many in the twenty-first century, individuals construct their identities through the performance of self where value is bestowed by the other.

### **The staging of hell**

The play is about the plight of three people who have died and found themselves confined together. The mention of hell is not explicit but can be inferred from the anxiety of the three protagonists and their references to torture.<sup>[note]3</sup> The Valet, the fourth character in the play, leads the three strangers one by one into a drawing room designed in the style of the Second Empire.<sup>[note]4</sup> Joseph Garcin, a journalist from Rio, is the first to enter, followed by Inez Serrano, a postal clerk from Paris, and, finally, Estelle Rigault, a wealthy socialite housewife also from Paris. Working with the knowledge that the characters are dead, their gathering in a drawing room of all places, is unexpected and even strange. To audiences in Sartre's time -- Paris during the Nazi occupation -- the Second Empire furniture in its state of wartime dilapidation would have been a stark reminder of danger at every turn. Lucy Osborne's set design for Paul Hart's 2012 production at Donmar Warehouse, Trafalgar Studios, London, evokes the atmosphere of wartime productions. The drawing room looks as if it has been bombed, the walls have holes in them, the furniture is chipped and worn, heaps of plaster litter the floor (Taylor 2012). To post-war audiences this backdrop, reminiscent of a historical era, is at best distracting and at worst misleading because it creates the impression that we are

experiencing an event that is situated in a particular time and space, which of course is not the case -- as what we are actually experiencing is a state of mind. In keeping with the artistic policy at Donmar, this production is fresh but true to the original context in terms of stylization. Other contemporary productions tend to be more minimalist and modern in design. Take the Snowglobe production, at MainLine Theatre in Montreal, in 2017--18. Directed and co-produced by Jon Greenway with co-producer Peter Giser, the set design is more sparse, with the greatest interior detail being the two-seat sofas. The 2013 production with *Diffractions*, the Theatre Collective, staged the play in what looked like a makeshift photography studio. Directed by Roxane Revon with Marine Morici as assistant director, it was performed at the Wired Arts Festival, the first online performing arts festival. Gone were the standard sofas, replaced with chairs. A similar mood is created by the scenographer Jean-Noël Yven in the 2016 *Compagnie Mutualiste de la Dernière Chance* production, with the evocation of a modernist art gallery. In spite of their different settings, what these productions share is a contemporary and dynamic approach to a play that has enduring resonance. It is simultaneously rooted in the here-and-now, wherever that might be, and is also timeless in its existentialist themes.

An integral part of the staging is the door, the significance of which is to signal the outside world. Doors are multifunctional devices in plays and operate on many levels beyond the narrative. These include creating a sense of spatial and temporal difference, making reference to the action beyond centre stage, and to indicate the multiple microcosmic worlds that exist simultaneously. The door as gateway between different states or passages adds drama, layers of extra meaning, and operates to generate differences in ambience. In the world of Huis Clos, what exists outside the door (if anything) aids in the construction of meaning about where the characters are and hence what the drawing room represents. The characters too have various degrees of cognizance regarding their whereabouts, which are kept uncertain until the 'big reveal'. The world outside, beyond the door in Huis Clos, remains unattainable, as experienced when Garcin unsuccessfully attempts to open the door after failing to summon the Valet at the start of the play<sup>[note]5</sup> and later when he decides he has had enough and heads towards the door. But, right up until the end, the door anticipates another world. The Wired Arts Festival production offers the audience glimpses of what lies behind the stage. We briefly witness the passage of

the three characters as they somberly walk parallel to translucent screens that are separated by gaps, to the door where they enter the stage. This inventive scenography does not dispel the mystery of what lies outside but instead intensifies it by bringing the characters into sharp and stark focus under the lighting design by Lauren Bremer.

### **The waiting game**

The staging is suggestive of a waiting room, where three strangers are passing time.<sup>[note]6</sup> In the text of the play we are informed that this room is actually a drawing room, traditionally a space where guests are entertained, but it adheres to these conventions only perfunctorily. The host, the Valet who introduces each character, plays a minimal but structurally important role, chiefly to alert the audience to the presence of two realms (whatever these might be -- the construal of this space is less important than the cognizance of its existence). As a character, he (as is typical in productions) is liminal, in between spaces, and identities. His characterization is shaped by the particular adaptations. In most productions he plays a mere instrumental role, leading the characters on and off the stage. He is of philosophical importance though because, being eyelid-less, he functions as the all-seeing eye from which nothing is hidden. The Valet in the Snowglobe production, and to a lesser extent at the Wired Arts Festival, is comic and this offsets the seriousness of the mood and the exchanges between the three characters as well as the bewilderment of the situation they find themselves in.

The low-key welcome the guest receive in Sartre's play is matched by an equally sparse drawing room that contains little more than three seats or sofas and a bronze statue on the mantelpiece. The items of furniture are arranged to focus attention on the three-way dynamic between the characters, which drives the play. Some productions opt for uniformity while others, in keeping with Sartre's play, choose to have at least one more luxurious seat, which Estelle will vie for. The noticeable absence of other basic items essential to the furnishing of a room is deliberate. It draws attention to the singular stripped-down purpose -- the three are brought together to make sense of their fates, their identities and their predicament in being placed together. Their environment is meant to be impersonal; it is not a space

intended to bring comfort but one that makes existential demands and that is unhomely. It is bare like a cell, a construction vividly emulated in the 2016 La Compagnie Mutualiste de la Dernière Chance production, where the set is enshrouded in muted grey, surrounded by what looks like disposable hospital curtains and minimalist benches. This clinical environment prevents the characters from relaxing their guard. The other productions cited, however varied in their scenography, share the presentation of the banal. At the start of the production at the Wired Arts Festival, the Valet comes on stage to remove the tape and coverings from the furniture. This has been an unoccupied space. Another aspect that creates a sense of unease is the lighting, which in many productions is used narratively to expose. When characters are communing with people from their past in their recollections, or when their guard falls, they are spotlighted, often in cold harsh lighting. Robert Goode, the lighting director at the 2016 production of the play at the Burton Taylor studio, Oxford, uses it for dramatic effect; his 'lighting design suffused the entire drama with a cold red light' (Beretta 2016). And individual passages are emphasized for effect. When Garcin and Inez confront Estelle about her past, for example, 'they draw her against the wall, where the lighting holds her in the spotlight in a cold blue ray' (Beretta 2016). Comparable to this is the lighting employed in the Compagnie Mutualiste production. Here Jean-Noël Yven uses the contrast of light and dark to dramatize the narrative, turning up the lights to clinical effect.

Garcin, more than the other two, feels the greatest discomfort in his unfamiliar surroundings and is plagued throughout. His uneasiness is not quelled by Inez, who is antagonistic towards him, asking if he is the torturer and openly stating that she hates men. Estelle temporarily dispels the mood and soon becomes the love interest for Inez. A bizarre dynamic is set up where they flit between creating deception and seeking approval. Each concerned with their self-image and standing, they need the affirmation of the other in different ways. Estelle seeks Garcin's attention by teasing and tempting him; Inez vies for Estelle's attention. Plagued by the fear that he is a coward, Garcin is desperate for vindication and seeks it from the others.

They are at various stages of self-awareness about the circumstances in their past lives that have led them there and this is fuelled by questions about why they have been placed together. The past intrudes via the snippets of memories that stream in,

as if by radio (Snowglobe production), or accompanied by background music (Compagnie Mutualiste production), which are reminders of the earthly realm that has been left behind.<sup>[note]7</sup> Hart's production features Tom Mill's soundscore, which animates the characters' memories as audible echoes from the past. Lending such vividness to their former earthly lives underscores the bleakness of the predicament that the characters find themselves in. But in spite of this no one will openly admit their reason for being damned. The truth is revealed only eventually. Estelle is the most shallow of the three and is wedded to her life on earth. She has just died and seemingly watches her funeral from the room. She sees no sense of being with the other two, remarking that they should all be with friends and family, and declaring that their being together is a mistake. Garcin concurs with the view that there is no underlying reason why they've been brought together. He is the weakest of the three, needing the affirmation of the others, and is both bewildered and easily manipulated. Fearful on his own, the company of the two women exacerbates his anxiety. He is overpowered by them. Estelle desires him and he eventually gives into her, enraging Inez. But his need for Inez's affirmation -- that he is not a coward -- is greater.

What is interesting, from the perspective of the audience, is that we learn about the characters more from their interactions with each other than in their explicit telling of why they are there. They are at best cagey and evasive about what they did in their lives to lead them to this point and they lie to themselves and seek to deceive others. The simplicity and starkness of the staging turns the spotlight on them; the characters are put under a microscope. Their subsequent unveiling of who they are confirms the audience's suspicions. To learn that Garcin is a coward comes as no surprise for he has behaved as such. Similarly, Estelle shows how fake she is by bolstering Garcin's confidence just so that she can make him desire her, and Inez's sadism comes out in the way in which she withholds affirmation from Garcin.

The friction in the exchanges between the characters is exacerbated by certain features of the play that reinforce the uncomfortable environment that the audience is in. The play consists in a single act, a decision partly made because of the precarious political situation during its opening, making it advantageous not to extend its duration by including an interval. A rarely considered aspect, the interval is

a reminder of the world outside the play, and the lack of one means that the audience is given no time to reflect on the spiralling tension of the conversations or the concomitant mood, there is no relief or resolution. Another aspect that contributes to the sense of the interminable is the aforementioned unhomely nature of the surroundings, heightened by the lack of mirrors (which one might expect to see in a drawing room) and windows, which collectively create a sense of oppression. The somewhat claustrophobic mood is further exacerbated by the staging in the round -- a strategy that generates a sense of encompassing, which in turn creates intimacy with the audience and enclosure. In the Snowglobe production the Valet is found sitting in the audience, which gives a foretaste of what the audience will soon realize: that the characters are undergoing their own judgement. Michael Billington (2012), theatre critic for the Guardian, remarks on the oppressive atmosphere and the 'air of dusty dilapidation' found in Lucy Osborne's design for Hart's production. Paul Taylor (2012), theatre critic for the Independent, noted something similar, commenting on the 'subterranean confines' of the theatre space, which make it 'ideal' for 'a claustrophobic hell'; and the critic Alexandra Coghlan (2012) comments on 'the encroaching sprawl of damp'.

The three characters tussle and are fundamentally unable to get along or to come to a consensus about their predicament. Conversations between them are choppy and persist stubbornly, without resolution; this exacerbates the drama, with the characters often encircling each other, until Garcin decides that he cannot put up with being manipulated by Estelle and invalidated by Inez and gets up to leave. When the conflict reaches a peak, Garcin heads to the exit. The door opens but he and the others stay put. His epiphany that 'hell is other people' sheds light on the central mystery. The denouement leads to the unravelling of the reasons why they are there in the first instance. The three may have laboured under the misapprehension that they were waiting to go elsewhere and that this interim period was no more than dead time. But the lesson learnt at the end is, anticlimactically, that there is no beyond. This is hell. Hell is not a place but the situation of being-with-others when one defines the self through the other. But the lesson that can be learnt here is that the situation undergone throughout the play constitutes an experience that is hell.

## Through the keyhole: The judgement of others

Garcin's utterance is both the revelation and turning point of the play because up until that point there was an expectation that the three were going to be led from their current situation of being arbitrarily placed together to another realm. The realization that there is nowhere else, as hell is here and just here raises the question of what exactly Sartre means philosophically when he describes hell as being other people. An effective way of framing this is through the metaphor of the mirror. Mirrors anchor identity. Within the play they represent or are shorthand for the gaze, the look of the other, itself a fundamental notion in Sartre's philosophy. 'The Look', a narrative section of Being and Nothingness, explores the concept of alienation brought out by the experience of being-with-others. Alienation refers to a sense of estrangement of the self from itself that can happen when we are in the world with others because it is here that one's self shows up as the object of another's gaze and not in relation to one's projects. When I am absorbed in the world and continuous with it, I do not experience the edges between myself and the other because I am existing for myself. However, the situation changes when I become aware that I am being looked at (which is discussed in 'The Look'). What happens here is that 'my subjectivity is invaded by the subjectivity of another for whom I am merely part of the world, an item for her projects), I become aware of having a "nature", a "character," of being or doing something' (Sartre 1992: 340--58).

In the contemplation on self each character falls into the trap of describing themselves in relation to others in their former lives. What's more, even though they are strangers, they are dependent on the perceptions of one another. If the mirror is used as a metaphor to reflect and complete the self then the absence of mirrors comes at a price. This is especially the case in a drawing room, where one would expect to see such objects. Garcin remarks early on that there are no mirrors in the room, as if to draw attention to this fact. But it is only when Estelle asks Inez if she has a mirror that the profundity of the symbol is revealed. Estelle needs to see herself to satisfy her vanity but also, more significantly, to verify her existence, because her investment in self, her project, to use a Sartrean term, is tied up with her vanity. She becomes distressed because she is not able to validate herself by looking in the mirror, which leads to a crisis of self. Inez offers to act as Estelle's



mirror, to allow her to reflect back at her, and she agrees. Inez uses this as an opportunity to get physically close to Estelle and is subsequently hurt that Garcin is the object of Estelle's desire.

Given the circumstances in which they've been brought together one can only describe their behaviour as thoroughly absurd. One would expect in their state of being dead that they would be contemplating their earthly existence to find meaning or spiritual truths, but human folly takes over and they are ensnared by vanity and the need for social affirmation from each other -- from strangers, strangers whom they dislike at that. The banal acts as a touchstone of the absurd. In earthly life the mundane objects of our existence are the most familiar because they are fundamental to the rituals that structure and ground our existence. But in death these objects become meaningless and absurd. The bronze statue, part of the set description, for example, is one of the only non-functional objects in the interior. It serves no purpose, is more oppressive than ornamental and makes the room seem even more uninviting. The ultimate example of the futility of material life is the paper knife that Estelle uses to stab Inez at the end of the text-play. Interactions between the three characters occur on two levels: momentary contemplation of their existence juxtaposed and subsumed by weaknesses of resolve. Inez is the most clear-headed and expresses the bleakness of their predicament. But her desire for Estelle pulls her back and prevents her from rationalizing her situation.

Sartre's existential position promulgates thinking for oneself, thereby adhering to good faith, and assessing one's behaviour using oneself as a yardstick. In fact, quite the opposite happens: Garcin, Estelle and Inez allow themselves to be framed in relation to one another and in spite of being strangers they allow themselves to be judged by each other. Their motivations might be different but they submit themselves to each other in various ways. The dynamic between the three often involves one or two of them acting as judge and the other as spectator, which conveys the idea of being judged and watched by other people (Beretta 2016). Estelle allows Inez to reflect back at her, to be her mirror when she needs affirmation. Inez seeks Estelle's attention. Garcin needs validation from both women. Jonathan Webber argues that there is a case for seeing Inez as occupying a different position in comparison to Garcin and Estelle. She is not only more self-

assured about who she is, but is less perplexed about her whereabouts and comes closest to the Sartrean notion of authenticity (Webber 2011: 45--56).

Stating that hell is other people should not be read merely as an exclamation but also as an assertion. Sartre is not advocating nihilism or misanthropy of any kind but is saying that our perpetual fall into being-in-the-world and reliance on the judgement of others is hell because it compromises and sacrifices selfhood. Hell is of our own making, then, and is difficult to escape from. The characters have set each other up as torturers and rather than taking responsibility for their lives and actions they hold each other to account to such an extent that their true selves are stifled. But this tendency, this behaviour, is so typical of humans that it feels impossible to escape it. That is why when the door springs open the three do not leave; there is no exit from this predilection of being. It takes courage to think for oneself and the majority cannot achieve this because we are imprisoned by others' perceptions of us and cannot be authentic and free. There is no redemption; 'we are damned, now and always, by the most pernicious jailor: ourselves' (Wicker 2012).

### **Connected but alone: The chamber of banality**

By setting the play in a down-at-heel Second Empire drawing room, Sartre was commenting on the applicability of the metaphor of hell in the time of the German occupation of Paris, where people lived in constant fear. It is interesting that when the play opened in 1944 it was originally titled Les Autres (The Others) (Webber 2011: 48). But maximally he was also making a more general philosophical observation about human behaviour. One of the central themes explored in Sartre's play is the ontological struggle of being that means one is seen from the perspective of another's consciousness. The other, any other, causes one to be estranged from the self and plunged into an experience of hell. The extended philosophical application of the play was not meant to minimize the horrors of wartime atrocities but rather to alert us to the situation of hell as an experience of being. Sartre defies the notion that hell is a place after life to propose instead that it exists immanently in our dealings with people.

The existential predicament of being with others in the play, where hell is experienced as their gaze, has renewed significance in the context of social media, and in the behaviours and practices that people exhibit there. In particular the need for affirmation that the characters seek from each other has parallels in the experience of contemporary patterns of social relations in the context of social media. In the interlocking webs/matrices of communication that have opened up in multiple forms and modes including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, for example, social interaction is set up in such a way as to necessitate two processes that are key in the play, and in Sartre's beliefs about the other: the gaze and validation of the other.

In the construction of a profile on social media, and the posting of various thoughts and views, one automatically places one's self under another's scrutiny, who in turn validates, positively or negatively, through appropriate symbols (emojis, for instance) or comments. This may prompt others to chip in, either to the original post or the comments about it. The original post takes on a life of its own, with the comments as the main mechanism of validation. If no one responded to social media it would die: it is entirely dependent on the continuous churning out of responses.

When social media first appeared, one could have been excused for assuming that the creation and construction of an identity involved autonomy. People are now more aware that this is far from the case and that as soon as one is 'released' into the public eye by means of posts, one is available to the other, laid bare, open to scrutiny and has limited control. In spite of greater privacy regulations that permit people to manage their profiles more closely, it does not prevent people's identities being constructed and developed through collective comment. The presence of others distorts one's conceptions of oneself.

Life online was once differentiated from life offline -- the latter being regarded as more real. The physical here-and-now was taken as the yardstick for reality, while the virtual world was an inadequate substitute. The pervasiveness of online communication has marred this erstwhile understanding. Although social media's modes of communication have come to predominate, they are still relatively new. Prior to the participatory culture of Web 2.0[<sup>8</sup>] and other aspects of

globalization that facilitated wider networks and greater social interaction, models of friendship and communication between people were very different. In general, people had fewer, longer-lasting connections that were often deeper rooted because of shared backgrounds, communities, etc. These types of contacts have been surpassed by a different type of interaction that is characterized by more sprawling, even rhizomatic, casual and superficial experiences that are selected on numerous bases that keep on changing and are forged through shared experiences. Sherry Turkle has argued that the increase in the technological efficiency of communication networks is matched by a downturn in emotional connectedness. This, she argues, is not because people's inherent needs for intimacy have changed but because we are allowing technology to dictate its own demands and ourselves to be led by it. In her own words:

Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. (2011: 1)

The development of new platforms or apps for communication makes connections more fragmentary. This has created numerous possibilities for the self to be constructed in different ways, as the setting requires, leading to multiple iterations of the self. But, rather than this increasing the possibility of authenticity, it detracts from it. Turkle maintains that technology is taking the place of true meaningful human interactions and she denies that communication that is not face-to-face is as personal or as valuable to the human spirit. Her phrase 'Connected, But Alone?' refers to the pandemic of being globally connected through various interconnecting channels and platforms while essentially still being alone. It also underscores the importance of discovering what it means to be alone, which, in turn, equips us to seek out more worthwhile connections rather than simply diving into our phones. Rather poignantly, the sense of alienation that Turkle speaks of has increased during the time of COVID-19, in which I write. In the absence of face-to-face contact due to social distancing measures and the concomitant rise of online contact, the need for

physical contact has been decried. This in itself is confirmation of the value of face-to-face communication.

Jaron Lanier's critique of social media makes different objections, which are apposite to the circumstances in Huis Clos. He claims that on social media people behave differently to how they would normally. They are less free and are more 'enslaved' by the pack or mob mentality, reacting to issues that they might not have otherwise (qtd in Williams 2018; Swisher 2018). He believes that people all too easily lose themselves in certain causes like justice, such that 'they lose track of reality, and so they do tend to spin out of control', as we see in trolling (qtd in Swisher 2018). He argues that social media can manipulate people, leading to a distorted version of reality (Lanier 2019).<sup>[note]9</sup> His comments are eerily Sartrean and could well be applied to Huis Clos. The three characters are brought together to ponder their existence and are unable to resolve their disquietude, instead agitating each other. Inez demands they stop lying to one another.<sup>[note]10</sup> Garcin suggests that they leave each other in peace but the other two compete for his attention -- with Inez's singing and Estelle's vanity calling out for a mirror. Inez displays a greater sense of fortitude but succumbs to her passions. Any sense of resolution is always temporary and gives way kaleidoscopically to another issue that needs attention. This creates the abrupt rhythm that is characteristic of the exchanges, which is often mirrored in their unsettled body language as they move about the stage in agitation. Exchanges in social media take that same form of presenting a view, waiting for affirmation, and gratification giving way to another demand or protest. The conversations in the play are fragmented and, like those on social media, involve collisions of past and present. At unexpected points each character is transported back in time to a memory that alters their state of mind and reminds the audience that we are encountering the dead. The conversations are rootless and flit without settling. This lack of focus and the endless exchange of snippets of information that are continually churned out is akin to what is experienced on social media. Taking a creative leap of faith, we could imagine the three, each from radically different backgrounds, meeting online, attempting to forge connections via seduction, provocation and other means on common ground, and to seek each other's validation.

## Fig 1.

### **Hell is on the other side**

A standout production that warrants discussion on its own for its distinctive interpretation is by the Virtual Stage and Electric Company Theatre. Directed by Kim Collier the 2008--9 touring production premiered at the Hangar, at the Centre for Digital Media in Vancouver, BC, and later at the Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto. The production pushes the boundaries of what theatre is by turning the stage into a cinema, and creates a spectacle that resonates with a contemporary audience. It departs from faithfully following the narrative of the text but without compromising the essence of the work. The single most effective strategy deployed in this production is the inversion of the play's perspective, both narratively and optically (Hoile 2009). Unlike other productions where the audience inhabits the same space as the characters and are intrigued by the suspension of what lies on the other side of the door, the spaces are reversed here. The play is not performed on stage but is merely the passage to the space where the play will be acted and the audience sees them at one remove. The characters are led onto a darkly lit stage by the Valet, who doubles up as jailer, and are then forced into a cramped bolted backroom cum store cupboard that is connected to video cameras. Once in the room, the door is bolted to symbolize no exit. The audience-as-voyeurs then witness the conversations between the characters on screen, while the Valet remains on stage, in the same space as the audience. The characters are in a pressure cooker environment. This is made apparent not only by the level of conflict experienced but also by the uncomfortably small space in the room, conveyed by the camera angles, which only show the tops of their bodies. In the climax, desperate to leave, the characters bang on the door and the Valet opens it, leading them onto the stage. Terrified, they scuffle, and hold back. If hell is the judgement of others, the fear of being othered, then the characters are right to be frightened to enter the space of those that have had them under their gaze. The twist is when the audience realize that we too are under surveillance. The audience has not been spared and cameras in the lights have been recording throughout the performance. The assumed critical distance that awaited the audience by virtue of being physically separate from the main action of the play has been thwarted surreptitiously as they, too, like the

characters on the screens, have been objectified and held in the gaze of another. This could be read as an admonishment that 'we should concentrate on developing ourselves through our future actions. We are not dead yet' (Webber 2011: 47).

## Fig. 2

### **Hell is all around us: Echoes of the chamber of banality**

In spite of 'hell is other people' having become one of Sartre's best-known quotations, as a play Huis Clos has not been performed widely by production companies. It has been taken up at more niche, pioneering venues and by arts organizations that encourage innovation. But this has been advantageous because it has meant the productions are fresh and contemporary, as conveyed through innovative interpretations of the text. In her use of cinematic techniques Kim Collier's production takes the drama to a whole new level of psychological intensity. It too was prescient of the contemporary age. For the characters, who stand in for you and I, the privileged readers, life behind the screen -- online -- has become normalized and experienced via social media where the self is constructed, crafted almost entirely in relation to other people. In and of themselves our identities do not exist because they need validation and every post or comment is part of this exchange. The three characters appear to the audience on screen at one remove. They refuse to leave the vault to come face to face with the audience, real people. The Valet operates on different levels. He is an intermediary between the characters and the audience, at times signalling cryptic gestures to the audience. And the audience too watches the downfall of three strangers who, unable to ground themselves in their values, fragment. Garcin's and Estelle's flaws, chiefly cowardice and vanity, brought about their downfall. Inez's are less evident for she has a firmer grip on the existential situation of their whereabouts and is honest about her character from the outset, from the moment she emerged on stage. But she too falls foul to desire.

In the parallel constructed with social media it becomes apparent that similar issues about the human condition pertain. People are too dependent on the opinions of the others, too immersed in the humdrum to live their lives authentically; they are propelled into inauthenticity and the freedom that resides at the core of being is too

much of a burden to bear. Human beings seek salvation through others and yet this is hell because in seeking out the validation of others we deny ourselves subjectivity.

In a play about hell one expects medieval torture devices, not seats in a drawing room with an attendant Valet. But Sartre's hell is a state of mind that is found in the here-and-now. For the audiences of Sartre's day hell was all around them in the wartime reality. The continued resonance of the message conveys the plea to action and choice, for existentialism demands application throughout the course of one's life. This requires courage in an unpredictable world especially in which human encounters are increasingly mediated via the virtual and couched in self-deception. In social media people perform rather than embody their identities. And the play too betrays such superficiality. Even though they are already dead and have nothing to hide, each character lies to him/herself, which in itself conveys the absurdity of the situation. And this absurdity is translated into banality. In the end there is only banality -- what Alexandra Coghlan (2012) astutely describes as the 'quiet menace of the banality'... 'Well then, let's get on with it'.

**Fig 3.**

### **Acknowledgment**

The author wishes to thank Clayton Baraniuk and Jennifer Swan at The Electric Company Theatre.

### **Notes**

1 It was first performed at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, Paris, in May 1944.

2 Another, lesser-used, English translation of the title of the play is In Camera.

3 Within the text-play, references to the location are elusive. The first character to arrive remarks 'And this is what it looks like' ... 'Still, I certainly didn't expect – this! You know what they tell us down there?' ... 'About... this – er- residence' (2000: 181).

4 The Second Empire style, also known as the Napoleon III Style, lasted from 1848 to 1880 and was known for its imposing and ostentatious interior designs, which included fireplace mantels, mirrors, candelabras and chandeliers.



5 The Valet informed Garcin that although he could be summoned by the bell he was not always available for service.

6 This inertia, this sense of waiting experienced so vividly in Huis Clos, inspired subsequent works including Beckett's Waiting for Godot and Pinter's hothouse dramas (Billington 2012).

7 Further reminders of the earthly are the traces of the banal raised especially by Garcin. On entry to this unfamiliar space he latches onto the everyday to ground him. He bemoans the furniture to the Valet, saying that he expects that he will get used to it in time and asking him if there are any other rooms. Seemingly unaware of his state, to the amusement of the Valet, Garcin asks for his toothbrush and the whereabouts of his bed.

8 That is, the retronym referring to the second stage of the WWW's evolution, which has been used since 2004.

9 In an interview with Kara Swisher (2018) he discusses, among other things, the good and bad aspects of social media. He argues that 'the bad parts can be described very clearly as a manipulative engine. It's the algorithms that are measuring you and then calculating what you should experience in order to change your behaviour according to an algorithm'.

10 She uses the term 'play acting' -- asking the others 'What's the point of play-acting, trying to throw dust in each other's eyes? We're all tarred with the same brush' ... 'Yes, we are criminals – murderers – all three of us. We're in hell...' (2000, p. 194).

## References

Beretta, Francesca (2016) 'Review: No Exit', The Oxford Culture Review, 2 June, <https://bit.ly/3wnUmv7> , last accessed 3 November 2020.

Billington, Michael (2012) 'Huis Clos -- review', 10 January, <https://bit.ly/3f7JrjC> , last accessed 3 November 2020.

Coghlan, Alexandra (2012) 'Huis Clos, Trafalgar Studios', The Arts Desk.com, 10 January, <https://bit.ly/3fz4PgG> , last accessed 3 November 2020.

Hoile, Christopher (2009) Review: No Exit, Stage Door, 17 November, <https://bit.ly/3ozraie> , last accessed 3 November 2020.

Lanier, Jaron (2019) Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now, New York: Vintage.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1992 [1943]) Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (2000 [1944]) Huis Clos and Other Plays, trans. Gilbert, Stuart and Black, Kitty London: Penguin Classics.

Swisher, Kara (2018) Should you quit social media? July 27<sup>th</sup> <https://bit.ly/3oNG3h7>, last accessed 21 May 2021.

Taylor, Paul (2012) Review of Huis Clos, *Trafalgar Studio 2, London*, January 10<sup>th</sup>. <https://bit.ly/2Sc9HQS>, last accessed 3 November 2020.

Turkle, Sherry (2011) Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other. New York: Basic Books.

Webber, Jonathan (2011) 'There is Something About Inez', Think 10 (27), pp. 45-56. <https://bit.ly/3hJ8riL> , last accessed 3 November 2020.

Webber, Jonathan (2018) Rethinking Existentialism, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wicker, Tom (2012) Review of Huis Clos: Theatre of the Damned, January 10<sup>th</sup>.  
<https://bit.ly/3f7VOfr> , last accessed 3 November 2020.

Williams, Zoe (2018) Review of Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now by Jaron Lanier.  
<https://bit.ly/345oKPO> , last accessed 3 November 2020.