

**Decoding visual and acoustic signals:
Epistemological uncertainty in Tom Stoppard's
After Magritte and *Artist Descending a Staircase***

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Abstract

The paper discusses two plays of Tom Stoppard, *After Magritte* and *Artist Descending a Staircase*, from the perspective of the uncertainty pertaining to the possibility of perceiving and adequately describing the reality. The plays employ intertextual references to two modern painters whose names are included in the titles of the dramas and who are known to have experimented in their artistic ventures. In two series of pictures, *The Key of Dreams* and *The Use of Words*, Magritte dealt with the difficulties connected with representing reality in pictorial and linguistic terms, while Beauchamp tried to present not only three dimensionality but also movement on the two dimensional canvas. Apart from referring to art, Stoppard's pieces are also a kind of who-done-it, with each of them trying to solve a mystery. *After Magritte* discloses the solution of the identity of the strange figure the characters saw in the street and also logically explains the strange opening and closing stage images. Being a radio play, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, teaches the audience to decode aural signals and demonstrates that, similar to objects of visual perception, they may be decoded in different ways. The two dramas discussed thus deal with the relative quality of reality, whose perception and description depends on individual sensitivity of a concrete person.

Keywords

Stoppard, „Artist Descending a Staircase”, „After Magritte”, aural and visual signals

**Rozszyfrowywanie sygnałów wizualnych i akustycznych:
„After Magritte” i „Artist Descending a Staircase”
Toma Stopparda**

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje dwie sztuki współczesnego dramaturga angielskiego, Toma Stopparda: „After Magritte” i „Artist Descending a Staircase”. Obydwa dramaty nawiązują do twórczości malarzy – w pierwszym przypadku jest to Rene Magritte, belgijski surrealista, w drugim zaś Francuz-kubista – Marcel Duchamp. „After Magritte” zaczyna się od surrealistycznej sceny, która zostaje wytłumaczona w logiczny sposób w trakcie dramatu. Sztukę kończy również surrealistyczna scena, która nie jest przyjmowana w ten sposób ponieważ widzowie otrzymują w trakcie jej tworzenia wszelkie potrzebne informacje. Z kolei „Artysta schodzący po schodach” to teatr radiowy. Nagranie magnetofonowe staje się podstawą do wyjaśnienia sprawy śmierci jednej z głównych postaci. W trakcie dramatu Stoppard uczy słuchacza rozszyfrowywać sygnały akustyczne, co prowadzi do stwierdzenia, że na taśmie zarejestrowano nie morderstwo, ale nieszczęśliwy wypadek.

Słowa kluczowe

Stoppard, „After Magritte”, „Artist Descending a Staircase”, sygnały wizualne i akustyczne

Divergent as it is, Tom Stoppard's oeuvre is characterized by certain traits, one of these being the epistemological impossibility of perceiving and describing reality in a way unanimously agreed upon. Stoppard has repeatedly stressed his lack of certainty pertaining to defining reality precisely. It was Clive

James who first noticed the parallels between Stoppardian theatrics and Einsteinian physics. He argued that Stoppard's plays reflect the new, post-Newtonian outlook based on the proposition voiced by Einstein who "found himself obliged to rule out the possibility of a viewpoint at rest" (1975: 71). In an interview, Stoppard affirmed that he considered James's article to be brilliant and added:

What he said was that you get into trouble with my plays if you think that there's a static viewpoint on the events. There is no observer. There is no safe point around which everything takes its proper place, so that you see things flat and see how they relate to each other. Although the Einsteinian versus Copernican image sounds pretentious, I can't think of a better one to explain what he meant – that there is no point of rest. (Hayman 1979b: 144)

Already George Moore in *Jumpers* (1972) complained about the uncertainty resulting from the development of science: "Copernicus cracked our confidence, and Einstein smashed it" (75). The main character of the drama also mentions the Wittgenstein anecdote. On being told by his friend that people assumed that the sun went round the earth because it looked like it did, Wittgenstein asked: "Well, what would it have looked like if it had looked as if earth was rotating?" (75). Copernicus proved that sometimes our interpretation may be misleading and that, due to imperfect perception, the description of reality may be faulty. Furthermore, Copernicus's discovery may also be viewed in the light of Einstein's theory of relativity concerning space.

Making numerous references to the discoveries of modern physics, another play of Stoppard, *Hapgood* (1988) demonstrates the changes that have occurred in our conception of reality and the epistemological uncertainty as a result of the shift from Newtonian mechanics to the formulation of relativity and quantum theory. Classical Newtonian physics postulated a permanent external world, fixed, objective and describable. Scientific laws were always based on strict cause and effect

principles and were independent of the perceiver. Modern physics has shown that once it is discovered, a law does not hold in conditions in which it has so far been considered to hold, it is necessary to search for new explanations. This notion was expressed by Richard Feynman in his *Lectures on Physics* from which Stoppard takes the motto of *Hapgood* and to which he often refers in the course of the drama. This play may be perceived, among others, as an investigation concerning epistemological uncertainty pertaining to individual identity.¹

In many cases, a given situation can be understood differently depending on the observer, the perspective from which they are observing the phenomenon, their individual perception and their subjective interpretation. In such instances, it is just not possible to establish what the reality is and what is its mere illusion. George in *Jumpers* poses the question: “How does one know what to believe? . . . How does one know what it is one believes when it’s so difficult to know what it is one knows” (71). George’s lack of certainty reflects a similar lack of certainty on Stoppard’s part. He has repeatedly argued that he “write[s] plays because writing dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting oneself” (Gussow interview 1972). According to him his plays “are a lot to do with the fact that [he] just [doesn’t] know” (Hudson interview 1974: 48). Ronald Hayman has written: “Stoppard makes a virtue out of uncertainty – ‘Tom Stoppard Doesn’t Know’ was the title chosen for his 1972 contribution to *BBC Television’s* series ‘One Pair of Eyes’” (1979a: 25). Janet Watts quotes the artist saying: “A truth is always a compound of two half-truths and you never reach it because there is always something more to say” (1973: 12).

The issues of different individual perceptions of reality and its divergent descriptions are also among the main problems of Stoppard’s two short dramas, making intertextual references to the art of painting: *After Magritte* (1970) and *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972). The titles of these two pieces bring up

¹ For the discussion of this issue see Uchman (2013).

the names of two painters, both of whom were investigating reality and experimenting with it and its artistic (and also linguistic, in the case of Magritte) representation.

The title *After Magritte* may be interpreted in a number of different, yet not contradictory ways. Firstly, the events of the play take place after the Harrises's visit to an exhibition of Rene Magritte's paintings. In this sense, the word "after" has a strictly chronological meaning in reference to the events of the day. Secondly, the drama was written "after Magritte" in an iconographic sense, "by the way of pseudo-painterly quotation (as in 'after Leonardo')" (Elam 1984: 471), which is visible in the opening stage image reminiscent of *L'assassin menace* and also in the reproduction on the stage of certain motifs from Magritte's paintings.² Thirdly, the play may also be treated as a kind of response to surrealism. And finally, the drama was written after Magritte's work established itself in the collective imagination. It could be argued, however, that while the play starts with a surrealistic stage image, later on all the surrealism dissolves while the audience is provided with a logical and reasonable explanation, a point which has been noticed by a number of critics.³

Rene Magritte painted two series of pictures, *The Key of Dreams* and *The Use of Words*, in which he investigated the imperfect and imprecise attempts of rendering reality in pictorial and verbal terms. Furthermore, he discussed the issue in an essay dealing with the arbitrariness of pictorial and linguistic systems of representation – *Les mots et les visages*. Stoppard was fascinated with the art of Magritte, this being visible not only in his having written a play bearing the name of the Belgian artist, but also in what he conceded in the review, entitled *Joker as Artist*, of Suzi Gablik's book on Magritte:

² For a discussion of these see: Elam (1984: 471); Goldstein (1975: 19) and Hu (1989: 77).

³ Corballis (1984: 57); Dean (1981: 51-53); Goldstein (1975: 20-21); Hu (1989: 69); Jenkins (1988: 54); Kelly (1991: 89-90); Sammells (1988: 60) and Whitaker (1986: 78).

But the one omission which I find incomprehensible is any acknowledgement of the fact that the man's technically perfect execution is crucial to the impact of his ideas [when Magritte] wished to remind us that you can't smoke a painting of a pipe, [he] was able to paint one so smooth, so woody, so rounded, so perfect that you could, as they say, smoke it; and thus made the idea work. (Stoppard 1970b: 40)

The title of Stoppard's review refers to the quality of the painter's art which Stoppard shares with him, namely an outrageous sense of humour. The playwright is simultaneously dealing with serious epistemological problems and evoking laughter, thus achieving his aim as described in one of the interviews: "What I try to do, is to end up by contriving the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce or perhaps even high comedy" (Hudson interview 1974: 8).

The difficulty connected with accessing a clear and convincing explanation of reality is demonstrated in *After Magritte* by the weird and shocking opening stage image and the hopping figure, seen by the Harrises on their return journey from the museum. Who the figure really was, what he actually looked like and what he was doing become the source of argument and disagreement, culminating in the following exchange of views:

FOOT: Can you describe him?

MOTHER: Yes. He was playing hopscotch on the corner, a man in the loose-fitting striped gabardine of a convicted felon. He carried a handbag under one arm, and with the other he waved at me with a cricket bat.

(FOOT *reels.*)

FOOT: Would you know him again?

MOTHER: I doubt it. He was wearing dark glasses, and a surgical mask.

(HARRIS *comes forward to restore sanity.*)

HARRIS: My mother is a bit confused, Inspector. It was a tortoise under his arm and he wasn't so much playing hopscotch as one-legged.

THELMA: (*deftly slipping the dress over HARRIS.*) A tortoise or a football - he was a young man in a football shirt -

HARRIS: *If I might just stick my oar in here, he could hardly have been a young man since he had a full white beard, and, if I'm not mistaken, side-whiskers*

FOOT: So the best witness you can come up with is a blind, white-bearded, one-legged footballer with a tortoise. (39-40)

A great many of the misunderstandings which occur in the play result from the characters being “victims of their own logical absolutism” (Elam 1984: 476), of their being “entrapped by their interpretative logic” (Kelly 1991: 90), which is explicitly illustrated by an earlier exchange between Thelma and Harris. When Harris insists that the man had “a white stick”, Thelma argues it was “an ivory cane” to which Harris shouts: “An ivory cane IS a white stick” (19). Pursuing their own logic, the characters each try to convince themselves and the others that their own description and interpretation is the only correct one. In this case, Reginald insists on the thing being a white stick because he has argued earlier that the man was blind. An ivory cane does not denote anything special, while a white stick symbolically indicates the blindness of the person carrying it.

As the play is coming to its end, the Inspector provides an explanation of the strange figure which caused so much confusion:

Well, I woke up late and my migraine was giving me hell and my bowels were so bad I had to stop half way through shaving, and I never gave the traffic warden a thought till I glanced out of the window and saw your car pulling away from the only parking space in the road. I flung down the razor and rushed into the street, pausing only to grab my wife's handbag containing the small change and her parasol to keep off the rain - [...]

I got pretty wet because I couldn't unfurl the damn thing, and I couldn't move fast because in my haste to pull up my pyjama trousers I put both feet into the same leg. (45-46)

Strange as it may seem, the story of the man in the street, highly improbable, yet possible, was based on an actual situation. Stoppard recalls it

was based on fact for a start – somebody I know had a couple of peacocks in the garden, and one escaped while he was shaving. He chased it and he had to cross a main road to catch it, and he was standing in his pyjamas with shaving cream on his face holding a peacock when the traffic started going by. (Hudson interview 1974: 17)

From the whole play, it clearly transpires that even the seemingly surreal pictures – the opening and closing stage images and the figure encountered by the Harrises – can, after all, receive a simple and convincing, though strange, explanation. It must be pointed out that there is a difference between the figure in the street and the stage images of the beginning and end of the play. While we do not see the Inspector hopping on one leg in the street and the picture is evoked by different descriptions of the event, as a theatre audience we directly experience the situation at the beginning and end of the play. We undoubtedly come to the conclusion that the opening of the play is weird and shocking. Gradually, as the play develops, all the oddities are logically explained. The situation at the end of the drama presents an opposite case – the bizarre final situation is constructed gradually in front of our eyes and each thing which could seem otherwise odd is justified in the process.

The title of the other play discussed here, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, also contains an intertextual reference, in this case to the famous picture of Marcel Duchamp *Nude Descending a Staircase*. In this picture, the artist tried to evoke not only the three dimensionality of the object presented on a two-dimensional canvass but also, seemingly the impossible, to evoke the movement of the figure. Art does not speak for itself, its overall meaning is the result of the creative effort first on the part of the artist himself and then on the part of the spec-

tators. Marcel Duchamp, who perceived himself as a cubist (D'Harnoncourt 1989: 256), made this point clear when he described the effect of "elementary parallelism": "[The] movement is in the eye of the spectator, who incorporates it into the painting".⁴

In his play, Stoppard also tries to achieve the seemingly impossible and he succeeds in his venture. Not only does he write a radio drama pertaining to surrealist art, but he also deals successfully with aural reality to teach the audience to decode sound effects and the reality signaled by them. This drama, further characterized by a specific time structure, tries to solve two mysteries: who Sophie fell in love with and what the cause of Donner's fall down the stairs was.

The drama presents three surrealist artists, Beauchamp (whose name evokes Duchamp), Donner, Martello and a young woman, Sophie, who met them in the past, during an exhibition of modern art. At that time she had very bad eyesight and at present she is blind. Before she went blind, Sophie fell in love with one of the four men she met. Remembering that each of them had been photographed with the picture he had painted, she identified her beloved as the one who had painted "black railings on a field of snow" (41), that is as Beauchamp. It was, however, Donner who truly loved her and wanted to help her after Beauchamp's abandoning her which finally led to her suicide. When, in the conversation with Martello, Donner expresses his regrets and says "She would have been happy with me", Martello remarks: "To *us* it was Beauchamp, but which of us did she see in her mind's eye . . . ?" Speaking about the picture she remembered, he says: "she described it briefly, and it had an image of black vertical railings, like park railings, right across the canvas, as though one were looking at a field of snow through the bars of a cage; not like Beauchamp's snow scene at all" and "Thick white posts, top to bottom across the whole canvas, an inch or two apart, black in

⁴ Pierre Cabanne (1971). *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. Trans. Ran Padgett. New York: Viking Press, 29. Quoted in Kelly (1986: 193).

the gaps –” (55-56). With which man did she fall in love, then? The one who had painted black railings against a white background or the one who had painted white posts against a black background? It could, perhaps, be argued that her mistake was due to the inefficiency of the two artists or to the fact that art, especially abstract art, is not really meant to be a reproduction of a concrete, objective reality. It could also be conceded equally well that, in certain situations, the interpretation depends solely on the perceiver. In this case, it is he who chooses which of the colours functions as the background and which one as the foreground. If we support the latter argument, it becomes obvious that once more the interpretation of reality or of its representation depends on the onlooker. Whichever reading we accept, however, it is not certain whether she has actually erred in visual perception and has thus become a victim of love at first sight, that is blind love, a word especially appropriate in the context of the play. The answer to the question is not really important to us, unlike to Donner who goes through a shock when he realizes that he may have lost his love due to an optical illusion.

Apart from the difficulty of interpreting visual reality, the drama deals also with a similar situation in reference to aural signals. Stoppard recalls that the genesis of *The Artist Descending a Staircase* lay in a

tape gag where we play a tape at the beginning and 75 minutes later we'd peg it off by showing that the whole thing had been, as it were, misinterpreted. So there was the need for 74 minutes of padding or brilliant improvisation if you like or very carefully structured and meticulously built-up plot.⁵

It is Beauchamp who is experimenting in producing “tonal art” (18). At present he is engaged in producing two different kinds of tapes, one of which “is a bubbling cauldron of squeaks, gur-

⁵ Tom Stoppard, Interview with Richard Mayne from the BBC's *Arts Commentary*, BBC Radio Three, 10 November 1972. Quoted in Delaney (1991: 171).

58) and the fly is smacked by one of the characters (22 and 24 3 times, 45 twice, 47, 56 and 58). As the play ends, the listeners hear Beauchamp chasing and finally killing a fly. They realize that the sound sequence is a repetition of what was recorded on his tape. The purely aural, non-verbal sounds, just like the words actually uttered by the two men, are very similar or even identical. The mystery of Donner's death is therefore explained to the radio audience: Donner was not killed but, while chasing a buzzing fly destroying Beauchamp's tape of silence, fell down the stairs and killed himself. Whether this chain of events is also made clear to Beauchamp and Martello remains unclear.

Both in *After Magritte* and *Artist Descending a Staircase*, Tom Stoppard investigates mysteries pertaining to reality and its representation by means of fine art, language, or a tape recorder. His presentation proves that a given reality may be perceived and interpreted variously by different onlookers which may lead to unpredictable, often funny consequences. Dealing with the serious issue of the difficulty of epistemological certainty concerning reality the playwright has written two plays which evoke laughter. He has thus achieved his aims connected with playwriting: he contrives "the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce" and manages to "entertain a roomful of people" (Hudson interview, 1974: 8 and 6).

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