

Jadwiga Uchman

WORDS AND IMAGES: TOM STOPPARD'S *AFTER MAGRITTE*

*After Magritte*, first performed in the Ambiance Lunch-Hour Theatre Club at the Green Banana on 9 April 1970, has been described by Randolph Ryan as "a clever and funny look at the problem of determining reality, reduced from philosophic terms to those of farce."<sup>1</sup> While, undoubtedly, the play is hilariously funny, nevertheless, even though the farce dominates, the philosophical problem still remains valid. The play deals all the time long with the questions of defining reality, mysteries of perception, slippery elusiveness of empirical and logical truth, the nature of point of view, the reliability of witnesses and testimony and, finally, the conflict between appearance and reality. Stoppard himself, in an interview with Hudson has referred to the possibility of viewing the play differently: "If you are thinking of a situation as being a metaphor for a more general confusion then of course that's true of *After Magritte*; but that's not an intellectual play, it's a nuts-and-bolts comedy."<sup>2</sup> While comparing this play with his other plays in which he is trying "to marry the play of ideas with comedy or farce", he remarks: "*After Magritte* and *The Real Inspector Hound* are short plays and they are really an attempt to bring off a sort of comic coup in pure mechanical terms. They are conceived as short plays."<sup>3</sup> The starting point of the play is a bizarre, surrealistic stage image connected with Stoppard's absorption with the mysteries of reality and perception. The play itself, however, pokes "fun at the logic of linguistic and visual representation of experience,"<sup>4</sup> and the end of this "nuts and

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<sup>1</sup> Randolph Ryan, "Theatre Checklist No 2", *Theatrefacts* I (1974): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Hudson, Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, "Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas" (Interview with Tom Stoppard), *Theatre Quarterly* 14 (1974): 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine E. Kelly, *Tom Stoppard and the Craft of Comedy: Medium and Genre at Play* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 90.

bolts comedy" provides a logical explanation for the most astonishing, absurd appearances. Thus the play moves from a seeming chaos to a kind of order, the mysteries being solved simultaneously on two levels: the visual, connected with images and the linguistic, associated with words.

In nearly all of his pieces Tom Stoppard sets, what he himself calls, ambushes for the audience. In the interview for *Theatre Quarterly*, entitled "Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas," Tom Stoppard said:

I tend to write through a series of small, large and microscopic ambushes – which might consist of a body falling out of a cupboard, or simply an unexpected word in a sentence. But my preoccupation as a writer, which possibly betokens a degree of insecurity, takes the form of contriving to inject some sort of interest and colour into every line, rather than counting on the general situation having a general interest which will hold an audience.<sup>5</sup>

The play makes use of two mysteries, ambushes set up for the theatre audience and the characters of the play alike. The first of these is the visual riddle of the opening stage image presenting the Harrises' room which appears at least strange and inexplicable both to us and to Constable Holmes watching it through the window from the outside. The second one, also connected with visual perception, concerns the identity of the man who most of the characters of the play saw earlier. It is presented not in visual but in verbal terms as he is described by the characters in a number of divergent, sometimes contradictory ways. Thus, then, the second mystery contains an element characteristic of the first one yet develops it further and new complications appear. In the case of the first mystery the problem consists of the individual perception and understanding of the image of reality perceived. In the case of the second one a question is added concerning a proper, adequate description of the individually perceived reality in linguistic terms and thus an originally visual image is evoked by means of words.

The two mysteries presented in the play seem to have traceable origins. The initial stage image is reminiscent both of René Magritte's painting *L'assassin menacé*<sup>6</sup> and of the beginning of Sławomir Mrożek's *Tango*,

<sup>5</sup> Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> The similarity between the two is mentioned by: Tim Brassell, *Tom Stoppard. An Assessment* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), p. 279; Lucina Paquet Gabbard, *The Stoppard Plays* (Troy–New York: The Whitston Publishing Co., 1982), p. 78; Anthony Jenkins, *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 55; Felicia H. Londré, *Tom Stoppard* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), p. 120; Neil Sammells, *Tom Stoppard. The Artist as Critic* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 60 and Hersh Zeifman, "Tomfoolery: Stoppard's Theatrical Puns," in: John Russel Brown, ed., *Modern British Dramatists* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984), p. 90.

a play which Stoppard translated in 1966. The story of the strange man in the street, as Stoppard says

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.<sup>7</sup>

*After Magritte* opens with a bizarre stage picture. The room with “most of furniture . . . stacked up against the street door in a sort of barricade,”<sup>8</sup> is occupied by three people:

MOTHER is lying on her back on the ironing board. . . . her downstage foot up against the flat of the iron. A white bath towel covers her from ankle to chin. Her head and part of face are concealed in a tight-fitting black rubber bathing cap. . . . She could be dead; but is not. . . . THELMA HARRIS . . . , dressed in a full length ballgown. . . . is discovered on her hands and knees, staring at the floor ahead and giving vent to an occasional sniff. REGINALD HARRIS is standing on the wooden chair. His torso is bare, but underneath his thigh-length green rubber fishing waders he wears his black evening dress trousers. (10)

From the ceiling hang the central light with a lampshade which is a “heavy metal hemisphere” and “a fruit basket attractively overflowing with apples, oranges, bananas, pineapple, and grapes.” Behind the window, “absolutely motionless,” gazing at the scene, is “a uniformed Police Constable (HOLMES).” (10)

During the initial moments of the play the audience, just like Holmes outside the window, keep wondering what all this could possibly mean. As the dialogue of the characters progresses, however, all the mysteries are gradually explained to us but not to Holmes who cannot hear the dialogue and thus is completely unaware of all the explanations provided by it. The furniture has been removed to leave space for Thelma and Reginald’s dance, the final rehearsal before a professional appearance. The fact that they are getting ready for a ball accounts for a number of other strange details: her evening dress, his naked torso and the ironing board (she is about to iron his shirt). The mother, who has just taken a bath, is lying on the ironing board waiting for a massage. She cannot be on the settee which is among the piled furniture. Reginald is wearing waders because he has just replaced a bulb in the bathroom while the tub was still full. Now he is replacing the bulb in the room. During this operation the counterbalance of the lamp consisting of a porcelain container with slugs from a .22 calibre pistol, has been damaged and the slugs have scattered round the room.

<sup>7</sup> Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Stoppard, *After Magritte* (London–Boston: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 9. All references in the text will be to this edition.

That is why Thelma is on her fours trying to find them and the fruit basket is hanging down from the ceiling acting as a replacement counter-balance. She is sniffing because, as she explains later, she has a cold and does not have time to wipe her nose (31–32). As the conversation progresses, providing information about the present situation and also about their earlier encounter in the street with a strange man, the bizarre elements slowly return to normal. Thelma quits her search and irons Reginald's shirt, he gets dressed and the furniture is put in its proper place. "The only surviving oddity is the fruit basket" (24). It is no longer mysterious to us as we have been given a logical explanation for its hanging down from the ceiling.

Just then Constable Holmes and Inspector Foot enter, pursuing the investigation of a crime supposedly committed at Victoria Palace earlier that day. As Harris's car was seen nearby they are suspected of having taken part in the afternoon's robbery, which, in turn, explains Holmes's earlier presence outside their window. The manner of the entrance of the two men deserves some attention here. Holmes has reported to his superior the earlier strange appearance of the room, which makes the Inspector charge into it and attack the Harrises saying: "What is the meaning of this bizarre spectacle?!?", whereupon he is informed about the broken counterweight. Noticing that the room does not resemble the strange spectacle earlier described by Holmes, Foot seems to realise that there might be some kind of mistake and asks him about whether it is the right house, accusing him of never having mentioned the fruit basket. Holmes, on the other hand, surprised by the changes which the room has undergone, insists that the address is correct. He also explains that the reason of his not having mentioned the basket was that "there was so much else" (24–26). Both the men enter the room expecting to face the bizarre reality of the initial stage image, which strengthened their suspicion of something extraordinary going on. Facing the altered, normal state of affairs, they are unable to accept it as it is and still try to follow their earlier preconceptions which fitted their scheme of investigation. That is why Foot says:

I have reason to believe that within the last hour in this room you performed without anaesthetic an illegal operation on a bold nigger minstrel about five-foot-two or Pakistani and that is only the beginning. (31)

This shocking accusation soon finds explanation when both the Harrises and the audience gradually understand the mistakes committed first by Holmes in giving his account of what he had seen happening in the room and then by the Inspector in the process of providing his own explanation for the situation described to him by the Constable.



The absurdity of Inspector Foot's accusation springs from several sources. On the one hand, it was difficult to make sense of what was going on in the room at the beginning of the play. The audience were soon provided with a logical explanation, yet Holmes did not hear it and did not get any additional information. When the Inspector was drawing his conclusions he based them on an eye-witness's account, in other words, not on the reality of the events themselves but on its description, distorted both by the individual perception of the witness (Holmes) and by the fact that visual sensations had been transformed into a verbal description. Furthermore, the Inspector's conclusions were also affected by another eye-witness's account (that of the elderly lady reporting the events in Ponsonby Place), as well as by his own prejudices, shortcomings and expectations. The presentation of Inspector Foot's investigation shows the ineptitude of the methods of detection applied by him. What results is a comedy of errors caused by differences between consecutive descriptions of the strange man in the street given by the characters. In each case the description is tinted by elements of individual perception, observation, interpretation and finally by description itself, by the use of imprecise language. Each of these elements, or consecutive stages, creates a barrier between the original phenomenon and its image presented by means of the description.

All the misunderstandings concerning the hopping figure in Ponsonby Place are caused by an absurd incident yet find a logical explanation, discovered by Inspector Foot towards the end of the play. Earlier that day, he had left his car outside his house hoping he would be able to move it to a parking meter before the traffic warden came round. Late in the evening, when he woke up and started shaving, he looked out of the window and saw Harris's "car pulling away from the only parking space in the road." He then ran out into the street, taking his wife's "handbag containing the small change and her parasol to keep off the rain." Being in great haste he put both his feet into the same leg of his pyjamas trousers. (45-46)

The spectacle which Inspector Foot made was so extraordinary and unusual that it attracted the attention of the Harrises and the elderly lady. To each of them, however, it represented something else. The elderly lady, according to Foot's account, saw

a bizarre and desperate figure. Being herself an old devotee of minstrel shows she recognised him at once for what he was. She was even able to glimpse his broken crutch, the sort of detail that speaks volumes to an experienced detective. (34)

His own conclusion, however, is different, as he says:

I am now inclined to modify the details inasmuch as the culprit may have been a genuine coloured man impersonating a minstrel in order to insinuate himself into the side door to the box office. (35)

The hopping figure is described and simultaneously interpreted in a number of different, contradictory ways in the course of the play. Some of the fun thus arising is due to our tendency to classify what we see according to our unconscious preconceptions and thus to delude ourselves.

The question concerning the man's identity causes a quarrel between Thelma and Reginald which takes place before the Inspector's arrival (12-14 and 18-21) and continues during Foot's investigation:

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 we can come up with is a blind, white bearded, one-legged footballer with a tortoise . . . (39-40)

Inspector Foot's final summing up is a combination of the reports. It makes use of details chosen at random and does not take into account the fact that they are contradictory, presenting different descriptions of the event and that any of them (or none, as it appears in the end) might be correct. The differences in the descriptions result from a number of things. On the one hand, being faced with a bizarre, strange figure, the spectators perceive it differently. The physical reality is tinted by subjective, personal elements. It is something different to different onlookers. On the other hand, while providing a description of it, the people try to interpret it, to find a logical explanation of the seemingly absurd elements. In doing so, they make use of their individual, subjective impressions and employ language as a means of describing them. Stoppard seems to prove that language can sometimes cause big misunderstandings. While reality is open to different interpretations (especially if it is such a strange, bizarre reality of the hopping figure), the language itself, too, is very often ambiguous and imprecise. Therefore a sentence may sometimes also be open to a number of different interpretations. In Stoppard's play, the ambiguity of

the visual image is accompanied by the ambiguity of verbal images describing it, visual puns appear side by side with verbal ones.

Stoppard wittily employs language to create confusion, making it clear that it is an imperfect tool for describing reality. Several critics have noticed the specific quality of language in the play, the use of puns and the fact that language is an inadequate means of describing reality.<sup>9</sup> Twice in the play Thelma says: "There is no need to use language" (pp. 11 and 15). On the one hand, she may be referring to the coarse or abusive vocabulary she suspects is being used (not justifiably, though). On the other hand, she might also be warning against relying on language of any sort.<sup>10</sup> The play repeatedly makes the audience aware of the unreliability of language. Very often, instead of explaining reality, language creates a still greater confusion.

Sometimes the misunderstandings arise when a homophone pun is used as, for instance, in the sentence repeated twice by Reginald when he is talking about the strange man carrying a lute which is misunderstood first by Thelma and then by Inspector Foot as "loot" (20 and 40). A similar play on the sound quality of the words brings about a comic effect when Harris asks: "Is something the matter with your foot, Foot? Inspector Foot. . . . You wish to inspect your foot, Inspector?" (42-43). The names of the characters also serve as a means of bringing about humour and confusion. Brian Crossley has written: "we have, in Foot of the Yard, a school-boy pun which nominally implies a 'flat-foot' and a smaller unit of measurement within a larger one."<sup>11</sup> Police Constable's name, Holmes, through the evocation of the famous Sherlock Holmes, is also charged with comic overtones. And, finally, Thelma's mentioning of Maigret, the famous detective of George Simenon's novels instead of Magritte, the painter, also adds to the general confusion (36).

On other occasions a given word or sentence is understood by the characters as belonging to different contexts and thus it has different meanings. Such is the case with Mother's question "Is it all right for me to practice?" and the answer given by Inspector Foot: "No, it is not all right! Ministry standards may be lax but we draw the line at Home Surgery to bring in the little luxuries of life" (33). While she is following her own obsession with playing the tuba (she keeps asking for permission to do so several times in the course of the play: pp. 16, 25, 26, 27, 33 and 46), he is following his train of thought connected with the investigation and

<sup>9</sup> Zeifman, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-92; Sammells, *op. cit.*, p. 61; Gabbard, *op. cit.*, p. 3; Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 56 and Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> For yet another interpretation, arguing that "there is in fact no need to use language because the same point has already been made *visually*" see: Zeifman, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> Brian M. Crossley, "The Investigation of Stoppard's 'Hound' and 'Foot,'" *Modern Drama* XX (1977): 81.

referring to the surgical operation he suspects has taken place in their house before his arrival. A similar situation occurs when the Inspector asks them about their alibi and hears Mother say "It was rubbish" (37). He jumps to the conclusion that he has finally cornered them. It soon appears, however, that, again, they are talking about two different things and that her sentence does not refer to the alibi but is an evaluation of Magritte's paintings. In these cases, the two characters are speaking as if side by side. What we hear is not really a conversation but two parallel monologues with certain overlappings between them. The above conversations are, in fact, examples of what the semiotician Keir Elam calls the

flagrant contravention of co-referential rules which is a frequent source of comic business, as when two speakers believe themselves to be referring to a single object while the audience is aware that there are distinct referents in play.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes it appears that the choice of phrasing is of crucial importance for the meaning. This becomes evident when Harris insists that the man had "a white stick" and 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 try to convince themselves and the others that their own descriptions and interpretations are the only correct ones. 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 Inspector Foot's report of the events of the evening makes clear, the thing the man had in his hand was really white but it was neither a stick nor a cane but his wife's umbrella. He was not blind, either. Reginald's attempt to apply logic when describing the perceived reality has brought about completely wrong conclusions.

A great many of the misunderstandings which occur in the course of the play result from the characters being "victims of their own logical absolutism,"<sup>13</sup> of their being entrapped by their interpretative logic.<sup>14</sup> As Inspector Foot continues his investigation he constantly draws wrong conclusions. Thelma, having noticed his incorrect resolution arising from his deductive method, says: "I am prepared to defend myself against any logician you care to produce" (30). Logic may be useful yet it does not always provide a convincing account of reality. Thelma seems to have forgotten now her earlier appeal to logic when she argued that "there

<sup>12</sup> Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London-New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> Keir Elam, "After Magritte, After Carroll, After Wittgenstein. What Tom Stoppard's Tortoise Taught Us?", *Modern Drama* 4 (1984): 476.

<sup>14</sup> Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 90.



would be more footballs than tortoises in a built-up area," (19) an argument she used while trying to persuade her husband that the man was carrying a football and not a tortoise.<sup>15</sup>

The play's main interest, then, centres on endeavouring to give a logical explanation of the mysteries of the bizarre opening and the incident in Ponsonby Place. As the narrative of the drama develops, gradually all the mysteries are solved and provided with a convincing explanation. Towards the end of the play, Inspector Foot gives an excuse for his failure as an efficient detective: "But bear in mind that my error was merely one of interpretation" (44). His justification is only partly true – he was mistaken in drawing conclusions. The other characters were also wrong when trying to interpret the perceived reality. Reality is not something fixed and defined forever. Each onlooker, viewing it from his own perspective, will afterwards define it differently. The final description of reality, then, is affected by the onlooker. In the process it matters what he is, what he pays attention to, what he notices, and what language he employs for his description. Moreover, the listener himself may have his own interpretation of the given phenomenon. Each person may react to a description in a slightly different way, just as actual onlookers react differently to concrete reality which they see with their own eyes. This could mean, one might argue, that there is no possibility of defining reality at all. The conclusion of the play, however, seems to be different. The final stage image is explicable, logical and self-evident. The play ends with a bizarre scene, another version of the opening pose, yet the audience now are fully aware of the meaning of each detail. What might appear to be an absurd, bizarre spectacle is, in fact, an intelligible scene of domestic activity, or to put it in Reginald's words "The activities in this room today have broadly speaking been of a mundane and domestic nature bordering on cliché" (44). Everything, also the interpretation of reality, depends on the amount and kind of information one is provided with. Things which seem to be irrational might have some rationale after all.

One thing more should be discussed here, namely the title of the play. It 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 René Magritte's paintings. In this sense, the word "after" has a strictly chronological meaning in connection with the events of the day. Secondly, the play comes "after Magritte" in an iconographic sense, "by the way of pseudo-painterly quotation (as in 'after Leonardo')"<sup>16</sup>, which is

<sup>15</sup> Again both of them are mistaken because what he actually had was his wife's purse with change for the parking meter.

<sup>16</sup> Elam, "After Magritte...", p. 471.

clearly visible in the opening stage image reminiscent of *L'assassin menacé* and also in the reproduction on the stage of certain motifs from Magritte's paintings.<sup>17</sup> Thirdly, the play may be also treated as a kind of response to surrealism. And finally, the drama was written after Magritte's work was established in the collective imagination. It may be argued, that while Stoppard's play starts with a surrealist stage image, later on all the surrealism dissolves while the audience is provided with a logical and reasonable explanation.<sup>18</sup>

René Magritte, a Belgian painter (1898–1967), whose work is characterised by fidelity of real detail but unreality of the scene depicted, kept questioning both the nature of reality as such and its perception and representation. He used everyday, familiar objects in such a way as to evoke something unfamiliar, mysterious. Suzi Gablik writes: "For Magritte, painting was a means to evoke a meta-reality which would transcend our knowledge of the phenomenal world. He referred to it continually as 'the mystery' about which it is impossible to speak, since one can be only seized by it."<sup>19</sup> The question of reality is strictly connected with that of perception. If reality is a mystery in itself it is even more so while being perceived. Thus, then, Magritte tries to revise our sense of reality and the reliability of our perceptions concerning it. The objective reality can be perceived only in a subjective way. In the process of perception reality loses its objectivity and becomes dominated by our subjectivity. The impossibility of knowing objective reality, the fact that it presents a different image to different people is a recurrent theme of Stoppard's plays. Also in *After Magritte* the fact that the characters give different descriptions and interpretations of perceived reality results from their individual, subjective bias, from different perspectives from which they view the surrounding world.

Another set of problems discussed by Magritte concerns the question of representing the reality by means of iconic painting. One of his favourite themes is a picture within a picture expressing in visual terms the represen-

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of these see: *ibid.*; Leonard Goldstein, "A Note on Tom Stoppard's *After Magritte*," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 23 (1975): 19 and Stephen Hu, *Tom Stoppard's Stagecraft* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> The difference between the disorderly, illogical images presented in Magritte's paintings and the rationality of the ones in Stoppard's play has been stressed by: Richard Corballis, *Mystery and the Clockwork* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press Ltd, 1984), p. 57; Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, *Tom Stoppard. Comedy as a Moral Matrix* (Columbia-London: University of Missouri Press, 1981), pp. 51–53; Goldstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21; Hu, *op. cit.*, p. 69; Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 54; Kelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–90; Sammells, *op. cit.*, p. 60 and Thomas R. Whitaker, *Tom Stoppard* (London: Macmillan Press, 1986), p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 12–13.

tational status of art and the tension between reality and illusion. In several paintings Magritte has explored the relationship between a real object and the painted illusion. *The Human Condition I*, for instance, is the painter's attempt to demonstrate the relationship between a three-dimensional space and its two-dimensional representation on a canvas. Magritte himself has commented on the picture:

I placed in front of a window, seen from inside a room, a painting representing that part of the landscape which was hidden from view by the painting. Therefore, the tree represented in the painting hid from view the tree situated behind it, outside the room. It existed for the spectator, as it were, as both inside the room in the painting, and outside in the real landscape.<sup>20</sup>

In another painting of the same kind, *The Waterfall*, the picture shows a forest with a canvas on an easel placed among the trees. In this case the representation is not superimposed on reality but is situated within it. The juxtaposition brings about the same notion: the image is not the same as the thing, an illusion of reality is different from the reality itself. In stressing the presentational character of his paintings, in making them self-reflexive by means of presenting a painting within a painting, Magritte's art is similar to that of Stoppard who constantly stresses the metatheatrical quality of his plays by using a play within a play.

René Magritte has dealt with the representational character not only of iconic signs but also of linguistic ones. He has remarked that "No object is so attached to its name that another cannot be found which suits it better."<sup>21</sup> He has painted a series concerned with relationships between iconic and linguistic representations of objects, *The Key of Dreams*, which presents four pictures of objects accompanied by labels. The three first icons have incorrect labels beneath them, only in the case of the fourth the icon and the name correspond. In *The Use of Words I* Magritte presents an icon of a pipe under which there is an inscription saying: "This is not a pipe." This painting is doubly paradoxical – everyone looking at the picture sees that it presents a pipe so there is no need for labelling. Furthermore, the label denies what the viewer perceives as a pipe is actually a pipe, pointing out that it is only an illusion, a representation of reality and not reality itself. In these pictures Magritte has investigated the imperfect and imprecise attempts of rendering reality in both pictorial terms (images) and linguistic ones (words). He has discussed the same problem

<sup>20</sup> René Magritte quoted in Gablik, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> *The Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by René Magritte*, The Arts Council and the Tate Gallery, 1969, publ.: London: The Arts Council, 1969, p. 28, quoted in: Goldstein, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

in an essay dealing with problems of both pictorial and linguistic systems of representation, *Les mots et les images*.<sup>22</sup>

Summing up, one must admit that the play fully deserves its title. Stoppard, just like Magritte, deals with reality as such, the viewer's perceptions of it, the confusion brought about by an improper understanding of an iconic or linguistic sign. John Fitzpatrick Dean has argued the possibility of the play being a reaction against surrealism.<sup>23</sup> It is true that while for Magritte the world is mysterious and inexplicable and the meaning of simple things is foreshadowed by their inherent mystery, for Stoppard, at least in this play, everything finds its logical and rational explanation. Yet for both of them, even though they look at the matter from opposite poles, as it were, things are not what they appear to be. Stoppard shares still another feature with Magritte. Both of them create a specific kind of visual and verbal joke. Stoppard himself mentioned his fascination with the work of René Magritte when he said: "When I encountered his paintings I responded to their humour immediately and I enjoyed his jokes and I also liked the fact that he painted things very carefully." He has also commented on the quality of Magritte's humour speaking about "his jokes about mirrors, his jokes about scale."<sup>24</sup> In October 1970, so a few months after the first production of *After Magritte*, he wrote a review of Suzi Gablik's monograph on the Belgian painter. In this review, entitled *Joker as Artist*, he wrote:

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.<sup>25</sup>

Stoppard, then, perceives Magritte as a great artist who plays with the rules of reality/illusion but can also be successfully mimetic. And this is finally where René Magritte and Tom Stoppard meet. Both of them are not only jokers but also true artists.

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<sup>22</sup> Gablik, *op. cit.*, quotes the essay in full, pp. 138-140.

<sup>23</sup> Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Joost Kuurman, "An Interview with Tom Stoppard," *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 10 (1980): 55-56.

<sup>25</sup> Tom Stoppard, "Joker as Artist. Review of *Magritte* by Suzi Gablik," *The Sunday Times*, 11 October 1970: 40.



Jadwiga Uchman

SŁOWA I OBRAZY: *AFTER MAGRITTE* TOMA STOPPARDA

Nie jest sprawą przypadkową, iż Tom Stoppard zainteresował się malarstwem René Magritte'a i że nadał jednemu ze swoich dramatów tytuł *After Magritte*. Belgijski artysta zajmował się zagadnieniami dotyczącymi możliwości artystycznego przedstawienia konkretnej rzeczywistości przy pomocy słów i obrazów. Problemy te są również jednym z przewodnich motywów twórczości Stopparda.

*After Magritte* rozpoczyna się z pozoru surrealistycznym obrazem scenicznym, który ewokuje skojarzenia z obrazem Magritte'a *L'assassin menacé*, jak również z początkiem *Tanga* Sławomira Mrożka, sztuki, którą Stoppard tłumaczył na język angielski. W miarę rozwoju akcji i informacji płynących z dialogu postaci scenicznych początkowy surrealistyczny obraz przekształca się w zrozumiałą scenkę z życia rodziny Harrisów. Sytuacja sceniczna zamykająca dramat osobie niewtajemniczonej mogłaby się wydawać równie nierealna. Tym razem jednak widzowie byli naoczniymi świadkami jej tworzenia i dokładnie znają przyczyny powstania niecodziennego, surrealistycznego obrazu.

Sztuka zajmuje się również innym obrazem, który ukazał się oczom kilku świadków wcześniej, tego samego dnia. W tym przypadku ważny jest nie tylko sam obraz (surrealistyczny jak towarzysząca mu sytuacja), ale również jego przekształcenie poprzez interpretacje indywidualnych odbiorców i użycie języka jako niedoskonałego, jak się okazuje, narzędzia służącego opisowi postrzeganej rzeczywistości.