

# Baudrillardian Hyperreality in *Travesties*

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## **Abstract:**

*The present study discusses the Baudrillard's hyperreality in Tom Stoppard's play, Travesties. Baudrillard states that in the hyperreal world, a constructed reality with some fake signs of reality and without any origin or exact referent takes the place of reality. In this study, hyperreality presents to be the result of blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, plays-within-the-play, disguising and doubling identities, intertextuality, Self-Referentiality, lack of the poems' originality, and trompe-l'audience. Old Henry Carr, the narrator of the story, recounts the actual realities about the past and distorts the realities while narrating. He lives in his self-made idealized world, enjoys that, and even accepts that as the actual reality. Carr's illusive memory provides unsettled debate between reality and fiction. Besides, the one-dimensional and fascinating media with its seductive power manipulates man's mind and plays a significant role in making the hyperreal world.*

**Keywords:** Baudrillard, hyperreality, originality, intertextuality, media

Tom Stoppard's play, *Travesties*, revolves around the fictional meeting of three significant revolutionary figures; the communist leader Lenin, the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara, and the modernist author James Joyce who all have a profound influence on their times in Zurich, "a real city in a real period," (Londre 312) in 1917 during World War I. Henry Carr, as the narrator, relates their interactions through his memory which is proved to be unreliable. Henry Carr "appears onstage as both his present-day self and his younger self" (Giglierano 9).

The play consists of two acts: in the first act, Carr and Tzara argue about the relativity of language and the function of the artist followed up by the discussion of the same topic by Joyce

and Tzara; in the second one, it is mostly Lenin's thoughts about art and politics that are presented. After that, the final scene of *Earnest* (where Jack's real identity is revealed) is parodied in *Travesties* through the discovery of the "missing chapter" of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The settings of the play are in the Zurich Public Library, where the salient characters interact, and in Henry Carr's apartment in Zurich, where the old Carr recalls the past. They are talking about their life's touchstones, for instance, Joyce's writing of his novel *Ulysses*, Tzara's principles of Dadaism, and Lenin's decision to journey back to Russia to participate in the Russian Revolution.

Carr's memories are formulated in a Zurich production of Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* in which he had a leading role. Using this production and Carr's memories, Stoppard aims to explore art, the war and revolution.

Situations from *Earnest* feature prominently within the action. Gwendolen and Cecily, the characters in *Travesties*, include versions from *Earnest*. Besides, the comedic situations of many of the other roles are shared by other characters. Henry "Carr plays the lead, Algernon, in a James Joyce produced version of *Ernest* in Zurich in 1918" (Jernigan 171) with a group of actors called The English Players, for whom James Joyce is the business manager. Carr and Joyce have an angry disagreement after the play, which resulted in a legal action and accusations of slander by Joyce. The argument is settled with the judge deciding in favor of both sides on different counts. Joyce later takes revenge from Carr and the English Consul General in Zurich at that time, as two minor characters in *Ulysses*, by portraying Carr as a drunken, obscene soldier in the Circe episode. Therefore, *Travesties* as its title offers a "clue about its content," Bloom states, consists of "multiple travesties of historical figures, history, memory, *The Importance of Being Ernest* (68) and reality.

Hyperreality is an "order of representation" that has "replaced reality" (Powell 58). It is, as Baudrillard claims in *Fatal Strategies*, "more real than real" (188). Hyperreality is "a world of self-referential signs" (Poster 6). Thus the hyperreal is the result of simulation process in which the natural world and its reference are replaced by "self-referential signs." Therefore, the subject-object distance dissolves and the real is disappeared, independent object world is assimilated and artificial codes and simulation models define it (Kellner 53-54).

Baudrillard in *Simulations* offers three orders of simulacra and states that a third order simulacrum produces a "hyperreal" or "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (2). This order, as Kellner argues, is called simulation which is based on the "reproductibility of objects" according to a "binary model" (171). The objects are reproduced, consequently, they become indistinguishable from each other and from the "generated model" (Kellner 171). In the first and second-order simulacra, the real still exists. But Baudrillard is concerned with the third order, hyperreality, which has no real origin. Therefore, in the "third-order simulacrum", reality is no longer even as part of the equation (Lane 86-7).

Hyperreal moments in the play, occur when the boundaries between reality and imagination or fantasy are blurred. Thus the presented reality provided for the audience, even the characters, as reality. Having no origin or reference, this pseudo-reality substitutes for the actual reality. *Mind of Old Carr* is a master embodiment of world of hyperreality in addition to the following instances of this world in the play.

Henry Carr, the narrator and the protagonist of the play, is narrating the events of 1917 in Zurich, in 1974. He describes the "setting of *Travesties*," which has "external reality to the play" (Londre 312). Old Carr's mind and "memory," Londre argues, "create the events." Such claim is approved at the end of the play, when the "Old Carr reappears on the stage "with a "new character, old Cecily" who discovers that Carr has never met Lenin (312). Besides, Cecily reveals that Bennett who Carr claims is his manservant in reproduction of the opening scene of *Earnest*, is the British Consul of Zurich and Carr is his employee. This casts shadow on the consistency of his representation of Lenin, Tristan and Joyce. This statement approves that "Lenin sequences," Corballis states, are "historically authentic" but those of Tzara/ Joyce/Gwendolen/Carr are "artificial product" of Old Carr's fantasy or "erratic memory" (77). Therefore, events are narrated "through the contorted filter of a guide," (Jenkins 116). Old Carr's defective memory filters real characters into illusive ones, which provides gross distortion and incongruity. His illusive memory provides the shifting perspective through which the play becomes the embodiment of parody or travesty as its title suggests.

Besides, remembering even what clothes he wears at special times intensifies the fact that he is creating the events while remembering them because it is odd that a person reminds his clothes at the crucial moments of a big war. For instance, when the "Great War" started, Carr mentions that he was in "Savile Row to order new clothes" (Giglierano 34). He reminds that he wore "a hounds-tooth check slightly flared behind the knee, quite unusual" (*Travesties* 11). Therefore, he is an unreliable narrator.

Old Carr like his "*Earnest* counterpart," is a "Bunburyist" who escapes his "present life" by remembering an improvised "past version of himself." For Old Carr, "Bunburying" serves as an "opportunity for idealization," that is, a "chance to invent" for himself what he had wished to be and to do (Giglierano 33). Old Carr's state of mind reminds Baudrillard's "Disneyland" which is an ideal model and instance of the third order of simulacra or "hyperreal" state. Disneyland is a place in the United States that is a representation of reality in a "fantasy mood," a game of "illusions" and "phantasms" in an "imaginary" world (*Simulacra* 171) in which everything is idealistic and fascinating. Therefore, by creating the experience of communicating with significant artistic and historical figures by his memory, Old Carr provides for himself a hyperreal world in his mind in which he is whom he had liked to be. Besides, he himself believes his narrated, invented history about himself and enjoys that. In other words, the Old Carr joyfully lives in the hyperreal world which he himself makes in his mind by distorting the realities about events and interrelations of Joyce, Lenin and Tzara with himself, while narrating them.

The "triumph of Stoppard's artistry is to affirm," as Londre suggests, the audience that he or she has the choice to "stick to a principle" or "make a mental adjustment." His play presents the "possible triumph of mind over reality" that the audience like Stoppard's "characters has the power within themselves, without ever leaving home, to travel from Zurich to Brazil" (Londre 322). This power of free-flowing of mind, especially that of Henry Carr's mind for instance, presents the sense of hyperreality.

Consequently, "Stoppard filters the story," Hesse states, "through the problematic perspective of one character who acts as a narrator" (189). In other words, the play is presented through Henry Carr's eyes, who, Shepherd argues, blurs "remembered episodes and realities together" (648). *Travesties* juxtaposes reality with fiction by transferring, or fusing, real life

characters into a dramatic form filtered through Henry Carr's a memory. "Memory functions in *Travesties*," as Sammells argues, "in the same duplicitous way as the fictionalizing imagination" (79). In other words, Carr's memory distorts realities and presents them as fantasy or fiction. The audience confronts with a distorted or travestied history and the reality "remembered by the central character" (Shepherd 648). Therefore, it is too hard for the audience to distinguish reality from fantasy or dreams of the Old Carr.

Baudrillard defines hyperreality as what is believed as reality but "without origin" (*Simulations* 2) or reference. Besides, as Baudrillard states, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the hyperreal world is introduced by "liquidation" or extermination "of all referentials" (167). In *Travesties*, Stoppard writes:

**TZARA:** I offer you a Shakespeare sonnet, but it is no longer his.

It comes from the wellbeing where my atoms are uniquely  
organized, and my signature is written in the hand of chance. (53)

"The sonnet," as Boireau concludes, "cuts into myriad pieces comes out of Tristan Tzara's hat as another fully-fledged poem" (143). Thus, Shakespeare's sonnet as a reality is copied and repeated as another poem and it loses its origin. Once it is repeated, it can be repeated with an indistinguishable origin; therefore, a hyperreal world emerges in which a new poem is made by Tzara based on Shakespeare's sonnet, that is, his sonnet is the origin but the readers of the newly made poem are unaware of its origin and accept that as the original poem. This re-making of a poem can be continued endlessly, therefore, Baudrillard's theory comes to practice, that is, "all referentials" are exterminated or terminated in the hyperreal world (*Simulacra* 167). Therefore, Stoppard deliberately shows that art or reality cannot survive without a tradition, origin or referent. Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* emphasizes on Jack's origin:

To be born, or at any rate, bred in a handbag, whether it had handles  
or not, seems to me to display contempt for the ordinary decencies of  
family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French

Revolution. And I presume what that unfortunate movement led to? (Wilde 268)

Issues concerning the importance of origin or referent are presented in the scene where Gwendolen recites Shakespeare's eighteenth sonnet in *Travesties*. Tzara, who is the travesty of Jack in Wilde's play, falls in for Carr's sister, Gwendolen. She insists that she will marry him only under the condition that Tzara should share her regard for Mr. Joyce as an artist. Joyce, being now a travesty of Lady Bracknell, requires Tzara/Jack to provide himself with the necessary equipment that would make him an artist: "I would strongly advise you to try and acquire some genius and if possible some subtlety before the season is quite over" (*Travesties* 42). It is a repetition of the funny scene between Lady Bracknell and Jack in *Earnest* where she mentions the same words about Jack's origin. She insists that "before the season ends," Jack should find at least one "parent" (Wilde 232). The word parent implies the origins of one's own genealogy. Thus, it emphasizes originality, identity, background, and tradition.

Hiding or disguising the reality, thus making hyperreality, is evident in the play. For instance, Vladimir Lenin "disguises" himself as a "priest" not to be noticed by "British officials." Tristan Tzara, trying to avoid Lenin's hostility towards Dadaism, disjoins himself from the movement by "lying" and presenting his younger brother Tristan as the artist and like Algernon, Carr pretends to be the no-good younger brother (Giglierano 31). Confronted with his library card

issued in the name of Jack, Tzara admits to Carr that "my name is Tristan in the Meierei Bar and Jack in the library" (*Travesties* 27). Besides, it is betrayed for Cecily that Carr has disguised himself as Tristan and Tzara has disguised himself as Comrade Jack. This revealing signifies shifting and hiding of real identities of the characters in the play.

When Old Carr talks about Joyce, the artificiality and creativity of his narration or his dreams, are accentuated (Corballis 75). For instance, Old Carr relies on "visualized aids" like photos while remembering the past. Joyce is visualized "in a velvet smoking jacket of an unknown color, photography being in those days a black and white affair" (*Travesties* 6). This Old Carr's statement discloses that, as Corballis mentions, he has seen Joyce just in photographs and not in reality. Besides, Carr is more open about his "reliance on photographs to visualize Lenin." But it is revealed in the play that Carr has never met Lenin in the "flesh" (76).

The fact that the plot of *Travesties* occurs in the foggy memory of the narrator, Henry Carr, approves the idea that he distorts the reality, or the real history, while narrating. Because the actions are taken place in his memory, Old Carr has the opportunity to create imagined relationships between historical or artistic figures and himself. He even grants himself a leading role in his fake story.

Old Carr blurs the demarcations between reality and his imagination in the play and makes hyperreal moments in which the fake presented realities are accepted as actual realities. This situation provides for Old Carr a chance for idealization in which he enjoys for being the one he had desired to be. Besides, "Stoppard's forum," Bloom argues, "allows meeting between real-life people and fictional characters" (68) which results in fusion of reality and fiction and emergence of moments of hyperreality in the play. In *Travesties* like the opening scene of *The Real Thing*, Stoppard uses the technique of "*trompe l'audience*" (Zinman 121) to create illusions. For instance, in *Travesties*, the audience is faced with different characters in the Zurich library but later it turns out to be the outcome of Carr's imagination. Therefore, some fictive and unreal scenes are provided for the audience as reality which turn out to be just hyperreal moments of the play.

*Travesties* was first entitled "*Prism*" (Hunter 114). Miss Prism is a character in Wilde's *Ernest* who takes everything too seriously but at the same time she is lost in her fictional fantasies. About the prism Giglierano suggests: The "image of a prism," "seems apt: the angled piece of glass can break a beam of light into its disparate parts, rendering visible the components of the whole, or change the multi-colored rays of light into a single unified beam. (39) By duplicating the texts of other authors, or outstanding various sources in his own play, Stoppard exactly does act as a prism.

Stoppard, Özdemir argues, presents the "impossibility of pure reality." Reality is "subjective," that is, it depends on which perspective or "prism" it is viewed. "Illusion and reality" are bound with the "laws of subjectivity and relativity," therefore, there are "an infinite number of infinitely shifting realities" (186). For instance, Carr opposes Tzara that "[...] you are asking me to accept that the word Art means whatever you wish it to mean; but I do not accept it." (*Travesties* 39).

The "title" of *Travesties*, Schreiber states, "invites associations with intertextuality." The play is a "spectacular display" of multiple texts and writings "fused" together by Stoppard. Although they are borrowed from different sources, they turn out to be "ingredients of a harmonious whole." "Intertextual relations" consist of two sources: "literature" and "historiography" (Schreiber 129).



Considering the realm of literature, "Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* is the unmistakable hypo-text of *Travesties*" (Boireau 137). *Travesties* like Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Londre states, has a "borrowed structure." "Inspired by the historical facts that in Zurich James Joyce had worked with the English Players on a production of *Ernest*," Stoppard constructs *Travesties* as a travesty of Oscar Wilde's play (312). Besides, *Travesties* includes references to Shakespeare, for instance just the Act 1 of the play entirely consists of lines quoted from "eight different Shakespeare' plays," (Londre 312) and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the realm of history, the play includes direct quotations from Vladimir Lenin's original letters. Generally, the intersection of Wildes' *Ernest*, Jernigan states, with the "physical world" of James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Lenin constructs a "collage" (170).

The preceding dialogues of Tzara with Gwendolen in *Travesties* comprise various Shakespearean works including *Hamlet* "These are but wild and whirling words, my lord" (54), *Much Ado About Nothing* "I was not born under a rhyming planet" (54), and *Othello* (Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter" (54). In other words, Stoppard has never "hidden his sources" and even he "takes pride in listing his reading and the origins of his ideas" (Nadel 481). Whitaker argues that "the mode of *Travesties* results from a fusion of Wildean farce, Joycean fiction, Dadaist spontaneous negation, epic theatre, and Shavian dialectic. Balancing an array of radical principles and egocentric procedures, *Travesties* suggests that our reality is at best a shared construction from fragmentary data" (113).

Not only does Stoppard directly quote or refer to other literary works in *Travesties*, but also he refers to his own plays. Referring to his play, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, in this play presents his deliberate self-referentiality. For instance, Tzara "wrote his name in the snow with a walking stick and said: There! I think I'll call it The Alps" (*Travesties* 25). The very similar scene with the same words is repeated by Beauchamps in Stoppard's *Artist Descending*. "Stoppard is fully aware of his self-intertextuality," Giglierano states, "as an example, he jokes about Switzerland, where Charlotte's character" of *The Real Thing* "allegedly went" (61). Besides, Cecily's striptease act in *Travesties* signifies the shedding layers in the play such as the layers of the plays-within-the-play and multiple identities which are some instances of self-referentiality in the play, reminding Brassell's term "circular self-reference" (262). Circularity and self-referentiality refer as Schreiber mentions, "not to reality, but to itself." Thus, things are just referring to themselves and not to "any designates in the real world" (131). In addition, presenting the plays-within-the-play and direct references to theater, that is, acting and playwrighting, present vivid self-referentiality in the play. It also signifies Stoppard's emphasis on theatricality or unreality of what is presented to the spectators.

"Dramatic structure of *Travesties*," Boireau states, "consists of inscribed plots, each one mirroring the other. The main story is the playful adaptation of Wilde's well-known plot amusingly summed up in Joyce's sartorial plot" (138). For instance, "You enter in a debonair garden party outfit-beribboned boater, gaily striped blazer, parti-coloured shoes, and trousers of your own choice" (*Travesties* 52). Then, it compresses into the spy-plot, announced later through the authorial voice of the stage directions. "Caa enters, very debonair in his boater and blazer. Carr comes to the library as a spy" (*Travesties* 70). Therefore, the mirroring process, or "mise en abyme," Boireau states, is unequivocally full scale here, in this "Chinese nest of plots" within Carr's experience of Wilde's play. The "compulsive repetition of the trick," "un-writing and re-

writing" the model ad infinitum has the major dramatic action of *Travesties*, the outer play (138). Due to Stoppard's "self-reflexive intertextuality," Giglierano states, the "audience is entertained by recognizing Stoppard's allusions" to other writers and also to himself (62). Finally, his technique of using intertextuality and self-referentiality in *Travesties*, "serves" and "strengthens the plot" (39).

*Travesties* is a "double of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)." *Travesties*, a play about "doubles and mistaken identity," duplicates not only Wilde's use of "doubled characters" in *Earnest*, but also his plot structure and much of his "dialogue" (Giglierano 14). Wilde's play functions both as a play within Stoppard's play and as an outer frame of the protagonist-narrator Carr's play.

Characters of the outer play "mirror the patterns of their counterparts in *Earnest*" (Bloom 69). In other words, Old Carr confuses the events of the play with those of his life. Each character in *Travesties* "doubles," Giglierano states, a character in Wilde's play. For instance, Cecily and Gwendolen's names come directly from *Earnest*, although Stoppard has recreated their "personalities"; James Joyce represents "Lady Augusta Bracknell;" Tristan Tzara "corresponds" to Jack Worthing; and "Henry Carr to Algernon." Vladimir Lenin, an author like Miss Prism in *Earnest*, "appears in disguise as a priest Rev. Canon Chasuble," and Nadya Lenin plays the role of "Miss Prism character" (31). These borrowings show that Stoppard's play is an "explicitly Wildean play" (Giglierano 14).

Not only does Henry Carr "double for Algernon," but also he "doubles himself," that is, the "present-day Old Carr," and the Young Carr of the "Consulate," as he reminds himself. Old Carr like his "*Earnest* counterpart," is a "Bunburyist" who escapes his "present life" by remembering an improvised "past version of himself." For Old Carr, "Bunburying" serves as an "opportunity for idealization" or a "chance to invent" for himself what he had wished (Giglierano 33).

The "arrival of the three characters," Corballis suggests, "Tzara, Joyce and Gwendolen, that are patterned on the entrance of Jack, Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen in the first act of Wilde's *Ernest*," is performed "twice by Stoppard" in *Travesties*, first in a "compressed and hilariously artificial form with Tzara/Jack depicted as a 'Romanian nonsense' and Joyce initiating a whole scene couched in limericks," and after that as a greater length with all the characters speaking urban, Wildean English. "The duplication of these entrances" manifests "how artificial everything is" (Corballis 77).

As Boireau mentions the play is the "epitome of the play committed to its own performance, re-echoing and repeating itself like an old record." "Performance" is both its "theme and structure," as the play re-enacts Henry Carr's participation in Joyce's production of *Ernest*. It simultaneously performs and therefore "deconstructs" the dynamics of performance through its "layers of role-playing." Repeated performances in *Travesties* signal representational codes as deceptive ones. They undermine "surface realism" and uncovering the "simulacrum of realistic imitation" which appears as nothing more than a mask or a mediation" (141).

The "dramatic structure of *Travesties* consists of inscribed plots, each one mirroring the other (Boireau 137). "The major dramatic action of *Travesties*," the outer play, Boireau argues, "is the compulsive repetition in ad infinitum" (138). Therefore, Stoppard's "use of doubling" in the play presents his "indebtedness to Oscar Wilde" (Giglierano 14). In addition to these doublings and repetitions, Henry Carr has multiple identities in *Travesties* such as the narrator, Young Henry

Carr and at the same time Old Carr, young Algernon, a "menial consular clerk masquerading as the Consul," (Boireau 139) and James Joyce in the process of writing *Ulysses*. Carr's "clothing determines his identity on stage" (Gigliano 34). For instance, his "hat and dressing gown" are the distinguishing means of Old Carr from Young Henry Carr (*Travesties* 9).

Old Carr's defect of remembering is also revealed through his repetition of the same question to the same person but narrating different answers by that character. For instance, he asks his servant, Bennett, three times about what the papers say. They are filled by news of war is Bennett's first reply to his question. Second, he responds that it is all about revolution in Russia, and the third answer is that Tsar is abdicated.

*Travesties'* time span has two frames; 1974, the outer time frame, and 1917, the inner time frame. In other words, Old Henry Carr is narrating the events of the year 1917 in 1974. The researcher of this study accentuates on these two worlds of the play. The first and salient world is the world of Old Carr's mind and the other is that of the blurring moments in the play. It is expected that the narrator of a story recounts the actual realities about the past, especially about the historical events in which three significant revolutionary figures, the communist leader Lenin, the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara, and the modernist author James Joyce take part. But Old Carr proves to be an unreliable narrator because he distorts realities and creates them while narrating. Besides, he lives in his self-made idealized world, enjoys that, and even accepts that as the real reality. Therefore, Carr's illusive memory provides unsettled debate between reality and fiction. In other words, Carr's memories distort realities and present them as fiction. Thus, the audience is offered a travesty of history, as well as, a travesty of salient figures such as Joyce, Lenin and Tzara whose historical significance is inverted within the play.

The second hyperreal world revolves around some events in the play such as the-plays-within-the-play, disguising and doubling identities, lack of poems' originality, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, and *trompe-l'œil* audience. For instance, as Boireau mentions, the "play-within-the-play" freezes its meaning and controls the "dramatic construction" of the outer play. *Travesties*, a "dizzying composite of *Ernest* and *Ulysses*," conjures up different "layers of fictionality, each one masquerading as the other" (137). "*Travesties*," Gigliano states, is "the most obviously Wildean of Stoppard's plays; its plot structure and much of its dialogues come from Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*" (27). *Travesties* and *Earnest* have a "recurring theme of mistaken identity" and "defining one's own identity" since they have repeatedly been "mistaken for each other" (36). Besides, Stoppard blurs reality with fiction by fusing real life characters such as Joyce, Lenin and Tzara, into a dramatic and fictional state.

Generally, Stoppard's plays, especially *Travesties*, suggest that being certain about the actuality of reality is a salient demand in human life, particularly for postmodern man who is bombarded with distorted realities, images, icons and models. Due to the hyperreality and simulation of postmodern era, people are doubtful and uncertain about what are presented to them as realities, but they have no way out of this crisis because of this world's attraction and beguiling power that pervert their minds into different directions by means of media. In the present play, the outer play with the help of its inner plays and Old Carr's memory distort and disguise reality and make the spectators accept constructed realities as the actual realities; therefore, make a hyperreal world in the play.



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