

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in The World of Simulacra

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Abstract:

Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra and simulation creates a new dynamics between reality, signs and society especially in this age of the technological and communication revolution. Simulacra creates a confusion between the reality and signs in the mind of the modern man leaving him confused and without agency. This paper analyses the famous play of Tom Stoppard "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" from the perspective of simulacra. This play by Tom Stoppard is predicated on Shakespeare's famous play "Hamlet". In Shakespeare's play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fully aware of their role and position in life. The play Hamlet belongs to the first order of Baudrillard's four stages of the sign. Reality is sacrosanct and the signs or the play in this case offers a faithful co- relation with the reality. The reality for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's play is more elusive and slippery. They are forever tenuous and unsure and are never able to find their feet on firm ground Their reality could be said to fall in the 4th order of signs as classified by Baudrillard where the signs no longer refer to reality but instead refer to other signs. The difference in the treatment of the players by the two playwrights brings out the telling differences between the man in the 16th century and that in the 21st century.

Key words: simulacra, signs, hyper-reality, agency.

This paper is an attempt at analysing the celebrated play of Tom Stoppard *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* from the perspective of Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra. His reading is a challenge to understanding how reality is perceived in this age of communication revolution. Jean Baudrillard, the famous French philosopher's celebrated treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* published in 1981 proposed a revolutionary way of perceiving reality. It seeks to interrogate the relation between reality, symbols and society. *Simulacra and Simulation* is famous for its discussion of symbols and signs and how they affect contemporary reality. It creates a new dynamics between symbols, signs reality and perception of reality through the prism of technological developments of the twentieth century.

Simulacra and Simulation discusses 4 levels of signs –order. These are as follows:

1. The first stage is called “the sacramental order.” In this the sign is a faithful reflection of the reality. Baudrillard calls it “a reflection of the profound reality” (p.6)
2. In the second stage there is a perversion of reality by the sign. The sign is no longer the faithful copy of reality but which “masks and denatures reality” as an evil appearance – it is the order of “maleficence”. In this stage the signs and the images do not faithfully reveal reality but can hint at the existence of an obscure reality which the sign itself is incapable of encapsulating.
3. In the third stage there is an absence of profound reality and is a stage where the simulacrum pretends to be a faithful copy but actually it is a copy in which the original is absent. Signs and images claim to represent something real but no representation is taking place and arbitrary images are merely suggested as things to which they have no relationship. Baudrillard calls this the “order of sorcery”, a regime of semantic noise where all reality is conjured up artificially to appear as a reference to a sealed truth.
4. The fourth stage is that of pure simulation, in which the simulacra does not have any relation to the reality. In this stage the signs reflect another set of signs and any claim to reality on the part of the images or signs is only of the order of other such claims. This is a regime where the the cultural signs do not even pretend to be real in a naïve sense because the experiences of the individuals are so artificial that they do not have any pretensions of being real. This is called as “hyperreal” by Baudrillard.

Each of the three types of simulacra is identified with three different historical periods in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. The identification is as: The first order is associated with the pre-modern period, where representation is an artificial place marker for the real thing. The uniqueness of the objects makes them irreproducible real.

The second order is associated with modernity and the industrial society where the distinctions between the real and the represented and there is a proliferation of mass reproducible copies of item which turns them into commodities. The commodity's ability to imitate reality and reproduce it as the original, because the copy is just as 'real' as its prototype.

The third order is associated with the postmodern society. In this the simulacrum precedes the original and the distinction between the real and the represented vanishes. There is only simulacrum and the originality in truth becomes a meaningless concept.

This fuzziness of boundaries between the reality and the simulacrum originates in the following phenomenon of the post-modern society.

1. Media such as the television, cinema print and the internet are responsible for blurring the line between products that are needed for a person to live and those 'needs' that are manufactured by commercial images.

2. The exchange value of goods in which the value of goods is based on money/currency rather than usefulness and usefulness is defined in monetary terms so as to assist exchange.

3. Language and ideology in which language increasingly becomes caught up in the production of power relations between social groups especially in the situation when the powerful groups institute themselves in monetary terms.

Baudrillard uses the fable derived from "On the exactitude of Science" by John Luis Borges. In it a great empire created a map which was so detailed it was as large as the empire itself. The actual map was expanded and destroyed as the empire grew or was reduced. When the empire crumbled all that was left was the map. According to Baudrillard it was the map on which the people live, the simulation of reality where the people spend their lives ensuring their place in the representation which is circumscribed and detailed by the map makers.

The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance. (Hegarty p 45)

Talking about the Gulf war Baudrillard says that the image of the war preceded the real war. War does not come when it is made by a sovereign state against another sovereign and not when there is killing for attritive purpose. It does not happen when the shots are fired rather happens when the people are convinced that it is coming.

Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. (Hegarty ,p. 49)

Jean Baudrillard has then questioned the relevance of the assumption that we can now imitate reality in our representations.

Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is predicated on Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. The title comes from a single dismissive line about them in *Hamlet* where the ambassador from England announces in Act V:

First Ambassador

The sight is dismal;

And our affairs from England come too late:

The ears are senseless that should give us hearing,

To tell him his commandment is fulfill'd,

That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead:

Where should we have our thanks?

Act V Scene 2

The characters were revived in W.S.Gilbert's satire *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* and as alienated heroes in Tom Stoppard's absurdist play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

In the play *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two student friends of Hamlet and courtiers who try to find out the reason for Hamlet's despondency& 'madness' under the direction of Hamlet's uncle and step-father Claudius They spy on Hamlet at the King Claudius's behest, using their claimed friendship to gain Hamlet's confidence. In

Shakespeare's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are fully aware of their role and position in life. The play *Hamlet* belongs to the first order of Baudrillard's four stages of the sign. Reality is sacrosanct and the signs or the play in this case offers a faithful co- relation with the reality. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* as well as all the other characters have a clear picture of the entire story and have full awareness of the on goings of the court life and other details. The world of *Hamlet* is predictable, anticipated determined and dependable one full of certitudes and certainties. In *Hamlet* although *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* get caught in the politics of the king and *Hamlet* leading to their innocent death are fully cognizant of the realities of their world. It was a faithful reflection of the life in the courts and palaces.

In contrast to this, the world of Tom Stoppard's play is a puzzling one. The bewildered characters are not only confused about the on goings in their life but are also confused about their identities and even their names at times.

The 'Two Elizabethans' find themselves in a place without any visible character and are carrying a bag of coins each. The play opens with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* wandering through a featureless wilderness, flipping coins, which keep coming up heads. Each time a coin lands on heads, *Rosencrantz* wins it as *Rosencrantz* is always betting on heads. *Guildenstern's* bag is nearly empty and *Rosencrantz's* is nearly full. The coins that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* flip at the beginning of the play symbolize both the randomness of the world and the play's exploration of oppositional forces. The pattern of coin after coin landing heads up defies the expectation that the laws of probability actually do work and that the world makes clear sense. Instead, the coins suggest that the world is ruled by randomness and the occurrence of highly improbable events. The point made by the coins is reiterated by the way that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* get caught up in a string of improbable situations that, from their perspective at least, occur entirely at random and make no sense whatsoever. Randomness is often contrasted to determinism, the notion that events happen according to some unbreakable plan. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* combines randomness with determinism to suggest that chance seems deterministic. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* feel that they can do nothing to counteract the chance's determinist force, just as they can do nothing to stop the coins from landing heads up.

It is strange because in the real world the law of probability would apply and the chance of each winning almost equal number of times would hold true. So while the two players believe and expect that they are in a real world i.e. in a world where the signs would mimic reality or in the stable world of the first order of signs, they seem to be in the world of simulacra or the

world in which the signs do not have a representation in the so called real. Their words fall in the category of language games and do not lead to meaning. While both of them are using the words in the mimetic system of signs, they do not realize that the principles governing their universe are different. Guildenstern wonders if they have entered a world where the laws of chance and time are absent. The pair struggles to recall why they are traveling and remember only that a messenger called them. They offer all kinds of explanations for the reason why the coin is landing on the head side all the while. They try to explain it in terms of economics calling it a ‘law of diminishing returns’ (p.8) or philosophical ones ‘ I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement of an unremembered past(p .11) or implausible ones like ‘time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin is being repeated ninety times(p.11)The grand narratives be they metaphysical ones like God, or those of enlightenment i.e. reason and rationality fail in this world of simulacra. It is a world governed by its own logic which is beyond the comprehension of the two characters. The world of art is a world of simulacra in the present play for the two characters that are unaware of the rules of this world. . They even describe the world in the manner of Baudrillard as a ‘conspiracy of cartographers’:

Rosencrantz: I don't believe in it anyway.

Guildenstern: What?

Rosencrantz: England.

Rosencrantz: Jut a conspiracy of cartographers, then?

Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

One recalls Baudrillard's reading of the fable from “On the exactitude of Science” by John Luis Borges in which the place inhabited by the people at the end of the fable is just a sheet of map- a cartographer's deception.

The Incomprehensibility of the World:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead highlights the fundamental mystery of their world. In the entirety of the play the two characters remain in total confusion, lacking such basic information even of their own identities. From the play's opening, which depicts them as unable to remember where they are headed and how they began their journey, to their very last moments, in which they are bewildered by their imminent deaths, Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern cannot understand the world around them. Their confusion stems from both the sheer randomness of the universe, illustrated by the bizarre coin-tossing episode, and the ambiguous and unclear motives of the other characters, who pop onstage and deliver brief, perplexing speeches before quickly exiting. They cannot understand any reliable feature or the significance in their world or its events. While Stoppard frequently uses their confusion for comic effect, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern occasionally become so frustrated by the world's incomprehensibility that they fall into despair. Their own memories play truant and are frequently confusing rather than helping them. Guildenstern says "Reality is the name we give to common experience" They misunderstand each other as they stumble through philosophical arguments without realizing the implications to their own lives. Guildenstern says:"

"A Chinaman of the T'ang Dynasty-and, by which definition, a philosopher dreamed he was a butterfly, and from that moment he was never quite sure that he was not a butterfly dreaming it was a Chinese philosopher. Envy him; his two fold security"

Guildenstern is envious of the China man because he oscillates only between two choices, while he himself cannot hope for any security.

The lack of agency of a person caught in the world of simulacra:

The constant confusion in which they find themselves leaves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feeling unable to make any significant choices in their lives. They are pushed along toward their deaths by what appear to be random forces, and they fail to respond to their circumstances with anything but total passivity. Their lack of agency is underscored by Stoppard's decision to transport them from scene to scene without any choice on their part. One minute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in the woods with the Tragedians, and the next they are in Elsinore being asked to probe Hamlet's distressed mind, a request they accept without even understanding what they have been asked to do. Even at the end of Act II, when they ask each other if they should go to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not make a choice but instead merely continue on the path that has been laid out for them. Since they have already come this far, Rosencrantz says, they may as well keep going. Their passive approach to their lives reflects how difficult it is to make decisions in a world that we do not fully understand, in which any choice can seem meaningless and therefore not worth making.

Stoppard demonstrates the danger of this passivity by giving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the opportunity to make a very meaningful choice, which they fail to do. This moment occurs when

they discover that they have a letter ordering Hamlet's death upon their arrival in England: if they destroy it, Hamlet lives, but if they do nothing, he dies. While Rosencrantz hesitates about what to do, Guildenstern argues that they should not take any action, since they might not understand what is at stake. Although this decision may seem like an unfeeling rationalization for moral laziness, it is in fact simply an extension of the passivity that has marked Rosencrantz and Guildenstern throughout the play. By failing to make a significant choice when they have the opportunity to do so, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern incur terrible consequences, as Hamlet discovers the letter and switches it with one ordering their deaths rather than his own.

The Relationship between Life and the simulacra (Art):

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead emphasize the close connection between real life and the world of theatrical performance. Numerous features of the play work to underscore this connection, not least of which is the fact that the play asks its audience to assume that the characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are real and deserve to have their story told from another perspective. Within the play, the connection between life and the stage is revealed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the presence of the Tragedians, who perform a play that depicts parallel events to those in which the two men find themselves. As they watch the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern see that the two actors playing the roles parallel their own: they are dressed exactly as they are. This confuses Rosencrantz so much that he wonders why he recognizes the actor dressed as himself but then tells the actor that he is not who the actor believed he was. In other words, theatre and life get so intermingled that Rosencrantz cannot tell which is which. Theatre which should be a reflection of the world becomes more trustworthy for the two actors. Confusion which is a potent force in this world of simulacra reigns supreme.

Guildenstern criticizes the Player for assuming that theatrical performance can depict real feelings, especially the terror of death. The Player's response is twofold—he claims that theatrical death is the only kind people believe in because it is what they expect, and then he demonstrates that point to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by convincingly performing his own death when Guildenstern stabs him with a stage knife. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are completely persuaded by the Player's performance, which lends credence to his claim that people really do believe in the things that theatre has led them to expect. Indeed, the characters only believe in death when it looks theatrical, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot quite bring themselves to believe in their own impending deaths, for which they are unable to form any expectations. The audience cannot believe in their deaths either, at least according to the

logic of the play and the Player, since the audience's expectation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die is never fulfilled. By refusing to depict their deaths and refusing to give the audience what it knows is coming, Stoppard keeps Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from dying and instead turns them into living literary characters. This is so much like the hyper-reality of the world of the virtual reality which is the best example of the simulacra. Virtual reality sometimes referred to immersive media is a computer simulated environment that can simulate physical presence in places in the real world or imagined worlds.

Engulfed in this dilemma and being caught in art where the signifiers do not reflect a signified but other set of signifiers in this beautifully exposit world the two characters also exposit the dilemma of the twentieth century man where words refer back to other words and meaning is forever 'deferred' as the theory of deconstruction puts it .

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