

Multiplied illusions

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Abstract: Drug use – a personal and social challenge; a form of manifestation of the level of awareness. Often described – in the media, specialist works or in popular culture – as a special, exotic experience, that can tempt, through its illusory effects, becoming a dangerous and destructive way through which people try to escape stress, anxiety or other emotional problems. These roots, however, also allow the use of art in preventing the consumption of narcotics and psychotropic substances (through awareness of the risks), but also in therapy. Theater can be (and is) used as a method to raise public awareness of drug use issues and educate/warn them in a variety of ways – presenting performances (centred on this topic), organizing debates, and after performances, workshops. Even if we have the impression that everything started now, in reality, even in Romanian society, this theme has been present for more than a century. Sorana Țopa has been sending such signals since 1928, in a subtle way, by means of a little-known dramatic text, Merchants of Illusions, which invites reflection on what (in a standard formula) we call today the risk of drug consumption. The history of Romanian theater still has many lessons to offer.

Keywords: Sorana Țopa, theater, drugs, Romanian theater history

1. Theater – mirror and method of awareness

There are many different reasons why people decide to experiment with drugs, and these can range from curiosity to a desire to escape from problems or stress. The use of drugs is often described – in the media, specialist works or in popular culture – as a unique and exotic experience, which may explain the temptation of people to try them; apparently, they could access a solution that would relieve them of stress, anxiety, or other emotional problems. Through drugs, they give themselves a temporary way to forget about personal problems or deal with negative feelings. Following the hypothetical inventory of causes, we observe that sometimes the consumption of plants, substances or narcotic products is part of the mechanisms of initiation or validation, within a culture or a specific social group. In some communities, drug use may be considered normal or acceptable, and social pressure and the need to belong may lead some people to experiment with their use. This subject is addressed in numerous works.

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Finally, there are also people who engage in drug use and distribution because of addiction. These may be people who started using drugs for fun or to cope with emotional problems, but who have become addicted to these substances and can no longer control their use. Specialists tackle these issues based on multidisciplinary, complex and lasting strategies; unfortunately the success rate is not gratifying.

Theater can be used as a method to raise public awareness of drug use issues and educate/warn them in a variety of ways – presenting performances (focusing on this topic), organizing debates, and after performances, workshops. The type of performance, dramatic structure or aesthetic direction has varied over time; the cry of alarm (explicit or implicit) remained constant: attention to risks and consequences; presenting characters and situations, which highlight the risks and consequences of drug use, such as addiction, health and social problems, as well as the impact on family and community), encouraging dialogue (by organizing debate or forum-type dialogues, where the public can ask actors and producers about the message of the show and other issues related to drug use), presenting alternatives (theatre can promote positive alternatives to drug use by presenting characters and situations that illustrate the importance of health, healthy social relationships and positive choices), the development of empathy (theatrical performances can help the audience develop empathy towards people facing addiction problems and understand the negative impact of drug use on their lives) – all become ways of reflecting a harsh reality. Attitudinal/social theater represents a method of involvement in combative action (with different forms of scenic expression), theater can be used as a modality of art therapy – with the use of spectacular techniques through which drug addicts or their families can express and understand emotions, can develop their communication skills, theater represents an alternative way of knowing – of oneself, of the world.

All these forms are born from a chronic need to cure an unresolved social disease – the emotional fragility of the modern man. In this context, some playwrights use the drug theme as a way to explore the psychological and the social effects of substance abuse on their characters, while others use it as a metaphor for the alienation and disillusionment of modern life. The history of dramaturgy gives us examples of playwrights who approach this theme:

- Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Walk into Night*: a semi-autobiographical drama about a dysfunctional family whose members struggle with alcoholism, morphine addiction, tuberculosis and guilt;

- *Trainspotting*, by Irvine Welsh: a dark comedy about a group of heroin addicts in Edinburgh who try to escape their bleak reality through drugs, murder and violence;

- *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner: A Pulitzer Prize-winning epic that explores the AIDS crisis, homosexuality, religion and politics in 1980s America. Several characters use drugs like Valium, AZT, and cocaine to cope with their illness, identity, and relationships;

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- *Rent*, by Jonathan Larson: a rock musical inspired by Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, which chronicles the lives of young artists and musicians in New York's East Village, dealing with poverty, HIV/AIDS and drug addiction;

- *The Normal Heart* by Larry Kramer: a semi-autobiographical play that dramatizes the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in New York in the early 1980s. The protagonist, Ned Weeks, is a gay activist trying to raise awareness and fight for the rights of people with AIDS, while dealing with his own personal problems, including his lover's drug addiction.

In Romania, the use, over the centuries, of narcotic and hallucinogenic plants as well as different types of drugs, was a forbidden subject during the communist period, the few articles published during the period being carefully concealed, as Andrei Oișteanu states: "I did not use the alarming expression «narcotic and hallucinogenic plants» in the title, but one with almost the same semantic value, but being less common: «psychotropic plants»¹. After 1989, the phenomenon of drug use manifested itself as a side effect of our freedom; access to the information available on the Internet has become unlimited and allows us to connect to its anthropological, psychological and social dimension. The previously cited study represents a synthesis of the reflection of drug use – in mild or strong variants; in search of happiness or inspiration, the victims – anonymous or illustrious – shrouded themselves in the fog of false but desired perception. We will mention only one example: Eminescu - "he often fed himself with narcotics and stimulants: abuse of tobacco and coffee"². The list could go on; the creativity born from the vapors of alcohol or from the smoke generating "olfactory drinking" could be the subject of a long series of discussions - the relationship art - additions is a complementary one; seemingly innocent, tobacco, coffee, alcohol are attached to the journey to... the dream world.

2. Sorana Țopa – about *Neguțătorii de iluzii*

Sorana Țopa has been sending such signals for almost a century; in a subtle way, through a dramatic text, which invites reflection on what (in a standard formula) we call today the risk of drug use.

The text belongs to the trilogy called *The Cycle of Life* (along with *Journey in the Dark*, written in 1930 and performed on the stage of the National Theater in Bucharest, in the 1943-1944 season and *The Hidden Man*, written in 1941), being dated 1929³. The date remains, however, under the sign of uncertainty⁴; the

¹ Andrei Oișteanu, *Narcotice în cultura română: Istorie, religie și literatură*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2010, p. 11

² Idem, p. 159

³ The date is noted on the first page of the volume Sorana Țopa, *Teatru. Omul ascuns*, Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă Publishing House, București, 1947.

⁴ Typewritten manuscript; it contains 108 pages, with the original title "Sowers of illusions", dated 1928-1930, with a later dedication: "To my dear Get – Aunt Sorana, 7 Febr. 1967".

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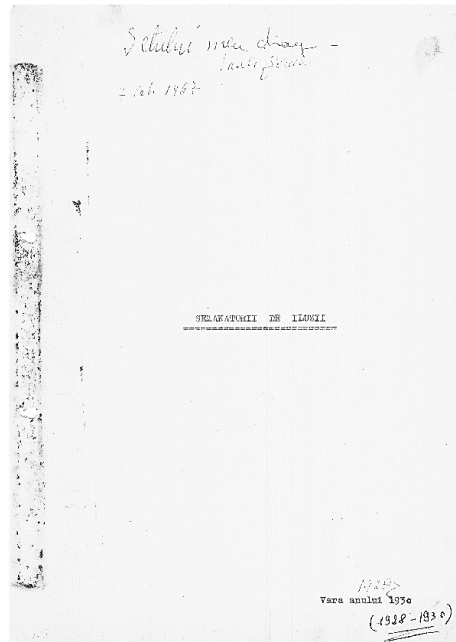
manuscript found in the documentary background, on which this study is based, indicates the period 1928 – 1930.

The Merchant of Illusions – a suggestive title of a literary challenge, a mirror of the years of the interwar period, which were marked not only by years of economic growth, cultural openness or vibrant social life, but also by the freedom to test risky experiences.

Although we do not know, precisely, the sources of information, we can correlate this dramatic text with moments in the real life of the author. We are led to follow this idea by a testimony of Petre Pandea who, in his memoirs, talks about Sorana Țopa's "drug addiction", "about her and other Romanian intellectuals' journeys from the 1930s "to artificial paradises".

She learned the habit of administering cocaine during a longer "Berlin vacation" from the late 1920s, when Petre Pandrea was attached to the press at the Romanian Legation in Germany."⁵ We don't know how much truth there is in this story, but – also from this perspective - *The Merchant of Illusions* becomes a text with current themes, which can still unsettle the audience (the receiver, the reader).

The dramaturgical concerns of the actress Sorana Țopa also explain her presence in the "Sburătorul" cenacle recorded in the monograph compiled by Carmen Antochi⁶: "The "Sburătorul" cenacle was one of the most important gatherings of Romanian writers. Eugen Lovinescu keeps a record of those who passed through his saloon over time, those notes being published, later, in the six volumes of the "*Sburătorul*" series. *Literary agendas*, edited by Monica Lovinescu and Gabriela Omăt. Among the most faithful participants are: Gheorghe Brăescu, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Ludovic Dauș, Vladimir Streinu, Dan Petrașincu, Ramiro Ortiz, Ion Petrovici, Dumitru Nanu, Victor Eftimiu, George Murnu, Liviu Rebreanu, Caton Theodorian, Zaharia Stancu, Tudor Vianu, Ana Luca, Sorana Țopa, Ioana Postelnicu, Ticu Arhip, G.M. Zamfirescu, Pompiliu Constantinescu, Camil Petrescu and many, many others. In a series of articles "*Sburătorul*" seen by... published in the newspaper



⁵ Petre Pandrea, *Turnul de ivoriu*. Memorii. Preface by Ștefan Dimitriu, neat edition and afterword by Nadia Marcu-Pandrea, *Vremea XXI*, București, 2004, pp. 97-101, apud Andrei Oișteanu, op. cit., p. 340.

⁶ Carmen Elena Antochi, *Sorana Țopa – roluri pe și dincolo de scenă: reflectări teatrolgice ale unui destin teatral*, preface Anca Doina Ciobotaru, Eikon Publishing House, București, 2021

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"Vremea", Sorana Țopa states: "The cross that the tormented dream of supremacy of art imposes on the shoulders of the fantastic person that is Mr. Lovinescu and which he wears serenely, with his eyes directed towards the pinnacle of the ideal, which eternally awaits the chosen ones.»"⁷.



The "Sburătorul" cenacle, 1942. From left to right: down – Sorana Țopa, Ana Luca, Ioana Postelnicu, E. Lovinescu, Monica Lovinescu, Ștefania Zottoviceanu-Rusu, Maura Prigor; up – Ion Ojog, Lucia Demetrius, Pompiliu Constantinescu, Vladimir Streinu, Dan Petrașincu, Ion Larian Postolache

However, the relationship between context and theme remains valid. Summarizing, the piece can be presented as follows:

Title: *The Sowers of Illusions*

Alternate Titles: *The Blind Who See Far* or *The Illusion Merchant*⁸

A play in four acts and a tableau

Typewritten manuscript; it contains 105 pages, with the initial title "The Sowers of illusions", dated 1928-1930, with a later dedication: "To my dear Get⁹ - Tanti Sorana, 7 Febr. 1967".

⁷ Sorana Țopa, *Sburătorul văzut de...*, „Vremea”, an V, nr. 232, 3 aprilie 1932, p. 7, apud *Amintiri și evocări despre E. Lovinescu*, neat edition, preface, chronological table, index and bibliography of Ion Nușă, Junimea Publishing House, Iași, 1981, p. 224.

⁸ The title of the manuscript submitted by Sorana Țopa to the National Archives of Romania, Iași County Service, Manuscript Collection, fund 354, volume 2, inventory 1439, no. 2466, roll 352.

⁹ Getei Angheluță, romanian actresses and theater professor, n.n

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THE CHARACTERS (sic!): Ariana, The Old Woman, Raymonde, The Mother, Jeana, A Blonde Girl, Another Brunette Girl, Ion, Vigor, The Sailor, The Waiter, The Stall Boy, The Russian Emigrant, The Musician, Another Sailor, A Negro, A colony officer, Second colony officer, Some businessmen, Some Chinese, Some sailors, The mutineer, The child.

In search of happiness, Sorana Țopa's characters take us to an area of traps, of networks where reality melts into delusion, beautiful dreams turn into nightmares. Placing the plot in different places suggests a filmic development, not yet exploited. Ample captions help the reader to get a clear picture of the spaces. From this point of view we can note the anthropological perspective supported both through the theme and the information transmitted through the direct (contained in the lines) and indirect (contained in the captions) information. Sorana Țopa talks about her world, filtering the image of time through her beliefs and values. Her connection to the feminist movement has been little talked about; and yet, Sorana Țopa, did not hesitate to express her opinions directly or indirectly (through the female characters in her dramaturgy). We present, in this context, fragments from the article *Answer to "The New Sexual Morality"*, published in 1931: "Once upon a time, humanity awakened to another level of consciousness by the voice of Christianity, had removed it as if it did not meet the soul's requirements, - today it intervenes as a factor through testing the new universal rhythm.

The struggle between the sexes, which enriched literature, science and art, bringing new elements of knowledge to the field of psychology, is no longer of any interest to contemporaries. What did this fight want to achieve? Overcoming the exclusively material feeling, through a wider understanding of the phenomenon. The deeply intuitive desire to know a neutral realm where the "selves" in perpetual collision merge into an indissoluble whole, with a "arrière goût" of eternity."¹⁰

Knowing these aspects, we approach the text with the understanding of the nuances of reflection of its intimate identity, reformulated over time by the search for the TRUTH and the inner SELF. The protagonist, Ariana, is determined to react, in the face of betrayal in love, by "running away". The reason for leaving – the solution for finding oneself and understanding the meaning, can also be identified in other pieces by the author. The starting point of the journey is usually marked by the protagonists' non-negotiable principles and values, by their beliefs. This time, the departure is triggered by the partner's infidelity (another recurring theme for the author), accepted in society as a common fact, passed by the Old Woman among the unwritten rules: "All men are subject to error... all men sin."¹¹ "The lie patch on the eye" becomes a subject of controversy; acceptance vs. non-acceptance. The definition of naturalness in the relationship of a couple belongs to a programming that acts

¹⁰ Sorana Țopa, *Răspuns la „Noua morală sexuală, „Adevărul Literar și Artistic”, Anul X, Nr. 564, 27 Septembrie 1931, p. 4, col. 1-2.*

¹¹ Sorana Țopa, *Illusion Merchant (Neguțătorii de iluzii)*, manuscris, Actul I, Scena a II-a, p. 5

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through "stories"; partner idealization is part of the recipe. Venturing outside of norms falls into the realm of "wacky dreams." The dialogue between The Old Woman and Ariana about the rules that should define a couple's bonds (from the first scene), is an example of the differences in vision between generations, present in society, ever since:

"Ariana (with joy): Aha, I understand, in other words, because I didn't swear and bind my life with the consent of the church and the town hall, God punished me, urging Ion to make a mistake, right?.. Beautiful faith, I have nothing to say!

Old woman (sighs scared): To punish you both, maybe.

Ariana (bitterly): Our union, as I dreamed of it... would have pleased the gods, I'm sure!"¹²

Having the chance to go through several manuscripts, we can see that in all her plays the defining turmoil and polemics for society become dramatic resources. The loss of identity, through the acceptance of customs, is also symbolized by the reevaluation of the Old Woman's status as a nanny and "woman of the house" and the recall of her name - Maria. In fact, if we pay attention to Sorana Țopa's biography, we will understand that the episode from her adolescence, in which her father sent her to Bârlad, and during which the dream of becoming an actress sprouted in her soul, also found a form of expression . The journey begins with a confession and the desire to obtain forgiveness (both from Mary and from Ion), in the form of an inner confession, as in a dialogue originating from another dimension. Besides, the invocation of Divinity is another constant of Sorana Țopa's dramaturgy, correlated with the idea of destiny, of accepting it, even when it involves suffering. In her plays, the prototype of the character who is guided by the values of Christian morality knows multiple variants, the relation to Divinity being reflected also through the approach to the relationship between life and death. The right or freedom to decide evokes lines reminiscent of Hamlet's eternal dilemma: "to die, to sleep...", which nuances the uproar between "to be" and "not to be", which Sorana Țopa tried to decipher, throughout life.

"The gentleman (trying to say while laughing): And absolutely! Ha! Ha! And do you think there is such a thing?

Ariana (after a pause, seriously) There must be! Otherwise, the thought of suicide haunts each of us...

The gentleman (settling himself): Suicide you said?

Ariana (as siesi): I've always said to myself that a life that doesn't have its foundation in something eternal, unshakable is like a river that runs

¹² Idem, p. 7

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empty without a river bed, or like the rare, priceless seed that dissipates without bearing fruit... How shall I say, a sort of breaking up of the empty spirit more fierce than any death."¹³

Both the text of the lines and captions indicate the author's search for the relationship between logical and emotional, between reason and affect. Despite its apparent simplicity, the play launches into deep and troubling themes that will accompany Sorana Țopa throughout her life. The characters and their actions are forms of expression of these themes. Ariana's departure to the "end of the earth" has the meaning of an initiatory journey; she will last as long as necessary: "I don't know... maybe, as much as I have to understand, why I can't reconcile myself, like other women with... the lie (...)." ¹⁴ The state of "emergency" is also derived from the desire to catch "the first train that crosses the border"; a metaphorical boundary that marks her "spiritual coming of age", obtained through the experience of her relationship with Ion. The protagonist's journey takes place between "The World of Imagination" and "The Blind Who See Far"; the first metaphor belongs to Ariana, representing the title of the manuscript she tears up before leaving; the second belongs to Sorana Țopa, who searched for inner vision throughout her life. That sight that showed her the way to freedom - with a price attached: "a bird that tastes the air of freedom does not return to the cage"¹⁵.

Act II begins with a painting at the opposite pole of the one from which Ariana left; the safety of the comfortable home is far away; the young woman knows the precarious reality of a "port locale", with all the specific atmosphere described through defining sonic, visual and olfactory details. The captions have the value of directorial indications, an aspect that demonstrates (once again) the stage sense of the actress; the last indication is eloquent: "When the curtain rises each character will have to follow the above instructions"¹⁶. Her paper characters breathe. Here the involvement in the relationship between *him* and *her* is measured in "grains"; emotions are replaced by negotiation. Disappointment and rebellion are replaced by insecurity and loneliness, along with the desire to take "life and people as they are..."¹⁷ Finding truth and beauty within, in contrast to and beyond the promiscuity of the surrounding world. Silence as a form of communication and a path to ... the ideal. Scene V presents another formula of married life, that of a sailor's family. Jeana brings with her an image of the submissive, waiting woman, who endures emotional and physical abuse, who has assumed the status of a possessed object: "he is my man, he has the right to

¹³ Idem, Actul III, Scena I-a, pp. 55-56.

¹⁴ Idem, Actul I, Scena II, p. 6

¹⁵ Idem, Actul I, Scena IV-a, p. 25

¹⁶ Idem, Actul II, p. 25

¹⁷ Idem, Actul II, scena I-a, p. 36

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beat me if he feels like it."¹⁸ The husband has full rights over herself and the children: "...if he feels like it, he can hit us as much as he wants, and even kill us..."¹⁹ The rule is part of the "dog's" life, assumed in the name of fulfilling an illusory and unwritten duty, perceived by Ariana as "the illusion of the powerless"²⁰.

Act III takes the journey to another threshold – that of abandonment. Sorana Topa places simple but powerful signs; for example, in the Lord's room she finds the book "Artificial Paradise" - Baudelaire. Basically, the protagonist manifests an acceptance of fate formulated in a more sophisticated version, but based on the same principle of abandonment: "everything that happens to me tonight... it seems to me that it was meant to happen."²¹

In this sense, the meeting between Ariana and Vigor acquires a symbolic dimension, on which the idea of partners' complementarity is based on, as the only chance of life as a couple. The drug dealer – *The Illusion Dealer* – is surprisingly attracted to Ariana; he is a symbol of the complementary half. Going out into the world to discover the "ideal", she ends up recognizing that everyone carries with them their own sufferings; light and dark, peace and turmoil, happiness and sadness lie dormant within and manifest according to how we "feed" them through thought. The responsibility, for the possible consequences of our own decisions, belongs to us – a message marked by invoking an attitude of refusal and/or abandonment: closing your eyes, when you find yourself on the precipice. The metaphor of the sight, of closed or open eyes, is another proof of the fact that the author does not write a text, but describes a show, cuts out fragments of life. The drug dealer's house, the artificial paradise, seems to be a place that the author has known. The characters say their names only when they face the reality defined by means of theatrical principles: here and now. Borders melt, contrasts are reformulated, power relations change, as in a communicating vessel.

The unknown is a testimony of the mechanism of immersion in the "artificial paradise", of transformation into a "shadow"; we notice an intermediate stage, which we could associate with the "lover boy" method; the illusion of love, another face of the upside down world. The drama is amplified by the turmoil of her mother, who tries to recover her, to bring her back to her own identity. The family - a collateral victim of some hard-to-understand decisions, born from "strange, unexpected" beginnings.

The finale sits under the sign of the same search for the ideal; only this time the male character is the vulnerable one. Ariana continues her journey to self; Vigor,

¹⁸ Idem, Actul II, Scena V-a, p.46

¹⁹ Idem, p. 47

²⁰ Idem, p. 57

²¹ Idem, Actul III, p. 53

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however, "seems to be looking for traces of Ariana in other lands, somewhere, through the recesses of his bloody heart"²².

"The last scene" has an open ending because Sorana feels the need for an enlightening didactic: "Vigor as awakened... without understanding yet..."; a possible mystical recovery of the lost or just another metaphorical illusion. The truth, the present, the real bring with them suffering, when they are part of a blind game.

3. The steps of illusion

Even if the thread of the dramatic conflict is a linear one, it brings to our attention, strong themes regarding inter-human, interpersonal and intra-personal relationships. The journey takes us, through Ariana, into the labyrinth of an inner search; step by step: rebellion, insecurity, abandonment, awakening/awareness of what we are beyond the mask... Approaching the mythical Ariadne is achieved through the mysterious ideational thread that leads her to search... "the end of every thought or feeling" and the meaning, the purpose.

"The truth is what we live now..." - a line that could make us understand the actuality of Sorana Țopa's themes/messages. If we probed the causes that trigger the traps of multiplied illusions, we could also find solutions. The trafficker Vigor has his own perspective: "I did nothing but submit to their fierce thirst to be blindfolded, deceived... It is true that I offered poisonous illusions.. but only to the unfortunate ones who had too good a memory, understand? So that they can forget the past,.. as well as those,.. who had no place to remember..." The need for truth vs. the need to forget the truth shrouded in fog or hidden in the labyrinth. Illusion merchants still thrive, the dramas are not over; the rediscovery of this text proves that beyond the slightly clumsy dramatic form, the subject and the characters have a symbolic load that allows us to approach the human.

If we open our eyes, when we are on the edge of the precipice, perhaps we would understand the meaning of the metaphor offered - temptation can be defeated by following the Christ model, by re-evaluation, without pride, without prejudice; purification involves suffering, lucidity, and communion alike. Perhaps this is one of the most powerful and current messages. Loneliness and distrust are just as traumatic for drug dealers as for drug users. The presences before the fall into the void are what can make the difference.

Approaching her simple yet expressive dramaturgy allows us to reassess theater's power to both unsettle and heal. Awakening awareness and understanding one's own emotions are still topical issues; society seems to have no time for the inner world. Running in and out drains our energy, giving us...personal (or group!?) illusions. Sorana Țopa's texts are waiting for us to abandon the illusion of political

²² Idem, Actul IV, Scena din urmă, p. 105.

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correctness and to accept the fact that the recovery of cultural memory represents a possible saving solution, which will reconnect us to the need for identity.

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