

Affective Memory in Artistic Creation: Tool or Trap?

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Abstract: The article discusses affective memory and its implications for the art of acting. More specifically, the article analyses two cases where affective memory, a potentially important tool for artists, can actually turn into a trap at times. The first case is that of Andrei Mavrodin, a character in a Mircea Eliade novel, who fails both in art and in love because, while he turns to his affective memory as a tool for building his fictional characters, he does not manage to do the same in his romantic relationship. In Andrei Mavrodin's mind there is a preconstructed image of what an artist should be, and he chooses to act that image out, hurting both his lover and himself in the process. The second case is personal. At the beginning of my acting career, I turned to my affective memory to help me construct a role in a one-man show, but I ended up in the impossibility to clearly dissociate myself from the role I was playing; in other words, I acted emotionally in a situation that called for objectivity. This study aims at taking an in-depth look at this duality, by analysing how affective memory, when used as a source for artistic works, can easily turn from a tool into a trap.

Keywords: affective memory, artistic creation, subjectivity vs. objectivity, the art of acting, building a character

“Memory is the personal journalism of the soul.” - Richard Schickel¹.

Affective memory – an actor's tool

In the works inspired from their personal experiences, various artists will use tools specific to their art in order to transfigure the situations, facts or events that make up their affective memory. Artists may resort to their own life events as a creative source either consciously or unconsciously. Yet actors cannot afford to make that choice. With actors, using affective memory as a

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¹ Richard Warren Schickel was an American film historian, journalist, author, documentarian, and film and literary critic. He was a film critic for *Time* between 1965 and 2010.

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tool should be a conscious process at all times. There are cases, however, when an actor's affective memory will no longer serve as a tool, but will actually become a trap.

According to Anzieu, an artist 'will often extract material for his works from personal processes or states that contribute to his creative effort, or from the borderlines of their Self, an area that previously had been clearly kept apart from their thoughts or behaviours.'²

I recall having heard about "affective memory" during my freshman year at the "Ion Luca Caragiale" National University of Theatre and Cinema, when Adriana Popovici, our class coordinator, introduced us to the concept, presenting it as a true working instrument for actors.

Konstantin Stanislavski was one of the most influential theatre personalities who used the concept of affective memory in relation to the art of the actor and discussed the possibility of using it as a tool. In his view, actors can and should use their own life experiences to construct the characters they play, as a tool in their creative act.

Actors can use recollections of some of their life experiences as points of reference for the present, and those past sensations, reactions and emotions can become pillars that support their current efforts to build a role. Moreover, past experiences with a strong emotional impact can at a later stage generate reactions in the body that are as intense as the original experience. By rehearsing and developing appropriate techniques, an actor can acquire control over his emotions and reactions and use them when performing on stage. By reaching back to his past experiences, an actor can use them to support their current acting. In time, an actor's lived human experience will develop into an emotional palette that provides him with a range of precious resources supporting his art.

In other words, affective memory is an important pillar theatre professionals can rely on, as it encompasses a variety of information sources collected from the actors' own past experience; moreover, as this is actually lived experience, actors really understand what that is experience is all about, and will have the ability to manipulate that information when constructing the characters they play on stage.

² Anzieu, Didier; *Psihanaliza travaliului creator*, translated by Bogdan Ghiu, Trei Publishing House, 2004, p. 81, translation mine, LCG.

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As mentioned earlier, most of my references to affective memory are based on the processes described by Konstantin Stanislavski³ in his analysis of the art of the actor. In his study of various elements involved in exploring affective memory, Stanislavski explains that, in case actors fail to appeal to their affective memory, their acting will be hollow, devoid of content:

„I admit that you may begin the exercise by allowing the external plan to lead you. But after that you must let it remind you of your former feelings and give yourself up to them as a guiding force throughout a scene. If you can do that, I shall say that your emotional memories are not exceptional or supernatural, but that they are good. If I must cut down my demands even more, then I should say: play the physical scheme of the exercise, even if it does not recall your former sensations, and even if you do not feel the impulse to look at the given circumstances of the plot with a fresh eye. But then let me see you use your psycho-technique to introduce new imaginative elements in your acting that will arouse your dormant attention, imagination, sense of truth, faith, thoughts, as well as feelings”.⁴

The principles of this working method are discussed, explained to and used by students already during their university years, which allows them to operate with these supporting elements mainly during rehearsals, where they can engage in a detailed manner in their quest and self-searching. Reaching back to one's own experiences may also result in moments of revelation, but it may allow actors to build associations with their own lived experience also while performing on stage in front of an audience. As actors become increasingly aware of the substance of their own experience, they can use it to work on their roles, which may sometimes give birth to moments of grace on stage, where the actors' authentic emotions will really touch the public's heart.

The actors' capacity to recall emotions may not always be accompanied by an ability to reproduce identically the effects of the emotions experienced, but if it is, then the effect of relived past events may provide them

³ Stanislavski, Constantin, *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*, Bucharest, State Publishing House for Literature and Art, 1965. The quotation above is a collage of ideas taken from Stanislavski's work. The English version is based on my translation and on consulting English versions of Stanislavski's work.

⁴ Stanislavski, Constantin, *ibidem*, page 150

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with a real support in the creative act. Actually, actors can get to know themselves much better by going through this process. They can (re)analyse their past by delving into it as deep as possible; and then, by associating these past experiences with the parts they are currently playing, actors can actually understand and make sense of their own past, beyond using it as a tool in artistic creation. This leads to better self-knowledge, which is achieved by means of a comparative analysis of the actor's own past and the past of the characters he is playing, the latter being constructed among others by making reference to the former. This complex process may also have therapeutic effects.

In the process, actors may also expand their knowledge about themselves by analysing their own behaviour. When reliving certain emotions by means of the parts they are playing, actors have the opportunity to understand their past traumas and moments of ecstasy, which can benefit them both personally and professionally.

This technique can be used by students to work on a part starting already in their early university years. While doing so, students have the opportunity to discover some other implications of the process: for instance, it is not advisable for actors to revert to recent past experiences (recent is generally taken to mean about five years), as this could generate very strong emotions that are hard to control, and may even make them relive the original trauma.

It must be said, however, that all the people who have experienced traumas, whatever their job, should benefit from professional support and should not be left to face their experiences on their own, as this could do them more harm than good. Therefore, reverting to past memories as a technique for developing a role always requires actors to observe some basic principles.

For acting students, reaching back to their own life experiences when constructing a role may look like a technique borrowed from *science fiction*; this is the very reason why students may be sometimes fascinated with the process, and they may want to relive certain emotions in order to discover their own behavioural patterns that they can then use as tools in their acting. Moreover, the very thought that they can intersect their own life experiences with the emotional experiences of famous dramatic heroes is a motivation in itself, and can make the profession they have chosen even more attractive to them. By trying out this technique on themselves, trainee actors gradually

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understand and acquire this working method, which may sometimes prove to be quite difficult to use and master.

Miriam Răducanu, the great artist with whom I had the privilege to train for more than 17 years, once said: „in everything they do, actors can capitalize on the joys and sorrows in their own lives and associate them with the joys and sorrows of the characters they play. Actors can use their past and present lived experience as an inner engine, and reflect them in the subtext of their performance”, the subtext including all the elements that bestow meaning on an actors’ performance.

The inner dimension, the part of an actor that is only accessible to the public to the extent that the performer allows it to be seen, is related to the actor’s self. The resources used by an actor who is in control of his performance are very personal and only known to him. But although those resources are not visible to the public, they do have the power to convey emotions. They can add depth not only to the words uttered by the actor, but also to his actions on stage. So an actor’s resources will only be known to him. The resources that actors use to give life to their characters and the passion they put into their acting are the exclusive perquisite of the actors’ intimate space.

Revisiting one’s life experiences may also work as a way to release inner tension or a form of therapy. When we were working together, Miriam Răducanu would sometimes recall a difficult moment in her life, when she was saved by the advice of a medical doctor who was helping her recover from a variety of health issues. This is what the wise doctor would say: “Stop hiding your feelings in your heart, pour them into your art.” Miriam would repeat those words whenever she would detect signs of dismay and despair on the faces of her trainees.

In the following sections, I will provide a more detailed definition of the concepts I have been working with, in an attempt to acquire a better understanding of the way in which actors can work with their affective memory.

Memory: definition and types

The notion of memory can be defined in several ways, depending on the extent to which various components thereof take precedence over others.

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I do not intend to go for the more complex definitions, as they would not necessarily serve the main purpose of my study, which is to analyse the way in which actors can work with their own affective memory on stage. Therefore, I am only going to concentrate on defining the phenomenon from the perspective of affective memory, i.e. the component that stores past emotional experiences that the actor can return to when constructing a role.

People can get to know the world by experiencing situations directly, but they can also accumulate such knowledge by storing their reactions to various events in their memory, and then revisiting those memories in novel contexts. If such a mechanism did not exist, everything would always appear to us new and impossible to understand; but due to it, we can organize our existence in time into past, present and future.

There are several types of memories; some are related to the senses – visual, auditive, olfactory, gustatory and tactile, while others are related to the workings of the brain – memorizing figures, proper names, music etc. In most cases, affective memory is a combination of sensory and cerebral memories.

The mechanism whereby some memories are triggered by association with current happenings is well known to us all. The intensity of these recollections may vary quite a lot depending on a person's emotional capacity or on the impact past events have had on the person experiencing them.

It is maybe useful to mention at this point that all living organisms are endowed with memory, even unicellular ones, but it is only humans who, using their sensory abilities to receive information coming from the external environment, can make sure that information is not lost. Thoughts, impressions, images, emotions can be stored, and the database thus formed can be accessed on subsequent occasions. "Memory encodes and stores experiences lived and information received and can later retrieve all of that".⁵

However, "memories are never completely reliable. Memories retrieved always contain false details, as they are the product of intellectual reconstruction. Memory is not a cerebral automatism, but a product of the psyche, aimed at creating a sense of personal identity."⁶

⁵ Sillamy, Norbert, *Dicționar de psihologie*, Encyclopaedic Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, page 192, translation mine, LCG.

⁶ Sillamy, Norbert, *ibidem* page 194, translation mine, LCG.

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I will be using these elements of general psychology in my analysis of the art of the actor, both at a theoretical and a practical level. They are the pillars on which actors will base their actions on stage. Or, as Nichita Stănescu, the celebrated poet, once said: "...people are what they can recall about themselves. The reason why people appear to be erratic or shifty at times is that every time they tend to remember different things about themselves."⁷

Emotion or reason, subjectivity or objectivity

By relying on their affective memory, artists can create authentic works of art. In drama, every staging of a text can become a novel artistic expression that is personalised by involving the subjective dimension; the artistic expression will define the style of an artist who relies on his affective memory to achieve a particular result.

The subjective dimension is used to generate the energy, motivation and inspiration required in the creative act. Past experiences can define people as artists, depending on the talent and perseverance they are endowed with. Therefore, there are quite a few situations when the creators' living environment or the events they experience will become sources of creative enlightenment. These works are impressive because they are loaded with the creators' emotions, that are so strong as to be capable of eliciting emotions in others.

In my analysis, I will make a parallel presentation of two cases, in an attempt to achieve a better understanding of the limits and implications involved in the uncontrolled use of the affective dimension in art.

My first example is taken from fiction, and it is an analysis of Andrei Mavrodin, a writer, one of the main characters in a novel by Mircea Eliade, "Marriage in Heaven" (*Nuntă în cer*). The second is a personal life experience.

In the first case, Mavrodin lives his life based on the professional conduct that he has imposed upon himself and uses his personal experiences in his writings, being convinced that this is something he can do that all his life. However, this approach eventually leads him to emotional failure.

⁷ Stănescu, Nichita, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjza7Mvf1PY>, minute 5, last accessed on 23.05.2024.

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In the second case, I am going to recount a personal experience in which my use of past memories and my inexorable attachment to the behaviour of a character I was playing eventually plunged me into a state of confusion that could have cost me my acting career.

The elements common to the two situations are the use of affective memory in artistic creation, on the one hand, and the way in which that memory can generate new actions with a strong emotional impact, on the other.

Working on a part or playing a role on the stage are not the only instances that can make one relive past experiences. This can also happen when writing or practicing other arts. Writing can also be a form of therapy, as reverting to past experiences can help heal some lingering emotional issues, while also being a technique for creating consummate works of art.

This may be the reason why most successful writers have turned to their personal experiences as a source of inspiration. Like actors, writers can turn to the world they know best, their personal world, which they can delve into and exploit for artistic purposes. There are quite a few examples of famous texts with a strong emotional impact, whose power is given by the subjective elements that went into their creation. Let me just quote a random example at this point, the script for one of the most recent Netflix mini-series, *Baby Reindeer*. It tells the true story of a comedian who decided to make it into a movie, thus giving birth to the character Donny Dunn.

There are cases, however, when artists are afraid of being judged as persons based on their artistic creations. Andrei Mavrodin, the young successful writer in the novel “Marriage in Heaven” does voice that fear, as he believes that in fact his readers must be thinking that what he actually does is to transfer his own experiences and emotions in his writing: “People think that now, after having read my book, they know things about me. They are now convinced that the things I wrote about actually happened and they proceed to weigh me up and judge me based on that.”⁸

Yet if we read through the novel, we find that Andrei Mavrodin is doing precisely what he claims he is not doing, i.e. he is actually transposing his personal experiences into his artistic creation. For fear of not being judged or of revealing too much about himself, however, he eventually gets to a stage

⁸ Eliade, Mircea, *Nuntă în cer*, Minerva Publishing House, 1986, translation mine, LCG.

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where he can no longer write, because he does not want to turn his love into fiction. It appears that he is simply incapable of detaching himself from what has developed into a habit with him, i.e. using his own life experience as a source for creation.

This is a typical case that we can read about in the literature, for instance in the article by Didier Anzieu I have mentioned earlier, which describes how personal life experiences can become a source in the creative process. This is what happens in my opinion to the fictional character Andrei Mavrodin, but it may also be true to say that the same mechanism was at work in Mircea Eliade's life experiences and his works.

Andrei Mavrodin makes an ample, almost therapeutic confession, admitting his romantic failure. However, he chooses to blame it on the fact that he is above all an artist, therefore he cannot lead the life of a mere mortal: "I had got used to the idea that I was an artist and that I could only walk a spiritual path. ... To me, an artist is a well-defined type of human; he is granted certain rights and licences, but he also had quite a few duties to himself, to his art, to his destiny. ...I used to be envious of the life of simple people, who fate did not compel to live in a splendid, cold solitude until their death."⁹

All along the novel, Andrei Mavrodin is characterized by a great passion for his profession, that he fully identifies with and that influences all his actions. For Mavrodin, his profession is like a life concept whereby he can identify and depending on which he can plan his decisions and actions.

Eliade's character is influenced by the way in which he perceives his work ethic, and he eventually loses the love of his life because he keeps invoking his idea about *what an artist should be like* to support his lack of empathy with his lover's wish to have his child. This is a "recipe" that not only guides his life, but also influences the way in which he recalls his own past.

After the woman he loves breaks up with him, Andrei manages to write again, being motivated by the thought that she might get to read what he writes, a thing that he had been unable to do during the year that they had spent together. Once the character's life experience is turned into a memory, he becomes capable of materializing it in an artistic creation. He can now get rid of his creative blockages and inhibitions, and he is stimulated by the idea that he is writing more for his lover than for himself.

⁹ Anzieu, Didier; *ibidem* page 224, translation mine, LCG.

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Andrei Mavrodin's confession also gives us an insight into the therapeutic dimension of a work of art: "I wanted to make this a true account of our love; I wanted to make this confession more for Ileana than for myself. ... Maybe the reason for writing this book was my need to apologize to Ileana: *Marriage in Heaven*, the title speaks for itself, I was saying to myself. ... Ileana is always on my mind when I am writing, and yet, the plot is developing in a different way, I am drawn into a web of lies without realizing it, and although the story is the same, neither Ileana, nor myself or the events in the book are the same as they had been in real life."¹⁰

When constructing his character, Mircea Eliade obviously allowed himself to be influenced by his own experience as a writer and by his own affective memories in order to develop the emotional setup of his protagonist, a writer himself.

To conclude, this brief analysis was meant to describe how Eliade's character, who initially makes appeal to his affective memory as a source for his fiction, gets to be dominated by this memory not only in his writing, but also in real life.

The personal dimension

My second example, as I was saying, refers to a personal experience in which my inexorable attachment to the character in a one-man show I was playing led me to develop a behaviour that triggered several incidents with ample emotional implications.

The events I am going to describe will illustrate the effects of my use of affective memory in my attempt to develop my role, which eventually led to an emotional involvement on my part that exceeded by far any reasonable limit.

This was a context where my daily actions as an actor were characterized by an excessive devotion to drama and the theatre, a clear case of erroneous positioning of an actor at the beginning of his career. I do hope that by presenting this incident in my life I can be of help to other young actors who are just starting out in their careers.

¹⁰ Eliade, Mircea, *ibidem* page 263, translation mine, LCG.

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The subjective dimensions of our existence and the way in which we relate to various events in our life can be much more deceptive at a young age. The events I am going to describe happened back in 2009, when I was still very young, and they even received some media coverage.

Despite that, it is only now that I have decided to take an in-depth look at the process and motivation that pushed me into a situation that made me suddenly mature and develop an awareness and an ethical conduct pertaining to the acting profession, while also deepening my sense of responsibility.

Although at the time I was just starting out as an actor, during the year that had passed since my graduation from acting school I had managed to score some successes in my career – I had been cast into leading roles in three plays premiering on the stages of state theatres and I had also performed in two shows put on by independent theatres. I do have to mention these details, as they are part of the framework where the events under consideration happened. My limited acting experience also made me perceive all negative criticism as something that could have radical implications for my career and would implicitly be very hard to manage.

As I was saying, I had completed my undergraduate studies one year earlier, in 2008, and I was planning to take up an MA program. That year I had also won a prize at the HOP Young Actors' Gala in Mangalia. This gave me a lot of self-confidence and I had the feeling that most theatre professionals, particularly the directors, would perceive me in a positive light and would want to see one of the other projects I was involved in, a one-man show that had premiered at the Monday Theatre at the Green Hours club under the title *Mon-Fri: 8 to 4*, a title that made reference to the usual working hours of most Romanians. The show was written and directed by Ioana Păun based on a text by Rodrigo Garcia. In developing the show, the director had decided to make use of the personal experiences of the team members, and then transform them according to her artistic vision. We talked at length about the show and we often revisited memories we had about the times of our lives that were similar to those of the character we were developing. This was a signature show, and Ioana Păun was very much involved in coordinating and structuring all the work.

The emotional dimension that I had to activate for the role, and my attempts to turn to my affective memory in order to be able to better understand what the character I was playing had gone through, eventually

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pushed me into a state where I was no longer capable of differentiating between the character I was playing and my own self. The show had somehow become part of me, I had identified completely with my character, and I wanted everybody to see the show, as in my opinion it had an extremely important message to convey. To a certain extent, I was no longer able to perceive this show as an artistic creation or a cultural product, but rather as an extension of myself. Because of that, my objectivity was completely clouded and, just like Andrei Mavrodin, who was unable to draw a clear dividing line between his life as a writer and his love life, I could no longer differentiate between what was objective and what was subjective or emotional in my behaviour.

My expectations concerning the people who might have been interested in seeing the show proved to be somewhat unrealistic, which meant that only very few theatre professionals actually came to see the show. Fuelled by a strong desire not to let all the hard work I had put into this show go unnoticed, I tried to devise a solution whereby I could reach out to the public I wanted to have.

Consequently, without consulting anyone, I decided to sign up for the Gala again, but this time to take to the stage a fragment of the one-man show. Once accepted, I did present a long fragment of the show in the Gala, a fragment that proved to be much too long, as honestly speaking it was actually half of the show. But by doing so, I used up twice as much time as the maximum limit allowed by the Gala rules, that is fifteen minutes. My reckless act brought on several consequences that had a strong emotional impact on me. As soon as I was given the opportunity, I apologized for what I had done and I accepted the consequences of my actions. Some of the consequences were really painful, but I also had some nice surprises that I'm going to mention later on.

To me, the decision to exceed the official time limit appeared to be more of a solution than a problem. I had made that decision based on my heightened level of emotional involvement in my artistic creation, which made me identify completely with the character I was interpreting, compounded by the state of confusion generated by my lack of maturity.

As mentioned earlier, in working for this role I had reverted to my affective memory. This allowed me to create a credible character, that I eventually identified with to some extent. But what I had pulled off at the Gala

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had placed me in an uncomfortable position, or to put it differently, I had been thrust into the limelight, not as a dramatic hero, but rather as the competitor who had violated the Gala rules.

Without consulting with anyone, I had made a plan that I had carefully kept for myself, just like the character I was playing. I was convinced that the public was going to witness a show that deserved every attention, and that was after all the purpose of the work that had been put into it. I was motivated by the issues my character was confronted with, but also by the work that I had invested into building my character, which made me strongly believe that the show had to become better known mainly due to the topic it treated in the first half: the situation extant in state education that my generation had been confronted with, and the education given to pupils by the system.

My character's plotting of a manifesto in the first scene of the play, when he was still acting with ingeniousness and courage, was a mirror image of what I was planning to do. I knew that the show could have an important social impact because, after all, it told the story of a child with great potential, a symbol of his generation, whose unique creative spirit was eventually destroyed.

The show captured the effects of the defective teaching methods used in school that resulted in the annihilation of the main character's need for making sense of things already during his first year of study. Alex, as he was called, was pained by the fact that his educators would not explain to him why he had to do what he had to do, why he had to learn what he had to learn, and above all why he was obliged particular learning methods. The vigilante in him was initially crying out in order to make himself heard, but eventually he gave up seeking answers to those questions and confined himself to simply executing whatever he was told to do. He was thus trapped in a system where he had no right to voice his opinions, and this was later also mirrored in his adult behaviour.

Ioana Păun had involved me into all the preparatory stages, which was a natural approach when working on a one-man show. We recalled details of my childhood that could be used in developing my character. In preparing for the show, she tried out her ideas by making me improvise quite a lot, so I was totally dedicated to this exercise, and I ended up taking everything very personally.

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All this intensified my desire to have the show seen by as many people as possible. I even thought that seeing the show was a must, also encouraged by the very good feedback I had received from some actors I admired who had come to see my show. Actors such as Florin Piersic Jr. and Horațiu Mălăele had been highly appreciative of my performance, which further increased my enthusiasm. This feeling was compounded by the free creative spirit of the character I was interpreting, as well as by the topic of the play, that was like a wake-up call, reminiscent of the lyrics of the famous Pink Floyd song, *Another brick in the wall*: “*Teacher, leave them kids alone!*”.

I had been greatly inspired by all these arguments, and being totally devoted to the show, I had no doubt that what I was planning to do was right. More than that, I had actually considered the possibility of performing the full show on the Gala stage. Looking back, I now understand that, if I had been reasonable, I could have chosen a fragment that would fit into the time limits foreseen, and I would have obtained the same effect.

However, at the time, everything was inexorably pushing me towards the same decision, among others the somewhat Brechtian approach to the play, that was conceived like a manifesto addressed directly to the public. I had found the perfect arguments that allowed me to go on the competition stage with the conviction that the most important thing for me to do was to make my message reach the public and then propagate it further on. All the energy that was fed into me by the paradigm I had espoused prevented me from giving the tiniest thought to the potential consequences of what I was planning to do. Or, to put it differently, I chose to simply ignore those consequences.

In this context I acted very much like Mircea Eliade’s character, who had made choices for himself and for the others, without considering the consequences of his decisions.

The subject of the play

The play aimed to show how the rigid and impersonal rules applied in the educational system failed to take into account the pupils’ individual qualities. Even the legitimate curiosities of a child got to be ignored. Or the child could even be punished for being inquisitive, which curtailed his curiosity and creativity. This approach to a young person’s education could

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have a negative impact on the character of the adult he was going to become, and could thwart his healthy development.

At the age of 6 years and 8 months, Alex reveals himself to the public with all his passion and energy, telling the story of the latest victory he associates with the feats of his favourite super-heroes.

He then describes in great detail how he planned and then carried out a well-thought-out strategy for saving an animal. He was touched by the suffering of a donkey which was used by his master as a prop for pictures in the park. Alex was convinced that the animal was abused by being kept in the hot sun, without food or drink, that it was subjected to exploitation and mistreatment. So he decided to devise a detailed plan to save the animal. He also managed to adapt to the unforeseen circumstances he was confronted with while executing the plan, but he stubbornly pursued his goal, being creative both in the actions he undertook and in the way in which he described them.

However, when he is enrolled in school, his curiosity and power of imagination are reined in, as he is required to carry out absurd tasks that are imposed on him without any explanation. The lack of any justification for the actions he is obliged to take and the constant lack of logic eventually turn him into somebody without a personality of his own, who merely executes whatever he is told to do; after graduation, he gets a job at a call centre where he is exploited and humiliated by an incompetent boss.

Although he has become a responsible adult, Alex can no longer find in himself the resources to oppose the repeated abuse he is subjected to and simply carries on with his dull life. At the end of the play, we find out that his girlfriend had left him, and he has taken refuge in watching mediocre shows on TV and video porn.

In the Gala, I had decided to only present the initial part of the show, where Alex speaks about his aspirations to become a super-hero. At that moment, the child speaks in detail about his success in freeing an animal from the grips of what he sees as its abuser, the photographer who mistreats the poor donkey. Later on, during his years in primary school, however, we see Alex's natural curiosity being gradually killed off by his teachers. Alex's path through school is illustrated by scenes where he repeats mechanically and absent-mindedly formulas and quotes memorized at various stages of his schooling. He suddenly breaks off after mentioning some things he appears to have

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learned in college, and gets bogged down in an obsessive repetition of a single word, “bromide”.

I wasn’t interrupted during my performance of the scene, and I actually got to play it to the end, as I had intended, without anyone objecting. There were over four hundred people in the hall, and the reactions of the public made me believe that I had managed to achieve my goal. However, although I wanted to feel satisfied with the feedback I was getting, there was something that made me feel uneasy. I wasn’t completely sure that my performance had been well received by everybody, and I could feel a wave of energy rising that was in sharp contrast with the initial appreciative reactions of the audience.

When I got off the stage, I felt an urgent need to call Miriam Răducanu, who had always been a professional landmark for me, and who I considered to be my mentor. I had told her absolutely nothing about what I had intended to do, and I felt an overwhelming urge to confess to her, hoping that she would help me understand better what I had done. She listened to me very patiently and then asked me to pay very much attention to what she was going to say. And this is how I discovered what the brazen act I had committed actually meant and what implications it could have.

She told me that I had allowed myself to be guided by my emotions, and not my reason, and I had thus disregarded a very important element: that I was in a competition that had its own set of clear rules. Since I had broken those rules, I would inevitably have to face the consequences. Moreover, I would be the subject of comments that I would have to accept. She explained that it was most likely that I would be penalized or even excluded from the competition.

She asked me what I was planning to do first. When I told her that I was totally confused and didn’t know, she formulated a suggestion that she asked me to contemplate carefully, allowing me to use it if I agreed with it. She made me consider the possibility of owning up to my mistake, without going into the details I had told her about. By attempting to justify my actions that were clearly carried out in breach of the competition’s rules, I would have elicited even more unwanted attention and I would have deepened the conflict I had generated.

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Tit for tat

The organizers of the competition asked me to attend a press conference where we could have a debate on the issue that I had caused by overrunning the prescribed time limits. They seemed to be baffled about the real reasons behind what I had done and they were also aware about the positive feedback I had received for my performance. Participants in the press conference also turned to other topics, but the one I was involved in elicited a particular interest and generated a lengthy debate.

At the beginning of the press conference, I was given the opportunity to take the floor, and everybody appeared to be surprised when I confessed that there was only one thing I could say, that I knew I had made a mistake that I now regretted, and I should have approached the whole situation in a completely different manner. I think I tried to utter some more sentences, but I only have a vague recollection about my lack of coherence in what I was trying to say, that was obviously generated by my extreme nervousness. Some people were trying to see whether what happened would warrant potential changes in the competition's format, which could benefit participants by making time-related rules more flexible. The conclusion to the discussion was that no such changes could be allowed.

As far as I was concerned, I could feel two types of energy in the tone of the people who took the floor, and in the words they used to describe what had happened. Some had a strong negative load in their tone, and they were almost revolted by the attitude of most of the people in the audience, who were much less outraged by the "stunt" I had pulled off. They were accusatory and they were blaming those who had enjoyed the show despite my having breached the time-related rules, notwithstanding the fact that the performance had been well done and interesting. And there was also another group that approached the issue with a calm, almost relaxed attitude, and who was trying to understand the reasons behind the passionate onslaught of the other group.

The debate that had me as a subject lasted for about thirty minutes, and I participated in it more like a spectator rather than an interlocutor. After having uttered the few sentences that I had been asked to say, from which they could understand that I was sorry for what I had done, I was ignored in a way that could have been made into a great movie scene, but that I found almost unbearable.

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The arguments invoked for and against by participants simply proved that some people were very good at voicing their pre-conceived ideas, and there was nothing that could make them look at things from a fresh perspective. The people who took the floor appeared to be very sure about the reason why I had strayed from the beaten track and what it all meant. I felt to some extent like the character I had played, at the time when he had lost any possibility to keep control of his own life and was drifting along. As I had mentioned earlier, it was very difficult for me to be confronted with negative reactions that did not concern my artistic performance, but rather my own behaviour.

The situation I had been exposed to gave me an all-pervasive feeling that my professional career was coming to an end. I was experiencing a sense of extreme fear as if I had been an exile, or as if I had been excluded from a world that I loved and wanted forever to be a part of. I was no longer able to distinguish between those who had thought that my performance had been successful and appreciated both the content and the artistic achievement, unmoved by the circumstances where it was played, as part of a competition, and those who seemed to be ready to exclude me from the profession for having violated the rules.

I had got to a point when I believed that all the people who expressed their views in the debate were actually amplifying the negative effects for me. I felt as if I was living in an augmented reality where all the people around me were trying to feed my fears, my frustration and my anxiety. I kept reminding myself that I had to breathe, and by concentrating on that simple task I could dispel the dark thoughts that kept cropping up in my mind. I was sweating a lot and the discussion seemed to go on forever. I was overcome with shame, I felt ashamed about the person I was going to be after having lived through all of that.

I was trying to take refuge in the conversation I had had with Miriam Răducanu, but that didn't help me too much. It allowed me to keep my feet on the ground because it reminded me that I had put myself in that situation on my own. This helped me keep my reactions under control and prevented me from running away. I stayed to the end and I tried hard to follow the discussions, feeling capable of owning up to what I had done and taking responsibility for all of that. It felt somehow right to be attending my own trial as a spectator, although no verdict had been passed at the time. I could

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compare this situation to the scene in which Andrei Mavrodin was listening to Barbu Hasnaş's confession and, in the process, would realize that he had made the wrong choice by mixing up his calling as a writer and his personal life.

The press conference that I was required to attend was organized after the competition had ended, on the morning of the day when the award ceremony was also taking place. I had no idea what lay in store for me, and there was no one who could provide me with any information about that, because the final decisions were to be made by the members of the competition jury, who thus had the final say. On the day, the members of the jury dedicated their time to drawing the conclusions and to deliberating on the results, without participating at the ominous press conference.

Later on, during the award ceremony, I was called on the stage together with all the other competitors. The prizes were all awarded to the winners, one by one. And after the top prize had been handed over and the audience's applause had died down, Cornel Todea, who was the coordinator and MC of the HOP Gala, went on to make some final remarks. His words were imprinted forever in my memory, and most probably I will never be able to forget them, because they were about me. This is what he said: "The prizes were awarded after actor Lari Giorgescu had been eliminated from the competition." As soon as those words left his lips, the public broke out into an applause that lasted for quite a few seconds. I tried to keep in check any reaction I might have had, but I was extremely nervous. I was absolutely flabbergasted when my competitors also joined in the applause. I don't know what made them do that, but I flattered myself with the idea that maybe they appreciated the courage and self-confidence with which I had taken a senseless dive into the unknown, without giving a moment's thought to what was going to happen to me thereafter. Their gesture certainly appeared to be a form of appreciation. This was the saving grace that helped me through the difficult moments I was experiencing.

The press releases announcing the results of the HOP Gala all contained that note about me. Let me quote a relevant fragment from a review written by Alice Georgescu: "As for the young actors, the results have given us few reasons for optimism; with the exception of Lari Cosmin Giorgescu, the "excluded" (who had been disqualified from the competition for having exceeded the prescribed time limits), who demonstrated some depth, subtlety and a clear progress as compared to last year's performance, and who is

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endowed with a charisma that will hopefully keep him away from the small screen of major compromises, none of the competitors stood out as the uncontested winner...”¹¹

When your self-judgment is even tougher

With my behaviour, I had clearly managed to attract the negative attention of quite a few of the theatre professional of the time. Over the years, I did sometimes feel the reverberations of what had happened, but I was determined to make amends by adopting a flawless professional conduct, by staying focused, and by making sure that, in whatever I did, I was not carried away by my emotions and always acted rationally.

There is no doubt in my mind that the art of the actor can be much more penetrating and authentic when actors are personally involved in their projects, and the actions of the characters they play appear to be manifestations of their own self. It is important, however, to keep these manifestations under control and submit them to objective thinking. In the absence of such control, these manifestations may be instances of gratuitous or even unfair exaltation.

My decision to do what I did at the Gala was the product of an uncontrolled impulse. I was completely dominated by my subjective dimension and the filter of reason appeared to be completely turned off. I had not even given a thought to the possibility of asking for advice, but I may have decided not to do so because I didn't want anyone to debunk my deeply held beliefs that were feeding my ambitions. I had been so deeply touched by the possibility I was given to relive my past experiences by appealing to my affective memory, as a tool for developing my role in the play, that I could no longer separate my character's emotions from my own.

The first steps an actor takes on the artistic path may be hiding as many traps. It may be difficult for an actor to carry out a fair self-assessment and to accept that the things he finds highly valuable may go unnoticed by others. But this is not an excuse for any actor to feel entitled to base his actions on his

¹¹ Alice Georgescu, De bine, de rău – The HOP Young Actors' Gala, 2009, Liternet, translation mine, LCG,

<https://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/9864/Alice-Georgescu/De-bine-de-rau-Galei-Tinarului-Actor-HOP-2009.html>

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own rules, when there are very clear rules that everybody needs to follow. Consequently, in their work artists need to strike a balance between emotion and reason.

I am not attempting to use this reasoning to justify my personal actions. My aim has been to use my own experience, and the fictional experience of a literary character, to launch a word of warning about the potentially grave and very real danger lying in the uncontrolled and unguided use of affective memory. At times, the artist's personal involvement in his undertakings may confound his critical thinking, generating confusion and disorientation. The use of affective memory to inform the art of the actor needs to be approached with great care already during the students' undergraduate years, by providing them with specialized guidance.

Conclusions

An actor's appeal to his affective memory in order to inform his current experiences may sometimes have unwanted effects on his everyday behaviour, and the distortions it may generate can be a real danger that needs to be approached with a great sense of responsibility.

In case actors fail to receive appropriate professional guidance and their use of affective memory is not treated with the requisite attention, they may be running risks that need to be avoided. These risks may concern the actors' mental health, and they may even lead to actions whose consequences are very difficult to accept. The actors' confidence in their professional abilities may be inhibited, and implicitly this may lead to them failing in their career.

Even if, at first sight, the two examples in my analysis may appear to be poorly matched, as one of them refers to the experience of a literary character, while the other is a real-life experience, I am confident that they are highly relevant for any discussion about the way in which the use of affective memory to inform artistic creation may generate negative side effects.

As mentioned earlier, the mechanism whereby artists transfer their personal experiences into their creations is at work in almost all the arts and has often been a topic of research. As Anzieu once wrote, "every being is a system of relatively stable fundamental conflicts, complemented by several ancillary conflicts that vary according to age, context, circumstances,

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encounters, successes, failures, stress, physical disorders etc. Artists can reproduce this conflictual structure in their works at will, without ever running the risk of exhausting the source. ... Any intra-psychic conflict may make a contribution to the content of a work, as well as to its internal structure.”¹² In my opinion, the two cases presented in my analysis have clearly demonstrated that the use of affective memory to inform artistic creation may generate crises if the process is not kept under strict control or it is inappropriately used.

Andrei Mavrodin kept digging into his affective memory in order to be able to write, but he appeared to be completely unwilling to admit that he was doing so, not even to himself. But when he got to be involved in a strong emotional experience, his romantic relationship with Ileana, he developed writer’s block. He was worried that, by continuing to write, he would be writing about his love and thus become vulnerable and a target for other people’s judgment. Moreover, due to his obsessive application of his conception about what an artist should be, Mavrodin felt compelled to give up the love of his life. Thus liberated, he could again revisit his affective memory in order to tell his love story, without being able to tell whether that story had actually occurred in real life or it was a mere product of creative transfiguration.

The situation that I had experienced was also generated by an improper use of affective memory. By delving too deep into my own past experiences and emotions, I somehow got to erase the dividing line between my self and my artistic creation, and I acted emotionally, without any rational control. The consequences could have been much more damaging than they actually turned out to be.

I will conclude by reiterating that the use of affective memory can be beneficial in informing the art of the actor, but the mechanism should only be used under professional guidance and with great care, in order to make sure that this valuable tool does not become a trap for artists, particularly those who are less experienced.

¹² Anzieu, Didier; *Psihanaliza travaliului creator*, translated by Bogdan Ghiu, Trei Publishing House, 2004, page 81, translation mine, LCG.

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