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The Precondition of Creative Work

There is suddenly something where there was nothing before. The process of this change from conception to birth is a process of searching and groping about, trials and errors. It is accompanied with both, immense torment as well as flames of joy. It is the miracle of creation present in all spheres of life – in nature, forming of relationships as well as in all fields of creativity: film, literature, painting, architecture and art in general. How much originality, genuineness, sincerity, empathy, sensitivity, but also art, craft, life experience and suiting material conditions is needed for (at least) something to become out of nothing. And is it enough?

The following text offers a reflection on the cumulation of energy which is essential for the creative process and which is mostly present in debuts or in a mature work of an author. Attention will be drawn to the almost forgotten magical dimension of creative work and its influence on identity play. Last but not least, the precondition of creative writing will be defined.

DISPOSITIONS AND TALENTS

The classic of psychology and aesthetics, Herbert Read, with reference to Martin Buber, points to the fact that “there exists

in all men a distinct impulse to make things, an instinct which cannot be explained by theories of libido or will to power” (Buber 1926 and Read 1958/1974, 285).

The creative impulse may differ in strength, the degree to which it is developed or subdued and in the way its intensity is transformed in relation to acquired experience and age. And as each of the creative kinds has its particularities, not everyone can be equally creative in all of them. It is natural that a person is a complex of different kinds of abilities, endowments, dispositions and talents. Each and every person is original and as Read points out “uniqueness, because it is something not possessed by anyone else, will be of value for the society” (Read 1958/1974, 5). Discovering the strongest point of one’s own creative tendency and greatest endowment tends to be the hardest task in the pursuit of happiness in life.

Ethnographic research has shown that in tribal societies the variety of endowments can even contribute to socializing transformations of the whole, to the so called democratization of society by creative work. These processes are also subjects of the interdisciplinary research of cultural anthropology, whose results have proven as immensely valuable also for the study of creative work and creativity. The link between abilities, definition of roles and plays with identity in the process of masking and rituals (i.e. the rituals of creative work) have inspired anthropologists in defining different personification figures. (Erban 2010, 154). Historian Peter Burke gives the following example:

the craftsman or singer hunts, fishes or tills the soil like other members of the community, and they too carve or sing, even if they do it less frequently and less well. In the Nigerian tribe Tivy

if a man carving a stick is called away, a bystander may pick up the knife and carry on the work (Burke 2009, 49).

In our “civilized” society which passed through the melting pot of post-Enlightenment and is characterized by narrow specialisations dependent on sophisticated technologies, this model can hardly assert itself.

THE MAGICAL DIMENSION

Confined by the cultural industry in all our discussions of output, grants and craft we often forget about the fact that creative work has got its magical dimension¹. Its recollection represents one of the main messages in Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s thesis about the period of Enlightenment as the turning point from which and in whose name humanity deliberately began to give up that dimension; the time when the process of “disenchantment of the world” began. With the uncontrollable growth of consumerism and the inevitable mass transformation of art into articles these ideas have yet again become particularly relevant. (Adorno–Horkheimer 1945/2006.) The process of change from nothing to something can occur on the spiritual level; through communication with something beyond us or in us, communication with the order or communication with the whole which is ungraspable by reason. I believe

1 I share the basic thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer about the period of Enlightenment being the turning point from which and in whose name humanity deliberately began to give up the magical dimension; the time when the process of “disenchantment of the world” began. For more see Adorno–Horkheimer 1945/2006.

that in the rational and post-postmodern era we live in, faith and creative work remain among the few ways of touching the whole about which we have already forgotten.

The Argentinian poet and essayist Ernesto Sábato rightly claims:

art, like dream, invades the archaic terrains of human race and therefore can be and is being the instrument for recovering the integration of which reality and fantasy, science and magic, poetry and pure thought form an inseparable part (Sábato 2002, 140).

Thinking of the magic dimension was taken even further by Czech art and architecture theoretician Václav Vilém Štech, who defined creative work (not necessarily artistic) as the struggle for renewing the moment of the first contact in which a person is penetrated by the world” (Štech 1946, 79).

Creative work, or transformation of form, can also be seen as balancing chaos with order or on the contrary, as disturbing the order by chaos. Creative work causes asymmetry as it upsets the current situation; thus, each asymmetry brings energy to lethargy and reclusiveness. All in all, this is happening each and every second in our body where our cells grow or die or, let us suppose, each and every second in space, which, according to the scientist, was created by the very same process.

A work of art which completes this struggle and succeeds in keeping and revealing the moment will be able to connect with not just the present, but also the coming generations of recipients. In receiving such works of art we tend to feel their effect physiologically, no matter whether in the good or bad way, as Sábato noted:

Nietzsche's reservations towards Wagner are of a physiological kind. He could not breathe, he felt weak in his knees and his stomach protested just as his heart, blood circulation and entrails (Sábato 2002, 146).

Picasso's Rooster in the Pinakothek can be just as intense as the Altamira cave paintings. In both cases, we can only guess the context; however, we recognize the animal in the tangled lines, we perceive the artistic code and through the intensity of the message and its simplicity we let ourselves be immersed in such a state in which we do not recognize ourselves.

Strictly speaking, a dialogical principle is involved. Tuning in is dependent not only on the author's skills, mentioned contexts, but also on the viewer's, or reader's, intimacy with experiencing spirituality and authenticity or openness towards the multiplicity of layers. The power of sincerity or genuineness is usually the main gate to emotional acceptance or refusal of a work of art. We feel that we understand it, trust it. By intricate work with emotions the mass media can evoke the feeling of authenticity in the recipient. They build on the assumption that the evoked emotions are authentic; that the recipients, believing in the reactions they experience, neglect to realize that they have been manipulated. As Umberto Eco puts it, a kitsch is nothing else than the marketing of an effect; it is an "imposition of an effect to be enjoyed by the consumer", offering the "ready-made, ready-to-use and commented emotion". Thus, the mass media spread the "aesthetic lie", as, by betting on the so called lowest denominator, they fail to bring the recipient to his/her own experience. (Eco 1964, 76, 78.)²

2 This is widely used by the mass media, which focus directly on this so called lowest common denominator.

CUMULATION OF ENERGY

During our lives, numberless authors and numberless works court our favour. Alongside those which were made for direct consumption and have a short expiry date, those which we basically flounder through, we can find those which talk to us more substantially.³ The impression they make, the atmosphere or a concrete situation stay in our heads and hearts, keep coming back and reminding themselves and sometimes they even come up in important or decisive moments of our lives.

How is it possible, though, that some works communicate with us more and some less? Even within the oeuvre of one author? Why is, pardon the personal selection, short story *Vieras mies tuli taloon* [*A Stranger Came to the Farm*] (1937) by Mika Waltari far more intensive than his grand historical novels (with the exception of *Sinuhe the Egyptian*, of course)? Why do Miloš Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Amadeus* (1984) draw us in more than other films from his filmography? Why can't we drive away our experience from reading such diverse works as the bitter Jewish absurdity from the time of Prague flooding *Sidra Noah* (2010) by David Jan Novotný, the magical detective search for women with special shamanic skills *Žitkovské bohyně* [*The Žitkov Godesses*] (2012) by Kateřina Tučková or *Harmonia caelestis* (2000) by Péter Esterházy? What can the above mentioned works possibly have

3 For me such initiation experience took place in a Prague film club in the 1980's watching the apocalyptic fresco about life in the countries of the so called Third World *Powaqqatsi* (1988) by Godfrey Reggio, with the fascinating camera of Graham Berry and Leonidas Zourdomis, and music composed by Philip Glass.

in common? What distinguishes them from the rest of the authors' production?

There may be a situation in the life of each artist when s/he is able to invest in his/her work more than just the essentials. Just as nature endowed us with endorphins and sexual desire, without which humanity would have died out a long time ago, we were also endowed with the urge for our own creative torment. Each author is actually a masochist, that is, if s/he takes their work seriously.

One of the greatest virtues of an author is the ability to part from his/her ideas, characters, best takings, whole works and manuscripts; the ability to fall into despair and then find the way out, overcome desperation with immense energy, fervour and longing. For this, a strong motivation is needed – like unfulfilled erotic desire, the desire to overcome oneself, to cope with something or even the natural desire to come to the fore and succeed. In the filmography of each filmmaker, in the catalogue of each visual artist or in the collected works of each writer we can find works which thus transcend their author.

One of the preconditions for something like that to happen is the author's unintentionality.⁴ As Czech painter Jan Zrzavý used to say: "The best things have always somehow done themselves" (Třeštková 1976).

Consequently, a suitable constellation of skill, talent, diligence, fervour, objective circumstances and experience can occur; in other words, the energy assembles. It spouts into the creative process, the search for adequate means to express the

4 However, I have been alerted by the literary theoretician Daniel Soukup to the fact that we need to distinguish more creative types; Goethe, for example, being aware of his genius "intentionally created masterpieces". In personal correspondence from 15 March, 2015.

idea, capture reality, convey or evoke a feeling, the realization. The jet of energy is drawn by the work of art as a magnet, it soaks it like a sponge and keeps it.

TWO PEAKS IN AN ARTIST'S CAREER

Debuts

The publication of a debut, let us say the first published or the first mature work represents the moment of initiation for an author. It is the first time for the person-author to come out of himself/herself, mostly with the most original and best which s/he has gathered during the first decades of life. (Only few people wait that long before they produce their second work.) In a certain virginal relationship to craft and the whole process one may be amazed by what is going on and the effort to communicate with the whole may seem naively sincere.

Josef Škvorecký's novel *Zbabělci* [*The Cowards*] (1958) about one week in a small town at the end of World War II occupies a specific place not only in the context of Czechoslovak literature and the political context of the period⁵, but also within the oeuvre of the very author. We can hardly find another work which would be so characteristic for Škvorecký and his world. Neither does any other of his works display such autobiographic treatment of the plot.

5 Written in 1948 it was banned by censorship – its first edition was shredded and was not published until ten years later in an adapted version.

*Vest Pocket Revue*⁶ (1927), the first performance of the phenomenal Czech avant-garde Osvobozené divadlo [Liberated Theatre]⁷ which took place between the wars is unique not only for its originality in the period context, but also because of the fact that it was created quite spontaneously, on an amateur basis and it was the enthusiasm of its audiences which catapulted it to the structures of official culture.

A debut in the sense of author's creative manifesto was Václav Havel's *Zahradní slavnost* [*The Garden Party*] (1963) – which is basically the prototype of Havel's absurd world, whose sharp originality is not only inspired but also inspiring.

The stylized documentary *Moravská Hellas* [*Moravian Hellas*] (1964) by Karel Vachek, criticizing the artificiality of folklore, provoked passionate debates at the time of its creation; however, as to the method of shooting, philosophical approach and choice of topics, there is no other work which would be more typical of Vachek than his debut.

By the same token, there is Jan Svěrák and his provocative ecological film *Ropáci* [*Oil Gobblers*] (1988) about a non-existent car exhaust loving creature, for which they were awarded the American “Student” Oscar. Getting an Oscar for your debut is a pat on the back but also a heavy blow. The standard is set high, the ideal and potential target conquered. What to do next? Svěrák, in my opinion, was never more authentic than in his above mentioned debut.

6 The title is a play on words west and vest.

7 Liberated Theatre was a platform of Czech avant-garde theatre officially existing (with a few breaks) from 1926 until the Communist coup in 1948. Its main protagonists and authors were Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, together with composer and pianist Jaroslav Ježek.

Most debuts originate out of desire. Nevertheless, the delusion of their success lies in the author's succumbing to the erroneous feeling that s/he knows it all, s/he got to the root of it and starts to expect that his/her work will go on in this spirit and on the same high level. That is why the second works share a sad destiny – a whole study could be devoted to this issue.

Masterpieces

Eventually, it may (and also may not) happen that the author once again creates such work of energy and magic. After s/he has overcome the resuscitating stages, gathered enough experience in life and work, freed himself/herself from thinking of craft and has mastered it perfectly, when s/he has the energy and motivation and recalls his/her original ritual of communication with the wholeness which transcends him/her. Only then can a work of art astonish again, this time as a mature fruit. As is the case of the above mentioned Forman's *Amadeus*.

František Vlácil's historical film ballad from the 13th century *Marketa Lazarová*⁸ (1967) was claimed by Czech critics as the most important work of Czech cinematography ever. That is the film made with great labour, effort and maybe even tears. Vlácil comments its birth:

After all those months – what am I saying – years, I think that the film about Marketa Lazarová was a job of its own. It is a relief that

8 It is an adaptation of Vladislav Vančura's novel from 1931.

the work is done. Before Marketa – you see, I divide my life into “before” and “after” – I used to make films with joy. Marketa was a purgatory for me. You struggle with things which are hard to master, they do not yield. (Nostalghia 2015)

Furthermore, one masterpiece the avant-garde film poem *Zem spieva* [*Earth in Song*] (1933) by ethnographer Karel Plicka, which combines the rich photographic and ethnographic experience of the author with youthful courage of Alexander Hackenschmied in editing. By the shift from scientific accuracy to associative editing and rhythmic editing, the film gained a whole new, poetic dimension which was great appraised at the Venice Film Festival. It is also one of the few non-fiction Czechoslovak films listed in world film encyclopaedias. This congenial and exceptional work can be seen as such also in the context of Plicka’s other, previous and later, movies. Heavens opened and this film was created. The power of expression and thought, multiplied by energy and experience, became so intense in these masterworks, that it surpassed the very authors.

INNER NEED OF CREATION: ME AND NOT-ME

Such intensity could not have been reached only by the interplay of all the above mentioned constellations and elements without a unifying principle. Something that urges us to create. An engine which heats the creative cauldron. Fuel which makes us sing during field work, write a passionate and moving love letter, make a drawing perfect in its simplicity, convey a gripping account of inner strength from a concentration camp,

shoot an amateur film, stage an amateur theatre performance etc. Creative work, as was said above, or the ecstatic experience of creative work can be given to each person. “A savage will not produce tasteless things because he cannot – he has nothing to choose from and thus complicate his work”, writes Štech (1941, 46).

It is not merely Read’s *creative tendency*, it is something more. Desire, passion. The essential *need of game as such and at the same time desire for ecstatic experience in communication with the whole*. The desire to touch it, be it by means of the craft’s tools or through experience and reincarnation to other lives, stories and identities. Štech defined this need in an art historian’s perspective:

Art is the creation of new nature; artistic expression is conditioned by the inherent (artistic) instinct which is as substantial as hunger, truculence or love. Out of the creative balancing of a person’s inner tension with the surrounding nature new things are created, independent on the existing world. (Štech 1946, 65)

Yet again does cultural anthropology enter the scene; this time by providing the most apt and inspiring proofs of this longing in its research of the principles of games and rituals. Both form the essence of creative work, and vice versa – games and rituals are forms of creative work.

In his study of the principle of masking (not only with indigenous peoples but also in theatre) Czech anthropologist Vít Erban (2010, 144) analysis and develops the so called Continuum of Performative Modes by John Emigh. He shows that on the scale of the different functions of a mask and changes of (social and actor’s) identity, the first stage of the total transfor-

mation from “me” to “not-me” there is also the so called mode of visitation/possession, trance and ecstasy⁹.

	PERFORMANCE	ACTING IN	
	IN EVERY DAY	CHARACTER	
ME	<□.....□.....□.....□..... >		NOT-ME
	PRETENDING	VISITATION/POSSESION	

(Emigh 1996, 22)

Actors can confirm that this situation is their bread and butter depending only on the condition in which they enter the play, their determination and openness towards the process of transformation, or the constellation of the participants at the ritual of the theatre performance (contact with audience etc.) Likewise, writers, filmmakers, musicians or visual artists can fall into this kind of trance. Czech painter Josef Jíra said:

You get this kind of chill in your hand while painting and you don't know what it is or who it is. And it's more beautiful than making love. And this happens to you once or twice in your life. And it is enough! (Štoll 1997)

We have shown that if creative work comes out of the desire to express the world by creative means there is hope that the author's energy will be focused with more precision than ever on the creative process itself and that his/her sincere effort to

9 Emigh uses the word visitation meaning the visitation by spirit, which is in the anthropological sense closer to the perception of indigenous peoples. However, the term also signifies total captivation, e.g. by creative work, which can in a certain intensity transcend to the magical dimension. See more in Emigh 1996, 22.

touch the magic can bear juicy fruit – at least in the debut or also, for the better, in other creative periods to come.

Let us propose a thesis at this point that the fundamental need for creative activities bordering on obsession is the basic and most substantial precondition of creative work.

It is the beginning of everything and without it there is nothing. Without the burning desire there can hardly be something worth “throwing” at the audiences, something that endures.

STERILIZATION OF DESIRE

In conclusion, let us make a slightly provocative practical excursion. What effect does education in arts have on this desire? And on subsequent professional life?

Since the time of the first academies of fine arts in Vienna, since the time of artists’ individualization and their coming out of anonymity or the shadow of their master there has been an ongoing discord. Let us ask ourselves sincerely: What is the real goal of education? Deepening the knowledge of the magical ritual and instigating desire or professionalization and high numbers of graduates successful on the labour market? Unfortunately, it is usually the latter.

Doesn’t the gradual consecration to the mysteries of their craft and revealing the principles of cultural life make the pedagogues guilty of causing the professional blindness of their students? Doesn’t the gradual loss of illusions dull the principal urge for creative work? One of the few possibilities for the pedagogue is to set an example, to burn with desire and cherish the hope that a spark jumps onto their students. Also, to put emphasis on deepening their individuality, pay attention to the

educational role of games and do everything to fulfil at least the first precondition of education according to Martin Buber: liberation of creative powers. “Liberation of creative powers (...) is a precondition of education” (Buber 1926/Read 1958/1974, 286).

I consider myself incredibly lucky that my pedagogue filmmaker Jan Špáta made it very clear that it is crucial to realize (it was in my 3rd year at the film academy) that I “can never be the second Špáta” and there “is nothing left to do” but be myself. From what I know, many of my colleagues didn't have the chance to realize that. The most difficult task for teachers is to realize whether their work cultivates, rather than liquidates their students.

Finally, what happens to the natural desire when the artist becomes a professional? Is getting one's first fee the key moment in life? This is true only partly, as there are more varieties of getting feedback than just in terms of money. The real breaking point comes in the moment when the artist begins to repeat the creative process in order to achieve similar effect and other reward. Thus, s/he can become the murderer of the precondition of creative work. Sábato says:

If we get money for our writing, that's fine. But to write with the purpose of making money is a disgrace. This disgrace is accounted for by the figment which emerges this way (Sábato, 2002, 91).

At this point one can easily end up producing, so to say, one book a year.

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