

The Working Model on Screen: Attachment Theory as an Actor's Framework

Jiaying Emma Chen

Guangdong Country Garden School, Shunde District, Foshan City, 528312, China

ABSTRACT

Actors are taught to identify what a character wants, what stands in the way, and how to respond to a scene partner. These methods do not explain why the same situation produces such different reactions in different characters. This paper asks whether attachment theory can fill that gap. Drawing on Bowlby, Ainsworth, and later adult attachment research, this paper connects attachment anxiety and avoidance to Stanislavski's objectives, Hagen's obstacles, and Meisner's attention to the other actor. Observational studies have measured behaviours an actor relies on, including proximity, gaze, touch, vocal quality and response latency, and this review uses the findings of these studies to propose how a character's internal working model might be translated into performance choices. Readings of *Good Will Hunting*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Shutter Island* illustrate the utility and limitations of this approach. This paper also considers attachment-based character work as an alternative to affective memory, letting actors build emotion from the character's relationships instead of personal memory. No comparison of the two approaches has been carried out. Earned security is then used to examine how an actor might portray lasting change across an arc. Attachment theory is not a diagnostic system and does not supply fixed character types. Cultural norms, personality and circumstance still apply, and its universality is disputed. Used carefully, it may give actors a specific framework grounded in observable behaviour, though its repeatability and its effects on performer wellbeing remain untested.

Keywords: attachment theory; actor training; internal working models; attachment anxiety; attachment avoidance; character development; affective memory; earned security

INTRODUCTION

John Bowlby developed attachment theory across the trilogy *Attachment, Separation: Anxiety and Anger, and Loss: Sadness and Depression* (1-3), now foundational to the study of close relationships. Bowlby proposed that

infants are born with a behavioural system that promotes proximity to a protective caregiver. A threatened infant seeks a trusted attachment figure for a secure base and safe haven. Repeated experiences of care or neglect build an internal working model of what relationships can be expected to provide, and that model shapes later bonds (1-3).

This paper argues that attachment theory can serve as a practical framework for acting. Stanislavski, Hagen, and Meisner help actors identify what a character wants, what stands in the way, and how to respond to a scene partner. None explains why one character wants what they want, or fears what they fear. When an important

Corresponding author: Jiaying Emma Chen, E-mail: chenemma2009@gmail.com.

Copyright: © 2026 Jiaying Emma Chen. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Accepted August 24, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.70251/HYJR2348.4413721382>

bond is threatened, a character's internal working model can be translated into choices about posture, distance, eye contact, and voice. Several of these behaviours have been measured in observational studies of adult attachment, providing an evidential basis that acting frameworks rarely have.

The review has four parts. The first separates the attachment constructs, which are routinely conflated. The second connects them to established actor training and to the observational evidence. The third offers case readings, presented as interpretations. The last considers the framework's limits, its competitors, and what it might imply for audiences.

ATTACHMENT THEORY: CONSTRUCTS AND EVIDENCE

Mary Ainsworth, Bowlby's collaborator, tested attachment theory in the Strange Situation, conducted in the 1960s (4). She observed infants' reactions to their mothers leaving the room and returning. The most informative moment, Ainsworth argued, was the reunion. Distress is easy to produce, but how a child recovers from it reveals what they expect from the person they are attached to. Ainsworth identified three classifications, and Mary Main and Judith Solomon added a fourth (5). Table 1 summarises them.

Spangler and Grossmann measured infants' heart rates during the procedure. The insecure-avoidant children showed almost no visible distress, yet their

heart rates rose during separation as much as the secure children's, and once attention to objects was corrected for, was actually higher (6). A person can be flooded with feeling and display almost none of it. For an actor this may be the most useful mechanism in the theory.

Hazan and Shaver extended the theory to adult romantic relationships in 1987, proposing that romantic love is itself an attachment process (7). Bartholomew and Horowitz developed this by asking two questions: "Do I have a positive view of myself?" and "Do I have a positive view of others?" The answers produce four adult styles: secure, preoccupied, dismissing-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant (8). Later work keeps those two judgements but treats them as continua rather than boundaries, giving the dimensions now called attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (9-10). The categorical and dimensional descriptions therefore rest on the same two judgements, and differ only in whether those judgements are divided into discrete styles.

In the later work, each attachment dimension corresponds to a characteristic strategy when a bond is threatened (9). Attachment anxiety runs with hyperactivation, which intensifies the system and produces protest, clinging and demands for reassurance in an effort to compel a response. Attachment avoidance runs with deactivation, which dampens distress by suppressing it, withdrawing, changing the subject, or behaving as though the relationship carries no weight. Because anxiety and avoidance are continua, a character can sit anywhere on each and can move along it, which is

Table 1. *Infant attachment classifications and reunion behaviour in the Strange Situation. The secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-resistant classifications are those reported by Ainsworth and colleagues (4). The disorganized/disoriented classification was added later by Main and Solomon (5). These categories describe how an infant behaves with one particular caregiver in a laboratory procedure. They are not clinical diagnoses, and they should not be treated as equivalent to the adult attachment categories or dimensions discussed in this paper.*

Classification	Reunion behaviour
Secure	Shows distress when the caregiver leaves, seeks contact on reunion, is settled by that contact, and returns to exploration and play
Insecure-resistant/ambivalent	Highly distressed by separation. On reunion, seeks contact but resists it, mixing anger with clinging, and is slow to settle or return to play
Insecure-avoidant	Shows little overt distress at separation. On reunion, ignores or turns away from the caregiver and stays focused on the toys
Disorganized/disoriented	Brief contradictory, misdirected, stereotyped, freezing or apprehensive behaviours in the caregiver's presence. Main and Solomon described these as momentary breakdowns in an otherwise organized strategy, so an infant given this classification is usually also assigned a best-fitting secure, avoidant or resistant category

what makes the dimensional description the more useful of the two for an actor.

A further distinction is how attachment is assessed, since the answer differs by developmental stage and by method. Infant classifications come from observed behaviour with one caregiver in a laboratory procedure (4-5). Adult attachment is assessed either through the Adult Attachment Interview, which yields a state of mind coded from a transcript, or through self-report inventories, which yield a position on the anxiety and avoidance dimensions. Roisman and colleagues meta-analysed ten studies comparing interview-based and self-report measures of adult attachment, finding the mean association trivial to small and each measure predicting different aspects of adult relationship functioning (11). Interview-based and self-report findings therefore do not transfer to one another. Table 2 sets out the distinctions and their relevance to performance analysis.

Attachment representations vary across relationships and change over time, so an actor should not play the same attachment behaviour uniformly with every scene partner. Fraley notes that a person holds several working models at once, a general one alongside separate models of particular relationships. An experience that contradicts what someone expects may produce a new model for that relationship rather than revise the general one, which is

how an adult can be insecure with a parent and relatively secure in a marriage (12). Dugan and colleagues assessed 4,904 adults repeatedly over time and found that these models move together. Someone growing more secure with one person tended to grow more secure with others, and on occasions when they felt insecure with one, they felt insecure with the rest. The models also fluctuated over intervals of about a month (13). Attachment is therefore not fixed even within a single relationship, and a character's position can shift across the span of a script.

ATTACHMENT THEORY AND ESTABLISHED ACTOR TRAINING

Attachment behaviour runs at low intensity most of the time and intensifies when a bond is threatened by separation, rejection, or the prospect of abandonment (1,9). Dramatic scenes are commonly built on exactly those moments. Attachment theory identifies what a character believes is at risk, and a scene's subtext follows from the same working model, which sets what the character expects of the other person (1-3).

Stanislavski's training centres on the idea that a character is always pursuing an objective (14). In a scene the character may say "I want her to forgive me" or "I want him to stay." These feed into a super-objective

Table 2. Attachment constructs, their measurement, and their appropriate use in performance analysis. The constructs below are related but not equivalent, and findings established with one do not transfer directly to another (11-12).

Construct	What it describes	How it is assessed	Use in performance analysis
Infant attachment classification	The organisation of an infant's behaviour toward one specific caregiver under mild stress	Strange Situation, observed reunion behaviour	Useful as the origin of a character's expectations. Describes a relationship, not a person, and should not be applied to adult characters
Adult state of mind regarding attachment	The coherence of an adult's account of early attachment experiences	Adult Attachment Interview, coded from transcript	Relevant to how a character narrates their past. Corresponds only weakly to self-reported style
Adult romantic attachment categories	Self-described patterns in close adult relationships	Self-report, four-category model	Convenient shorthand for actors. Categorical labels obscure variation within each type
Adult attachment dimensions	Continuous standing on attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance	Self-report inventories	The most useful frame for character work, since a character can be placed anywhere on each dimension and can move
Secondary strategies	Hyperactivation and deactivation as responses to threat within a bond	Inferred from behaviour and self-report	The level at which the framework becomes playable, since these are processes with visible behavioural form
Personality traits	Stable dispositions such as introversion or conscientiousness	Trait inventories	Not attachment. Reserve and self-reliance may be traits, not attachment histories

driving the character across the whole play. Stanislavski does not specify where the desire originates, and this is where attachment theory becomes useful. "I want him to stay," spoken by a character high in attachment anxiety, may carry a fear of abandonment that is less central for a more secure character. The objective is identical, but not the expectation behind it.

Uta Hagen builds character through a set of questions, working from the inside out (15). Who am I? What are my circumstances? What do I want? What is in my way? What do I have to do to get it? Attachment expectations can help an actor answer the fourth question before the scene begins. For a character high in attachment anxiety, being left may be the obstacle. For one high in avoidance, being known may be the obstacle.

Sanford Meisner advised actors to try "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances" (16). His method directs them to stop performing inside their own heads and attend instead to the other actor. Meisner does not specify what the character is watching for, and two actors following the same instruction will not arrive at the same reaction. Attachment style operates in how one character attends to another (9). An anxious character may scan a partner's face for signs of rejection, while an avoidant one may look away. The partner's behaviour remains the same, but each character notices and interprets it differently.

Where Stanislavski emphasises the objective and Hagen the obstacle, Meisner directs the actor's attention toward the scene partner. All three clarify what a character does. None accounts for the psychological patterns that make the character who they are, and attachment theory may supplement them by helping the actor formulate the relational expectations underlying those choices.

APPLICATION AND TECHNIQUE

Attachment theory's main advantage for an actor is that it turns an abstract label into physical choices carried by the body, the voice, and the face. Several have been measured. Guerrero videotaped 80 romantic dyads in three-minute conversations, coding touch, gaze, body orientation, forward lean, proxemic distance, vocal expressiveness, fluency, response latency, bodily relaxation and vocal anxiety (17). Tucker and Anders coded nonverbal closeness in 61 dating couples (18). Simpson and colleagues videotaped 83 dating couples in a waiting room while one partner anticipated an anxiety-provoking task (19).

Deactivation shows up consistently. Simpson and colleagues found that more avoidant women withdrew emotionally and physically as their anxiety rose, while more secure women turned toward their partners for comfort (19). Tucker and Anders found that a more avoidant style was associated with less nonverbal closeness (18). Guerrero found that fearful-avoidant participants sat farthest from their partners and showed the least fluency and the longest response latencies (17). Together these findings yield a specific set of choices for an actor: increased physical distance, an object placed between the bodies, broken eye contact, flattened delivery, and answers that arrive late and end early. For the actor, the dramatic tension may arise from the contrast between internal arousal and restrained outward behaviour.

Spangler and Grossmann also demonstrate how easily behaviour can be misinterpreted as deactivation. Their insecure-avoidant infants handled objects more than any other group while their heart rate stayed high, unlike a child genuinely absorbed in play, which the authors read as inattentive or low-quality play (6). For an actor this separates a woman distracted by the mug in her hands from one using it to manage her distance from the person opposite. Only the second is deactivation.

Hyperactivation is more difficult to observe. Guerrero found that preoccupied participants scored alongside secure ones on gaze, facial pleasantness, general interest and attentiveness, and held more in-depth conversation than dismissing participants. Differences appeared mainly in vocal anxiety, on which preoccupied and fearful-avoidant participants scored highest (17). Tucker and Anders reported that, against their expectations, a more preoccupied style did not produce more intimate or clinging behaviour (18). Simpson and colleagues found no effect of the anxious dimension on support-seeking, and defended that null result against several alternative explanations (19).

One study did find anxious participants behaving distinctively. Where the earlier studies observed ordinary conversation or an external stressor, this one manipulated the partner's behaviour directly. Guerrero and Burgoon arranged for one member of each couple to increase or decrease nonverbal immediacy in a second conversation. Preoccupied participants showed the strongest and most consistent pattern of matching increases in involvement and, when a partner withdrew, of moving toward them to close the gap (20). What activates the anxious pattern is therefore a threat to the bond itself, not distress in general.

For performance, the implication is that an anxious character's pursuing behaviour should be tied specifically to a partner's withdrawal, and is not necessarily apparent in ordinary interaction. On the available evidence they present as warm, attentive and forthcoming, with the strain audible in the voice.

Guerrero and Burgoon found no support for the reverse dynamic. Dismissing participants did not withdraw when a partner increased involvement. Almost all matched the increase, and when partners decreased involvement the dismissing participants moved to restore the previous level (20). The pursue-withdraw pattern so often described in clinical writing therefore has evidence on one side only. For an actor this means the anxious character's pursuit has an observed basis while the avoidant character's retreat remains an interpretive choice.

Neither pattern simply switches on under threat. Simpson and colleagues found the avoidant pattern inverted at low anxiety, with more avoidant women seeking more support than more secure women, and more avoidant men providing more (19). In the calm passages of a film, during small talk or a character's introduction, an avoidant character may therefore be the more forthcoming of the two, and the characteristic withdrawal appears only as the threat to the bond rises.

CASE EXAMPLES

The readings below are interpretive. A fictional character's experiences are scripted rather than lived, so no comprehensive developmental history can be assessed, and no scene can confirm or disconfirm a psychological finding. Each example is one plausible reading consistent with attachment theory and an illustration of how an actor might use the framework.

Will Hunting, from *Good Will Hunting*, is a useful example (21). He appears self-sufficient, brilliant and in control, and in the calm passages of the film his relational pattern is not apparent. The self-sufficiency can be read as a deactivating strategy, on the logic that if he never needs anyone, no one can leave him. A working model where the people meant to care for him hurt and abandoned him would be consistent both with his childhood experiences and with this behaviour.

However, the real model becomes visible when a threat arrives in the form of intimacy. His girlfriend, Skylar, tells him she loves him and asks him to move across the country with her. He denies loving her and ends the relationship, which can be read as a way of controlling his own abandonment by bringing it upon

himself. His behaviour in this case actually fits a fearful-avoidant reading more closely than a dismissing one, since he appears to want the closeness he is sabotaging. In dimensional terms he is high on both anxiety and avoidance at once, where a dismissing character would be high on avoidance alone. Will's rejection of Skylar is a withdrawal in response to increased involvement from a partner, which is the one thing Guerrero and Burgoon's dismissing participants did not do (20). Their study did not test the fearful-avoidant combination, so an actor may still read the character this way, though the evidence does not support this type of reaction for a dismissing character as a general regularity.

Marianne Dashwood, in Ang Lee's film of Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, provides a case for a hyperactivating reading (22). She loves openly and believes love should be all-consuming and displayed. Her emotional openness can be understood as a bid for reciprocity. When events fail to match that expectation, her response escalates. The threat to her working model is clearest when Willoughby abandons her. She makes no attempt to emotionally protect herself, collapses into a grief she cannot regulate, and falls ill. The film stages the breakdown physically as well as emotionally. Marianne is also the character who changes most. She moves toward a steadier attachment to Colonel Brandon, learning to modulate an intensity she never stops feeling.

A third example marks where the framework stops. In *Shutter Island*, the protagonist's identity is a construction built to avoid an unbearable truth (23). He builds an elaborate persona around a killer who does not exist, and the truth surfaces only at the climactic confrontation. The persona looks like deactivation taken to an extreme, though the resemblance holds only until the threat is identified. Teddy faces no threat from another person, only a memory of what he did, and attachment theory has little to say about guilt of that kind. An avoidant character keeps others at a distance because closeness has taught him that closeness is dangerous. In this case, Teddy keeps a fact, rather than another person, at a distance. An actor reaching for attachment theory here would be using the wrong instrument.

AFFECTIVE MEMORY AND PERFORMER WELLBEING

Method acting is a family of American approaches descended from Stanislavski through the Group Theatre. Affective memory is a single exercise within it, in which an actor generates feeling by recalling a painful personal

experience. Lee Strasberg learned it from Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya at the American Laboratory Theatre rather than from Stanislavski himself (24-25), and described it in his memoir *A Dream of Passion* (26). Of the teachers who developed the approach, only Strasberg made affective memory the central technique of his own training. In popular usage the term now refers mainly to remaining in character away from the set, a practice Strasberg never taught and which has nothing to do with affective memory.

Objections to affective memory are nearly as old as the exercise itself, though the earliest were about lineage and technique. Stanislavski moved away from it later in his career, developing techniques built on physical action and imagination instead (24). Stella Adler sought him out in Paris in 1934 and returned to challenge Strasberg's emphasis on the exercise, reporting what she had learned about his later work. Strasberg called a meeting the following day to answer her, announcing, as Robert Lewis recalled it, that he taught his own method rather than Stanislavski's system (24). Meisner broke with the exercise as well (25). The technique at issue in the following discussion is therefore Strasberg's, and the objections raised here are concerned with the emotional risks associated with affective memory rather than its lineage.

Evidence on the emotional risks of actor training comes mainly from qualitative work. Robb and Due interviewed acting trainers and students in Australia and reported that the demand to expose one's inner life raises questions about safety in the training studio (27). Robb, Due and Venning interviewed twenty professional actors and identified threats to wellbeing including problems with autonomy, complex interpersonal relationships and high self-criticism, alongside vulnerability to depression, generalised anxiety, vicarious trauma and perfectionism (28). Seton has argued that actors are frequently trained in an unquestioning vulnerability whose costs are rarely examined (29). Not all of the effects reported are negative. Goldstein, Tamir and Winner found that involvement in acting classes was associated with less use of expressive suppression, which is generally regarded as an unhelpful regulation strategy (30). These accounts describe what actors report, without a comparison group against which to judge it.

Thomson and Jaque assessed 41 actors and 41 non-artist controls using the Adult Attachment Interview together with self-report measures of dissociation, fantasy proneness and traumatic events. A greater proportion of the actors were classified secure than of the controls, and

the actors showed greater fantasy proneness. Despite no group difference in the type or frequency of trauma and loss, the actors showed more unresolved mourning and elevated dissociation (31). The actor group was therefore more secure than the controls and also carried more unresolved loss, suggesting that secure attachment may not protect against the emotional risks actors describe. The design is cross-sectional and cannot show that acting produced these differences, and the classifications come from the interview rather than the self-report dimensions used elsewhere in this paper.

Attachment theory arrives late to an argument that was already under way. It offers a route to the same dramatic material without reliance on personal memory. Instead of retrieving a real experience, the actor constructs the character's working model, using a history of care or neglect that established the character's expectations of relationships. An actor playing an abandoned character need not revisit a personal loss, only inhabit someone for whom every relationship carries the expectation of being left, and make the physical choices that expectation produces.

Three benefits might follow from applying attachment theory as an acting tool. Constructing a character's working model does not require the actor to retrieve a personal loss, so it may place different demands on the performer. A working model can be consulted for whatever the scene requires, including circumstances the actor has not played before, where a personal memory may be less adaptable across varied scenarios. A working model is built for one character, so it produces behaviour particular to that person rather than a general emotional state. Attachment theory is not in wide use as an acting technique, so none of this has been tested. Establishing whether it works, and whether it outperforms affective memory on measures of performer wellbeing, would require randomised comparison and follow-up over time.

EARNED SECURITY AND THE CHARACTER ARC

People change, and a character can move from an insecure attachment pattern toward something more secure. Researchers call this earned security, meaning security developed after a difficult early attachment history, usually through a corrective relationship with a partner, mentor or therapist (32, 33).

Roisman and colleagues compared two ways of identifying earned-secure adults within a 23-year longitudinal study (32). The retrospective method relies

on the adult's own account, classifying someone earned-secure when they describe a painful childhood coherently in the Adult Attachment Interview, where coherence rather than content is taken to indicate security (33). The prospective method relies instead on an assessment made in infancy, and requires that the person was in fact classified insecure at the time. Roisman and colleagues found that the retrospective method did not identify the people it was meant to. Adults classified earned-secure this way were no more likely to have been anxiously attached as infants than adults who described untroubled childhoods, and the observational record showed they had received among the most supportive and structured maternal care in a high-risk sample (32). The prospective method does not depend on recollection, since the infancy classification was made by observation at the time. Adults identified this way went on to succeed in their close relationships, many without high levels of internalising distress. Changes in attachment style are therefore documented but best confirmed by the prospective method, since retrospective self-report proved unreliable. Roisman and colleagues note underpowered analyses on some comparisons and the absence of observational data on paternal care.

Researchers also disagree about what earned security is. Filosa and colleagues reviewed 24 empirical studies and found that the term is used consistently while the definitions and measures behind it are not, so any conclusions drawn across this literature remain preliminary. Developmental factors, the association with depressive symptoms and the role of fathers in earned security all remain poorly defined. Two things did emerge consistently as contributors: a secondary attachment figure outside the original caregiving relationship, and reflective functioning, meaning the capacity to make sense of one's own history rather than simply recount it (34).

Both contributors are on screen in *Good Will Hunting*. The therapist is portrayed as a secondary attachment figure, and the content of the therapy sessions can be read as prompting reflective functioning. The film shares one feature with the prospective method wherein the audience learns about the character's past without relying on his own account of it, since the childhood is shown directly. A screenwriter decides what an audience sees, so a depicted arc cannot function as developmental evidence, and no film can establish how common earned security is, how it comes about, or whether the construct is valid.

An actor playing such an arc has some guidance to

work from. Fraley notes that attachment patterns remain open to revision in adulthood while being relatively difficult to modify (12), and Dugan and colleagues found that changes in one relationship-specific working model tend to accompany changes in others (13). Change should therefore cost the character something, and it need not stay confined to the relationship in which it happens. In the film the change registers in the scenes with Skylar as well as in the therapy room. Within the film, repetition is what makes the change look costly, since an expectation built from many experiences is unlikely to be dismantled in one conversation.

Stanislavski's concept of the through-line of action holds that a character's individual scene objectives serve one overarching drive running the length of the play (14). A character's working model can serve as that drive, with the difference that a working model can shift. An arc built on attachment gives an actor a starting position, the relationships that press on it, and an endpoint that differs from the opening in a way that can be named.

RELATION TO OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Other psychological accounts are available to an actor, and several have empirical support of their own.

Schema theory, developed within cognitive therapy, describes self-defeating emotional and cognitive patterns that form early and repeat across a life. Young and colleagues trace these patterns to unmet emotional needs in childhood and identify eighteen of them, each comprising memories, emotions, cognitions and bodily sensations (35). The resemblance to a working model is close. Schemas are broader, covering competence, control and autonomy as well as relationships, which makes schema theory the more complete clinical instrument. Attachment theory covers only what happens between people, which limits it clinically but suits it better to scene analysis, where what is usually at stake is a relational bond.

Konijn's task-emotion theory holds that what an actor experiences during performance is emotion belonging to the task of performing, with the character's emotion playing a smaller part. Surveying professional actors in the Netherlands, Flanders and the United States, she found that task emotions predominated in their accounts of performing (36). If task emotion is what the sheer act of performing produces, then no method of preparation removes it, and attachment theory is no exception. What Konijn's theory does not supply is any account of why

one character behaves differently from another, since it is concerned with the actor themselves and not the role.

Trauma-informed performance practice operates at a different level again, supplying principles for structuring training and rehearsal. Hartley works from Thompson and Carello's adaptation of the SAMHSA framework, in which safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration and empowerment become live questions inside the conservatoire studio. A trainer's task is to help students recognise and respond to trauma so that a career resists retraumatisation (37). Busselle makes a related argument for aftercare, distinguishing de-roling, an actor's exit from a character, from debriefing, a collective reflection on the process (38). Neither competes with attachment theory as a way of reading a character. Both concern how the work is conducted. Attachment theory concerns the construction of a character's working model. Nothing in that displaces the case for trauma-informed practice, which applies whatever method a studio adopts.

Attachment theory replaces none of these frameworks. What recommends it for acting is that it describes a relationship, and a scene is almost always two people wanting something from each other. It shows up in behaviour an audience can see, so it converts into decisions about distance, gaze and touch. And it explains where that behaviour came from, so a character's history and their present conduct sit inside one model.

CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

One risk is treating cultural difference as attachment difference. Van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg pooled thirty-two Strange Situation studies from eight countries and found the distributions varied, with German infants most often classified insecure-avoidant and Japanese and Israeli infants insecure-resistant. Secure attachment was still the most common classification everywhere, and samples within a country differed more than countries differed from each other (39). Whether the framework holds across cultures is disputed. Keller argues that attachment theory generalises a Western middle-class model of caregiving and that its central constructs are not universal across the caregiving practices of most of the world (40-41). Mesman and colleagues take the opposing position, arguing that sensitive caregiving serves a widespread function while what counts as sensitive differs from one setting to another (42-43). For an actor the consequence is that a behaviour the framework would classify as avoidant, such as emotional restraint, may instead be a cultural norm. The actor's question is

what this character expects from other people, not what their culture would suggest.

A second risk is mistaking a personality trait for an attachment pattern. A guarded or independent character is not necessarily avoidant, and an affectionate character is not necessarily anxious. An actor who runs every trait through the attachment framework will invent a relationship history for a character who simply has a specific personality.

A third risk is that an attachment classification replaces the character, and the actor plays the type instead of the person. As noted above, anxious and secure participants were largely indistinguishable outside conditions of relational threat (17-18). An actor who plays to the type would therefore show visible anxiety in calm scenes, where the research found none. Attachment patterns are also not permanent. They shift between relationships and over a lifetime, and they fluctuate within a person over intervals as short as a month (12-13). An actor who fixes on a single style will play a static type. The framework is a sketch, not a finished portrait, and the actor still has to draw the specific living person.

The studies that measured attachment-related behaviour, such as distance, gaze and vocal quality, are narrow. They used heterosexual dating or romantic couples in laboratory conditions, mostly in North America, with self-report measures of attachment and short interactions. The Simpson study assigned the anxious role to women and the supporting role to men by design, so its findings cannot be read as symmetrical. These are the conditions under which attachment behaviour has been measured, and they are narrower than the range of situations an actor meets. The case readings above are interpretations that cannot be checked, since a fictional character has no developmental history.

ATTACHMENT AND THE AUDIENCE: A HYPOTHESIS

Why do scenes of separation, betrayal and reunion move audiences, and does this framework have anything to say about it?

Some evidence suggests attachment differences shape how viewers respond to characters. Cole and Leets surveyed 115 participants on the parasocial bonds they formed with television personalities, meaning the one-sided attachments viewers develop toward figures who do not know them. Anxious-ambivalent individuals were the most likely to form such bonds, avoidant individuals the least likely, with secure individuals between them (44).

Cohen surveyed 381 adults about their favourite television characters and asked them to imagine the character leaving the show (45). Most participants anticipated their reaction would be close to that of the end of a real relationship. Severity of anticipatory reaction depended on how close they felt to the character and on their own attachment style, with anxious-ambivalent respondents anticipating the most distress. Together these suggest that a viewer's own relational expectations shape how they respond to a character. The field has grown since: Schramm and colleagues reviewed 281 studies from 2016 to 2020, reporting more work in those five years than in the preceding sixty, though most addressed social media and non-fictional figures (46). Neither Cole and Leets nor Cohen concerns film performance, and both rely on self-report. More importantly, both measure attachment to a character sustained over time, not response to a single scene. Whether attachment style predicts how a viewer responds to a depicted separation has not been tested.

Established works already explain how stories produce emotion at all, without relying on an attachment theory framework. Narrative transportation describes how a viewer becomes absorbed in a story (47), and identification describes how they take on a character's perspective (48). Neither explains why one viewer is moved more than another, which is where attachment theory provides a potential framework and mechanism.

The proposal is offered here as a hypothesis. If attachment differences shape how viewers respond to characters under relational threat, the effects should be measurable. Viewers higher in attachment anxiety would be expected to respond more strongly to depicted separation and abandonment, and viewers higher in avoidance to disengage from such scenes. Testing this would require measuring viewers' attachment dimensions alongside their responses to scenes chosen for relational threat, which existing instruments already allow. The answer to the opening question would not be that attachment explains why such scenes move an audience, but that it explains which viewers they move most.

CONCLUSION

Attachment theory supplies a psychological account of what drives Stanislavski's objective, Hagen's obstacle, and Meisner's attention to a scene partner. Its distinctive value for an actor may lie in three things at once. First, it describes a relationship, which is what a scene is usually built on. Second, the behaviours it predicts have been observed and measured in adults under relational

threat, which may let an actor translate a character's expectations into decisions about distance, gaze and touch. Third, the same working model explains both a character's history and how they behave now. Beyond these, it provides actors with a tool for generating character portrayals from the character's history rather than from their own personal memories, which may cause unnecessary harm to actors. The two approaches have never been empirically compared.

If an actor chooses to use attachment theory to inform portrayal choices, three suggestions follow from the evidence reviewed here. An anxious character's pursuit should be tied to a scene partner's withdrawal, since that was the condition in which the anxious pattern appeared. In low-stakes scenes an avoidant character may be the more forthcoming of the two, because the pattern inverted at low anxiety. Change across a script should be played as costly, given that attachment patterns are open to revision in adulthood while remaining difficult to modify.

The framework has limits. It can flatten a character into a type or mistake a cultural norm for an attachment history, and whether it applies outside Western caregiving contexts is disputed. Avoidant attachment produces visible behaviour across several study designs, while the anxious pattern appeared only when a partner withdrew. The readings of *Good Will Hunting*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Shutter Island* illustrate how an actor might use the framework to arrive at portrayal choices, but they are not evidence that a theory built on real relationships can be accurately applied to a cinematic context. There is a case for teaching attachment theory alongside established acting methods, as a supporting framework and not a replacement for any of them.

Several unanswered questions can direct future research. The behavioural vocabulary proposed here, covering proximity, gaze, touch and vocal quality, has been measured in couples in laboratory settings and never with performers enacting characters, so whether trained actors can reliably produce these behaviours, and whether audiences read them as intended, is unknown. The randomised comparison proposed above, and hypothesis, both remain untested. In sum, attachment theory offers actors a relational framework with an evidential basis that acting methods rarely have.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

REFERENCES

1. Bowlby J. Attachment and loss. Vol. 1, Attachment. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books; 1982. ISBN: 978-0-465-00543-7.
2. Bowlby J. Attachment and loss. Vol. 2, Separation: anxiety and anger. New York: Basic Books; 1973. ISBN: 978-0-465-09716-6.
3. Bowlby J. Attachment and loss. Vol. 3, Loss: sadness and depression. New York: Basic Books; 1980. ISBN: 978-0-465-04238-8.
4. Ainsworth MDS, Blehar MC, Waters E, Wall S. Patterns of attachment: a psychological study of the Strange Situation. Hillsdale (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1978. ISBN: 978-0-89859-461-4.
5. Main M, Solomon J. Discovery of an insecure-disorganized/disoriented attachment pattern. In: Brazelton TB, Yogman MW, editors. Affective development in infancy. Norwood (NJ): Ablex; 1986. p. 95-124. ISBN: 978-0-89391-345-8.
6. Spangler G, Grossmann KE. Biobehavioral organization in securely and insecurely attached infants. *Child Dev.* 1993; 64 (5): 1439-50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131544>
7. Hazan C, Shaver P. Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 1987; 52 (3): 511-24. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.3.511>
8. Bartholomew K, Horowitz LM. Attachment styles among young adults: a test of a four-category model. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 1991; 61 (2): 226-44. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.61.2.226>
9. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR. Attachment in adulthood: structure, dynamics, and change. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford Press; 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4625-3381-7.
10. Brennan KA, Clark CL, Shaver PR. Self-report measurement of adult attachment: an integrative overview. In: Simpson JA, Rholes WS, editors. Attachment theory and close relationships. New York: Guilford Press; 1998. p. 46-76. ISBN: 978-1-57230-102-3.
11. Roisman GI, Holland A, Fortuna K, Fraley RC, Clausell E, Clarke A. The Adult Attachment Interview and self-reports of attachment style: an empirical rapprochement. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 2007; 92 (4): 678-97. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.4.678>
12. Fraley RC. Attachment in adulthood: recent developments, emerging debates, and future directions. *Annu Rev Psychol.* 2019; 70: 401-22. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010418-102813>
13. Dugan KA, Fraley RC, Gillath O, Deboeck PR. Changes in global and relationship-specific attachment working models. *J Soc Pers Relat.* 2022; 39 (10): 3015-43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211051408>
14. Stanislavski C. An actor prepares. Hapgood ER, translator. Dead Authors Society; 2022. ISBN: 978-1-77323-879-1.
15. Hagen U. Respect for acting. 3rd ed. Hoboken (NJ): Jossey-Bass; 2023. ISBN: 978-1-119-91357-3.
16. Meisner S, Longwell D. Sanford Meisner on acting. New York: Vintage Books; 1987. ISBN: 978-0-394-75059-0.
17. Guerrero LK. Attachment-style differences in intimacy and involvement: a test of the four-category model. *Commun Monogr.* 1996; 63 (4): 269-92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759609376395>
18. Tucker JS, Anders SL. Adult attachment style and nonverbal closeness in dating couples. *J Nonverbal Behav.* 1998; 22 (2): 109-24. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022980231204>
19. Simpson JA, Rholes WS, Nelligan JS. Support seeking and support giving within couples in an anxiety-provoking situation: the role of attachment styles. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 1992; 62 (3): 434-46. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.62.3.434>
20. Guerrero LK, Burgoon JK. Attachment styles and reactions to nonverbal involvement change in romantic dyads: patterns of reciprocity and compensation. *Hum Commun Res.* 1996; 22 (3): 335-70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1996.tb00371.x>
21. Van Sant G, director. Good Will Hunting [motion picture]. New York (NY): Miramax Films; 1997.
22. Lee A, director. Sense and sensibility [motion picture]. Culver City (CA): Columbia Pictures; 1995.
23. Scorsese M, director. Shutter Island [motion picture]. Los Angeles (CA): Paramount Pictures; 2010.
24. Carnicke SM. Stanislavsky in focus. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic; 1998. ISBN: 978-90-5755-069-0.
25. Krasner D, editor. Method acting reconsidered: theory, practice, future. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; 2000. ISBN: 978-0-333-91547-9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62271-9>
26. Strasberg L. A dream of passion: the development of the Method. Morphos E, editor. New York: Plume; 1988. ISBN: 978-0-452-26198-3.
27. Robb AE, Due C. Exploring psychological wellbeing in acting training: an Australian interview study. *Theatre Dance Perform Train.* 2017; 8 (3): 297-316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2017.1324518>
28. Robb AE, Due C, Venning A. Exploring psychological wellbeing in a sample of Australian actors. *Aust Psychol.* 2018; 53 (1): 77-86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12221>
29. Seton MC. The ethics of embodiment: actor training and habitual vulnerability. *Performing Ethos.* 2010; 1 (1): 5-20. https://doi.org/10.1386/peet.1.1.5_1
30. Goldstein TR, Tamir M, Winner E. Expressive suppression and acting classes. *Psychol Aesthet Creat*

- Arts. 2013; 7 (2): 191-6. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030209>
31. Thomson P, Jaque SV. Holding a mirror up to nature: psychological vulnerability in actors. *Psychol Aesthet Creat Arts*. 2012; 6 (4): 361-9. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028911>
 32. Roisman GI, Padron E, Sroufe LA, Egeland B. Earned-secure attachment status in retrospect and prospect. *Child Dev*. 2002; 73 (4): 1204-19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00467>
 33. Hesse E. The Adult Attachment Interview: protocol, method of analysis, and selected empirical studies, 1985-2015. In: Cassidy J, Shaver PR, editors. *Handbook of attachment: theory, research, and clinical applications*. 3rd ed. New York: Guilford Press; 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4625-3664-1.
 34. Filosa M, Sharp C, Gori A, Musetti A. A comprehensive scoping review of empirical studies on earned secure attachment. *Psychol Rep*. 2026; 129 (3): 1807-32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941241277495>
 35. Young JE, Klosko JS, Weishaar ME. *Schema therapy: a practitioner's guide*. New York: Guilford Press; 2003. ISBN: 978-1-57230-838-1.
 36. Konijn EA. *Acting emotions: shaping emotions on stage*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; 2000. ISBN: 978-90-5356-444-8. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789053564448>
 37. Hartley J. Towards a trauma informed pedagogy in actor training: knowledge and agency. *Theatre Dance Perform Train*. 2024; 15 (2): 163-78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2024.2368474>
 38. Busselle K. De-roling and debriefing: essential aftercare for educational theatre. *Theatre Topics*. 2021; 31 (2): 129-35. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2021.0028>
 39. van IJzendoorn MH, Kroonenberg PM. Cross-cultural patterns of attachment: a meta-analysis of the Strange Situation. *Child Dev*. 1988; 59 (1): 147-56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1130396>, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1988.tb03202.x>
 40. Keller H. Universality claim of attachment theory: children's socioemotional development across cultures. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. 2018; 115 (45): 11414-9. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1720325115>
 41. Keller H, Bard K, Morelli G, Chaudhary N, Vicedo M, Rosabal-Coto M, *et al*. The myth of universal sensitive responsiveness: comment on Mesman *et al*. (2017). *Child Dev*. 2018; 89 (5): 1921-8. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12873>
 42. Mesman J, van IJzendoorn M, Behrens K, Carbonell OA, Carcamo R, Cohen-Paraira I, *et al*. Universality without uniformity: a culturally inclusive approach to sensitive responsiveness in infant caregiving. *Child Dev*. 2018; 89 (3): 837-50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12795>
 43. Mesman J, van IJzendoorn MH, Behrens K, Carbonell OA, Carcamo R, Cohen-Paraira I, *et al*. Sense and sensitivity: a response to the commentary by Keller *et al*. (2018). *Child Dev*. 2018; 89 (5): 1929-31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13030>, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12795>
 44. Cole T, Leets L. Attachment styles and intimate television viewing: insecurely forming relationships in a parasocial way. *J Soc Pers Relat*. 1999; 16 (4): 495-511. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407599164005>
 45. Cohen J. Parasocial break-up from favorite television characters: the role of attachment styles and relationship intensity. *J Soc Pers Relat*. 2004; 21 (2): 187-202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407504041374>
 46. Schramm H, Liebers N, Biniak L, Dettmar F. Research trends on parasocial interactions and relationships with media characters: a review of 281 English and German-language studies from 2016 to 2020. *Front Psychol*. 2024; 15: 1418564. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1418564>
 47. Green MC, Brock TC. The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2000; 79 (5): 701-21. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>
 48. Cohen J. Defining identification: a theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Commun Soc*. 2001; 4 (3): 245-64. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0403_01