

VILÈM FLUSSER

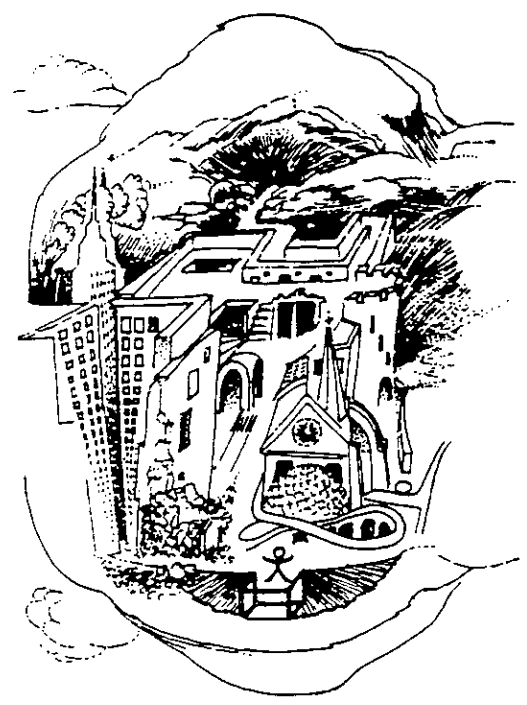
Walls

IT IS A HEALTHY ENTERPRISE to look at the things that stand about us as if we had never before seen them. Take the four walls of our room as an example. They just seem to stand there, mute and neutral. But if we try to let them speak to us (as Husserl recommends us to do), they speak a very ambiguous language. In fact, a magical language. They are there to protect us and to shut us in; they form a whole and a hole between them. This ambivalence of the Indo-European stem "hl" (see, for instance, "holy" and "hell") expresses well the structure of magical thought: it thinks in opposites simultaneously. Thus magical thought captures the essence of the walls by revealing their double character. Modern scientific thought analyzes this ambiguity, shows its internal contradiction, but loses the essence of the walls in the process. This is what modern walls are: ambiguity resolved, therefore the essence of the walls lost. But there are now tendencies to reconquer the synoptic quality of thought, to let walls be walls again—and these tendencies occur not only in architecture. A magical thinking again, but now on a new level. We may expect this thinking to result in new types of walls.

In psychology, the ambivalence of the phenomenon "wall" is easily demonstrated. It means resistance and protection, prison cell and cosiness, anxiety and relaxation—in short, tomb and womb. But this attempt to psychologize the things that form our surroundings (though it is attractive and may lead to interesting results) is too limited to really shed new light on the human condition. We must permit the things that condition us to appear from various points of view, if we want to understand them and thus free ourselves from them. We cannot merely react psychologically to walls, if we want to be their subject and not their object. This paper will try to look at walls from three different angles and hear what they have to say, if thus interrogated. Thus a synoptic view of walls may be suggested.

Walls Seen From an Ethical Viewpoint

They form the frontiers between the political and the private. They divide the world into two realms: the big outer one where history happens, and the small inner one where the concrete experience of life is centered. But they divide in a curious way: they create the private realm by dividing. Were it not for the walls, everything would be



political (which means totalitarian in a very obnoxious sense of the word). Through this curiously dividing character, the walls pose a typically human choice (typically human, because it allows for no decision): either to leave the walls in order to conquer the world outside, or to stay within the walls in order to find oneself. The walls show clearly: to conquer the world outside means to lose oneself, and to find oneself means to lose the world. This is so because the walls are compact and allow for no osmosis.

But, of course, the compactness of walls may be broken with doors and windows. One may open the door in the morning, leave the four walls and commit oneself to the public. And one may return at night through the door with what one has conquered. Or one may open the window, and enjoy a view of the public scene while remaining between one's walls and protected from rain or other events in the world. And one can do both these things much better now than ever before. One's door may lead to the garage where the four walls of a car await one to project one into the traffic. And one may open a new type of panoramic window (the TV set), which opens the view into both the most public and the most private regions. Nonetheless, neither door nor window really pierce the compactness of the wall, and do not solve the problem.

Because to leave the door in the morning in order to return to it at night is not true political commitment. It is not an attitude by which one gives oneself to the public, but on the contrary it takes the public domain as a hunting ground for the private. It is "politics" in the bad sense of the term. And this is true not only of the capitalist society, but everywhere where walls exist. And to look at events from a distance (from the window) is not, as it seems to be, a philosophical attitude, but irresponsibility (and this in-

volves not only philosophy but every "pure" scientific and artistic commitment). Because there can be no "window knowledge." Knowledge requires the leaving of walls and getting involved—it requires praxis. Doors and windows do not solve the wall problem.

The ethical ambivalence of walls is therefore not only an architectonic problem. Ever better doors and windows resolve it just as little as ever better walls, be they sound-proof or thermostatic. The loneliness of being between walls, and the feeling of frustration of being outside them—these two sides of the walls are an aspect of the condition of that wall—building animal "man." It is not the way walls are built, but the fact that they *are* built that causes this condition. We can, of course, try to imagine a wall-less "man of the future." A man that has solved dialectically Hegel's unhappy conscience. But however we try to imagine him, he will be no longer man in the present sense of the term. Because he will be a man without ethics. The ethical ambivalence of walls is man's ethical condition.

Walls Seen From an Aesthetic Viewpoint

We speak of naked walls as we speak of the naked body. Something which ought to be covered up, and which takes courage to show as it is: naked. We are, inescapably, part of the Christian tradition. For in our tradition nakedness is nature, and nature is there to be changed by man, that "God-like spirit." Nature is what is given, and must be changed into what is made by man—into culture. In other words, nakedness is entropic, and must be covered up by the negentropic activity of the human spirit. Walls stand there, naked, as a defiance to the human will to impose form. It is against the walls that man affirms himself as a being that opposes the formless-nonsense of the world as it presents itself to him.

Yes, but are walls really given? Of course not. They were built by man, and we know this not only "historically" (we know who built them and how and why he did it) but also "structurally" (we know that they have an un-natural structure). But this poses both an historical and an existential problem. The historical problem goes like this: for the cave dweller, cave walls were given, and it was in opposition to them that wall paintings were made as articulations of the human will against nature (as articulations of "beauty"). Our walls are late and decadent forms of cave walls. The existential problem goes like this: although our walls were made by some men (by bricklayers and architects, and by those who impose their ideology on the bricklayers and architects), they are given for those of us who dwell between them. It is an error to say that culture is man-made, and that it is therefore the realm of human freedom. For those who dwell within a culture, it is a condition given at least as much as nature is. Therefore, in fact, walls are given. They are given even for those who build them.

Nonetheless, we must admit a curious ontological ambivalence in walls: seen from inside they are given, seen

from outside they are man-made. (This is a difference between cave-dwellers and ourselves: the cave dweller could not see his walls from outside, he had no "philosophical distance.") We can step outside our four walls and see not only the world out there, but also our own four walls from out there: we are reflective and speculative beings. Thus we can do what the cave-dweller could not do: develop a philosophy of culture. And culture will appear to us as the ever-increasing collection of things which are put against the four walls of our dwellings in order to hide their nakedness, to hide the fact that they are given. Sometimes these things that make up culture do more than hide the nakedness of walls: they hide cracks in the walls, they hide the danger that the building may collapse and bury us in its debris.

This vision of culture becomes even more enlightening if we imagine one of the four walls torn down and thus transformed into a glass-less window. The three remaining walls then become a stage on which the tragi-comedy of culture goes on—a truly historical vision of culture, with man on a stage as an actor. What is truly historic about this vision is its representational (symbolic) character, and the fact that it is a temporarily limited process. Culture thus appears as a "fiction." . . . The three remaining walls enclose the pathos of man's attempt to impose his will upon nature, and the possibility of his final defeat by universal inertia—for the three remaining walls themselves will come down in the "end."

Nonetheless, and in spite of knowing all this, man will go on filling the space between his walls with things that attest to his informing power. He will do so simply because the walls are there and cannot be left naked. And if there are moments in history which try to show the nakedness of the walls (moments of inverted puritanism which insist on the beauty of nakedness and the functional quality of walls), these moments are a dialectical part of the process by which man covers up the walls that surround him. A process which does not aim at doing away with walls (as impossible as that is), but at doing the best one can between the walls that are given as part of the human condition. This is what makes every cultural commitment a "heroic" commitment in the true sense of the term, and what makes of art a tragedy and an agony in the sense of the Greek playwrights. And this is, in short, what walls are if seen from an aesthetic viewpoint: borders of a stage on which the tragedy of human will towards beauty goes on.

Walls Seen From a Religious Viewpoint

The ambivalence of walls appears now in a chiaroscuro by the light shed by the flames of an open fire: it is the ambivalence of secret and message, of the hidden and the revealed.² of *phainomenon* and *epiphania*.³ There is a deep feeling rooted in man that the sacred (whatever that may mean) is secret. It is now certain that the cavemen did not

² In the sense of the Latin *ingere*, to fashion or form.

dwell in caves just to hide from the cold and from wild beasts, but at least as much in order to live near what is itself hidden there: the tremendous. It is well and good to say from the window of a modern apartment that those were "primitive" fears, and that they are "overcome" by present town planning. The cave dweller does not merely dwell in caves, but also within each one of us, and it is prudent to admit it. It is well also to admit that certainly nothing tremendous hides in our apartments, and that this fact is a very mixed blessing.

The deep-rooted feeling that the sacred is secret is responsible for one of the most important elements in architecture: the temple. *Templum*, like its Greek equivalent *temenos*, means walls that enclose a sacred space, an artificial cave carved into the common space of the polis. Thus the political space came to revolve around the secret-space of the sacred, and it was the walls of the temple that gave political life its meaning. And, in fact, this is what the word "sacred" means: that which gives meaning. If there is nothing sacred now, if mass media have done away with all secrets and have cracked up all walls of privacy, this is to say that there is now no meaning to what we are doing. (Unless our modern temples, like banks and administration centers with their solid, truly impenetrable walls, provide that meaning.)

But there is a different and equally ancient feeling of the sacred. It is the feeling that the sacred breathes in the open spaces, on hilltops and around rocks in the sea, and that it is necessary to tear down all the walls in order to reach it. This "windy" sacred (as opposed to the "cavy" sacred) marks our official occidental tradition, and it explains in part the tall towers we build, as if to escape from the walls in a vertical direction. It explains in part our love for the open spaces and our claustrophobia (as opposed, for instance, to Japanese architecture). But of course the "cavy" sacredness is always present with us, and forms an antithesis in our quest for meaning. This contradiction may be termed "uranic-chthonic"² or "appollonean-hermetic,"³ and a synthesis may be seen when looking at Gothic cathedrals. (Or at the broken walls of the mosque at Cordoba, to give another example.) Several present attempts to re-

formulate the problem of the wall may be understood as attempts to reach a synthesis in this sense.

However, there is a quite different dialectics involved in the walls as keepers or barriers of the sacred. It has to do with habit. Existentially, the sacred is the totally uncommon, unfamiliar, unexpected. It is the "noise" that penetrates suddenly the redundancy of our surroundings and results in "information." Life has no meaning if everything that happens can be explained, foreseen and, at least theoretically, manipulated. This is the meaning of the term "profanation." Now, nothing is more habitual, more familiar, more expected than the four walls within which we live. In fact, so familiar are they, so covered up with habit, that we are unable to see them. Thus, if the walls are meant to provide us with a space wherein we can live a meaningful life (a life which gives room to the "scared"), this is a self-defeating endeavor. In other words, the dialectics of the sacred are that it is profanized if it becomes a habit. One cannot inhabit the sacred.

Thus the walls as phenomena of the sacred (as phenomena that give meaning) possess a double ambiguity, and one can see no way out of it. On the one hand they must be kept if life is to have a meaning, and they must be broken, if life is to have a meaning. On the other hand they must not be allowed to become familiar if life is to have meaning, but they must be familiar if they are to be walls in the strict sense of the term. If there is some truth in the saying that man is a religious animal (in the sense that he seeks a meaning to what he is doing and suffering), then walls are a beautiful example of his condition. It was never easy to be an architect (if to be an architect means to be conscious of what one is doing) but it is even less easy to be an architect at present.

Walls Seen From a Synoptic Viewpoint

No doubt the three points of view chosen in this paper are far from exhausting the problem which the wall poses. But they suffice to show the purpose of this study: Modern analytic thinking, by explaining all problems, explains these problems away, and does not permit a true understanding of the world we live in. Attempts must be made, not to "overcome" modern thinking, but to complete it with a different attitude, more like the magic one, but informed by scientific findings. If one considers problems in this way (for instance walls), one may be able to point out aspects which are not always conscious to those who deal with them (for instance architects and builders). That is the hope of this paper.

¹ *Lethé and alethia.*

Mere appearance, and the manifestation of a divinity, Heaven and Earth.

² The Bright and the Dark, in the sense of Apollo the Sun God, and Hermes Trismegistus, author of all mysteries.

Vilém Flusser is a member of the faculty of Sao Paulo University and of the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy. The preceding paper is taken from his book, "La force du quotidien" (Paris, Mame 1974), and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the publishers.