

VILÉM FLUSSER Alexandre Bonnier's Living-Room.

This paper will be ordered as follows: first it will describe from memory the impact Bonnier's living room had on the writer; second it will elaborate the dialectics which hides behind the impact; and third it will attempt a diagnosis of the present situation and a prognosis of the immediate future by taking the living room as a symptom. The thesis on which this paper stands is that one method to understand a situation is to analyze a single element deeply enough to get at the root of the entire situation. In other words: if we understood Bonnier's living room well enough, we would know where we are and where we are going. Now although according to this thesis any single element of a given situation will serve for its analysis, some elements are better suited than others, because they are in some way especially characteristic of their situation. In other words: an analysis of Bonnier's living room will reveal more easily the "spirit of our times" than would an analysis of any living room taken haphazard in Paris. The reason why Bonnier's living room is especially characteristic of our situation is easily stated, but very difficult to explain. The reason is that Bonnier articulates consciously and unconsciously several aspects of the present situation and of its tendency toward the future in his living room and through it. That he is what is called an "artist". Now this fact is easily stated and easily sensed if one enters the living room, and it explains the choice of the living room as a symptom of our situation by the present paper. But it is very difficult to say why this specific living room is an "esthetic phenomenon" and most others are not. Possibly the following analysis will contribute accidentally to the problem of distinguishing "esthetic phenomena" from others.

A: After having climbed the stairs of a typical Rive gauche apartment house, and, a little breathlessly for the typical lack of an elevator, having knocked at the door, one enters a "studio" one would expect the bohème Mimi to live in. In these surroundings one cannot escape Victorian associations, especially if one is, like this writer, a visitor from a different and "underdeveloped" world. The spirit of history blows strongly in these buildings, and it brings with it the perfume of sweet decay and of refined corruption. One knows, of course, that tuberculosis is no longer in fashion in present-day Paris, that it is no longer a fashionable social protest, and that therefore Mimi no longer lives here. She has been expelled from here by two world wars, one economic miracle and several other minor changes, and she has moved from here both geographically and socially to the shanty-towns of Recife. But her ghost must linger on and haunt the studio and its inhabitants during the chilly nights of the petrol crisis. At least, this visitor would expect so.

The moment the studio door opens and one enters the ~~the~~ living room,

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one suffers the shock of having one's expectation confirmed in a way that is in fact a refutation. Yes, Mimi's ghost is still there, but it has changed almost out of recognition. The stage is no longer Grand Opera, but Deep-Sea Fishing, and Mimi no longer sings in Italian, but now gestures as in the archetypical dreams Jung wants us to dream, (and which we therefore in fact sometimes do dream). But if we look closely at the ghost, we may still recognize Mimi under all those changes. Let us do so.

The room is full of objects in the literal sense of the term: "objectum - what has been thrown against us". This objective fullness of the room, which causes every movement in the room to be an obstacle race, provokes a feeling in the visitor which is the exact opposite of the "horror vacui" of the Ancients. The visitor becomes immediately a subject of all those objects, and he thus becomes aware on an existential level of two meanings of the term "subject": namely "to be thrown under" and "to be governed by a monarch". He thus experiences "objectivity" and "subjectivity" very concretely and in a way not always stressed by philosophical tradition. To enter this room is a concrete philosophical experience, (if this is not a contradiction of terms). And at the same time the visitor is aware of the fact that Bonnier wants him to have such an experience, that he is being exposed to it by Bonnier, that it is not the objects in the room, but he himself who is on exhibition. An uncomfortable feeling, because one becomes Bonnier's "patient", not "agent". Like at a doctor's, one is being manipulated by Bonnier through his objects, which become instruments of some subtle operation. But, like at a doctor's, one also feels that Bonnier does it to cure one of some mysterious and as yet unidentified illness. That there is a therapeutic quality to this room, that the room has to do with some sort of "salvation".

The first impulse is, of course, to clear away some of the objects, (one can never hope to remove all of them), and thus open a way in the direction of a chair one could sit on. It is the impulse to change the room back into a place suitable for "living" in the traditional sense of the term. But to clear away objects means to look at them, (pay them attention), take them in one's hand, (apprehend them), and put them into a different context, (comprehend them). If one wants to clear some of the objects away, one must enter into a specific relationship with them, namely the relationship of "objective knowledge". Curiously one is thus thrown into a situation characteristic of man facing nature. As if the room were a sort of tropical jungle, not a cultural context. A situation reminiscent of discovery both in the ancient sense of "aletheia" and the Renaissance sense of "descoberta". The reactionary impulse to clear away these objects and thus re-establish a traditional living room turns out

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to result in a revolutionary movement not unlike in structure to those movements which brought about Greek philosophy and modern science.

Although the movement of doing away with Bonnier's objects is reminiscent of pre-socratic philosophy and Renaissance science, it results in a different sort of knowledge, which may hardly be called "episteme". Because Bonnier's objects preclude the question "what is this?". No use saying that this here is a flower-like phallus or a phallus-like flower made of green paper and shaped like a pistol. Nor that that here is a parcel containing the clothes of some person, and which has been cut in half to show its contents in a sort of violent negative strip-tease. Nor that most of the objects suggest some under water fauna in their shapes, their motions and their texture. This kind of categories of knowledge, (and many possible others), fail to grasp the essence of Bonnier's objects. One cannot escape the feeling that Bonnier deliberately suggests such kind of categories of understanding on the visitor in order to mislead him. To have him swim helplessly within a sea of dreamlike objects too full of connotations to be ever deciphered, in order to manipulate him the better. In other words: one can only begin to understand these objects if one realizes that they were made to suggest a wrong understanding. They are not problem-like, (as are the objects of nature), but enigmatic, which means they are riddles which deliberately admit no solution. Not in the sense that no solution is possible, but in the ironic sense that every solution is senseless. Thus the movement of doing away with Bonnier's objects does not result in "episteme", but in the knowledge that knowledge is devoid of meaning.

But this is not the important discovery the visitor makes while trying to remove some of the objects: that it is useless to try to understand them. The important discovery is that it is useless to try and remove them. None of the objects within the living room, (except for some chairs and the table), are things that can stand by themselves and thus be either included or excluded from a context. They are inseparable elements of a rather diffuse whole, of a climate, and they change their essence, if they are separated from their context. They are more like organs of a monstrous shapeless living being than they are like "works" in an exhibition. To remove them is to amputate them, not to classify them. It is not them, but the living room itself, that is what is now fashionable to call Bonnier's "message". To pay attention to some single objects, (as Bonnier forces us to, in order to mislead us), is to lose that "message". One must avoid the trap, and try to take the whole room in, as one battles against the many obstacles and is being absorbed by them. In other words: one must play Bonnier's game by trying to avoid the apparent rules and discover the true ones. Which are the rules of the game of living amidst a situation

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composed of elements which it is senseless to try to understand or to remove. If one does so, one discovers what sort of situation that is: it is the situation of a shell, and the game Bonnier proposes is the game of living in a shell-like situation.

The objects that fill Bonnier's living room are now understood to be his secretions which form layer after layer of a shell of which he himself is the center. They are not things of his external world, but extensions of his "body", (if by "body" we understand his concrete being-in-the-world). By entering his living room, we have not penetrated Bonnier's world, but his body. This is why no single object can be separated from the rest: it is organically linked to it. And this is why the visitor feels to be on exhibition: he is being swallowed by Bonnier like Jonas by the whale and he now forms an "objet trouvé" within the shell of the living room, an object to be stared at and manipulated. But this is also why the visitor feels that he is being manipulated to be cured of some illness: Bonnier swallows him up in order to save him from the outside world. Because this is the message of the living room: the only dignified way of living at present is to live in a shell, even in a shell to which one has been invited. To have been invited by Bonnier to his living room is to have been invited to be saved from the world. Is that not Mimi's ghost, after several re-incarnations? Yes, but there is much more to it.

B: The monstrous living being, the jungle-like deep-sea creature, the multi-layered shell which has swallowed up the visitor is a room for living. The objects that fill it and that are secretions of creative fancy and pseudopodia meant to catch others in order to save them are also furniture. The materialized dreams, hopes and dispairs which gently and uncannily move around the visitor are also the scenery of his talks with Bonnier and of his dinner with him. In other words: this extraordinary, surprising and awe-inspiring surroundings is also the ordinary, common and negligible surroundings of a room one lives in. In fact: it is this violent dialectical contradiction between the awful and the cosy that is the climate of the room and that causes its impact. It must be analyzed, if one is to understand its message, and to act on it.

One can of course try to escape from this dialectics. One can say that for the visitor the room is extraordinary, because the visitor is not accustomed to it. But that for Bonnier, who lives there, it is just as customary as are one's own chairs and tables. Which would amount to saying that Bonnier's room is just like any other one, only more complex. But such an attempt to escape from the impact of the room must fail for the following reason: Private rooms are places meant not to be looked at, and this is what makes them private. Art is public in the sense that it wants to be looked at. Bonnier's is a room which is both art and private. One cannot escape this.

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The distinction between the private and the public is an existential distinction characteristic of modern Occidental civilisation. Which is to say of bourgeois civilisation. In the private realm one feels secure, because all things there are in their pre-established place and can be used without having to be looked at. We need not pay them attention. In the public realm, on the contrary, one feels a challenge, because things are not as they should be and must be dominated. We must pay them attention. This distinction between the private and the public, between self-assertion and commitment, between "oiké" and "polis", between the "profane" and the "sacred" is in fact the basis of bourgeois thinking and feeling. It does not exist in the same way in other cultures. For instance not in the Byzantine and Russian one, where ~~where~~ there is a constant interpenetration between the private and the public, because everything is "orthodox", namely impregnated by politics and religion. Nor does our distinction exist in Islamic or Chinese cultures. It is we Western bourgeois who have, on the basis of Latin and Jewish tradition and with the help of the Reformation, established this clear distinction. Bonnier's room is an attempt to surmount it.

It has never been a comfortable distinction. The public could never be wholly separated from the private, because, after all, politics for the bourgeois means to "dominate", to insert in the "domus", to make private. This is why people ~~buy~~ pictures in galleries to hang them on their private walls and then no longer pay them any attention. They now dominate the pictures, they "own" them. And then there has always been the opposite tendency of the public realm to invade the private one and to destroy it. The totalitarian tendency of puritanism, fascism, commercial propaganda and television. In fact: the distinction between the private and the public has always been what might be called a bourgeois "ideal". The ideal of doing business on workdays and going to Church on sundays. Of having dinner at home and then going to see the movies. Of having a Ministry of Culture without having to pay too much of income tax. In fact: this ideal distinction is the motive and the purpose of "democracy" in the Western sense of the term. It is no longer working very well, which is to say that our civilisation is in a crisis.

Bonnier's room faces the crisis and tries to overcome it in a way which is revolutionary in a radical sense of the term. Because it is a way which goes against the general tendency in our situation. The general tendency is toward a "mass culture", which means toward a culture in which the private space is diluted into a uniform mass easily manipulable and penetrable by some highly technified public spaces. Bonnier's room suggests the possibility of a private shell-like space which has the existential climate of public spaces. A dialectical synthesis through which the private becomes even more private by having absorbed the sacrality of the public. In order to understand this, one must go a little bit into that aspect of the distinction

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which I have called "the profane" and "sacred".

The sacred is what inspires awe, admiration and adoration. The profane is what may be despised and requires no attention. Of course: it is possible to sacralize the profane and profanate the sacred. Bourgeois civilisation does both by profanating politics and by sacralizing private property, the family and so forth. But still: the distinction between the sacred and the profane is always with us, and it characterizes our civilisation. It distinguishes us from other civilisations which live in a space which is fundamentally and totally sacred. Which means to say that in civilisations like these life has always a meaning. The general tendency I have mentioned above is one toward total profanation. Bonnier's room suggests the possibility of total sacralisation. It makes the private room sacred. A sort of "lar" in the Roman sense, a private temple. It does so by giving it an "artistic" climate. But by doing so, it gives the term "art" a new and revolutionary meaning.

In civilisations different from ours, in civilisations where everything is fundamentally sacred, there is no place for art in our sense of the term. "Art" is the last refuge of the sacred ever since the Renaissance, it makes Reality shine and it immortalizes. In Romantic times it becomes the vehicle of salvation. The general tendency mentioned above is, among other things, a profanation of art by its massification. ^h Bonnier's room, on the contrary, "art" becomes an artifice to sacralize the banal. It is no longer sacred in itself, but a method of sacralisation. It is in a true sense a "techné". The technique of having a room and living in it. "Art" in that room is to live by secreting a shell and then using the shell to swallow up others and living with them. "Art" there is no longer a doing of things, but a way of living in private. It is not "art" in the bourgeois sense of the term, but closer to what for instance the Brazilian Indians are doing when making masks, or collages of feathers. It is a method of living meaningfully, and therefore of salvation. Of Bonnier's own salvation, of course, but also of the salvation of those who visit with him, which means potentially of our civilisation.

C: Bonnier's room is a symptom of our situation. A symptom both of things as they are now and of the shape of things to come in the near future. This is one way to read the symptom: There is a general tendency toward massification. Everything tends to become a stereotype of some hidden prototype elaborated by some technical governing places like factories, governments and institutions. Within this technological stream a few islands are crystallizing like the monasteries in the Dark Ages. Bonnier's room is one among them. They are shells within which some of us may retire to save themselves from the rising tide of general profan

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ation. To those committed to the general trend the shells are dispizable reactionary remnants for molluscs, and the majestic stream of history shall bypass them. But molluscs are remarkably resistant creatures, and ever since the Silurian geological period they are with us. And it is the monasteries, and not the majestic stream of barbarians, which shape to this day our thinking and acting. It may well be that Bonnier's room is a last form of bourgeois decay and alienation. But decay is the best humus, and alienation is what was called in earlier ages "human spirit". It may well be that later historians will consider phenomena like Bonnier's room to be first symptoms of a new form of living. As for us, we must be content with the fact that, after all, phenomena like Bonnier's room exist to remind us that the general tendency is not the only one at work at present.