

VILÉM FLUSSER To rent a house.

Let us suppose that you are Brazilian, a University professor on a one years' leave in Europe, that you want to write a book, and that you therefore want to rent a house somewhere in the countryside, not very far from some important town, (to have access to books and people), but in a pleasant natural surroundings. It does not matter where the house you look for is located, nor what it is like, as long as it is more or less comfortable and will not cost a fortune. Let us suppose, furthermore, that you are not very naive and that you know of the most incredible phenomenon in the second half of this century called "tourism", which causes millions of otherwise more or less civilized people to invade the fields, the meadows, the woods and the beaches of Europe in regular waves, like their ancestors did in the early Middle Ages. You will of course try to avoid these hordes of crying children, burning fires, ruined objects that line the roads, and all the other symptoms of warfare. Therefore you will study the structure which these waves follow, in order to discover some regularity in this movement. You will find that the movement has two yearly climaxes, one in mid-summer, the other in late winter, and that the first climax sucks the waves in the direction of the sea shores, and the second in the direction of the mountains. You will not stop to consider the reasons for this strange tendency, (whether it has to do with the phases of the Moon, or with the Sun spots, or with some fertility rites, or with the compensation of some deeply repressed complexes), but you will accept this tendency as given. Your strategy is therefore clear: you will avoid both the sea and the mountains, and look for your house somewhere along peacefully rolling rivers. There, where trees reflect themselves in calm streams, where the wind blows softly over the fields, and where the flowers bloom in the meadows, you will find, (you think), your refuge from the benefits of advanced civilisation. In the Touraine, for instance.

The moment you think of the word "Touraine", (and look it up on your Michelin map), your heartbeat quickens. Because, of course, you have your historical education. You imagine the majestic castles in their beautiful parks, the shadows of Jeanne d'Arc, Rabelais and the dying Leonardo da Vinci hovering over the evening meadows, the echoes of madrigals in the soft breeze of the night, and all this and more conspiring to embrace you lovingly in your return to the breasts of Mother nature-culture. You are ready to plunge into the deep well of that tradition from which the life-giving juices spring that sustain your own, (the Brazilian), civilisation. This is indeed a return to the Mothers. You therefore take your car, drive out of Paris, (after some traffic difficulty in the Périphérique, which you dismiss as typically 20th century massification), and take the autoroute to Chartres. You leave that mountain of Gothic faith to your right, (because you are not now in the mood to seek God, but more immanent blessings), and hasten to take the road to Tours, which lies at the center of your provisional Utopia.

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Well, know you are in Tours, (which is the nearest possible approximation of reality to imagination, if you come from the North and do not see its industrial suburbs), and ready to go house-hunting. The people you naively ask in the streets direct you to a "Syndicat d'Initiative", a terrible word with sinister connotations. You have no prejudice against syndicates, (you belong to several yourself), but the idea that initiative can be syndicated has obviously something to do with theory of decision, cybernetics, computers and other things that do not fit into your Touraine image. But, obediently, and still full of hope, you go there. You find that it is an institution which is established to channel tourist waves into small capillary vessels, thus transforming their potentially destructive character into an irrigation system that brings money with it. You will also find that there is a network of such syndicates covering the whole of Touraine like an invisible but powerful apparatus, (one syndicate to each village), but that you do not fit into the network, not being a tourist. Syndicates do suck the invasion army into individual houses, but only for the duration of a few weeks, in order to spit them out again after having absorbed their money. So here you have it: your tourist theory was wrong, and tourists are to be found everywhere, (like rats, not like the Vandals). You will have to live with this fact, and try to hear the echoes of the madrigals, inspite of the "son et ^{lumière} image" that ornate the Touraine nights like measles.

But the syndicates, although they refuse you, still direct you to other house-providing systems which are more apt to absorb you. These systems consist of overlapping networks with nodes like real estate agencies, village mayors, restaurants, village priests and butchers. Postmasters seem to have very important cross-reference functions in this complex of systems. You slowly but surely get enmeshed in these systems, and you find out two things that might surprise you. One is that the famous "establishment" is far less deliberate than one might think, and that it works as if through resonance within the social body. The people you get in contact with are quite unaware that they are part of an administrative department which takes care of invasions. The second surprise is that although these people ignore their administrative position, they have both human kindness and ignorance of the facts which makes them endearing, although inefficient. All of them, (except for the agencies), want to help you in a disinterested way and you can establish true human relationship with them. But they do not know the first thing about the housing situation that surrounds them, which makes them useless for your commitment. Which means that although the establishment does function through resonance, it does so very badly. Which may be taken by some as a symptom that there is still hope for the future.

These people bring you in contact with roughly three types of house owners: the smart ones, the desperate ones, and those who can be called the

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"secondary house owners". The smart ones see that you can be made a far more profitable victim than are the tourists, because you want to stay longer. The desperate ones see that you can be made to finance their decrepit houses and save them from ruin. The "secondary" ones discover, to their own surprise, that they own houses to be rented, not, as they thought before, abandoned factory buildings, garages, and farm stables. The first type of owner represents France's dynamic economic future, the second type her feudal past, the third type her inventive, scientific spirit. After having talked to several representatives of each type, you have crisscrossed the whole of Touraine, seen all of its castles and parks, but the utopic character of this "garden of France" has evaporated. It has become a jungle of economic struggle for the survival of the fittest, and you find yourself in fierce competition with tourists. A competition in which you must lose in the end, because you are one and they are many. You retreat to a hotel, lick your wounds, and try to learn the lesson.

The lesson is not, as you might think, that man is an economic animal everywhere, and that all the rest is just a trimming aimed at luring victims into traps where to be dispoiled at a profit. The lesson is far more terrible: everything works in function and for the benefit of several overlapping, invisible and totally inhuman systems. The Touraine, for instance, with its castles and its historical background, is in reality a department for the exploitation of one type of alienation, (tourism), in favor of another type of alienation, (easy money making). If you drive through the Touraine, you do not notice it, because on the surface it looks as if it were a place where people live in villages and towns, as they always used to live during the centuries that preceed us. If you live in the Touraine, you do not notice it, because the several inhuman systems that structure life there are hidden under deep layers of pretense, custom and deliberate and spontaneous repression. But if you want to rent a house there you discover that the Touraine is not a place where people live in the traditional sense of the term, but a place where people are inserted into complex systems, without knowing it, and without anybody anywhere having any advantage from it. And you discover that this is so, not because the Tourain is a special place, but because people can no longer live anywhere in the traditional sense of the term. Invisible overlapping, (and inefficient), systems are present all over the world. There is no hiding from them. You are either a tourist, or a house owner, or a fonctionnaire of a system, or an outcast all over the world. Wanting to rent a house is a good method to discover the human situation at present.