

## On Turning Comfortably Numb: how “The Wall” Reaches Out to Our Vulnerable Self

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### **Abstract**

*Far from claiming to penetrate an artist’s psyche and attempting to „translate” his profound contents to the readers, I propose an essay based on Roger Waters’ „The Wall” concept album and Alan Parker’s 1982 screen version, with a view based on the psychological content which might be triggered in contact with its bold lyrics and visuals. I also commit to the subjectivity that might come with such an endeavor, while referring to relevant concepts in order to come in touch with useful terms of reference.*

*“The Wall” (released in 1979) still stands as one of the strongest, most vocal and deep creations offered by modern artists. Besides the evident imprint on popular culture, Waters’ work seems to bite into very personal aspects of pillar-relationships and individual expression. Even though several messages are clearly addressed to the public (regarding atrocities of war, giving a rap to educational rigidity, among others), the art which comes to complete these messages reaches out to the audience’s deepest and darkest emotional resorts. Despite the discomfort of facing “nightmares made true”, “The Wall” can be seen as a rather “safe space” where anger, despair, crippling loneliness are collectively displayed, looked at and shared within its own public.*

**Keywords:** *Self, The Wall, contrast, vulnerability, behavior, guilt*

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## I. CONTINUING

Far from claiming to penetrate an artist's psyche and attempting to „translate” his profound contents to the readers, I propose an essay based on Roger Waters' „The Wall” concept album and Alan Parker's 1982 screen version, with a view based on the psychological content which might be triggered in contact with its bold lyrics and visuals. I also commit to the subjectivity that might come with such an endeavor, while referring to relevant concepts in order to come in touch with useful terms of reference.

“The Wall” (released in 1979) still stands as one of the strongest, most vocal and deep creations offered by modern artists. Besides the evident imprint on popular culture, Waters' work seems to bite into very personal aspects of pillar-relationships and individual expression. Even though several messages are clearly addressed to the public (regarding atrocities of war, giving a rap to educational rigidity, among others), the art which comes to complete these messages reaches out to the audience's deepest and darkest emotional resorts. Despite the discomfort of facing “nightmares made true”, “The Wall” can be seen as a rather “safe space” where anger, despair, crippling loneliness are collectively displayed, looked at and shared within its own public.

While the revolt is somehow an implicit driver we frequently encounter in the rock music genre, “The Wall” reaches depth by dissecting a wide tableau of vulnerability anchored in a derailed use of attachment, where the Father is molded by the State's deranged sense protection to be framed in an absent, hero figure, the Mother suffocates her offspring, reflecting her own lack of identity, the Lover feeds on resentment, guilt and requisition. „The Wall” might be difficult to absorb by those still struggling with (or inhibiting) their deepest fears, while being embraced by those who have experienced and reflected upon their own perceived handcuffs blocking creativity – whether in its classical sense of producing and sharing one's work to the world or in the sense of creating one's own life based on the courage of displaying authentic manifestation.

Regardless of possible interpretations of its impact upon the public, „The Wall” is worthy of being viewed as more than an usual pop-product, and rather as a tough depiction of individual drama resulting in a modern society's bid of dictating terms of personality construction. Also, “The Wall” itself stands as an open and sharp metaphor for an individual's immersion into one's own defense mechanisms, process which, in lack of functional support and depth of human contact, enhances vulnerability to the point of disruption (Cohen & Willis, 1985).

I further propose that together we look at “The Wall” as divided in several main themes; each theme referring both to specific songs found on the album and to the scenes found in the 1982 movie version.

**1. The doubt-shaded attachment - “Momma's gonna make all of your nightmares come true” (Waters, 1979):**

One of the most incisive figures for “The Wall’s” narrative is the Mother, whose portrait results in a rather harsh image, showing an inability to respond to her child’s anxiety, resulted from its struggles to make sense of the world’s threats, along with personal insecurities. The mother figure, as shown from the narrator’s point of view, puts the audience in the uncomfortable position of looking at the bareness that comes with introjecting a prematurely censoring source of affection. The Mother seems to contribute to building a fearful lens for experiencing the world, promising protection while enhancing the perception of external threat and limiting the child’s self-reliability.

The narrator manages to bring us back to feeling unprepared to face reality, with a great intuition of how loose guiding marks, born out of the impaired contact with important figures of our growth (in this case, the parents), results in mistrust in one’s capacity to mediate between personal, psychological contents and external requests in order to manage reality. This is a process which, in “The Wall”, is rather a source of fear and implicitly of relying on defense mechanisms (for further reading, see Bowlby, 2005; Freud, 1992; Young, 1994).

The bareness (induced right from the first images in the screen version as we are placed in a rather cold and wide hotel hall – the proximity of Pink’s psychological split) is later reflected in the contact with the romantic partner, or better said, in the lack of authentic contact. Fear remains the canvas on which the love relationship is built upon; turning into anger as the narrator finally verbalizes its lack of depth, an apparent hypocrisy of running from shared feelings and replacing them with shallow experiences. The anger gets more easily expressed in contact with a stranger rather than in front of the lost partner, who only remains standing as a figure mirroring once again the inability to respond to human emotions once they turn uncomfortable; the episode might lead us to the fear of facing what we call „negative emotion”, a struggle which is necessary for enhancing human contact while exposing one’s vulnerability to a partner, for instance. In the given narrative, the relationship darkened by fear turns into a dependent one, where the partner is given the supreme power of minimizing one’s self, while the individual further gets overwhelmed with guilt and powerlessness.

**2. The un-holding peers: „Poems, everybody! The laddie reckons himself a poet!” (Marshall & Parker, 1982):**

Easily recognized by the public, the anti-system anthem „Another Brick in the Wall (II)” (Waters, 1979) is again, richer in content than the usual pop hit. In the context of the narrative

exposed within „The Wall”, „we don't need no education” (Waters, 1979) is the cry of children modeled by an education paradigm which labels authenticity, creativity and individual expression as misbehavior. A form of misbehavior, on the other hand, is a trigger for Pink to come in contact with the impact of his teacher's dictatorship (we watch him firing a bullet under a train's wheels before picturing a monstrous vision of his teacher and caged pupils); the anti-social behavior can be seen as the only response available for the child to the indefensibility experienced in school. A circle of violence is sharply depicted as domestic psychological abuse experienced by the teacher is belched upon the children; further, Pink's helplessness in the situation finally bursts into riot phantasm.

The un-holding peers are later represented by the producers who Pink works with. In plain contact with death, he is raised by figures who, this time around, respond to the act of desperation in the same manner as the teacher – as if it was an insult to them, to the gig promised to them – to the role he was supposed to play. The moment falls to yet another phantasm of violence, which will be further discussed.

Overall, the social support desired by all is replaced with undefined human beings, figures of no potential for contact, represented by different types of crowds – all picturing a world of broken mirrors as they deepen the feeling of being understood.

### **3. The war:**

The war is placed as the social context on which Pink's story is constructed. A strong emotional contrast is inferred while we watch terrible images of war victims along with listening to foggy-voiced lyrics speaking of parental protection. The contrast brings us to life itself, where severe suffering regresses us to seeking the primary source of comfort and also sketches directions of creating our own life scenarios. We notice that the first „bricks of the wall” are lifted by the child who protects himself from the emotional unavailability of the mourning Mother, a victim of the war herself.

### **4. The rebound of misinterpreted vulnerability:**

„In the Flesh” (Waters, 1979) is an imposing moment of „The Wall” where we come in contact with a paranoid representation of the self. Helplessness is replaced by identification with the executioner (with clear references to the Second World War) with intolerance, as the aggressor is once again invested with absolute power. It is the moment where Pink has a perceived control upon the abuse, can finally label himself what is and isn't suitable. The self is

no longer vulnerable, with the price of engaging in the delusion of what „The Wall” might have to offer.

Finally, „The Trial” (Waters & Ezrin, 1979) is the scene of emerging pieces of the psychological split come together, forming a terrifying tableau of the self which is practically devoured by introjected figures of authority. The absence of the father figure makes room for the supreme judge (a disgraceful androgynous caricature), a representation of the self-critical voice which mediates the dialogue between the paralyzed, unresponsive self and messengers of mandatory behavior (the Teacher, the Mother, and the Lover – the only figures that seem to function as mirrors of the vulnerable self). The guilt experienced by the self is reflected in being human: „Was caught red-handed showing feelings, Showing feelings of an almost human nature, This will not do” – Waters, 1979 – the message is, in itself, a critique of the social tendency of judging emotional expression as inadequate, once again scratching into misinterpreted vulnerability. The latter is placed as part of the supreme punishment – consisting of exposing the self-as-is to the peers.

No consolation is found in “tearing down the wall”. Of course more meanings can be found in Waters’ work, and perhaps some other themes should be considered, regarding modern politics, insights to the artist’s condition, and so forth. However, what the present essay intended was to propose possible reasons why pop-culture products such as “The Wall” should be seen as psychological material we all work with, generation after generation, and to invite the reader to ask oneself “What is it that’s so appealing to me while I watch this movie, or while I listen to my favorite music?”.

Hence, the version at hand stands by the idea that “The Wall” reaches out to our vulnerable selves. We face the option of an alienated self-construction cluttered by emotional unavailability and human contact, spurned by both sides. No treatment is found for what seems to be a continuous loop of the creation and destruction dichotomy, as a reminder of how pain can be the resort of either splitting hurt or of blooming works of art – both in the literal way and as an expression of everyday authenticity.

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