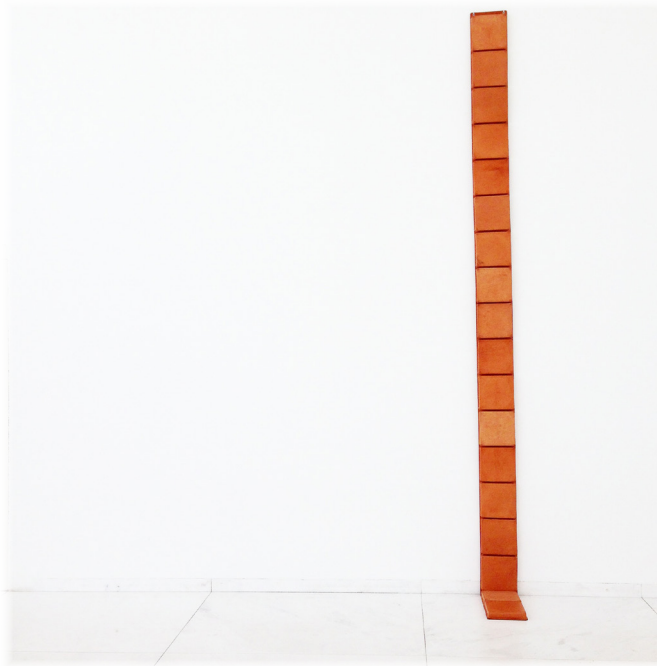


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What is an architect?

The singular case of Manuel Graça Dias and his multiple selves

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Abstract

This paper departs from a seminal text by Michel Foucault — “What is an Author?” (1969) — in order to question some of the idiosyncrasies of being an architect, particularly within the contemporary Portuguese realm. By transposing some of the concepts and ideas of Foucault’s essay into current architectonic debates, we aim to reflect on the “architect-function” through an analysis of Manuel Graça Dias’s work. For Foucault, the question of “What is an Author?” (extrapolated in this paper’s argument as the correlating question, What is an Architect?) is fundamentally linked both to the function of the author’s name — *that performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function* — and also to the question of what constitutes a “work” (*oeuvre*) — *If an individual were not an author, could we say that what he wrote, said, left behind in his papers, or what has been collected of his remarks, could be called a “work”?* In the case of Manuel Graça Dias, an architect divided between multiple forms of discourse production (construction, drawing, writing, teaching, film, television, radio, etc) who also nourishes a peculiar appreciation for forms of “architecture without architects”, one could inquire: How can Manuel Graça Dias architectonic practice be delimited, when it is scattered through a plurality of selves? What ultimately constitutes his “work”? Finally, what defines him as an Architect?

Keywords

Architecture; philosophy; visual culture; media

This paper is consequence of a PhD research, which focuses specifically on broadcasting and audiovisual production about architecture, in Portugal. One of the most fundamental case-studies of this research is the audiovisual production of the Portuguese architect Manuel Graça Dias. Born in Lisbon in 1953, Manuel Graça Dias shares his architectural practice with Egas José Vieira in the office “Contemporânea” and he is also a teacher, writer, editor and filmmaker, and has developed several programs for radio and television. Quite peculiarly, he is also a regular *Instagrammer*. In terms of audiovisual production alone, Manuel Graça Dias has explored the medium through a wide array of formats – from the television program to cinema, video and digital film – and he has also been involved in the backstage of several feature films as the designer of decor and props. But the intention of this paper is not to focus solely on his link to audiovisual production, it is rather concerned with engaging in a global analysis of how all these multiple forms of discourse production have influenced the construction, and even the definition, of Manuel Graça Dias’ own architectural practice. However, for reasons of limitation of space, we will be analyzing just two different facets of Dias’ production, which can function as points of contrast. The first example is one of Manuel Graça Dias’s recent incursions in cinema, as a director – realized in the formal and scientific context of academia, this film is as then undoubtedly linked to a “juridical and institutional system”. The second example is Dias’ regular *Instagram* activity – the highly personal and spontaneous nature of which introduces the question of whether it should be even considered “work”. Taking into consideration these two activities, this paper mainly aims to question: Can all Manuel Graça Dias’s incursions in different media be considered as forms of architectonic production? How can we define, or delimit, his body of work as an architect? And, finally, departing from Manuel Graça Dias’ singular case, how do we then define what an “architect” is, or even, how do we define what is “architecture”?

To attempt to respond to some of these questions, this paper will resort to some of Michel Foucault’s writings, and it is within Foucault’s own notion of the “freedom of the reader” that we felt somehow at ease to freely apply and adapt his ideas. *If thinking is needed, it is not as Foucault but with Foucault* — claims José Bragança de Miranda and António Fernando Cascais in “The Lesson of Foucault”, the preface of the Portuguese edition of “What is an Author?” (2012, 27) — *It is a way to fight what he [Foucault] called the ‘monarchy of the author’ — always a limitation of the freedom of the reader to depart from the intention and meaning targeted by the author, who, in his ‘eminent sovereignty’ (sic) presents himself as the law of the entire reading.* The final aim behind this free exploration of Foucault’s texts and reflections is solely to generate thought and hopefully initiate a structured understanding of how to approach the entirety of Manuel Graça Dias’s body of work, which

is fundamental to the future development of the PhD research of which this paper forms a part.

What is an Architect?

“What is an Author?” — “*Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?*” — was a communication Michel Foucault presented in 1969 at *Société Française de Philosophie* (for the purpose of this paper, two different English translations have been used: the first from 1977 [Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon] and the second from 1998 [Robert Hurley and others]). For Foucault, this essay emerged from a gap he detected within his previous “*Les mots et les Chooses*”, admitting that in that work he had focused more on the “hidden discursive fabrics” of the text, and not so much on the works and the writers themselves. “What is an Author?” also seems to have emerged as a reaction to a 1967 text of Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, wherein Barthes criticized the “God-like” figure of the author in classical literature and criticism, condemning both for never paying any attention to the reader — *for it, the writer is the only person in literature*. For Barthes, in order to “give writing its future” there could only be one radical solution: *the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author*. (Barthes 1977, 148) Even though Foucault, in his essay, does not entirely contradict Barthes manifesto, he definitely seems interested in pushing the debate further by questioning the author figure in its relation with the text: *I am not certain that the consequences derived from the disappearance or death of the author have been fully explored or that the importance of this event has been appreciated*. (Foucault 1977, 117) Within this paper’s objective, which foremost aims to question the figure of the author in architecture, is it possible then to establish a kind of parallel between the philosophical debates of the late sixties in France — where, as Barthes and Foucault diagnosed in their essays, a major shift in literature was occurring — and the current Portuguese architectonic scene? Could a similar shift also have taken place in our architecture? If so, could the architectonic production of Manuel Graça Dias somehow embody this fundamental shift?

To begin with, Manuel Graça Dias’ practice of architecture surely needs to be interpreted in a different light than that of the more “traditional” definition of an architect, a notion which remains very much rooted in the Portuguese *status quo* that still largely considers the function of an architect to be solely linked to building and construction. The recent economic crisis however, which has led to a severe stagnation of construction activity, might have led to the emergence and acceptance of new forms of practicing architecture, especially those connected to cultural production. In this regard, Manuel Graça Dias’ career is absolutely remarkable and

prescient: since its very beginning, almost four decades ago, his architectural practice was already punctuated by the different forms of cultural production that only now are beginning to be more widely associated with the discipline. It is precisely these kinds of “alternative” forms of architectural production that this paper is keen to analyze in order to question the very essence of being an architect. Foucault said that *if we wish to know the writer in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence*. (Foucault 1977, 117) Our approach is also to attempt to “know the architect in our day” by the “singularity of his absence”, using the case of Manuel Graça Dias to understand what it means to practice architecture at the very fringes of the discipline, at a place where the architect almost “disappears” and one can be left to wonder if what is being produced can even be considered “Architecture” — *We should reexamine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of his void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance*. (Foucault 1977, 121)

Manuel Graça Dias and Cinema

Manuel Graça Dias always cultivated a close relationship with cinema, ever since his time as a student of architecture. Immediately after the Portuguese revolution of 25th of April 1974, the school of architecture was shut down due to profound convulsions started by students that demanded drastic changes and actualizations to the programme and way in which architecture was being overall taught at the school. During that time, Manuel Graça Dias enrolled to study cinema. Years after, he would work on some cinematographic productions, namely on the film of António-Pedro Vasconcelos, “*O Lugar do Morto*” (1984), where he was responsible for the creation of all interior environments – controlling the arrangement of all objects within the spaces of the scenes and even designing the style of clothes that the female protagonist was to wear in the film.

More recently, Manuel Graça Dias directed two short films, which were produced within the context of an academic project he was integrated within as one of the main researchers. The project was suggestively titled “Silent Rupture” since it was envisioned to explore the intersections between Portuguese architecture and cinema during the dictatorship, more specifically in the period between 1960-1974 (this project was based at the Architecture School of Oporto University in 2010-13). The first film, “*A Encomenda*”, is a film about a project of architect Raul Hestnes Ferreira, a single house in Albarraque that the architect built for his own father, the poet José Gomes Ferreira, in 1959-61 [Figure 1]. However, even in this film about an acknowledged architectural project by a well-known author,

Manuel Graça Dias “contaminates” the discrete authorship of the house by emphasising the outside world and the anonymous “architecture” (“architecture without architects”) surrounding the territory of this special and delicate house. In addition to these more personal points of view, foregrounding Graça Dias’ own fascination with informal architecture, the director “contaminates” both the film and Hestnes Ferreira’s house yet further, through a particular scene in which Manuel Graça Dias himself appears in the film as another character, as a postman passes on the street with his bicycle, and introduces Dias with a very short biography: *Good morning my friend Manuel Graça Dias, born on the 11th of April of 1953*. [Figure 2].



Figure 1: *A Encomenda*; Film by Manuel Graça Dias, 2012



Figure 2: *A Encomenda*; Film by Manuel Graça Dias, 2012

Throughout Manuel Graças Dias’s work we always feel his subtle presence through these little “contaminations”, which function almost like a signature. For Foucault, the function of the author’s name proffers, (...) *more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a description.* (Foucault 1998, 209). A name, in fact, also implies a “classificatory function”: *Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts.* (Foucault 1998, 210) In the case of Manuel Graça Dias this recognition might also apply, as a form of organizing and classifying the wide diversity of his production. No matter the form or format which Manuel Graça Dias decides to work and express himself within, if he signs it and associates his name to it, then, as an unarguably acknowledged architect (several times recognized by the institutions that officially sustain the discipline of architecture in Portugal), it should be with some degree of safety that anyone can classify whatever he does as “architectonic production” — *The author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author’s name, that one can say ‘this was written by so-and-so’ or ‘so-and-so is its author’ shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumed. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.* (Foucault 1998, 211)

What is Architecture?

Following Foucault’s line of thought in “What is an author?”, there are two fundamental notions that could be substituted for the notion of the author in the case of his “disappearance”, but that he feels end up blocking it instead. The first is the notion of “work” [*oeuvre*] and the second is that of “writing” [*écriture*].

As Foucault puts it, this question of the “disappearance of the author” is not as immediate as at first it could seem. It is not sufficient to leave the “author” and just focus on the “work”, because, he says, “work” and the unity this term implies can be just as problematic as the individuality of the author himself: *If we wish to publish the complete works of Nietzsche, for example, where do we draw the line? Certainly, everything must be published, but can we agree on what ‘everything’ is? We will include everything that Nietzsche himself published, along with the drafts of his works, his plans for aphorisms, his marginal notations and corrections. But what if, in a notebook filled with aphorisms, we find a reference, a reminder of an appointment, an address, or a laundry bill, should this be included in his works? Why not?* (Foucault 1977, 118)

Regarding the notion of “writing” [*écriture*], which Foucault recognizes might be even more complex than that of “work”, how can the status of a certain text be defined if there is no reference to an “author”, if it has no signature, if it is, by chance or accident, anonymous? There are plenty of discourses all around us, Foucault says in “The Order of Discourse”, which circulate without having their meaning or efficacy necessarily associated with an author: *everyday remarks, which are effaced immediately; decrees or contracts which requires signatories but no author; technical instructions which are transmitted anonymously.* (Foucault 1981, 58) But there are domains in which anonymity is not tolerable and the literary domain is definitely one of them — as is architecture, we risk to add, at least in rapport to the notion of the discipline that is widely conceived today — *If by accident or design a text was presented anonymously, every effort was made to locate its author. Literary anonymity was of interest only as a puzzle to be solved as, in our day, literary works are totally dominated by the sovereignty of the author.* (Foucault 1977, 126)

Manuel Graça Dias and Instagram

The act of regularly posting images on *Instagram* might not be immediately comparable to the “laundry bill” mentioned above that Foucault suggested as a potential component of Nietzsche’s full body of work, but it is, in fact, a similarly intimate artifact — a personal and spontaneous activity that it feels almost voyeuristic to peek into, despite being published to the public within the form of social media. Nevertheless, these images, which he regularly collects from his everyday life, have the potential of rendering an interesting, though slightly skewed, viewpoint of Manuel Graça Dias’s “work”, introducing some degree of novelty into the analysis of his more “canonical” architectonic production. In fact, these images somehow seem to encapsulate a hint of his authorial essence and intuition, which can be quite useful when attempting to grasp the unity and coherence that links the entirety of his work.

On *Instagram*, Manuel Graça Dias organizes his photographs through different categories that are grouped around *hashtags* like: *#iseefaces*, where he photographs suggestions of faces in buildings, objects, etc [Figure 3]; *#onedoraday*, which consists of a never ending collection of images of this fundamental architectonic element [Figure 4]; *#cityistherealmuseum*, which are basically photographs of objects scattered through the city that are generally considered “trash”; *#signs*, following his fascinations for words or any other written element in the city; *#gostomodernismo* (I like modernism) — where Manuel Graça Dias takes pictures of different modernist buildings that he admires, with an almost childlike approach: “I like this”, “I don’t like that” (by the way, he also has a series called “I don’t like *Português*

suave – a style of Portuguese architecture from the 1950s-60s); and, finally, in the middle of all these random images, he also captures his own architecture (which he shares with Egas José Vieira, #*gracadiasegasvieira*), always with the same relaxed and uncompromising posture as the other images.



Figure 3: #iseefaces; Instagram of Manuel Graça Dias, 2015



Figure 4: #onedooraday; Instagram of Manuel Graça Dias, 2015

The question of whether these *Instagram* images might be considered, and therefore potentially analyzed and scientifically studied, as Manuel Graça Dias “work”, can probably only be answered by its author, that is, Manuel Graça Dias himself — *The author provide the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications.* (Foucault 1998, 214-215) Is it then the author (architect) that ultimately holds the power to legitimize, or not, his own “work”, his own (architectonic) production? Should it then be Manuel Graça Dias himself who ultimately decides which aspects of his own multiple and diverse production — these materialisations of his “multiple selves” — are in fact, or not, Architecture?

The “architect-function” (Final Considerations)

According to Foucault, the function of the author plays a vital role in the review of all literary works, as it serves to characterize the mode of existence and circulation of certain discourses within a society. However, the “author-function” does not generate itself spontaneously by the attribution of a certain discourse to an individual, it is in fact the result of a complex operation that constructs a rational entity called an author. But even this authorial entity is not always constructed in the same way, it varies according to period or type, as the philosopher-author is not constructed in the same way as the poet. Still, in the face of all these variables, Foucault admits there are some constants that have ruled the construction of the “author-function” throughout the ages, which in his essay he limits to four characteristic traits:

- 1) it is linked to a juridical and institutional system. On this point, it could be interesting to also bring to the debate the notion of “discipline”, which is a very strong and foundational subject within the architectonic universe, and an idea Foucault sees mainly as a “principle of control over the production of discourse”: *Within its own limits, each discipline recognizes true and false propositions; but it pushes back a whole teratology of knowledge beyond its margins.* (Foucault 1981, 60-61);
- 2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way
- 3) it is not spontaneously attributed but results instead of complex operations; and finally
- 4) it does not simply refer to a “real individual” but it can give rise to a simultaneity of “several selves”, several “subjects-positions”. (Foucault 1998, 214)

But more than an end in itself, Foucault's notion of "author-function" introduces the possibility of a method — a method for the construction of a "typology of discourse": *Perhaps the time has come to study not only the expressive value and formal transformations of discourse, but its mode of existence: the modifications and variations, within any culture of modes of circulation, valorization, attribution and appropriation.* (Foucault 1977, 137)

The questions proposed by this paper were not objectively answered and will probably always remain in a fairly open state, but the introduction of the "author-function" notion into the architectonic debate — the "architect-function" — opens the possibility for a more systematic process of analysis of the work of architects like Manuel Graças Dias, who has dedicated a large amount of his practice precisely to the development of multiple forms of discourse production and communication: to talk, write, teach and broadcast Architecture, and ultimately even design it.

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