

Profession: Távora

Being Portuguese, Modernism, Pessimism, American Journey, Fernando Pessoa

/Abstract

It is the decadence that Oswald Spengler predicts for after 2000 that Fernando Távora already encounters at every step of his mythical American journey. It is this “cultural pessimism”, the matrix of “decline”, that marks his life forever, even if the “springtime” with which he was formed is omnipresent: Le Corbusier and Picasso, the modernists as baroque angels, the modernism that then fluttered and rebuilt his beloved Brazil; and Fernando Pessoa, who was decline and ascension in reverse order, with an entourage of heteronyms to deal with the complexities of life.

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We can see Fernando Távora's body of work as a map of the second half of the 20th century, full of intersections and crossings, "terceiras vias" (third way). The other map that is of interest now is the small Portuguese rectangle, in expanding, war, reflux, revolution and, finally, in a radical change of geocultural coordinates: from a colonial empire fallen into disgrace to a member of the sophisticated European club.

Távora lived through it all, and when he left on 13 February 1960 on a journey that took him to America, Mexico, Japan, Lebanon, Egypt and Greece, among other places, he was perfecting his vision of the world by antagonism (with America) and affection (the other destinations). His nervous system integrates the modernist avant-garde and classical traditions; "culturalism" and "progressivism", to quote Françoise Choay; an American lunch with Louis Kahn and the pyramids of Egypt, which Kahn reintroduced for the benefit of modern architects.

Classicism was replaced by modernism, as Le Corbusier explained in *Vers une Architecture* exactly 100 years ago. Távora understood this very well; it is inexorable, despite Kahn, of the retro choreographies of the 1980s and his own conservative instinct. The artistic violence of the avant-garde cultivates an infamous affinity with wars and dictatorships. The architects previously known as modern in the post-war period retreated; Le Corbusier designed Ronchamp and La Tourette; Team 10 spoke of "recreation" and "communities". Nevertheless, the 1960s and 1970s will be violent, albeit with a different subtlety. Terror remains in suspense; the term "cold war" explains everything. (There is no subtlety in Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution).

Távora stands between his famous family and the new family of the Escola de Belas-Artes do Porto. The "third way" that he proposed in 1945 with the publication of *O Problema da Casa Portuguesa* ["The Problem of the Portuguese House"] is not merely disciplinary or cultural, it is an early autobiography. In those years, there was a "springtime", to use the terms of the forgotten and cursed Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*, which Távora read and referred to. Adapting the cyclical way Spengler organises history, from the 1960s onwards, "autumn" arrives on the way to "winter".

In the various stages of his journey in the United States of America, Távora sees the confirmation of this decline, the coming "winter". The economic prosperity, the technological inventions, and the social and cultural transformations that will Americanise everyday life are seen in reverse as a world in perdition. The "future" that Távora finds in America can be seen according to the biological matrix with which Spengler analyses the history of cultures: death as inescapable from birth.

It is the decadence that Spengler predicts for after 2000 that Távora already encounters at every step of his mythical journey. It is this "cultural pessimism", the matrix of "decline", that marks his life forever, even if the "springtime" with which he was formed is omnipresent: Le Corbusier and Picasso, the modernists

as baroque angels, the modernism that then fluttered and rebuilt his beloved Brazil; and Fernando Pessoa, who was decline and ascension in reverse order, with an entourage of heteronyms to deal with the complexities of life.

Yes, modernity is permanent in Távora, like a breath of spring in the “winter” in sight.

The difficult balance Fernando Távora pursued, achieved, lost and found again, in successive decades of work from *The Problem of the Portuguese House* to his last works at the beginning of the new century, is today a “foreign country”.

We can see his pathway as that of a tightrope walker – with his feet firmly on the ground; it should be emphasised – dealing with the centrifugal forces that the second half of the 20th century inexorably unleashed. Távora, in his destiny as a classical architect on his way to becoming modern, tries to integrate perspective into the Cubist picture, quickly realising that Cubism is something else; and that it must be safeguarded at all costs. The story begins to accelerate here.

It’s sad not to count on Távora these days. But it’s not hard to imagine that his cultural pessimism – which fuelled his enormous *joie de vivre* – would turn into an undisguised annoyance so much “artificial intelligence” or other; the intellectual diet of the “tribes”; compulsory penance; the regime of settling accounts.

The balance that Távora sought between tradition and modernity, between the aristocracy and the modern painter, between the pre-existence and the new architecture, looking for continuities and congruences, has been pulverised. The assumption that underpins the discussion today is that of imbalance, discontinuity and “cultural wars”. Távora is trained and executes and remains unbeatable in a sweet way of bringing disparate things to the same place at Quinta da Conceição, in Vila da Feira, in his classes. “Ser português” was his goal and his natural state. He sometimes externalises in the diary he wrote on the 1960 trip what is always implicit as the object of his thoughts: “how much I have thought about Portugal, how much I have translated into Portuguese what I have seen and heard here [...]”¹

What will the new travellers think about?

The 20th century in Portugal was traversed by this restlessness about “being Portuguese”, which goes back a long way and which in the 19th century gained expression in Garrett and Herculano; its poet was Fernando Pessoa, its thinker, Eduardo Lourenço, and its architect, Álvaro Siza. Eduardo Lourenço tells us that

¹ Fernando Távora, *Diário de “bordo”, 1960*, original manuscript (Porto: Fundação Marques da Silva/Arquivo Fernando Távora), fol. 148, FIMS/FT/5000-321.



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Pessoa became “himself, in the cultural order, a kind of equivalent of Portugal.”² It’s the same with Lourenço and Siza.

Távora is an extraordinary connector of the supernatural mission of these personalities, allowing us to think about the intervals that separate them. When, in a text from April 1963, he describes architecture as “an event like any”, concluding in an epiphany that “the untouchable white virgin has become for me a manifestation of life”³, Távora seems to encapsulate years of doubts that the American trip probably exacerbated (or helped resolve on the contrary, “that which must be avoided at all costs”⁴). In any case, the idea of architecture as “terribly contingent, as attached to circumstance as a tree by its roots is attached to the earth”⁵ has Kahnian resonances, rather than ecological or ruralist ones. Or perhaps it’s Alberto Caeiro: “Let us be simple and calm/ Like the streams and the trees”.

2 Eduardo Lourenço, “Even today the Portuguese go around the world picking up the bones of the Empire”, *JA – Jornal Arquitectos*, no. 237 (October-November-December 2009): 48 (“Ser Português”, Collection and setting of the text by MGD, AVM, JF).

3 Fernando Távora, “Escola Primária do Cedro, Vila Nova de Gaia”, in Luiz Trigueiros, ed., *Fernando Távora* (Lisbon: Editorial Blau, 1993), 86-90.

4 Távora, *Diário de “bordo”*, (Fundação Marques da Silva/Arquivo Fernando Távora), fol. 266v, FIMS/FT/5000-564).

5 Távora, “Escola Primária do Cedro, Vila Nova de Gaia”, 90.

Fig. 1

Fernando Távora at the atelier of the Rua Duque de Loulé, Porto, [1958] (FIMS/AFT, Foto 4050).

However, “being Portuguese” will become more complex. At Távora’s request, Alexandre Alves Costa embarked on a great theoretical adventure: in a delicate dialogue with his own political biography, he dedicated himself to explaining “Portuguese architecture” to us, including the “sense or lack of sense of being Portuguese”.

Meanwhile, architecture was gaining prominence, which was very slowly recognized in the Land of Poets: “not only the Language but also Architecture and Portuguese Cities,” writes Alves Costa, measuring his words, allow us “some sense of belonging to a community built with as much injustice and suffering as effort and imagination.”⁶

Alves Costa’s work evolved from his anti-fascist and modern upbringing, from what the *Inquérito à Arquitectura Popular* [“Survey on Popular Architecture”] revealed, from the new cinema of the 1960s, from Siza’s increasingly unexpected work and, fundamentally, from his absolute confidence in Távora as “Portuguese architecture”. When he writes that Portuguese architecture “in a country divided by unifiable cultural values, found in the colonial territories a clear image that not only synthesizes, but also deepens, its structural tendencies”⁷ he eradicatestaches the tree from its root, he enters the poem. This radical decentering is possible in the context of nationalist, then post-nationalist history, in which Portugal, exacerbated or seen as depressing, is always considered extraordinary, against all appearances. As Lourenço writes: “Portugal, for Pessoa, is so oneiric, so mystical, so mythical, that he actually began by giving *Mensagem* the title of Portugal; he was the greatest mythmaker of the very idea of Portugal.”⁸

This idea of Portugal as an essay subject is a past beyond us. During the nationalism of the Estado Novo and the emancipation of Democracy, Portugal was the official enigma before and after European entry, even in coffee bars.

We can perhaps place the turning point at Expo’98, which had “The Oceans: a heritage for the future” as its theme. Expo’98 crossed the now unmentionable past – as a “commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Portuguese discoveries” – with the future that will increasingly reveal itself as belonging to “sustainability”.

“Being Portuguese” is no longer a problem; it will be solved, at a time when “tribes” are defined by other types of global and trendy identities, a bit like electric scooters came to solve traffic problems. But for a long time, it was a poetic, philosophical and existential challenge; “being Portuguese” could even be an “art”. The “mythical psychoanalysis of Portuguese destiny”, to quote Eduardo Lourenço, seemed indispensable in the face of the empire that had fallen, our overwhelming smallness and contemporary insignificance. Uncovered by the

6 Alexandre Alves Costa, *Sentido ou falta de sentido do ser português. Orações de Sapiência* (Porto: Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto, 2016), 8.

7 Alves Costa, *Sentido ou falta de sentido do ser português*, 16-17.

8 Lourenço, “Even today the Portuguese go around the world picking up the bones of the Empire”, 48.



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blunt post-colonial scrutiny, Portugal – now a member of the E.U. – is at the mercy of the mass tourism that has discovered the last secret (the second) of the Iberian Peninsula; finally lulled into the performance of numbers and museums that Távora used to have nightmares about, even at night, in the American Y.M.C.A.

As you can see, Fernando Távora's work and life allow us to think higher, critically, culturally and biographically. From the point of view of the history of architecture, it can be said that Távora follows Kahn, but no longer his disciples Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; he follows Ernesto Rogers, but no longer Aldo Rossi or Team 10 – to speak of two fundamental geocultures of the 1960s-1980s. In any case, it's a difficult update, between the electric symbolism of Las Vegas and the shadows of the Modena Cemetery. Távora rediscovers himself in what he knows better than anyone and what the growing number of commissions in the heritage field allows him to recreate: Portuguese architecture. From this point of view, he is in the right place for a second time: the first was in the extraordinary works of the 1950s and 60s (Vila da Feira Market, Tennis Pavilion, Ofir House, Cedro Primary School), under the demand for the "third way"; the second began with the Pousada de Santa Marinha da Costa, in 1975, with the historical narrative coming to the

Fig. 2

Taliesin East, 9 April 1960, photo by Fernando Távora (FIMS/AFT, 0251-22-sld0005).



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fore and modern architecture playing an instrumental role, whenever the new is required, without minimising it.

It could be said that there is a circularity in Távora's work, a homecoming in the classicising traits of some of his later works, as history takes over and the modern loses its aura of the ultimate architecture.

Research by the curatorial group of Fernando Távora. *Pensamento Livre* ["Free Thinking"], at the Marques da Silva Foundation, made it possible to go through the drawings and models that Távora and his skilled and loyal collaborators produced over the decades. The emotion felt was not only due to the historical importance of the projects, but also to the youth to which they transported us; to the tangential thickness of the sketch or tracing paper. The obsolescence of the media appeared like a ray of light. And among sheets of paper of all shapes and sizes, in drawings for every imaginable programme, in words that we could decipher with difficulty, a single profession emerged – the Távora Profession.

Fig. 3

Taliesin East, May 2011 (photo by the author)

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