

It takes a lot of time to be young : a long-distance conversation between a psychoanalyst and an architect

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It Takes a Lot of Time
to Be Young—A Long-Distance
Conversation Between
a Psychoanalyst and an Architect
Francisco Moura Veiga
& Vasco Tavares dos Santos

One evening a phone starts to ring on a kitchen table. A conversation begins to unfold between Basel and Lisbon. The call ends. The next morning a new email in the inbox. The conversation continues and meanwhile time passes.

FMV So tell me, Vasco. According to psychoanalysis, what is youth?

VS The concept of «youth» is not an operative concept in psychoanalysis. Those of childhood and adolescence are. The theory of psychosexual development is central to Freudianism and sexuality is the basis upon which the psychism is built. When psychoanalysis speaks of adolescence it does not speak of a group of age, but of the metapsychological description of the organisation of the personality typical of this age group. Child sexuality, sexual bipolarity, the establishment of a difference between biological sexuality and psychosexuality are capital discoveries with a decisive impact on law, morality, religion, education, and art. So important that we sometimes forget its importance in the spectacular contemporary banality.

FMV And what would youth be for you, as the weathered man you are?

VS For me, a young man is a restless man. The world owes all its creations to restless men, since for a happy man the old limits suffice. The young man knows, quoting your wife on what she said on Caspar David Friedrich's «Stages of Life», that «the sea is above as in the engravings». A young man will never say in Autumn, to quote the poet, that Summer was the only season. A young man never gets old.

FMV So are you young?

VS Of course I am! I have worked my way to it... But what is youth for you, as the young adult that you are?

FMV I agree that in youth, a search for the self, a redefinition of limits is implicit but I would not characterise this search, as you mentioned, by its restlessness. Rather by curiosity. Here I refer to curiosity as the desire for learning and exploration. The way I see it, the young man desires to explore as to redefine himself and his surroundings and this implies a specific context, both physical, social and emotional. By this I mean that curiosity is triggered, it is fundamental and aimed. It is neither random nor

restless. I have to say that I am not sure if this definition is not too influenced by the proximity to Lacan's take on Identity that we have been developing with Cartha¹ throughout the past year and, if it is not a romantic take on a state of life that is slowly running its course for me. Then again, your view is maybe even more romanticised! The question here is, are we addressing the «youth» of nowadays or a tainted version we construct ourselves? What is «youth» now?

VS Although I do see myself as young, I can also look at it—«it» being youth—from afar. We can approach this serious question from two perspectives: If we were to be kind, we could say that the essential did not change, regarding being young, love and death. In the West, of course. From ancient Greece, to the Roman world to the Middle Ages, to the modern world: what defines being young is age. Historically the ages have changed, but the concepts of childhood and youth were intrinsically linked until the end of the nineteenth century. We can say that thinking about youth is ancient thinking. Plato devoted book III of the «Republic» for the education of the youth. Aristotle in «Rhetoric» describes the nature of the young man as being impulsive, unpredictable, passionate and intolerant of criticism. And also Shakespeare and Rousseau, Goethe and Gide, all were concerned with youth in their works. Adolescence, however, was only recognised as a stage of life in the late nineteenth century and it was only at this time that this group became clearly separated from the rest of the population within the industrial society.

One reason why the ideas of stages of life and time in human development progressed so slowly, is that it was difficult to meet the concept of time, which was suddenly facilitated by the industrial age when clocks began to enter the houses. Doctors and educators became interested in the stages of life. The emergence of sciences such as sociology and psychology was fundamental in this area, with the German characterologists making an important contribution in defining that the character is completed at the age of 18 and, with it, so begins

adulthood. This is why the voting age is 18, as well as being the «hard alcohol consumption» age. With character comes responsibility.

Or we can look at it from a standpoint rooted in the now, from a perspective which is, I would say, apocalyptic. We can assume that we currently live in a time of discontinuity. Nothing will be as before—neither youth, nor love, nor death. The megamachine is not Hellenic. The caesura will have no end: instead of Oedipus, Narcissus triumphs. The instagramming of life places the self where the drive² should be. Violent narcissism (typical of early childhood) characterises individuals, groups, institutions and countries. Thus, capitalism has transformed children into adults and adults into children.

Consume! To be idle is only allowed if one is consuming. The manic side of melancholy (poetry) has now been replaced by consumption.

Being young today is not looking for an otherness but a sameness.

Being young is no longer to be in a state of disorder or poiesis, future impulse and utopia, but rather order and acceptance of precariousness (i.e. of inequality and poverty).

It is therefore social, political and cultural. Paradoxically, the young nowadays are, hence, precociously old. The ideology of youth and health would be intended to replace the idea of salvation.

The idea of death is the contemporary taboo. All cremated, now! Long live the biodegradable urns for the ashes of my architect husband! Today one dies only by carelessness, by irresponsibility. If capitalism is introduced, capitalism does not work.

I'm going to play tennis now. It's only two in the morning! And I'm only 60!

FMV Wait, wait! So youth is now a numb state for those who should be young and an eternal promise for those who are no longer?

VS Being young nowadays is the demand for permanent, immediate gratification and therefore the intolerance of frustration. It is the end of the sublime.

I'm not sure that Aristotle would write Ethics to his son Nicomachus nowadays.

In ancient times, people believed they had a secret soul, a centre of introspection in which God had settled. In 2019 no longer. But virtual

life did not end the secrets. We just do not tell our friends. And there is much suffering taking place, especially when it comes to love! Intimacy is a fundamental concept of modernity. Today we see the triumph of extimacy (Lacan) through techno-sociability. There is an impoverishment of the world with the sex-appeal of the inorganic and the gradual cyborg construction of the human (go read Mário Perniola!). Sex has become obsolete for young people. Networking is sexuality. Replace it...

Being young has always had a class relationship. That is: it was different to be the son of a rich Roman or a poor Roman, it was and is different to be the son of a bourgeois or a worker. But never before had such a dystopia, a covert alienation of the truth been created in such an evident way: young people of all classes can go to MacDonalds, buy a mobile phone, clothes, travel, get a car. But few will be students in Berkeley or ETH—and even fewer teachers.

But I do not know. As Mário Quintana said: truth is a lie that has not yet happened.

So, my dear young architect, my question to you would be, how will architecture react to this youth? To a youth that is increasingly disconnected from the real?

FMV I am not certain I can answer that. In fact, I am certain I cannot. What I can say is that I have trust in the dual character of the universe and in its primordial laws, specifically in causality. If there is a movement into a state of disconnection, extimacy and displaced materiality, there will be a reaction to it with the same intensity in a diametrically opposite direction. Change will occur—is occurring—but it is a negotiation between two opposite poles and not a blind run into an extreme. On the other hand, even if a stark denial of the real would occur, the need for a built environment of some kind is still present, at least in the current paradigm of interaction. One still needs to actually be somewhere. Although I do agree that this «somewhere» is becoming ever more irrelevant and there is a definite impoverishment of certain ideas of tangible qualities in the real, I do not consider this a general condition.

I also have to say I find your rant—your analysis if you like—of the apocalyptic youth extremely accurate, but I see this shift as a coherent step in the youthful redefinition of limits. If we are to accept the precarious state of society, as identified by Bauman³, and to also accept its exacerbation in the state of youth, what would be the limits a youngster would be able to

explore? Going back to the idea of curiosity as the contextualised definition of a desired exploration, the material poverty imposed by the consumerist society you refer to, seems to me as a strong guiding hand towards the virtual. This actually was the trigger for the first digital social networks—spearheaded by John Perry Barlow⁴, among others—and to the perception of the virtual space as a new-foundland, containing a myriad of new possibilities. The unexplored, the visible limit upon which youngsters can project themselves in hopes of finding a new freedom of their own could nowadays be the digital. In this sense what remains to be seen is which capacity architecture will assume in the digital.

But I would like to address something you said before regarding the characterologic definition of a «character as the end of youth». Where does the Lacanian approach to identity stand in relation to this dogmatic chronological limit?

VS German characterology is a complex subject. It begins in the very indefiniteness of «character». And in the definition of «personality». For in the psychoanalytic paradigm, the subject is not defined at 18 years. Nor at 81. Because for psychoanalysis, man is a tragic subject. He will never know, like Tiresias, the whole truth about himself. I'm a stranger to myself. It is not hard to see why the characterologists are not very compatible with Freud & Co. As for identity, the greatest poet of Brazil, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, in the poem «The Supposed Existence» writes: «Here is an amazing battle between the invented world and the inventing world. I am a fiction rebelled against the universal mind and I try to build myself up again with each passing moment, with each colic, in the task of drawing a beginning of my own.» (I close Drummond's book).

This is an accurate definition of Identity under the psychoanalytic vertex. This concept was used by Freud in a very particular way. He is more interested in the concept of identification, for example. Identity is the patrimony of Social Psychology.

FMV Why?

VS Because psychoanalysis sees the entrance of man into the order of culture centering on the subjective dimension. For Lacan—and I am quoting in a dishevelled way—the illusion of being unique is an illusion necessary to sustain narcissism. And it is, for him, an imaginary construction. An imaginary construction of a social representation that masks the presence of the Other in the self (in the selfie?) and validates

its pertinence in the human world. This subject, however, dear Architect, is very vast and complex. And as Marilyn said, «there are always two ways to tell a story»...

FMV Let us then avoid complexity and vastness and focus on a very small part of it; the imaginary construction. It is precisely this that I find interesting in the Lacanian notion of identity in relation to youth. One can only build oneself up from pre-existing parts and pieces. You are either appropriating or rejecting something. So it completely defeats a certain idea of uniqueness that is rooted in the postwar economic boom and lingers on until today. What I extract from this position is that you are only original in the choices of pre-existing elements that you make. The architect is more a curator than a divinely inspired artist and the originality lies in how prevalence is rethought, reframed, reassembled and proposed anew. If we were to translate this notion to an architectural project, it would place anything done into a long line of common intellectual and practical efforts towards a fluid, but specific goal.

VS So what would this denial of the self as original and unique—something that is commonly associated with the state of youth—implicate in the definition of the young architect? Is it not somehow contradictory?

FMV I do not think that it contradicts the search for an own identity as the definition of youth, I think it offers a more precise take on it. Let me give you an example. Talking to Dries Rodet in the aftermath of one of the lectures he organises together with Charlotte Truwant⁵, we ended up discussing the current condition of the young architect. Of course we touched upon the notions of precarity, of the architect as a pre-conditioned late bloomer, but we also tripped on something which I found striking. The current young generation—at least the one within our narrow context—has the time and the distance to actually be able to choose what they want to be from an unprecedented range. What I mean by this is, that there is no reigning mentality we have to accept or to react to and that our references and our contexts have never been as numerous and as far-reaching. I would isolate the absence of a reigning idea of architecture as the most relevant contributor to this freedom. The post-moderns are still present, but becoming almost romanticised, the high-techs are still doing their work, but the ideas and techniques behind them have proven to be unable to deal with all scales and contexts, contrary to what was expected. The strains of ideologies and practices related to the digital turn have also been tamed by the

market and by the harsh reality of man as the physical user of the spaces produced. You are certainly aware of how reductive this brief analysis I am doing is, but it is the briefest way to situate you in a rather complex context. My point is, we are offered the opportunity of looking into each of these ideas from a critical distance, to extract from each what we find relevant and to reject what we do not, towards our own idea of what architecture could be. We now know that architecture has a social component, but we also know that seeing architecture as a straightforward solution for social issues would be inaccurate. Similarly, we are aware of the potential that technological advances have in relation to architecture, but we also know that placing technology at the core of architecture would lead to simplistic, hollow results. In a nutshell, this void in the definition of the «Architecture of Now» has placed us in a somehow privileged position from where we can study what surrounds us, identify what we find valuable, and compose something new and original. Of course, from a more distant standpoint, we are—as all other young ones before us—reacting to a context. Therefore the freedom I refer to should only be understood within the discipline, not the broader cultural context. In this sense, the generation I am part of faces the same steps towards an own approach to architecture, towards adulthood or an own character. What is different is that we can choose to confront ourselves with a multitude of approaches to architecture instead of having to either accept or reject a reigning approach. Going back to Caspar David Friedrich's «Stages of Life», the seas are somehow wider.

VS I see your point but I also see a possible trap. A trap connected to the fear of decisions, to the avoidance and diversion of responsibility that soaks our society. If you keep looking for anchoring points without any restrictions, you might get stuck in this search. Beyond a natural fear of maturing, this is the mirror of the elastic nature of time at its worst. It circles back to what I said before regarding consumption.

FMV Is this connected to what you told me when we first thought of seriously discussing youth? You said that—and I quote—«it takes a lot of time to be young?»

VS Precisely. Being young implies a Telos, a purpose. So being young is a project, one to come. That is why it takes a lot of time to be young.

Vasco Tavares dos Santos, born in 1959. Psychotherapist and psychoanalyst, carries out clinical and teaching activities. He is Deputy Director of the Portuguese Magazine of Psychoanalysis and an educator at the Institute of Psychoanalysis of Lisbon. Since 1979 he has been working as a publisher. He founded the publishing house Fenda and directed its magazine, co-directed the magazine Pravda and founded in 2017 the publishing house VS.

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