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Poíēsis and *fabrica* – An Investigation Linking Language to Architecture

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In this paper, my intention is to find the extent to which the domain of architecture, more specifically the manifestation of the creative act, can be approached from the viewpoint of linguistics. To this aim, I brought into discussion two ancient concepts, poíēsis *(of Greek origin) and* fabrica *(of Latin origin), which I subjected to an etymological and semantic analysis in order to see if and how they converge in the architectural practice. Additionally, I analysed contrastively some translations (in English and Romanian) of a short fragment from Vitruvius'* De architectura*, in order to explore the shades of meaning offered by the translators, with regard to architectural practice. In this way, I have combined the diachronic approach with the synchronic one, being aware of the fact that all this will contribute to a better, clearer understanding of the creative act in architecture.*

Key-words: *poíēsis*, *fabrica*, *architecture, linguistics*

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to offer a linguistic analysis of two ancient concepts, *poíēsis* and *fabrica*, of Greek, respectively Latin origin, with the purpose of emphasizing their meaning in and relevance for the domain of architecture. At first glance, the choice of bringing together these two particular terms may be puzzling. However, this study shows that, despite the differences regarding their philological and cultural affiliation, *poíēsis* and *fabrica* converge in the realm of construction, providing evidence for the manual-mechanical-practical nature of the architectural profession.

Although this nature was much more prominent in other times (Antiquity or the Middle Ages), it has slowly washed away with the break of modernity in the

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Renaissance, the contemporary architectural context offering, however, a new interest in this matter, trying to understand and adjust it to the present needs. This inquiry acts, therefore, as a 'building block' in a more extensive study of ours, which has the purpose of showing how these two terms converge in the current architectural practice.

In terms of methodology, in order to reach my goal, I have employed both linguistic means of investigation (etymological and semantic), as well as comparative translations, in an attempt to identify on the basis of these instruments the closest similarity in meaning between these terms in the domain of architecture, by subjecting them to both a diachronic, as well as a synchronic analysis.

2. *Poíēsis* and the act of creation in architecture

Let us proceed with *poíēsis*, which, essentially, implies turning into being something that did not previously exist. Giorgio Agamben ([1994] 2003, 103-104) explains it as "portare in essere" or "pro-duzione nella presenza". *Poíēsis* requires thus a transformation that subsequently aims at materialization, a shift from an abstract state, for example, into a concrete one. Architecture, as a discipline, deals with both practical, concrete and theoretical, abstract matters. What establishes the link between them is the act of creation. In other words, creation transforms architectural ideas and conceptions into tangible reality. The present section aims at clarifying the meaning of *poíēsis* in architectural creation. As we will see, in order to better grasp the meaning of the term and its relevance for the field of construction, it is necessary to explore its relation to other concepts such as *prâxis* or *techne*.

2.1. *Poíēsis* and *prâxis*

With Aristotle, *poíēsis* is limited to production that aims at something beyond itself, such as shipbuilding, for example, whose objective is to produce the ship. Although it focuses on something practical, *poíēsis* is different from *πρᾶξῐς* (*prâxis*), which has purpose and value in itself (Bunnin and Yu 2004, s.v. 'poiesis').

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> Production [*poíēsis*] and action [*prâxis*] are different. [...] So the practical state involving reason is different from the productive state involving reason. Neither, therefore, is included in the other, since action is not production, nor production action." (Aristotle [2000] 2004, 106, 1140a)[2]

Therefore, what defines the notion of *poíēsis* is the experience of bringing something into existence, of passing from nonbeing to being. By contrast, what determines the notion of *prâxis* is the idea of will that finds its immediate expression in action (Agamben [1994] 2003, 103-104). The subtlety of difference lies in the distinction between the verbs *ποιεῖν* (*poieîn*) and *πράττειν* (*práttein*), 'to make', 'to produce' and 'to do', 'to act'.

It is worth mentioning that the classical understanding of *prâxis* differs from its currently inherited meaning. Moreover, modernity sets equivalence between the two notions: *praxis*, once referring to living and acting, overlaps with *poíēsis*, originally bringing into existence, generating a hybrid that is limited to practice as production, namely the process by which the object was produced. However, modernity is not the only blurring the Aristotelian contrast between *poíēsis* and *prâxis*. Etymologically, *poíēsis* comes from the verb *poieîn*, which encompasses both the meaning of producing, making and of acting, doing (Liddell and Scott 1883, s.v. '*ποιέω*'). Basically, *poieîn* can mean to physically make, produce or create, in the sense of manufacture or work of art, a use we also find in Aristotle. In the case of Homer, the term often refers to architecture, construction, and other meanings cover metal- or wood-working. Figuratively, *poieîn* means 'to make', 'to create', 'to bring into existence', and is largely related to the activity of God, demiurge or poet. With respect to the other connotation, the one referring to doing, acting, *poieîn* is used much like *práttein*, with the meanings of doing good or bad, doing something to someone or something. Nonetheless, there are opinions (Agamben [1994] 2003 and Preus 2015) that disagree with this information listed in the Greek-English Lexicon.

This observation about the polysemy of *poieîn* is important because it draws attention to the fact that, besides the abstract dimension of bringing (something) into existence, which is transferred to *poíēsis*, there is also a manual, craftsmanlike

[2] For the Greek term correlation Ingram Bywater's edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* has been consulted.

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dimension, which *poíēsis* inherits from *poieîn* as well. As it will be seen below, this prepares a connection with the meanings of *fabrica*.

2.2. *Poíēsis* and *techne*

Until now, the connection of *poíēsis* to the field of architecture is only indirect and subtle. The following discussion about *poíēsis* in the light of *techne* will clarify their significance in construction. Let us continue this analysis bearing in mind the fact that architecture is concerned with creating, bringing (something) into existence. *Grosso modo*, *techne* refers to skill, practical activity, craft or art, being a state that corresponds to *poíēsis*. Concerning the field of architecture, Chapter 4 of the *Nichomachean Ethics*' sixth Book explains the term *techne*, in correlation with *poíēsis*:

> Since building is one of the skills [*techne*], and is essentially a productive [*poietikos*] state involving reason, and since there is neither any skill that is not a productive state involving reason, nor any such state that is not a skill, skill is the same as a productive state involving true reason. Every skill is to do with coming into being [*peri genesin*], and the exercise of the skill lies in considering how something that is capable of either being or not being, and the first principle of which is in the producer and not the product, may come into being; for skill is not concerned with things that are or come into being by necessity, or with things that are by nature (since they have their first principle within themselves). (Aristotle [2000] 2004, 106, 1140a)

Aristotle continues by marking the distinction between *techne*'s relation to *poíēsis* and to *prâxis*, respectively: "Since production [*poíēsis*] and action [*prâxis*] are different, skill must be a matter of production [*ποιήσεως poieseos*], not action [*πράξεως praxeos*]" (Aristotle [2000] 2004, 106, 1140a). Hereby, *techne*, as a disposition that produces something by means of true reason, refers to bringing into existence things capable of either being or not being. The principle of these things resides in the one that produces them, unlike the principle of things that exist either necessarily or naturally, which is inherent in them. Richard Parry (2014) explains this judgement as an intention to distinguish between activity (*prâxis*), whose purpose is inherent in the activity itself, and production (*poíēsis*), whose

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purpose transcends production itself. For example, on one hand, when someone plays the flute, there is no product of this activity, singing being an end in itself. On the other hand, the craftsman does not choose his activity (*techne*) for itself, but for its purpose, its outcome. The value of the activity lies in the product. Practical skill (*techne*) is productive and therefore falls under *poíēsis*, because it bears witness to what it produces.

To transpose what has been rendered until now, *poíēsis* regards architecture as a capacity of bringing into existence, and manifests itself through practical activity or *techne*. It is important to bear in mind that *poíēsis* is not mere production, but creation, passing on this quality to architecture as well.

3. *Fabrica* and the manual-practical feature of architecture

As outlined so far, it also becomes clearer that *poíēsis*, *prâxis* and *techne* all have a common denominator, namely the reference to craft and manual activity. It is the aim of this section to demonstrate the link between the above-mentioned concepts and *fabrica* by way of their shared meaning regarding the manual character of the architectural profession. Naturally, we cannot start the discussion about *fabrica* in the absence of *faber*.

3.1. *Fabrica* and *faber*

The Latin word *faber* may bear different meanings: as a noun, it may refer to a craftsman, artificer, workman, artisan, or may designate the person who is involved in wood, stone, or metal-work; as an adjective, it may be used to indicate a certain manual activity, or may signify 'workmanlike', 'skilful' or 'ingenious' (Glare 1968, s.v. 'faber', Lewis and Short [1879] 1958, s.v. 'faber').

From the beginning, we notice its resemblance to *poíēsis*, which through its root *poieîn*, or through *techne*, may have the same denotation. What is even more interesting, being encoded in the etymology of the word *faber*, is the fact that one of its roots, the verb *φαίνειν* (*phaínein*) (Lewis and Short [1879] 1958, s.v. 'faber'), means in ancient Greek "to bring to light, to reveal, to appear to the mind or senses, to come into being" (Liddell and Scott 1883, s.v. '*φαίνω*'); hence, another similarity to *poieîn*, this time through its sense of bringing into existence. Although *phaínein* and *poieîn* are neither synonymous, nor etymologically related, we believe

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it is worthwhile to point out their connection based on the idea of coming into being, with the claim of their difference in nuance: one implies coming into existence (*phaínein*), while the other one means being brought into existence (*poieîn*). Moreover, Gerhard Goebel, etymologically exploring the syntagm *poeta faber*, states the connection between *faber* and *ποιητής* (*poiētḗs* as maker, creator, constructor, inventor, but also poet) and through this with *poieîn*. He notes that, although justifiable, the derivation of *faber* from *facere*, traced to Isidore of Seville, is, however, inaccurate from the etymological point of view. Rather, he concludes that *faber* acquires in Latin a similar locus as the Greek *poiētḗs* (Goebel 1971, 10).

Taking the opportunity of this linguistic inquiry, we will also add a brief observation, namely that in the Romanian language *faber* has given the words 'faur' and 'a făuri', which, besides their basic meaning linked to metal-working, also send to the idea of conceiving and transforming through a creative effort (*NODEX* 2002, s.v. 'a făuri'). Its semantic vicinity to *poieîn* and *poíēsis* is worth pointing out.

3.2. Vitruvius's *fabrica*

Turning to *fabrica*, it is generally used both in the sense of action or process of making, building, construction or skilful production, craft, art, as well as with the meaning of workshop, place of exerting the above-mentioned activities (Glare 1968, s.v. 'fabrica', Lewis and Short [1879] 1958, s.v. 'fabrica'). Bearing in mind the connotation of *techne*, previously outlined, one cannot help noticing their striking semantic resemblance. In particular, in the ultimate architectural – theoretical context, we find *fabrica* in Vitruvius, who mentions it in his famous treatise *De Architectura Libri Decem*, his ten books on architecture. Despite its low frequency, the significance of the term for the discourse is not negligible, as it appears right in the opening of the treatise, being one of the two defining generative parts of architecture. Here is how the first chapter of Book I begins:

> Architecti est scientia pluribus disciplinis et variis eruditionibus ornata, [cuius iudicio probantur omnia] quae ab ceteris artibus perficiuntur. Opera ea nascitur et fabrica et ratiocinatione. Fabrica est continuata ac trita usus meditatio, quae manibus perficitur e materia cuiuscumque generis opus est ad propositum deformationis. Ratiocinatio autem est,

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> quae res fabricatas sollertiae ac rationis proportione demonstrare atque explicare potest. (Vitruvius [1931] 1955, 6)[3]

Thus, Vitruvius clarifies from the very beginning that the science and service of the architect are born out of practice (*fabrica*) and theory (*ratiocinatione*). After defining the two concepts – *fabrica* as continuous and constant practice carried out by the hands, and *ratiocinatione* as a means of demonstrating and explaining the matters skilfully made by way of proportion – he emphasizes the tremendous importance of their merging in the architectural process, arguing that neither of them is able to lead to success on its own.

Let us focus now on the definition Vitruvius gives to *fabrica*: "Fabrica est continuata ac trita usus meditatio, quae manibus perficitur e materia cuiuscumque generis opus est ad propositum deformationis" (Vitruvius [1931] 1955, 6). We propose investigating a couple of translations, both in English and Romanian, in order to better grasp the meaning of the fragment. Thus, Morris Hicky Morgan provides the following translation: "practice is the continuous and regular exercise of employment where manual work is done with any necessary material according to the design of a drawing" (Vitruvius 1914, 5); a previous translation by Joseph Gwilt states: "practice is the frequent and continued contemplation of the mode of executing any given work, or of the mere operation of the hands, for the conversion of the material in the best and readiest way" (Vitruvius 1826, 3); Frank Granger rewords it as: "craftsmanship is continued and familiar practice, which is carried out by the hands in such material as is necessary for the purpose of a design" (Vitruvius [1931] 1955, 7); George Matei Cantacuzino translates: "practica este o experiență continuă și completă, obținută prin prelucrarea cu mâinile a oricărui soi de materie, în scopul de a-i da formă" (Vitruviu 1964, 37), its English equivalent being: "practice is a continuous and complete experience, obtained by hand-processing any kind of matter, in order to give it shape".

Some preliminary observations need to be made. Firstly, the translation of the term *fabrica* by "practice" is satisfactory, even though, the modern architectural acceptance of the word *practice* does not emphasize, with the same

[3] What pertains to the architect is a science that depends upon many disciplines and varied learning, whose judgment assays all that is achieved by other arts. Its work is born from practice and theory. Practice is the uninterrupted and constant exercise, being the work carried out by the hands from any kind of material, with the purpose of giving it shape. Theory, on the other hand, is the one which can demonstrate and explain what is skilfully produced on the principles of proportion.

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strength, the idea of manual activity, craft, carried by *fabrica*. In this sense, the third translation, 'craftsmanship', seems to come closer to the original meaning, as indicated previously. Secondly, with regard to the understanding of the words *continuata* and *trita*, they appear as "continuous and complete", "continuous and regular", "frequent and continued", or "continued and familiar". In this case, too, there would be differences of nuance, since *continuata* and *trita* have the meaning of uninterrupted and in constant application (Glare 1968, s.vv. 'continuatus', 'tritus'). Thirdly, even if *meditatio* means mainly reflection, contemplation, its sense in this particular context is the secondary one, i.e. practicing, rehearsing (Glare 1968, s.v. 'meditatio'). And finally, the translation of *deformationis* as 'design' should not have the meaning of figure, graphical representation ("drawing"), but of configuration, formation (Glare 1968, s.v. 'deformatio'). Taking into account these observations, Vitruvius's definition should sound as: *Fabrica* is the uninterrupted and constant exercise of practice, being the work carried out by the hands from any kind of material, with the purpose of giving it shape. In conclusion, the last two translations, the one in English by Frank Granger and the Romanian one by George Matei Cantacuzino, seem to come closest to the original meaning of the passage.

It is legitimate to question the relevance of this exegesis of the Vitruvian text. The answer is simple: Vitruvius offers his definition of *fabrica*, not in general, regarding any *ars* or *techne*, but in the specific context of architecture, and furthermore he insists upon the fact that the architect (and consequently his work) cannot have genuine existence embedded in reality, in the absence of this manual exercise of practice. That is why I believe it is so important to capture even the finest nuances.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper investigates the connotations of the two proposed concepts, *poíēsis* and *fabrica*, by employing a linguistic approach to matters pertaining to architecture. *Poíēsis* and *fabrica* reveal the capacity of architecture to turn the intangible into being through practice, skill and manual activity, showing thus the materialisation of the creative act in architecture.

As we have seen, the tools I have employed in my study are, on one hand, an etymological and a semantic analysis carried out by tracing the multiple nuances of

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the proposed terms and exploring their interconnections with regard to the field of architecture, and, on the other hand, the cross-examination by means of comparative translation. Although this linguistic analysis seems mainly diachronic, judging by its focus on the historical semantic evolution of the terms in question, it may be suggested that it also acquires a synchronic dimension in the light of the comparative study of translation variations that originate approximately in the same period of time. Judging also by the aim that transcends this study, namely to fundament a contemporary *re-cognition* of these ancient concepts, the hypothesis of a synchronic approach seems conceivable, enabling in this way the association of these two perspectives. The present convergence of a diachronic and a synchronic approach provide the means of understanding *poíēsis* and *fabrica* in the architectural context as clearly as possible.

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