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Utopia and Measure

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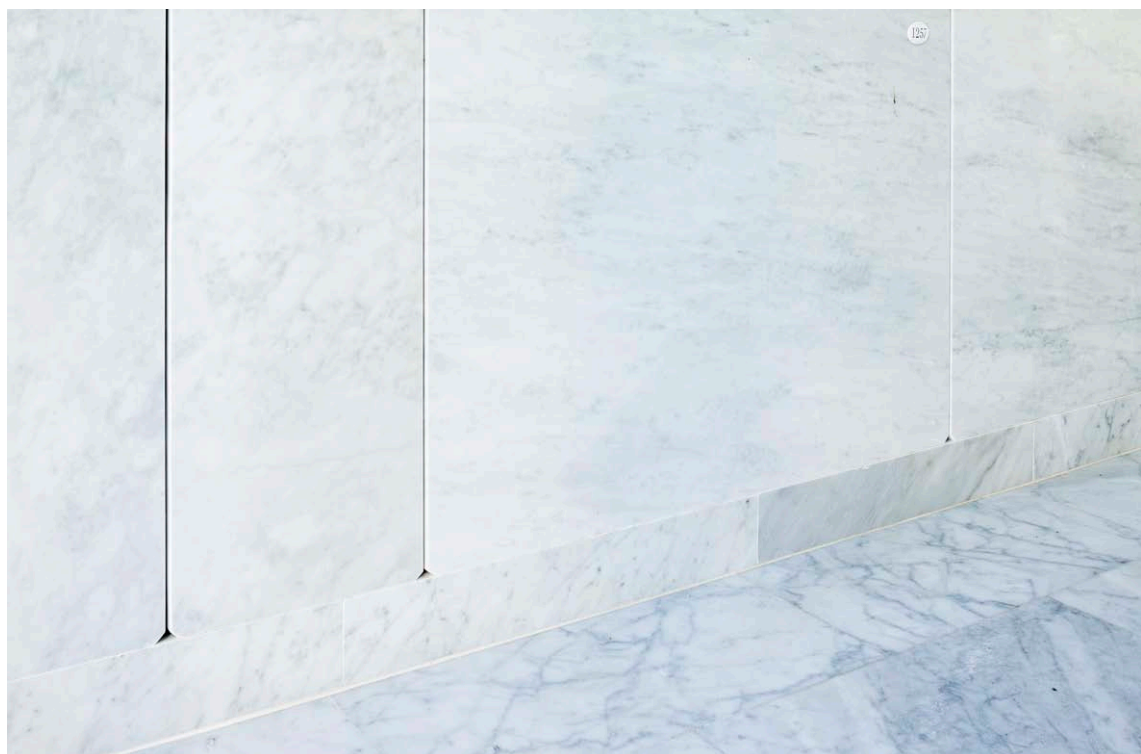


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EDITORIAL

Utopia may be thoroughly an issue of measure. More specifically, utopia puts measures to test. It is upon this “testing moment of measures in the name of utopia” that we invited contributions for this issue of *lo Squaderno*.

On the one hand, we measure the things we value, and all utopian discourse starts from the affirmation of a certain value or a constellation of such values. On the other hand, the causal relationship is complicated by the fact that measures naturalise the commensurations between things measured.

Techniques of measuring, far from being a passive reading of the world, transform things and suggest, or impose, an order onto the world. If new methods and units of measuring are intimately connected with world-making and modes of existence, what are the endgames implied here? Or, put differently, What are the utopian problems to which techniques of measuring respond?

Utopia has often presented itself as the pure aim of measurement. But, what if utopia is in fact the spirit of a perpetual interrogation that voices an endless dissatisfaction with the measures in place? If so, utopia would be a stance that undoes assumptions more than implementing measures. And yet, what would be a utopia without measure?

On a theoretical level, we may ask why we measure in the first place. Is the ever-increasing array of measuring techniques leading us to the problem of meaning that we find ourselves unable to formulate consciously, a round-about way of approaching unconscious utopian desires? Or, alternatively, has measuring become the end in-and-of itself? Here, a discussion ensues about whether that which is not, or cannot be measured (yet) can be harnessed through the act of measuring, or whether the measuring itself will destroy the very qualities it seeks to capture.

In this issue, Sophia Banou begins approaching the problem by looking at the utopia of maps in Louis Marin’s *utopics*, based in a discussion of Borges. Banou extends a critical reading of the representational techniques of maps, tracing these techniques up to contemporary digitally produced urban representations. While digital technologies are usually hailed as intrinsically dynamic and plural, the author suggests that they may in fact be much more static than expected, as happens with many other quantitative techniques which may be strong in “accuracy” (i.e., in “geography”), but poor in “impression” (i.e., in “chorography”).

Moving to the domain of literature, Jean-Clet Martin discusses utopia in an apparently more classical sense. Martin seeks to convey the potential of becoming-child that the great works of fiction enables. By bringing the reader into the suspended and eternal atmospheres of such works, Martin unearths the intimate link between utopia and childhood. Utopia is here revealed not so much as a challenge to measures, but somehow as a temporary (yet, eternal, and liberating) oblivion of them.

The dimension of temporality is quite central in Caterina Nirta’s piece as well. For Nirta, time can be regarded as the actual “value of utopia”. Analysing the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Thomas More’s foundational work, Nirta subtly questions the irreflexive association between utopia and hope, as well as the perceived dominance of a notion of utopia mostly associated with space. But Nirta, argue, “space has largely failed as the terrain of utopia”. Over the last half century, utopia seems to have failed to go “beyond the misery of a new way of living organised around capital, labour, profit and the de-personification of space”.

This argument matches well with the subsequent piece by Karl Palmås, who reports from a little known story in modern industrial history.

In 1974, the Swedish Volvo Car Company set up a new plant in the city of Kalmar, focused upon the concept of “humanized production”. Instead of the classic assembly line, “workers operated in teams, collaborating through the full assembly of the car, with a considerably widened scope for self-management”. This could be said to amount to a capitalist-utopian experiment. Although the project has not become dominant, and has in fact been abandoned, Palmås calls attention to the current proliferation of adjectives such as “smart” and “living” attached to working environments. Could this suggest a strange transformation in utopian forms and measures under contemporary capitalism?

Rodrigo Delso seems to suggest so, defining as “real timetopias” the temporal horizon of the current economy, where the “real time” ideology has turned into a kind of “infra-ordinary sovereignty”. As anticipated by Virilio, speed has turned into an essential component of power. We appear to be taken by surprise by our own measures, as technology has radically altered the scale of association afforded by our urban and digital environments. We again face a triumph of “precision” to the detriment of meaningful purpose: “what do we measure for?” asks provocatively Delso.

On a more philosophical plan, however, building on the classical philosophy of Hegel and Husserl, Alessandro Castelli argues that utopia could never exist without measure. In fact, he warns us to distinguish between utopia and what he calls “daydreaming”. Our age is dominated by daydreaming but utterly lacks utopia, Castelli suggests. He concludes that “in dreams, as it is known, there can be no right measure” and that unbridled dreaming has largely replaced utopia, giving way to dangerous arbitrariness.

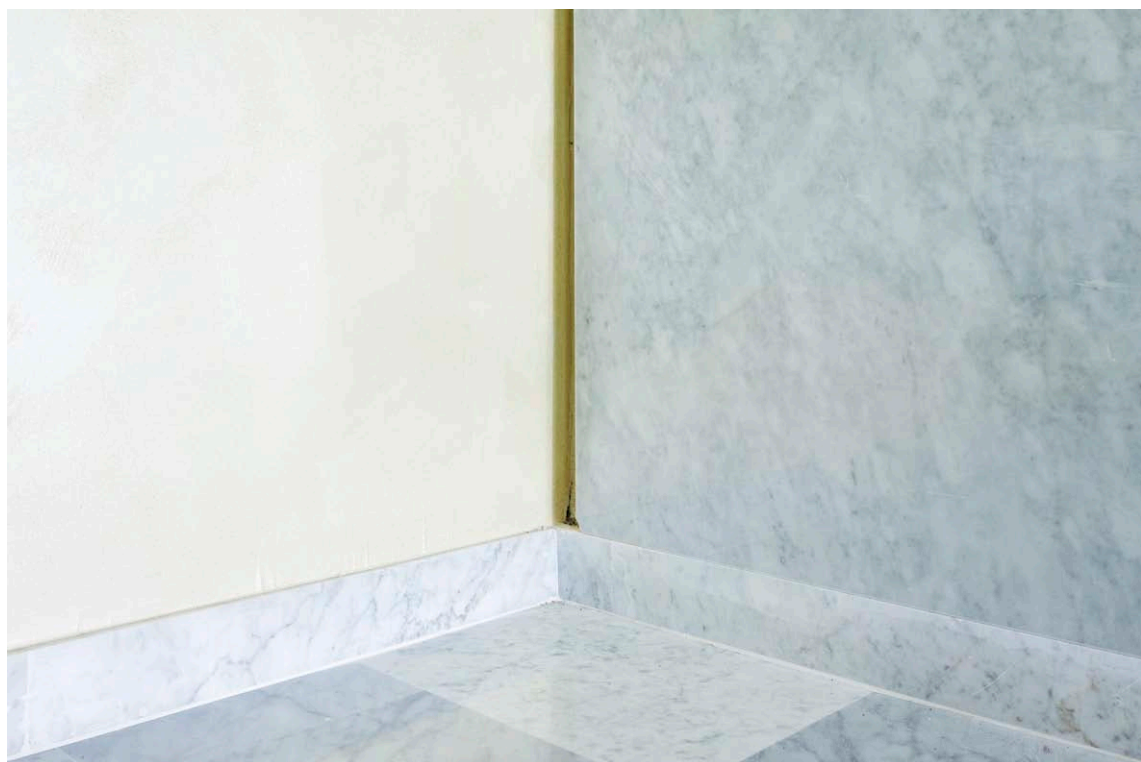
In his analysis of the “utopian mystique of neoliberalism”, Fredrik Torisson stresses that, under the dominant economic model, the no-

tion of potential has turned into “a central aspect of competitiveness and investment”. Bringing into consideration architectural examples from Koolhaas to Foster + Partners, and following the theoretical lead of Paolo Virno, Torisson focuses on how capitalist valorisation is deeply imbued with the temporality of potentiality, understood as a “capacity of infinite development”. In this sense, the whole process is based on a mystique that appears to be deeply ingrained into how capitalism currently works.

The final piece by Andrea Mubi Brighenti is laid out on a different terrain. Examining the case of Fernand Deligny’s experience with autistic children (spanning from 1969 to 1986), the author here proposes a way to interpret the stance embodied by the radical alternative French educator. While it seems easy to attach some kind of utopian potential to Deligny’s experience, much more difficult is to pin it down, especially insofar as the latter looks like a “utopia without plans”. Almost the opposite of a daydreaming and a capitalist mystique, Deligny’s “attempt”, as well as the action by the autistic children themselves, put us in contact with something that is of the order of a “vital necessity”, resistant to calculation and yet fundamentally connected to a measure of the Earth.

The articles collected in this issue are far from exhausting the manyfold relations between measures, utopia, space and society. By presenting an asystematic range of cases, we hope however to have evoked some of the directions in which one such exploration could evolve.

FT & AMB



Picture Perfect

Maps and other measures of the contemporary city

Sophia Banou

The map beyond measure is so perfectly measured that is no longer an analogon of the country, its equivalent but is rather, its 'double'.

Louis Marin, The Utopia of the Map

Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'On Exactitude in Science' (1946) has been referred to innumerable times: it features a map that is repeatedly revisited and scaled up, until it becomes contiguous with its referent object (the territory) and effaces it. In this extreme cartographic project, the desire for a representational perfection leads to a description by duplication, which renders the map a useless ruin, and eventually condemns it to oblivion. Here, I am interested in particular in two readers of Borges: Jean Baudrillard's (1994) exploration of a new order of simulation, and Louis Marin's (1984) discussion of the utopian nature of representation – or, more explicitly, of mapping.

Pivotal in Borges is arguably more the desire for exactitude than the cartographic object itself. As Baudrillard (1994) has highlighted, the magnitude of the map not strange to the pursuit of hyper-reality that contemporary technologies promise, and which contemporary habits of consumption demand and anticipate. The 1:1 reproduction of this map, presented in Borges' parable as a futile paradox, is now ubiquitous in everyday life and architectural practice alike. The extreme visibility of an entire planet under constant surveillance by institutions as available as Google and as sophisticated as NASA, as well as the unprecedented accessibility of data capture, manipulation and dissemination tools made possible by the coupling of the internet and mobile technologies, increasingly tip the scale between the real and its constructed double in favour of the latter. The concept of post-truth exceeds the interest of mass-mediated politics and manifests itself in the production and the experience of the urban and its architecture. The appeal of the technologically advanced presents itself to both designers and city dwellers as a token of the future, but carries in fact an agency of value production for social and architectural space. This agency is visible in the ways urban space is perceived, experienced, and re-produced through mappings and images that approach technology in distinct ways.

However, within these technologically advanced but diverse means of measuring the reality of the city, an age-old geographic dichotomy persists: which one is the most important, impression or accuracy? In Borges' Empire, the desire for perfection determines the priority of scale. The cultural geographer Ola Söderström (2011: 116) highlights that scale is an epistemological, rather than ontological, category: a graphic tool for categorizing information about the world, in ways that reduce

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and obscure important dimensions of the urban condition, such as the transient, the kinetic or the relational. This division between local and global is already grafted in the very origins of geography and consequently cartography. In Ptolemy's *Geography* (ca. 150 AD), geography is described as the representation of the surface of the entire Earth, the *intera oecumene*, while chorography entails "the representation of small parts of this world" (Borys 2014: xv). The distinction clearly suggests a matter of scale, which extends to matters of semblance and perspective, or viewpoint. The depiction of the Oecumene demands the panoptic view of the plan, and of the map as an *analogon* of the

Marin approaches utopics as a signifying spatial practice, where meaning is produced through the text at the interplay of a multiplicity of spaces

earth. The familiar local calls for a more direct form of representation and a relatable mode of subjectivity that simulates the experience of an actual viewer. The mistranslation of the Greek definition of chorography into Renaissance Latin as *imitatio picturae* (*mimesis diagraphès*;

instead of the correct 'imitation by means of writing': *mimesis dià graphès*) reinforced the qualitative interpretation of chorography, which was commonly considered as secondary to the mathematical validity of geography (Nuti 1999: 90).

The Earth

In contemporary geography, planning and architecture, a positivist approach is still prevalent. The fascination with the digital promise of a paradigm shift offers itself as the best advocate of such tendency. Söderström (2011: 115), for instance, criticizes non-digital images of the city as favouring the "material, the immobile and the permanent" due to their "technological limitations". The architect and critic David Gissen (2008) has similarly described the "geographic turns of architecture", recounting the digitally-driven neo-positivist approaches that have emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century. Gissen refers to the architectural projects by firms such as MVRDV and UN Studio, among others, which involve extensive digital data collection and data-driven form-generation and visualization.

For Gissen (ibid. 67), the primary link between architecture and geography does not lie in notions of quantification or representation, but in territory as their common ground. In this context, geography is not just about the *writing* (in Greek, *γραφείν*) or the measure of the earth (*γαία*), but rather about the writing *upon the earth*. Gissen suggests that architecture's contemporary geographic project is about tying concepts to the Earth, producing difference and fostering political subjectivity. However, this subjectivity is grounded in data, and the earth is considered as a given, stable ground; architecture and its representational project then emerge as a kind of problem-solving through the manipulation of information. This takes place through processes, not so much of mapping as much as of *imaging*. The representation is still instrumental, but constitutes merely the image of the territory. Nothing is utopian about this conception, nothing is impossible or ideal in these representations: in fact, everything claims to be already so accurately real that projection is irrelevant at best. If, as Söderström suggests, "traditional", non-digitally generated representations are incapable of representing the real complexity of the city, digital data-driven images can equally entail stillness. Instead of spatializing information, these simulative representations stabilize and thus displace the transitive character of both the city and its image. This removal of temporality entails the removal of spatiality, essayed through the denial of representation by simulation.

The map

Keeping in mind Baudrillard's conception of simulacra, I would like to review the concept of

“traditional representation” by revisiting Borges’ short story through Louis Marin’s reading. To begin, it is important to remark that so-called traditional representations are not so much “non-digital” as they are *not-definitively digital*. In other words, these are representations where digital tools do not determine the mode of producing meaning and validating integrity. Marin (1984: 233–34) proposes that the map in Borges’ story is a representational object that is at once *same* and *other*: the utopia of the map therefore emerges in the gap, in the mismatch between sign and meaning. This process of misrecognition involves an act of forgetting, an oblivion of the difference produced out of the act of representation that emphasizes the agency of the map.

Marin approaches *utopics* as a signifying spatial practice, where meaning is produced through the text at the interplay of a multiplicity of spaces. Although multiple, these spaces convey a unified narrative of representation. They are incongruous spaces, perpetually re-performed and negated, evading the fixing of a determinate meaning (Hill 1982). Rather than a re-presentation, the utopian text is the negation of both reality and mimesis. In other words, Marin’s *utopics* brings into play the diverse concepts of spatiality that are derived by what Fredric Jameson (1977: 16) describes as a “duality of registers”: an internal discontinuity that emerges from the clash of the figural (physical/imaginary) and the textual (symbolic). This idea connects space with text through a combined process of poesis and projection, produced not only upon writing but also upon reading the text, the map and the figure. Marin pays particular attention to maps as instantiations of such a dual register, which creates the conditions for the production of meaning through a heterogeneous yet unified spatiality.

The two sides of the distance therefore operate reciprocally. The map is meaningful only as a doubling of the Empire, which in turn is defined by the recognition of the difference of the map, what Marin calls its *neutralization*. This transaction between the origin and the enunciation of representation tends to the nought, the no-place of representation. On the one hand, there is the zero degree of representation as simulation, that is, as having no figure of its own; on the other hand, there is the zero degree of its recognition as self-contained figure, which is produced through the alienation from the origin and the intention of representation.¹

A phenomenal denial of craftsmanship, neutralization or “zero-degree writing” is therefore a kind of articulation that seeks to produce a pure experience of the content by removing the subjectivity of the author and of language. As Marin observes, this leads to the double negation of the representation: in fact, the removal of subjectivity eventually equates to the acceptance of its ubiquity. In Borges, the exactitude of cartography as objective science is supposed to remove subjectivity; but this only reveals the utopian negation of its expediency denouncing mapping as *hybris* — of surpassing legitimate measure.

The city

In the essay ‘The City in its Map and Portrait’, Marin (2001) underlines the utopian nature of the cartographic image through the device of the city portrait. Most commonly associated with the ‘perspective plan’ and the bird’s eye view, the city portrait is a chorographic rather than geographic document (Nuti 1999: 98). As noted above, chorography lies on the verge between measurement and observation. Although there is no evidence that such depictions were based on measured surveys, they mark the move from a symbolic depiction of the city as ideal to the function of the map as a record concerned with the specificity of the city’s geographical and man-made characteristics (Ballon and Friedman 2007: 690).² The city portrait thus combined overall resemblance with the type of abstraction that brought urban representation closer to the quantitative intentions of geography.

1 The zero-degree refers to a “colorless” writing that attempts to convey a neutrality of representation (Barthes 1977).

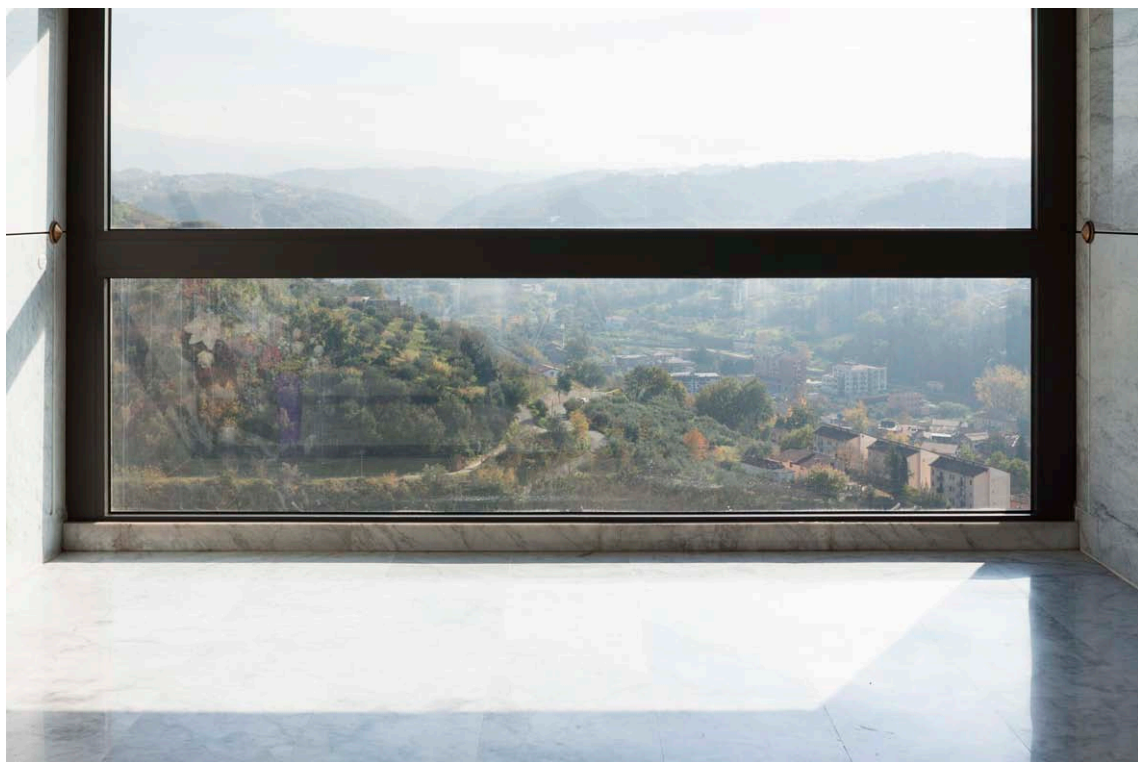
2 Jacobo de Barbari’s *Veduta di Venezia a volo d’uccello* (1500) is considered the earliest example of this kind (Schulz 1978).

According to Marin (2001: 204), the portrait offers a selective representation of traits, founded on the truth-value of individuality: the city is portrayed as an individual and the map is both a presentation of its 'pro-trait' but also a 'pro-ject' – at once a recollection and an intention. The expression of this twofold nature combines description and narrative through iconic and symbolic functions. This is expressed in the experience of the map as a visually received object. Description refers to an external synoptic gaze, while narration regards "a moving gaze, working through space and itineraries" (ibid. 205-8). Both the city and its projection are experienced from within the drawing through a sequence of interrelated gazes. This movement between what is present and what is represented is partly voluntary (an instrumental abstraction) and partly an omission, resulting from the "filtering" of the original. This filtering follows ideological, political and representational lines – what Marin calls "the markers of the cartographic enunciation" – and conditions what is made present within the representation itself.

Contemporary digitally produced urban representations can be categorized in two kinds that echo the geographic/chorographic dilemma. On one hand, reincarnations of the cartographic plan are augmented by an info-graphic richness of data visualization made possible by GIS; on the other hand, as an extension of the misunderstood chorography, we can perhaps consider another mode of technological desire: the direct observation of places becomes ubiquitous through the unprecedented availability of 'social' witnesses fully equipped with the ability to capture and share local content. We are thus faced here with two sides of the city and its portrait, the institutional(-ized) mathematical side, and the popular(-ized) pictorial side. Paradoxically, both sides seem to converge into the iconic function of the image/model. Both increasingly attain a position of resemblance as calculation performs a full circle: digitised maps return to modelled bird's eye views (Google Maps being the most accessible example). Data manipulation succumbs to formalism and cities themselves pose as iconic profiles, rather than experiences. If, from the Enlightenment onwards, the image of the city has moved from portrait to plan, now, in the age of informational exactitude, it returns back to profile. There is no more reading of the map, there is no longer enunciation (Marin 2001: 204) but simply spectatorship of the land as model. The calculative and the instantaneous demonstrate their exactitude through, respectively, mathematical accuracy and immediacy; however, they are at once images of the city, the earth, the building, and products of desires that define their scopic and epistemological approaches. They differ from the map, the portrait, and their utopics because they overlook and conceal this doubling, and thus remain, in their singularity, *still*.

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