

MA in Landscape Urbanism

Term 2

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Rhetorics of mapping

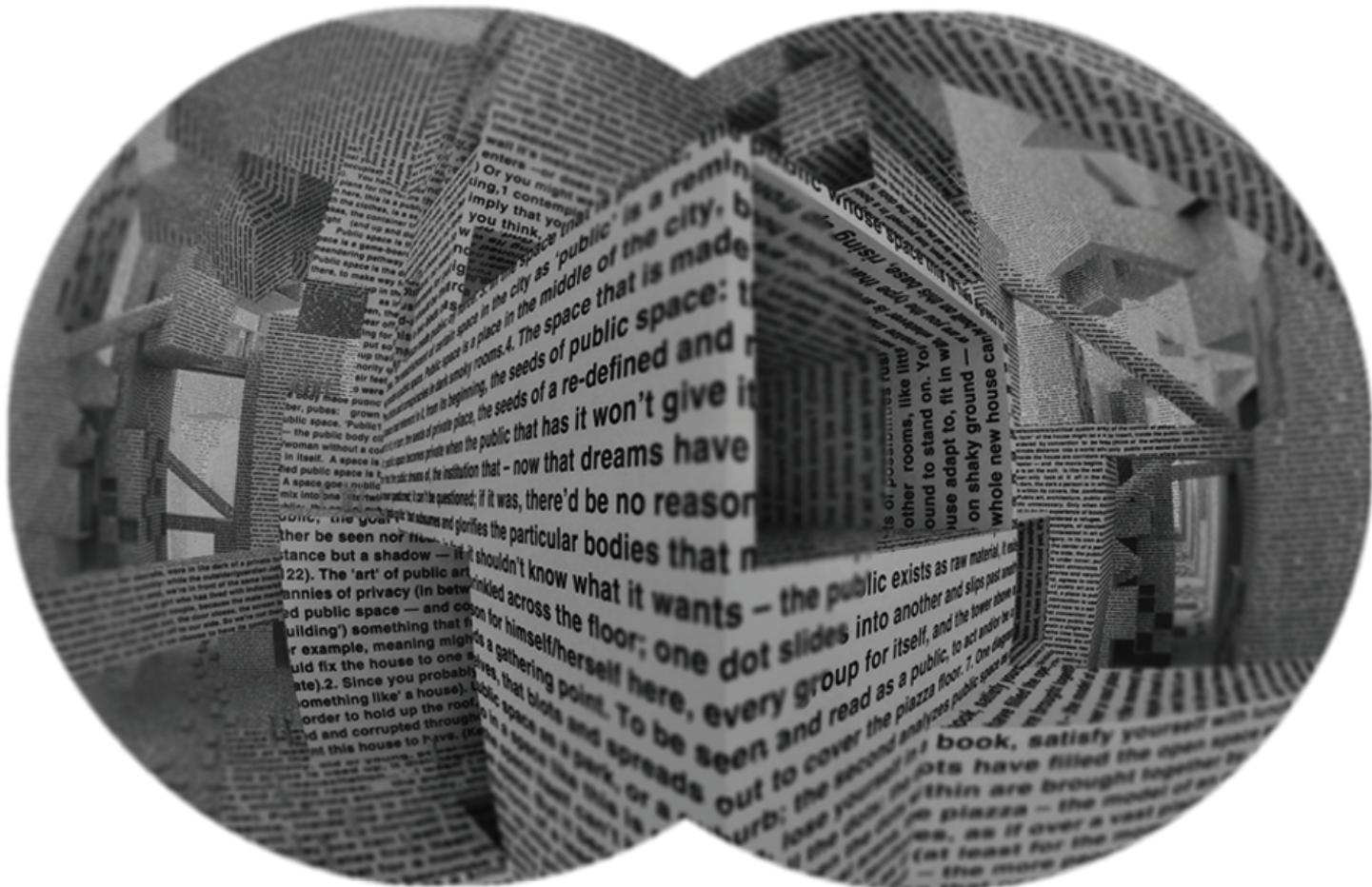
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Essay 2

This is not cartography: the power of a myth

The case of the labyrinth



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The case of the labyrinth

Cartography, the science of map-making is not only about representing, but about unveiling hidden possibilities, uncovering realities that are not clearly visible, proposing new connections, constructing original arguments. But which are the roots of cartography? When did the first maps appear? The truth is that the origin of the map is lost to history.¹ No one can affirm with certainty the specific place or the exact time or for which reason someone thought of drawing a sketch or a map that could convey the sense of a place. Perhaps, this happened even before written language appeared, but whichever the case is, the concept of a map can be formed by words. Words combined in a certain way which would create the conceptual map into someone's mind, and subsequently this could be transformed into a descriptive narrative or a graphical entity, that would constitute the first case of a map. So the question would be how cartography can be formed by words, by language? How language, by the form of a narrative or a myth can become a means through which someone is oriented or disoriented through the territory? And in the case of disorientation could we talk about a different or critical case of cartography that could function as the extreme opposite of it, as a form of "anti-cartography"? This idea will be explored through the Greek myth of the Cretan labyrinth, (fig.1) and its symbolic extensions.



Fig. 1 Typical Cretan labyrinth design

¹Wood Denis with John Fels and John Krygier, *The Power of maps*, The Guilford Press, New York London, 2010, p.23

All of existence as far as men are concerned, is specifically bound up with language, whose terms decide each individual's vision of it. Each person can imagine his total existence, even for his own eyes, only by means of words. Words rise up in his head bearing all their multitude of human or superhuman existences in relation to which his personal existence exists. The individual being is therefore, only something mediated by words that can present a being only arbitrarily as an autonomous being, though very profoundly as a "related being". It is only necessary to track for a little while the routes repeatedly taken by words to discover the disconnecting sight of a human's being labyrinthine structure.²

Bataille, “Le Labyrinthe”

In Greek mythology, the labyrinth was an elaborate structure designed and built by the legendary craftsman Daedalus for King Minos of Crete at Knossos. Daedalus had so ingeniously made the Labyrinth that he could barely escape it after he built it. Its function was to hold the Minotaur, a creature half-man half-bull. Athens, after losing a war with Crete, was obliged to send every nine years seven young men and seven young women to be devoured by the Minotaur. Theseus, son of the king of Athens was voluntarily offered to join the team to kill Minotaur and free Athens from Crete's dominion. The daughter of Minos Ariadne was the one that helped Theseus find the exit of the labyrinth by giving him a ball of golden thread, which he unrolled as he walked through the labyrinth to remember the path that he followed. (fig.2)



Fig. 2 Ariadne and Theseus in the labyrinth entrance

² Hollier Dennis, *Against architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1998, p. 57

The idea of the labyrinth either as a conceptual product of the myth or as an elaborate structure is conceived as an unknown, mythical space that has been connected with a variety of symbolisms and most strongly with the unconscious and the entrance to another world, to the underworld. The labyrinth can be associated with nature like prehistoric tunnels, or the subterranean network of caves like Lascaux, (fig.3) or human origins , the womb; however it cannot be considered an ultimately “natural” product. It is an artificial construction that was created in order to create confusion, to unfold this uncanny³ sensation of getting lost, to reveal and raise anxiety when someone is facing the endless variety of possible paths to follow.



Fig. 3 Lascaux caves in southwestern France

It is very difficult to envision the labyrinth as a map as the notion of the labyrinth comprises issues that dilute the essence of cartography. This is not due to the fact that the labyrinth cannot be designed, but in the acceptance that when entering it, it is almost impossible to orientate, thus to transfer the information of a map into the actual space. *Labyrinths are single (there is one physical structure) and double: they simultaneously incorporate order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos.*⁴ This double essence of the labyrinth is the one that creates the most confusion and anxiety. The fact that it seems like a riddle that can be soluble and simultaneously someone can be easily trapped in its daedalian tunnels forever, encountering continuously the same repetitive pattern of corridors can lead to madness, to insanity. The labyrinth seems to be an unsafe space where everyone stands alone, trying desperately to find his way out. It incarnates the complete loss of a route, the constant trapping in an eternal void without an escape.

³ The term of uncanny was deeply explored by Sigmund Freud, who was based on the essay of Ernst Jentsch entitled “On the Psychology of uncanny”³ (1906). He stated after his research that uncanny is something that was familiar and installed in the human mind somehow in the past, but became alienated from it through the procedure of repelling. For more information see terminology of *heimlich unheimlich*. Freud Sigmund, *The uncanny*, first published in *Imago*, reprinted in *Sammlung*, Fünfte Folge, Alix Strachey(trnsl.), 1919

⁴ Doob Penelope Reed, *The Idea of the labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1990, p.1

The labyrinth is the disoriented space of someone who has lost his way whether he has had the good fortune to transform the steps he is taking into a dance, or more banally has let spatial intoxication lead him astray: the labyrinth is drunken space. The drunkenness is not without vertigo, drunken words have meaning no more than the drunken man has balance. The axes of orientation (up/down, left/right, back/forth) are astray. The inner ear returns to the level of immaturity associated with infancy: upon these bodily passages, referred to as a labyrinth orientation and disorientation depend.⁵

The labyrinth seems to be the perfect paradigm which negates cartography, in the sense that inside it, the perception of reality and space is lost. Cartography is transmitting all the aspects, no matter how hidden or obvious they are, to reality and to spatial qualities. It also develops structures and demonstrates ways of ordering by classifying the data that she wants to unveil. The map is not the territory⁶ but still the connection between reality and the “model of reality”, that is the map is visible to some extent. The labyrinth could be perceived as an anti-map as inside it no latitude or longitude exist, darkness reigns supreme, disorientation takes place. The understanding and interpretation of a map presupposes the fact that most of the times, there are some elements that function as guides or as signs of the territory that help you orientate. In the case of the labyrinth, disorientation is caused mainly due to two reasons: one is the constant repetition of objects and the other is darkness.

The terror of being lost comes from the necessity that a mobile organism be oriented in its surroundings.⁷

Jentsch states that the best someone is orientated within its environment the less likely is for the uncanny sensation to unfold. This is due to the fact that orientation creates this feeling of safety, of familiarization. If all the labyrinthine paths seem identical it would be extremely difficult to decipher the map and this would reveal a certain kind of anxiety. This is due to the fact that involuntary repetition (fig.4) is according to Freud one of the main sources that can stimulate the uncanny feeling and therefore result into this unfamiliar weirdness.

⁵ Hollier Dennis, *Against architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1998, p. 59

⁶The expression "the map is not the territory" first appeared in print in a paper that Alfred Korzybski gave at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1931.

⁷ Lynch Kevin, *The image of the city*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, London, England, 1960, p. 125



Fig. 4 Repetition. Helene Binet, Holocaust Memorial, Berlin, 2005

Another element that makes the labyrinth example of an anti-map is that all knowledge and thought that is intertwined with the essence of cartography is lost due to the darkness of the space. (fig.5) The labyrinth in the myth is supposed to be a terribly dark space that reinforces the already omnipresent disorientation. Darkness subjects human into the experience of “dark space”, of a space that absorbs and depersonalize the subject, causing the blurring of the boundaries of the inside and the outside.

For psychoanalyst Eugène Minkowski and philosopher Roger Caillois darkness is not the simple absence of light.

While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is "filled," it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him: hence "the ego is permeable for darkness while it is not so for light"; the feeling of mystery that one experiences at night would not come from anything else. Minkowski likewise comes to speak of dark space and almost of a lack of distinction between the milieu and the organism: "Dark space envelops me on all sides and penetrates me much deeper than light space; the distinction between inside and

*outside and consequently the sense organs as well, insofar as they are designed for external perception, here play only a totally modest role.”*⁸



Fig.5 Darkness

Inside the labyrinth space can be distorted, time can be frozen, with no consequences. Instead of functioning as a map showing the right path to follow, it confuses all senses through an endless quest of the right path. But what if there is no right path to follow? What if the existence of the thread is only a part of the myth and in reality there is actually no way to escape the labyrinth?

*Wanting to explore the labyrinth only confirms this further: there is no getting around it. But neither the category of subjectivity nor the category of objectivity can exist in this space, which having made them unsound, nevertheless has no replacement to offer. Distance like proximity, separation like adhesion remain undecidable here. In this sense one is never either inside or outside the labyrinth-(a space perhaps that is already too much to say) that would be constituted by none other than this very anxiety, which is however, incurably undecidable: am I inside or outside?*⁹

This blurring of the boundaries, of the inside and the outside space and the weakness to define the correct route emphasize the importance of memory as a way of

⁸ Minkowski Eugene, Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological studies, Metzel Nancy (transl), Evanston: Northwestern University, University Press, 1970, p.427

Vidler Anthony, *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, The MIT Press, Massachussets 1992, p.177

⁹Hollier Dennis, *Against architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1998, p. 58

orientating. Since there is no other element which can be used as a guide for orientation, trying to memorise the already visited paths seems the only possible way that could lead to the exit; still it is extremely difficult.

In the modern city, we are often encountering labyrinthine structures either in a symbolical or in a literal way. It is true that with the rapid growth of technology and science and with the contemporary navigational tools it is difficult to feel the sense of disorientation into the city. But if we imagine that suddenly all these tools of orientation were lost or damaged and that someone should find its way into the city without the help of them, it could be extremely plausible to get lost as by learning to rely on those orientating tools, the power of memory that is connected with orientation is weakened.

Beatriz Colomina argues that although Daedalus is supposed to be the first architect as he constructed the labyrinth, Ariadne is the one responsible for the first work of architecture, as she was the first who managed to interpret it, by solving the problem of getting out of it, and by helping Theseus orientate in it with the ball of thread after killing the Minotaur. (fig.6)



Fig. 6 Pablo Picasso, Minotauromachia, 1935

Thus while Ariadne did not build the labyrinth, she was the one who interpreted it; and this is architecture in the modern sense of the term. She achieved this feat through representation; that is to say, with the help of a conceptual device, the ball of thread. We can look at this gift as the “first” transmission of architecture by means other than itself, as architecture’s first reproduction. The thread of Ariadne is not merely a representation (among the infinite ones possible) of the labyrinth. It is a

*project, a veritable production, a device that has the result of throwing reality into crisis.*¹⁰

Following this way of thinking, it could be suggested that as labyrinth is the anti-map, the thread is the one which constructs space and creates a direction that leads to the exit, to the light, to the other world. Consequently, it can be argued that the unrolling of the thread, this conceptual device, in which Beatriz Colomina refers to, could be one of the first notional maps, one of the first primitive attempts of cartography, as cartography is an interpretative art, similar to architecture. The thread is designing the new route, the path that solves the complicated structure of the labyrinth. It uncovers the reality of the unknown path and it unveils the hidden possibility of starting to acquire a sense of orientation into the labyrinth.

In this point, we should wonder, not for the significance of the thread (fig.7) as a means which helps the orientation into the labyrinth, but for its final denouement. Bataille thinks about of the thread in an unconventional way, as an instrument which instead of deciphering the labyrinth, it constructs it. For Bataille ‘There are hours when Ariadne’s thread is broken ...’ and the impossible is a broken thread through which we can become lost in the labyrinth.¹¹ For him, Ariadne’s thread and the labyrinth are indistinguishable elements and the loss of the thread or the failure of the thread to lead someone out of the labyrinth is the actual meaning and importance of the labyrinth itself. Bataille followed Nietzsche, who, as he said, “never lost that Ariadne’s thread of being always aimless.”¹² For Bataille dreaming of the escape of the labyrinth is the actual transformation of it into a prison. *To want to get out of the labyrinth, making this into a project, is to close it, to close oneself inside it.*¹³

It is clear that in the literal consideration of the myth, the thread gave the solution to Theseus and this act could be considered one of the earliest attempts of a map concept in terms of the narrative. However, whichever interpretation of the thread we choose, the notion of the labyrinth is so powerful that devours everything within its dark disorientating morphology, even cartography. It is a conceptual project that is created not for the discovery of the right path, but for the importance of wandering and the loss in the unconscious, that is utterly connected with the sense of the labyrinth itself.

¹⁰ Rattenbury Kester, *This is not architecture*, Routledge, New York, 2002, p. 207

¹¹ Hollier Dennis, *Against architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1998, p. 59

¹² Sur Nietzsche, p.27m(OC, 6:23)

Hollier Dennis, *Against architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1998, p. 59

¹³ Hollier Dennis, *Against architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1998, p. 61



Fig. 7 The role of the thread

Someone that is lost inside the labyrinth could be regarded as a flâneur¹⁴ who constantly wanders around and lets the labyrinthine space absorb him without being preoccupied of finding a way of escape, as this is useless, as it does not exist.

This closure into the labyrinth, either it is deliberate or it is happening because of the difficulty to find the exit consists of minus importance, as it is the actual closure that matters. The eternal seeking of the thread could be perceived as a symbolic tool of renaissance. And the fact of giving birth to ourselves constantly could occur from the multiple failures of getting out of it, rather than finding the exit.

Human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them...; life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.¹⁵

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

¹⁴ The concept of the flâneur, the casual wanderer, observer and explorer of the urban life in the modern city of Paris, was first explored, at length, in the writings of Baudelaire and consequently in the writings of Walter Benjamin.

¹⁵ Marquez Gabriel Garcia, *Love in the time of cholera*, Edith Grossman (transl.), Penguin books, London, England, 1988, p.175

Consequently, returning to the connection of the myth of the labyrinth constructed by language, and how this leads to a form of anti-cartography, it would be interesting to think of the labyrinth as the arrangement of existence as existence is undoubtedly bound with language. And what more intriguing than thinking that the role of the language and the act of writing is an act of a constant “loss of the thread”? Bataille¹⁶ argues that language is the impossibility of finding a basis within oneself. It could be understood as a negative umbilical cord (one that would attach a person not to the origin but to the absence of origin), an umbilical lack that must be produced through writing, and in writing, until death comes to cut the thread.

You are playing with me”, I said, “by weaving a labyrinthine argument from which I cannot escape. You seem to begin where you ended and to end where you begin. Are you perhaps making a marvelous circle of divine simplicity?¹⁷

Boethius, Consolidation of philosophy, 3p12

¹⁶Hollier Dennis, *Against architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1998, p. 65

¹⁷ Doob Penelope Reed, *The Idea of the labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1990, p.254

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Figures

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