Superstudio's Dystopian Tales: Textual and Graphic Practice as Operational Method

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ABSTRACT

Written in 1971, Superstudio's *12 Cautionary Tales* anticipated, with its critical attitude against the totalitarian and alienating aspects of the advanced capitalist metropolis, the debates on production, consumption and sustainability that arose following the 1970s economic crisis. Situated at the crossroads between architecture, literature and graphics, this work revealed a vision of urban reality that was both extreme and radical, and rejected what until then, had marked the body of architectural research connected with social utopias. Investigating and meditating in an unconventional way the existing network of human relations through its physical dimension – the architecture of the metropolis – Superstudio's work presented a critical theory that stood out as a negative reflection on reality, unveiling its deep and hidden contradictions through a utopian and cognitive model. It still represents one of the most interesting contributions to an alternative debate on architecture and urban planning, highlighting the importance of the dissenting role of architects and intellectuals in society.

Superstudio's *12 Cautionary Tales* was instrumental in reinvigorating the discussion around architecture and city development models. Its influence survives to this day, and contributes to fully illustrating the richness and the breadth of the critical debate pertaining to growth strategies of the 1970s.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF SUPERSTUDIO'S *12 CAUTIONARY TALES*

The 12 Cautionary Tales. Premonitions of the Mystical Rebirth of Urbanism, written in 1971 by the group of Florentine architects Superstudio (formed in 1966 by Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, later joined by Piero Frassinelli, Roberto and Alessandro Magris and Alessandro Poli), anticipated the discussions on production, consumption and sustainability that arose following the 1970s economic crisis, and contributed to fuelling the debate surrounding architecture, urban planning and the role of architects and intellectuals in society. This project, in the guise of an illustrated literary work depicting twelve imaginary cities, was conceived in Italy within the framework of the short-lived Radical Architecture movement (1965-1975). The latter was characterised by a critical attitude towards society and architectural discipline, heterogeneous components, time-specific ideological and political orientations, and by the multitude of expressions that it has found. Superstudio was both one of the initiators and one of the most active operators within this extremely composite movement, born in the effervescent context of the Faculty of Architecture in Florence, at that time characterised by the presence of strong educational changes embracing innovative artistic tendencies, and by an open and sharp academic approach that sought to renew architecture through the introduction of new building technologies and formal languages connected to coeval artistic trends, such as conceptual and pop art. A number of Radical operators worked also in the avant-garde design and artistic scenes of Turin and Milan. The common ground for the groups and operators that took part in this movement was the adoption of a rigorous critical and theoretical attitude towards functionalism and rationalism, exerted through the abdication to concrete practice and traditional professional obligations, and the consequent adaptation of their projects to writing, photography, film, or any other kind of media combination. This approach was largely inspired by a keen interest in the philosophical theories of the Frankfurt School, and particularly by its critical position against the totalitarian and alienating aspects of the advanced capitalist society, by the aesthetic vision of Adorno, by the utopia of Marcuse, and by the theories of Pollock.

The makeshift adoption of the communication strategies of the historical avant-gardes, of the literary creation, represented a method for Superstudio to go beyond the professional routine. In

this way Superstudio detached itself from a "general plan" [1] in which, following the rules of capitalist economy, every reality was subtly and slyly planned to help the system's self-preservation through the exertion of a total control of the consciences [2]. In these conditions, even art and architecture had lost their disruptive and revolutionary characteristics, being domesticated to follow the markets' requirements. Therefore Superstudio deliberately refused its social role and took architecture to be a means of communication, managing it independently from the productive cycle, through an intellectual – and not operational – practice. This choice was also motivated by the impossibility for young professionals to fit in a building industry that flourished during Italy's post-war reconstruction and in the subsequent years of the economic boom, but was at that time going through a phase of recession. The architects' professional role was consequently questioned, reinvented, and reinterpreted. Its shift from "specialised technician" to "intellectual-artist" marked the final disappearance of the boundaries between professional practices, establishing the synthesis between art, literature and architecture. Concrete work was converted into intellectual action: in this concept the urban project, almost an interlacing of literature and architecture, was not measured against reality but stood as a means of communication to broaden the discussion on city planning and architecture. Descriptive practice became for Superstudio a meticulous way to operate within the discipline.

COUNTER UTOPIA AS AN OPERATING METHOD

Visions of the cities of the future, which typify the history of modern architecture, mostly narrate a practical engagement of architects who, feeling charged with a social and ethical mission, work for the improvement of society through an accurate and realistic planning of the urban space. Conversely, Superstudio portrayed a vision of urban reality that was both extreme and radical, rejecting what, until then, had marked the body of architectural research connected with social utopias. Indeed the 1960s were marked by the disappearance of almost all the great protagonists of 20th century's architecture and by the emergence of critical positions in the debate on the legacy of the Modern Movement. Modernist's doctrines engaging with the resolution of practical problems were definitively abandoned and consequently the images depicted by traditional architectural and literary figurations of utopias were discarded as well, in favour of those belonging to counter-utopian or dystopian narrative. Such definitions were created to indicate a literary or cinematographic genre which depicted urban and societal models that, far from representing an ideal example, showed on the contrary how the excess of

order and perfectionism and the concern to realise the most favourable living conditions, could led to totalitarian or extremely dangerous and injurious drifts, and to the eradication of mankind's genuine human qualities (Verra 1984). This new genre used the same artifices – memories, stories, reports from the future – that defined also the traditional utopian constructions. The words of Nicolas Berdjaev's epigraph in Huxley's *Brave New World* offer a perfect definition of counter-utopia's aims:

> Utopias seem much more attainable than one may have previously thought. And we are now faced with a much more frightening thought: how do we prevent their permanent fulfilment? […] Utopias are attainable. The way of life points towards them. But perhaps a new century will begin, a century in which intellectuals and the educated class will find means of preventing utopias, and will return to a non-utopian society, which may be less perfect, but will offer more freedom. [3]

At the origin of this turn in the interpretation of utopia were not only the most important and dramatic events of the 20th century – conflicts, failed revolutions, massacres – and the growing apprehension for a possible ecological devastation, but also a contemporary criticism of the oppressive and alienating aspects of the capitalist society. In the architectural domain, the disciplinary crisis shifted the attention towards the formal and linguistic aspects of the project and tested the boundaries between architecture and the iconography of new artistic avant-gardes. Italy was one of the first European countries impacted in the 1960s by this radical review of the discipline: following the wake of earlier experiences developed by Archigram in England and by Hans Hollein and Walter Pichler in Austria, Superstudio showed a greater openness towards new forms of art and used drawings and illustrations as finished, autonomous projects that did not need to be realised to be eloquent. However the faith in an optimistic future (as mirrored by Archigram's work) that had characterised the beginning of the Sixties had vanished in the years (1963-1967) that preceded students' and workers' agitations and the advent of Radical architecture in Italy. The political and ideological climate was then marked by a rising aversion towards the advanced capitalist system. Italian Radical operators therefore resorted to old and new avant-gardes' expressive stratagems (such as manifestos, performances, etc.), pushed architectural practice beyond its concrete applications and widened it conceptually, into the sphere of a sort of architectural criticism, exploiting the possibilities offered by the intersection of visual and literary artifices.

Superstudio's activity was defined by the adoption of this modus operandi, and by a specific interest in science fiction that had already been present in Archigram's work.[4]

To create *The 12 Cautionary Tales*, the group used a combination of fanciful images (drawing, collages and photomontages) and prophetical writings inspired by both counter-utopian classics – such as Orwell or Huxley – and popular science fiction novels, making a broad use of their literary artifices, for instance, the meticulousness in the description of the imaginary realities, as well as of their most common themes: the relentless development of industrial civilisation and its continuous demands of organisation, the almost infinite possibilities of biological mutation, and the controversial relationship between man and machine. In particular, *The 12 Cautionary Tales* largely bore the mark of the influence of science fiction novels dominated by sociological or socio-cultural concerns, written mostly during the 1960s and published in the "Romanzi d'Urania".[5] This science fiction book series was the first to introduce Italian readers to some eminent authors like Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, James Graham Ballard, Philip K. Dick as well as many others. At that time Italian science fiction was indeed dominated by American and English productions, and Italian authors, hiding behind pseudonyms, generally used to anglicise not only their names, but also the topics, the plots and the language adopted in their novels, thus creating a hybrid phenomenon. Therefore, science fiction in Italy was not yet considered by critics as a new experimental genre, even if it was reputed to be a vehicle of positive values: Umberto Eco, for instance, considered it as "consumer literature" but also "allegorical literature with didactic intent" (Eco 1964, 373). Moreover, the awareness that science fiction genre was part of a new anthropological dimension internal to consumer society was also acknowledged by art critic Gillo Dorfles, who affirmed that

> apart from the literary value of various tales and novels […] it constitutes an interesting branch of studies… because it reveals some of the most urgent aspirations and pours scorn on some of the most disgraceful faults of today's humankind. That's why science fiction could not get out of exerting back an influence on visual arts… (Dorfles 1968, 131).

The choice of using a popular media like the science fiction tale to divulge the group's analysis was consequently not accidental, but the fruit of a conscious research that the group had realised coherently with his views, in the attempt to appeal to the widest readership possible

and provoke a debate on the dramatic costs of the perpetuation of dangerous urban models. Indeed, *The 12 Cautionary Tales* was undoubtedly inspired by popular science fiction novels that encouraged readers to meditate on pressing ecological, social, political and technological issues: several parallels can be traced, for instance, with Jack Vance's *The Houses of Izsm*, Robert Silverberg's *The Man in the Maze*, K. Dick's *Dr. Bloodmoney*, Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars*, and Frederick Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth *The space merchants*. All these novels were published in Italy between 1965 and 1970 in the Urania series. Frassinelli owned them all, in addition to a great number of other science fiction books [6].

A CRITICAL THEORY OF ARCHITECTURE AND OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

The 12 Cautionary Tales find their origins in the *Continuous Monument*, a project previously developed by Superstudio. This was a model of total urbanisation consisting of a primary element that crossed seas and mountains, not needing to deal with or to respect the environment anymore; it was an architecture that lived independently, as an indifferent sign on the ground on which it laid. This project exacerbated the potential of an architecture freed from all super structural conditionings, which realised itself as order, logic, and purity. In 1971 Piero Frassinelli started to enhance this project with a series of perspective views illustrating the interior of the *Continuous Monument*, yet afterwards Superstudio agreed to leave it as it had been imagined: a symbol, an endless vision. Frassinelli, though, had already begun to visualise the possible inner mechanisms within this mega structure: the depiction of the *First city* was thus born [7]. It was soon followed by the others, becoming therefore a separate project that marked the starting point for a series of didactic operations [8].

Superstudio's *12 Cautionary Tales* presented a critical theory of architecture and of the contemporary city. It sought to stand as a negative reflection on reality and to unveil its deep and hidden contradictions through a utopian and cognitive model. In this way, the model revealed the imperfections and the treacherous deviations of a society project aiming at more rationality and progress, but also criticised the concept of rationality itself, namely the "counter-finality of reason". Defined by Horkeimer and Adorno in their 1947 text *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, it represents, according to philosopher Gianni Vattimo, the key aspect of counter utopia: "it is the discovery that the rationalisation of the world – insofar as it accomplishes its design even more perfectly and, therefore not by mistake, by accident, or a casual distortion – overthrows reason and its goals of perfection and emancipation" (Vattimo 1992, 78).

As Superstudio's purpose was both informative and moralistic, and the group wanted its voice to be heard in professional debate, it tried to give its work the widest dissemination possible. It proposed its project to a number of publishers in Italy and abroad, and it was picked up by the AD magazine in London, who distributed the English version first, with the title *Twelve Cautionary Tales for Christmas. Premonitions of the Mystical Rebirth of Urbanism*, whereas the Italian version was originally published by the magazine Casabella in the January issue of 1972 with the title *Premonizioni della Parusia Urbanistica*. In Italy at that time, the dissemination of the languages and practices related to the new avant-gardes was mainly led by specialised magazines of art and architecture (like Domus, Casabella, Marcatré, Op. cit., IN). Their objective was not limited to divulging such practices, but aimed at favouring the birth and the development of debates and networks between critics, architects, and young exponents of the contemporary artistic scene as well. Radical projects were therefore published by both Gio Ponti's Domus magazine, and especially by Casabella, which, as of 1971 started focusing on counter culture related subjects. Casabella, then under the direction of Alessandro Mendini, published *The 12 Cautionary Tales* at a time attempting to reconsider the debate on architectural problems from a different critical point of view, at least when compared to Italy's editorial reality. Casabella would soon become the principal instrument for the diffusion of the artistic and architectural ideas of neo-avant-gardes. According to this primary and specific role, it was also one of the rare spaces in which *The 12 Cautionary Tales* was published uncensored in its original format, displaying a complex and well-defined relationship between architecture, text, and images.

With an inflated and divinatory prose, oscillating "between the Gospel and science fiction" (Branzi 1972, 36) Superstudio's "fantasy, horror, science fiction tales" (Pettena 1982, 22) described some of the then current urban trends – exacerbating them in a dramatic, ironical and corrosive vision of the city's reality. The writing style ranged from the use of an extremely lyrical lexicon to the utilisation of intimidating expressions, with the clear aim of moving the reader's sensibility. Indeed Vittorio Gregotti wrote of the "religious terrorism of Superstudio" (Gregotti 1972, 337): this aggressiveness, typical of the languages of the avant-gardes, enhanced the communicative force of the narration. It emphasised the violent and authoritarian implications of the social organisations described in the project, which was essentially composed of three parts.

In the first one, 12 imaginary cities with an evocative name were described and illustrated. Superstudio insisted principally on three crucial themes: the city as a rational project that manifested itself through the exertion of control and totalitarian force; the consequent

alienation of its inhabitants, and the dichotomy between natural and artificial, or between nature and machine. The physical description of the cities revolved around the obsessive reference to their size, indicated with pinpoint precision, and the use of a very specific and technical language; each story illustrated by suggestive images created through photomontages or technical architecture drawings. The combination of text and images, rather than insisting merely on the physical aspects of the cities, alluded to their functioning: it described the precise modus operandi that the cities imposed on themselves and their inhabitants in order to ensure their performances and consequently their endurance. This faultless self-preservation mechanism associated all the 12 imaginary realities. The cities educated and encouraged all citizens to depend on false needs, inducing behaviours abiding by the system's logic. Consequently all their necessities were satisfied; the guarantee of an apparently perfect and endless existence freed them from the damages provoked by the passing of time, thus enhancing their performances and eliminating at the same time all possible social conflicts. Death occurred only if an element escaped from the system's programmed logic: the transgression of the imposed rules, although rare, sometimes happened despite the city's continuous process of indoctrination and persuasion. Such rare transgressions were rectified with the exclusion, expulsion and the final and silent disappearance of dissidents. However, sometimes death was planned from the beginning, scheduled to respond to the cities scrupulous requirements. Individuals were necessary for the subsistence of the system, and this was reflected in the physical spaces that the city provided for its inhabitants as well: narrow and functional, they were conceived to facilitate the daily operations of the overall structure rather than the life and the needs of the individuals. As a consequence, the cities' development was antithetical to nature, not just human nature. Not only were men's feelings destroyed but the natural landscape was supplanted by the continuous growth of an artificial, distorted, hostile reality. Superstudio's assertions tended to reveal the treacherous deviations of a project in which not only nature and earth but also the deep psychic structures of the individual were sacrificed for the sake of necessity and survival, progress and civilisation.

In *The 12 Cautionary Tales* drawing and written language were considered as two equivalent logical systems; consequently, the iconographical apparatus that accompanied the written text was conceived as a parallel narration. The analytic drawings associated with the text were, in fact, fruit of exact mathematical calculations based on the cities' units of measurement. Every city had indeed its own unit of measurement in order to give the project an appearance of universality. Therefore, there was a direct correspondence between the images and the written

text that suggested that those urban descriptions were potentially a feasible project. With an analogous intention, six of the cities were also depicted through more realistic and evocative images, largely influenced by the covers of Urania's novels, at that time realised by Dutch artist Karel Thole. Visual metaphors of urban tendencies ranged from excessive mechanisation to the trivialisation and homologation of architecture, to the artificial beautification and treasuring of cities [9]. These images contributed to reinforce the prophetical tenor of the written tales. These graphical representations of an extremely suggestive power were a necessary complement to the project: not only did they help the reader to visualise the cities, they also drew connections between Superstudio's work and the artistic and architectural models which had inspired them. For instance, the virtual reality of the *City of the Hemispheres* illustrated by a surrealistic photomontage (derived from René Magritte's painting *Les fleurs de l'abime II*, 1928), recalled another Superstudio contemporary conceptual work, *Reflected Architecture*; reference to the "speaking architecture" of French Enlightenment was evident in the representation of the *Conical Terraced City*, with its ascendant power structure; the typical urban grid of American cities was reproduced to illustrate the *City of Order*; a similar organisation which was also applied to distribute the cosmetic structures of the *City of the Splendid Houses*, in which the walls of the residences were the support for "metal frames bearing silk-screened panels depicting any subject in bright colours […] the most popular is famous historical building […]" (Superstudio 1971, 742). The rhetoric of progress and mechanisation was revealed for example, through the images of the *Continuous Production Conveyor Belt city*, in the *Ville Machine Habitée*, and in the futuristic *Spaceship City*.

In the second part of the work, an *Epilogue* introduced the reader to a psychological test – as accurate as the ones which were published in popular magazines – in which extremely negative and degrading psychological profiles, accompanied by insults and sarcastic reprimands were traced depending on the number of cities that the reader had appreciated [9]. The path to spiritual and moral redemption was penned in the last lines of the *Epilogue*, the subsequent *Post scriptum* and in the depiction of a *Thirteenth City*, describing an alternative hypothesis to the oppressing and discouraging urban future illustrated earlier. A short *Post scriptum* (appearing in other versions of Superstudio's work) [10] explained the project of the 12 cities as a series of *contes philosophiques*, a way of critically approaching the problems of architecture as they were debated in architectural magazines, focusing on the necessary role of intellectuals and artists as guiding lights. *The Thirteenth City*, added to Casabella's version [11], being written by Natalini was radically different from the other 12 cities. The only city without a

name, a defined shape and a clear functioning, was described as an ideal, crystal made – like in the positive Expressionists utopias – evanescent, disappeared or invisible city. It was suspended in the sky above an immense and perhaps non-existent green field, maybe far away in time and space. It may still have been considered as an ideal model of life and society in which people could continue to believe, restart the planning process and their life project in the opposite direction, from civilisation towards nature. Like in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* (Gargiani-Lampariello, 2010, 98), people who observed the city could see only its shadow under particular light conditions. Consequently, they were unable to seize the city's characteristics and to recognise its exemplary qualities [12]. Therefore, the *Thirteenth City* could be interpreted not as a new positive utopia, but as the allegory of a society who is unable or unwilling to seek truth and wisdom.

Superstudio's hope in the possibilities of an architecture freed from all super structural conditionings, which realised itself as order, logic, and purity, was a constant presence in the theoretical works of the group. Therefore, while *The 12 Cautionary Tales* shed light on the risks of an uncontrolled development of various tendencies of the contemporary capitalist civilisation, the project for an "environment" that the group presented at the exhibition "Italy: the new domestic landscape" organised at the Museum of Modern Art of New York in 1972 displayed the image of a free and pacified society. This event, organised under the supervision of Emilio Ambasz and sponsored by the most important Italian industries (Eni, Anonima Castelli, Olivetti, Fiat, Abet Print, Alitalia), celebrated Italian design and tried to clarify its critical and theoretical purposes as well. One of its sections was dedicated to 12 *Environments*, created purposely for the exhibition on the base of the "Design Program" that was sent to a number of selected participants in order to ask them "to propose microenvironments and microevents… design the spaces and artifacts that singly or collectively, support domestic life; and… demonstrate the ceremonial and ritual patterns in which they may be used" (Ambasz 1972, 139-140). Superstudio's environment was *Supersurface (An Alternative Model of Life on Earth)*, a film of 35 mm, in colour with sound.

Referring to the last concepts developed by Herbert Marcuse in his essay *Eros and Civilization*, *Supersurface* described a new type of neutral environment, a space built around a network of human relations that were not alienated and in which men could finally exert their vital functions in a complete freedom of expression, without external influences, thanks to a minimalist lifestyle made only possible by a rational and equal distribution of the resources, symbolised by the Cartesian surface on which all the described activities took place [13]. This twofold vision of

society and architecture, apparently in conflict, represents the two sides of the same coin: *The 12 Cautionary Tales* does not correspond to a reaction of discouragement to the disappearance of the illusions created by the excesses of rationality, but to a critical inner dimension of architecture itself; an admonishment to never losing a fair detachment from the political or technological instruments employed to realise the optimal, alternative plans, without being swept away from their not always unconditioned positive potentialities. *The 12 Cautionary Tales*, works in conclusion as a corrective to the excesses contained in the utopian aspirations. *Supersurface*, agreeing with Marcuse's theories, confirms the end of utopia – and the presence of architecture as a positive issue – describing it through the predictable development of a freed civilisation, the product of the improvement of perfected technology in an advanced industrial society.

CRITICAL FORTUNE AND REDISCOVERY OF SUPERSTUDIO'S WORK

Although Superstudio gave an original contribution to the new-born science fiction scene, from a literary standpoint *The 12 Cautionary Tales* had no impact on the young Italian fictional panorama of the time. There has been speculation (Lang and Menking, 2003, 23-24), on the probable connection between the writer Italo Calvino – one of the few Italian novelists that showed an interest in science fiction literature – and Superstudio: *The 12 Cautionary Tales* was in fact mentioned in an unsigned review dated 5th December 1971 on page 29 of the weekly Il Mondo, whose cultural editor was at the time, Calvino himself. Calvino started to work around 1970 on his famous book *Invisible Cities* published in 1972. This work also had an enormous influence on a whole generation of architects helping them to envisage how cities could appear without the limitations of modern urban theory.[14]

The graphic legacy of *The 12 Cautionary Tales* had a stronger impact. In 1978, writer Robert Sheckley asked the group's permission to publish *The 12 Cautionary Tales* in an anthology on science fiction cities, later brought out with the title *Futuropolis*. On that occasion, Frassinelli decided to write a new *Epilogue* and a new tale, called *The Last City*, stating that the previous *Epilogue*

> had irreparably exceeded the events; during those months in fact, for the first time people started to speak about the N bomb (the neutron bomb that eliminates all the human beings from the explosion area leaving intact the material infrastructure) that

seemed to me more a philosophical idea than a military invention; by far it exceeded the descriptions of the 12 cities that were inspired to situations much less radical than this one, so definitive (Frassinelli 1978) [15].

Therefore, in *The Last City* Frassinelli imagined the ensuing consequences arising from the use of the N-bomb. While the prose was ironic, less dark than in his previously literary experiments, the contents remained extremely pessimistic. *The Last City* as well as the new *Epilogue* remained nonetheless unpublished: Sheckley indeed chose to reduce the texts space in the book, but published the illustrations of *The 12 Cautionary Tales*.

Being one of the most well-known Superstudio's projects, *The 12 Cautionary Tales* has since its conception been re-published numerous times in magazines, monographs of the group's work and in many exhibition catalogues, thus losing a part of its original force due to the displacement and the changes in the editing. Even if the influence of *The 12 Cautionary Tales* survives today, contributing to fully illustrating the richness and the breadth of the critical debate that surrounded the shape of the city and its development in the early 1970s, this work needs, in fact, to be fully understood, to be read in its original context, that of the architectural journals in which it was originally published [16].

The critical fortune of Superstudio's work from the architectural point of view proved to be significant and enduring. *The 12 Cautionary Tales*, relying primarily on a strong literary and philosophical background and on the efficiency of its language and visual communication, contributed to instilling new life to the debate on architecture and city development models. Moreover, Superstudio's contribution can be recognised as a fundamental starting point for the creation of and experimentation with a different concept of the relationship between city and architecture, from which recent avant-garde's experiences spread: architects such as Rem Koolhas, Leon Krier and Bernard Tschumi were all Natalini's students while he was teaching at the Architectural Association in London, in 1970-1971.

The relevance of *The 12 Cautionary Tales* to the present, witnessed by the past years increased consideration of Superstudio's productions, relates to the association between the group's work and topical subjects: implications on current societal dilemmas are still far-reaching. Worries and struggles that were present over forty years ago – from the reassessment of suburbs to the exploitation of workers to the lack and conservation of natural sources – are unfortunately still present and even amplified. The presence of these elements is already sufficient to underline the dramatic contradictions of our society, its lack of political conscience,

but today, new concerns linked to globalisation issues are especially present in the field of architecture and city planning, where the dangerous stance of using a unique model, repeatable and identical everywhere is patent. The recuperation of Superstudio's avant-gardist concepts, through dedicated exhibitions and new historical and critical surveys therefore represents a revealing symptom of the state of contemporary architectural and urban research that still consider their dissenting and imaginary dimensions as vital instruments to reflect on today's consumer society, pursuing the struggle for a better world.

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NOTES

[1] This definition was employed by Friedrich Pollock in a 1941 essay in which he tried to underline the changes that occurred in the capitalist system during the 20th century, regrouping them under the definition of "State Capitalism" (Pollock, 1941 IX, 2, 200-255).

[2] The topic related to the "Culture Industry" was thoroughly analysed in the third part of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The term created by Adorno underlines that the user is not the "subject" of this Industry but that, on the contrary, he has the passive role of the "object". Adorno also judges the expression "mass media" negatively: "the very word mass-media, specially honed for the culture industry, already shifts the accent onto harmless terrain. Neither is it a question of primary concern for the masses, nor of the techniques of communication as such, but of the spirit which sufflates them, their master's voice". (Adorno, 2011, 106).

[3] The original citation in the book is in French (translation provided by the author). (Huxley 2004, XXVII).

[4] See, for instance, the fourth issue of *Archigram* magazine. Archigram used however science fiction to prefigure positive utopias based on the intensive development of sophisticated technology.

[5] *I Romanzi di Urania* ("Urania's Novels") is an Italian science fiction series published by Mondadori since October 10, 1952. The first issue featured the novel *The Sands of Mars* by Arthur C. Clarke. Its first editor was Giorgio Monicelli, also credited with the invention of the word *fantascienza*, meaning science fiction in Italian. From 1964 to 1985 the curators of the series were renowned Italian writers Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini, who authored a few science fiction short stories published under pseudonyms.

[6] Romanzi di fantascienza in Studio al dicembre 2002. Archivio Superstudio. Over the course of this research, the author has had several conversations with Piero Frassinelli and Adolfo Natalini on their predilection for science fiction.

[7] Following a usual practice inside the group, all of Superstudio's projects were presented as a collective work. However, it is important to highlight that Frassinelli, who unlike the other members of Superstudio had a peculiar background in between that of anthropology and architecture, was actually the author of *The 12 Tales* and of the iconographical apparatus of the project as well. *The 13th City* was later written by Natalini.

[8] The other didactic projects were: *Reflected Architecture* and *Interplanetary Architecture*.

[9] The group's criticism of the excessive tendency to consider the aesthetic aspect of the cities by developing them with the single goal of mass tourism is also visible in a mocking article, *Rescue of Italian Centers*, written with a prophetic and apocalyptic tenor: an ironic method is proposed to rescue the historical centres of the famous Italian cities of Naples, Pisa, Venice, Milan, Rome and Florence. It was, actually, an allusion to a final act of destruction that completed the process of disintegration induced by the devastating actions of time and human exploitation to which these cities had been permanently subordinated. The image of Florence's monuments submerged by water was probably inspired by Thole's cover of the Italian edition of Ballard's *The Drowned World*, owned by Frassinelli and published in the Urania Series in 1963.

[10] For instance in A. Natalini 1979, or Gianni Pettena 1982.

[11] In Casabella's version, the profiles are interspersed with literary quotes of authors such as Franco Ferrini, John Donne, Franz Kafka, Marco Polo, Adolf Loos.

[12] Published in Casabella (Superstudio 1972, 49).

[13] The work presented in New York is part of a wider investigation on the great themes of human life that the group transformed into a project based on the *Five Fundamental Acts: Life, Education, Ceremony, Love and Death*. Each one of the Acts should have been described by a film – imagined first in storyboard format and later published as a series in the magazine Casabella – but only two of them, *Life* and *Ceremony* were realised; another two, *Education* and

Death, were developed in alternative media. The first film of this series, *Life, Supersurface*, was shown at the MoMA exhibition, and was sponsored by Anic-Lanerossi, a brand of the Eni group that after seeing the film refused to finance the rest of the project.

[14] A more recent study also suggests Calvino's hypothetical familiarity with Superstudio's work through the analysis of the literary relations between Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and *The 12 Cautionary Tales*. (Pisaniello 2009, 34-37).

[15] Unpublished text sent to the author by Piero Frassinelli, from his personal archive in Florence (translation provided by the author).

[16] To be coherent with this statement the author has deliberately avoided illustrating this article with pictures of *The 12 Cautionary Tales*.

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