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A Dream of the Perfect Map – Calvino's Invisible Cities

The cartographer's dream is that of a perfect map: a map that perfectly represents a territory, a dream of Divine knowledge; a map that has haunted the ideology of representation throughout history; a map so detailed that it coincides with real space. In a short parable, 'Museum, on Exactitude in Science[1] , Borges describes the mysterious gild of cartographers which charts such a map.

In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography (Borges 325).

Although Borges' narrative finishes with a nostalgic conclusion about a superfluous and forgotten discipline, the cartographer's dream of a perfect map has never ceased: it has merely varied throughout history. For medieval cartographers the perfect map included the physical cosmos and the spiritual one. In Dante's time the European 'mappa mundi' depicted one single landmass, the Northern Hemisphere, with Jerusalem in the middle and the world is variously shown as dominated or held by God. In the Psalter mappa mundi[2] , which is surmounted by an illustration of the Last Judgement, God holds a little dark red ball, the size of a golf ball – the world. Its size reminds us of the world's shrinkage due to the advancing technology of transport and communications of the 20th century. Borges' mystical Aleph on the other hand contains the whole cosmos within its

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confines (no bigger than the globe held by God on the Hereford map). In a sense the Aleph is a goal of cartography, its theology. Instead of God's gaze into the unknown distance (as on the Hereford map), Renaissance cartographers imagined the Ptolemaic human gaze looking down on the Earth. The cartographer's 'organ of sight' began to shift from the inner eye of the soul to the physical eye of the body: the idea of the globe as a whole observed by a 'roving human eye' is connected to the Renaissance idea of perspectivism. In many respects Renaissance concepts of space laid the foundations for the Enlightenment project. Maps were stripped of spiritual space, of their angels and their monsters; cartographers were involved in the production of abstract and functional systems based on mathematically rigorous depiction. By conceiving space as abstract, homogenous and universal, perspectivism and mathematical mapping enabled the era of great discoveries and colonization. Since then, the world has become more and more enmeshed in different maps, in different spaces, including that without volume, a new immaterial space of digital being. By constantly increasing digital connections of one site with thousands of others, cyberspace branches out in many directions at once, creating a labyrinthine web. Its expansion parallels the latest theory of cosmology, of an 'inflationary' period, during which the whole cosmos swelled from a microscopic point smaller than a proton to the size of a grapefruit in a fraction of a second. Paradoxically, we live in an ambiguous spatial construction: on one hand there seems to be a perfect map of the Empire that covers the territory (modern science masters both micro and macro worlds ever more precisely); on the other hand social theory reflects an overwhelming disorientation and confusion, characteristics of an existence within 'the ruins of the Map'. However, both premises of Borges' parable appear to be confusing. The map that covers the territory would confuse a traveller: does one navigate the actual or the virtual? Is the perfect map that would be a substitute for reality possible? Do we live in the 'Tattered Ruins of that Map'? Maybe the map does not mirror the real, but precedes the territory and opens new, as yet undiscovered spaces. Or, better still, we should invent new maps. Borges' parable teems with many readings describing postmodern cartography's attempt to map the territory, or reality, and at the same time show the impossibility of such an endeavour.

In this essay I focus on narrative strategies of Italo Calvino in his Invisible Cities and his attempt to map the invisible.[3] I will show that Calvino's ways to map the invisible crystallize the tension

between structuralist spatialization on the one hand and deceptive heterotopic isolation on the other, which ultimately results in the rhyzomic sprouting of a zigzag line. The slogan for navigation in Calvino's Esmeralda – "the shortest distance between two points is not the straight line but a zigzag" (Calvino 88) is the hymn for a new multiplicity, for a new mapping that correlates with the unrestrained idea of the text and intertextuality. I argue that Borges' and Calvino's 'maps' converge with the theories that emphasized openness, decentredness, multiplicities, multivocality, celebrated by Barthes' idea of the text under the motto "My name is legion for we are many" (Barthes 160).

A Lost Atlas

The first dreamer was given the vision of the palace and he built it; the second, who did not know of the other's dream was given the poem about the palace. If the plan does not fail, some reader of "Kubla Khan" will dream on a night centuries removed from us, of marble or of music. This man will not know that two others also dreamed. Perhaps the series of dreams has no end, or perhaps the last one who dreams will have the key (Borges 17).[4]

Cities present great difficulties to cartographers because they are so crowded and complex and full of different signs. The density and complexity of the life and fabric of cities cannot be easily mapped because there is an immense concentration of diverse hybridity. Cities are like a text, full of different intersections, points of view, intentions, desires; cities form plans, structures; they are the complex layering of power from its most general pre-textual forms to the ideology of the city plan or text itself. Semioticians feast on the city stroll since everything opens up in textual tapestry: texts of streets, text of movies, television programmes, magazines, of towers, bridges, dark and desolate blind alleys. The traditional topographical map of the city indicates ground plans of buildings, streets and railways, but other dimensions, the height of buildings, older layers, vistas and panoramas either fade away or require a new mapping. The realization of the map's full potential with its traces of the movements, breath of energies of citizens into architecture is made possible by mapping, or by an infinite number of cartographers producing an infinite number of plans.

Every city may be used as a metaphor of language.

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with additions from various periods. Cities have never stopped developing; there are no fixed boundaries to all that they might encompass (Ludwig Wittgenstein quoted in Thiher 27-28).[5]

Cities are constantly transforming themselves, like languages, from the cosmological centrality of ancient cities to the perspective of the Renaissance individual composed in the universe, to the social, functional space of modernism, to the postmodern conception of urban fabric as fragmented, a 'palimpsest' of past forms superimposed upon each other. Spaces of very different worlds seem to collapse upon each other, much as the world's commodities are assembled in the supermarket and all juxtaposed in the postmodern city.

Calvino's Invisible Cities are ontologically grounded in different ways, similarly to McHale's[6] description of our postmodern ontological landscape as unprecedented in human history, at least in the degree of its pluralism. These 55 cities are divided into nine sections – eleven sets of five cities called in order of appearance: Cities and memory, Cities and desire, Cities and signs, Thin cities, Trading cities, City and eyes and City and names. Are these cities characterized by monstrous propinquity, like Foucault's heterotopia, or are there some other possible connections, networks, spirals to spark a narrative? Zaira consists of relationships between measurements of its space and the events of its past; Melania, cities of the dead where everybody has numerous roles; Armalia, forest of pipes, taps, showers, without buildings; Tamara, where citizens do not see things but its images, and so on. Invisible Cities, its streets, its squares, its stone arches that shaped the past or desire, are like words or sentences sprawling in the vast network where the inside and the outside are blurred.

The cartographers, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan played a huge part in the creation of the elusive Atlas into which meaning cannot be read by the traditional sense of logic and language as well as architecture. How far may this interaction between them and the text produce the map of Invisible Cities? How much is their reading of the Atlas limited by the discourse of a particular time or the result of the tension between Khan's wish to read a text and a map of cities as unified whole – or

Polo's fractured, self-referential and contradictory cartography of the invisible? Or can the roles not be separated at all? Is this Atlas of Invisible Cities merely an image compounded of other texts or ultimately does it have some representational quality illuminating our postmodern landscape, creating a unique concept of space, like heterotopia or hyperreal or a rhizome?

The Cartographers of the unusual, impossible urban space of Invisible Cities, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, seem to exist thanks to Polo's loosely organized series of accounts of places in Asia – Il Milione, which is a reliable guide to the reader. It is as if the italicized sections of Invisible Cities with Polo's reports of the invisible contextualizing a singular city within the broader context of the Atlas offers comfort to the reader because of its fixed point of reference, the ability to plunder other discourses. But the narrative frame, rather than illuminating the dark accessible corners of cities, generates new readings that further complicate the overall location of cities on the Atlas. In addition to that, the narrative refers to the past recoverable only through Polo's text that makes his presence ambiguous.

> *Calvino's Marco Polo in Invisible Cities both is and is not the historical Marco Polo. How can we, today, 'know' the Italian explorer? We can only do so by way of texts – including his own (Il Milione), from which Calvino parodoxically takes his frame tale, his travel plot, and his characterisation (Hutcheon 37).*[7]

Or is it that the textual Polo is subsequently decomposed, scattered through a dreamlike geometrized imaginary of the cities?

Even if the reader follows traces of the historical Marco Polo, she or he cannot be sure he is telling the story. The passages in italics are narrated in the third person, with the dialogue of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in quotes except in the seventh section where they appear as dramatis personae. The omniscient narrator fades into a puzzling algebra of the Invisible Cities. And the narration of the cities is more confusing: occurring first in Zaira, the I debuts with the standard self-effacement of the narrator: "In vain, great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions" (Calvino 10), emerging in Eutropia as a brief intrusion in the third person to describe its impossible sum with the persuasive: "Now I shall tell you how" (Calvino 64). This directness, associated with the topos of sincerity is undone by an unreliable narrator: "Kublai Khan does not

necessarily believe everything Marko Polo says"(Calvino 5) which sets up cities as lies or metafictions but does not, at the outset, destroy storytelling as a conscious process. The confusion about narrators coupled with the suggestion that a city has multiple names questions the numerical arrangement as well as the situating role of the italicized passages aimed at sustaining rhizomic narrative space. In 'Cybernetics and Ghost'[8] Calvino has envisaged a writing machine that resembles the narrative strategies of Invisible Cities as well as the Barthian death of the author in which the writer's authority has been dispersed in a multiplicity of different 'I's':

The 'I' of the author is dissolved in the writing. The so-called personality of the writer exists within the very act of writing: it is product and the instrument of the writing process. A writing machine that has been fed an instruction appropriate to the case could also devise an exact and unmistakable 'personality' of an author, or else it could be adjusted in such a way as to evolve or change 'personality' with each work it composes (Calvino 15).

Therefore, Invisible Cities are not just the illusion or vision of the first person narrator but the product of a labyrinthine "I" of a dead author. They traverse historical epochs and maps, and in an endless combinatory effort create a strange urban space that seems to shape, to construct an impossible architecture of desires, dreams, memories. Calvino suggests that there is no one 'entrance' into the city, that it can be anywhere, each street, each corner, house, each fabric or urban design.

The book in which I think I managed to say most remains Invisible Cities, because I was able to concentrate all my reflections, experiments, and conjectures on a single symbol: and also because I built up a many-faceted structure in which each brief text is close to the others in a series that does not imply logical sequence or hierarchy, but a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple, ramified conclusions (Calvino 71).

Even if the reader or a traveller is invited wherever he/she likes, the invitation is in Barthesian fashion, where the space of writing is without depth, without configuration created by a hidden, secret meaning. Upon entering, the reader must orient his/herself in the city. A metaphor of the map indicates holes, fissures, gaps, a space for a body.

Navigating Through The City Of Esmeralda

My writing desk is something like an island: it can be the same here as in another country. And, moreover, cities transform into a single city, an uninterrupted city in which all the differences that once characterised each are lost. This idea, which runs through my book The Invisible Cities, has come to me from a way of living which is by now common with many of us: a continuous passage from one airport to another, making life nearly the same in whichever city that we find ourselves (Calvino quoted in Carter 8).

There are innumerable entrances; the architecture and city planning defy plain and acceptable Euclidean geometry. We will be trying to map different points of entrance, if there is connection. It could be anywhere, even in the dark of a sewer, full of rats and rodents, where the Signifier lies in the dark, and the cities are really invisible. The city is Esmeralda.

In Esmeralda, city of water, a network of canals and a network of streets span and intersect each other. To go from one place to another you have always the choice between land and boat: and since the shortest distance between two points in Esmeralda is not a straight line but a zigzag that ramifies in tortuous optional routes, the ways that open to each passerby are never two, but many, and they increase further for those who alternate a stretch by boat with one on dry land.

And so Esmeralda's inhabitants are spared the boredom of following the same streets every day. And that is not all: the network of routes is not arranged on one level, but follows instead an up-and-down course of steps, landings, cambered bridges, hanging streets. Combining segments of the various routes, elevated or on ground level, each inhabitant can enjoy every day the pleasure of a new itinerary to reach the same places. The most fixed and calm lives in Esmeralda are spent without any repetition.

Secret and adventurous lives, here as elsewhere, are subject to greater restrictions. Esmeralda's cats, thieves, illicit lovers move along higher, discontinuous ways, dropping from a rooftop to a balcony, following gutterings with acrobats' steps. Below, the rats run in the darkness of the sewers, one behind the other's tail, along with conspirators and smugglers; they peep out of manholes and drainpipes, they slip through double bottoms and ditches, from one hiding place to

another they drag crusts of cheese, contraband goods, kegs of gunpowder, crossing the city's compactness pierced by the spokes of underground passages.

A map of Esmeralda should include, marked in different coloured inks, all these routes, solid and liquid, evident and hidden. It is more difficult to fix on the map the routes of the swallows, who cut the air over the roofs, dropping long invisible parabolas with their still wings, darting to gulp a mosquito, spiralling upward, grazing a pinnacle, dominating from every point of their airy paths all the points of the city (Calvino 88-89).

Consider Esmeralda once more, the city of numerous routes, hanging streets, canals where each passer-by has more than two options, many options that constantly increase. The same goes for the reader: lines and routes, interpretations and meaning productions. The narrative stratum is not characterized by homogeneity. There is no centre, no consolation of unifying meaning. So the critic or theorist thus becomes an urban planner of constantly shifting, changing routes. The urban planner maps futile relations that would ultimately convey the map of all cities, with all its ramifications and secret recesses known to its denizens. Esmeralda is full of narrators, perspectives, lines, alleys that a divine but absent presence tries to subsume under its hierarchical model. Passersby are immersed in the labyrinth of streets of Esmeralda, with infinite narration (depending on their route) or, on the other hand, with infinite possibilities of reading their routes (so there is no repetition); in the deep secret of Esmeralda's underground teeming with rats and conspirators and narrative events not known to its denizens that live above. How then one can know if Esmeralda exists? One could be immersed in one's own private circle of darkness or routes.

Esmeralda resembles our contemporary sense of space, the loss of the dimensional mechanics of ancient Greek geometry, conformity in unity, entity, symmetry. "Ours 'is a world of dispersed or scattering structures whose amplitude –contrary to the structuralists – we can no longer measure'" (Virilio quoted in Gibson 9)![9] Hence the resonance for narrative theories and their inability to cope with the explosion of different, disparate spaces, the crisis of representation. Virilio claims that this spatial confusion since the Renaissance onwards leads to

the crisis in the conceptualisation of 'narrative' [that] appears as the other side of the crisis of the conceptualisation of 'dimension' as geometrical narrative, the discourse of measurement of a reality visibly offered to all. The crisis of the grand narrative that gives rise to the micro-narrative finally becomes the crisis of the narrative of the grand and the petty (Virilio 25).[10]

Thus Esmeralda anticipates this crisis and rejects the possibility of an omnipresent narrator as well as the meaning situated in the central square. Swallows flying over Esmeralda, dominating "from every point of their airy paths all the points of the city"(Calvino 89) cannot classify and signify different narrative strategies, different spaces in the city of Esmeralda. Boundaries between one narrative 'rank' and another are almost impossible to cross: swallows cannot penetrate deep textual strata where conspirators and rats gnaw their way into the text. In addition, innumerable combinations of possible routes, create labyrinth without labyrinth since their fortuitous routes neither have the same nor the final destination (cities seen from a camel or a boat are not the same cities). It is only in exceptional circumstances that moves between strata may take place (maybe rats or conspirators); narratology functions in the terms of geometry, and urban planning which produces text as a box or a pyramid is not valid for Esmeralda. How, then, could rats and conspirators move around, map their dark trail? Are their dark sewers connected to the other cities? Or, rather, is there another way out: is it possible to fix the routes of swallows and to produce a map of the world? Cities are surrounded by the desert, the space of the non-signified, the disconnected. If divided or separated how could the rats and conspirators be signified in their secret, imperceptible movement through the darkness? However, Esmeralda epitomizes a possible way of reading, not only contained within its urban design.

A Mystery Of A Zigzag Line

The polymorphic visions of the eyes and the spirit are contained in uniform lines of small or capital letters, periods, commas, parentheses – pages of signs, packed as closely together as grains of sand, representing the many-colored spectacle of the world on a surface that is always the same and always different, like dunes shifted by the desert wind (Calvino 99).[11]

The instruction on how to move around Esmeralda may at the same time suggest how to read Calvino's Invisible Cities. It cannot be narratology with its roots in structuralism, in an overly geometric schematization of texts, a drive to universalize and essentialize Esmeralda's urban design, a supposedly uncovered city plan, a constant tendency to conceive an essential universal scientific or divine grid of its streets and squares. Calvino's Esmeralda opposes narrative theory that constructs the space of the text as a unitary, homogenous space, determined by whatever constant. Esmeralda defies the supposed clarity, uniformity, purity and universality of narrative space, and paradoxically hints at the strategy of reading Invisible Cities when it says – "the shortest distance between two points is not the straight line but a zigzag" (Calvino 88). The statement that defies our knowledge of geometry as a way of reading, a linear reading, strongly echoes the Deleuzoguattarian itinerary and their preference for "being an abstract and broken line, zigzag that slips 'between'" (Deleuze & Parnet 40-41). There is no linear development of the text; there is no simple orientation in cities; as if Calvino's writing machine advises the readers to pursue their own pathways. A broken, zigzag line. Calvino's work is a burrow. A rhizome – an endless pattern, in which everything is linked to everything else, counterpoised to the centre, to the simple city plan, a reading that would unify the text in some final interpretation. The metaphor of the rhizome is meant to signify the anti-hierarchical, undisciplined form of lateral, multi-branching growth.

Like heterotopia, rhizomes following Deleuze's metaphor of bulbs and tubers, spread everywhere without linearity, hierarchy, genealogy. The rhizome is an attempt to subvert and disorganize all categories of Western philosophy, the project of thinking differently. Therefore, the metaphor of the rhizome is counterpoised to the tree, and signifies an anti-hierarchical, undisciplined form of lateral point for point, from a simple inversion of the rules of the Discourse on Method of Descartes. Kafka's writing is 'a rhizome, a burrow' – an uncentred and meandering growth like crab grass, a complex aleatory network of pathways like a 'rabbit warren'.[12] The rhizome is an attempt to resist subordination, classification and any interpretation rendering any part of its vast network into fixed meaning, but at the same time to keep these immeasurable multiplicities moving in their numerous interrelations. The rhizome, like the routes of Esmeralda (the ways open to each passerby are never two, but many, and they increase further), is reducible "neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived

from the One, or to which One is added (n+1)" (Deleuze & Guattari 6). Like Invisible Cities, the rhizome "pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flights" (Deleuze & Guattari 7). Hence, it is not simply applicable to the structuralist narrative model, which has no vocabulary adequate to such developments, since it consists not only of the idea of a pluralized conception of space, but also pluralizes the spaces of knowledge.

Polo And Khan's Mapping Of The Invisible

I constantly play cat and mouse with the reader, letting the reader briefly enjoy the illusion that he's free for a little while, that he's in control. And then I quickly take the rug out from under him; he realises with a shock that he's not in control, that it is always I, Calvino, who is in total control of the situation (Calvino quoted in Carter 11).

The tension between structuralist spatialization on the one hand, and deceptive heterotopic isolation and a rhizomic sprouting on the other hand, seems to correspond to a conversation between the Emperor Kublai Khan and the traveller Marco Polo and their attempt to map the invisible. The pursuit of the unity, of frames, of unifying form or principle or entelechy, of an Atlas that holds together the invisible is the role of the reader accustomed to the Western way of excluding opposites. Yet what holds everything together: is it the Emperor's Atlas? The quest for a "pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing" (Calvino 6) may refer not just to a projection of the Emperor's thirst for order, for possession, but to an attempt to keep the heterogeneities of his Empire from dissolution. When Khan hears from Marco about the diverse cities of his Empire, he seeks their secret unity. If the fact that they belong to his Empire proves to be extraneous to their description (that is, if there is no trace of that entity in the descriptions), then Empire may be a delusion. Marco experiences one unique city after another, Khan exists to assert that they are all part of one thing and that the fact is patent in them. Empire asserts a uniformity that starts with mailboxes, flags, gauges or railways, and extends to essences.

So the process of territorialization affects the deepest recesses of the subconscious from the religious zeal of mediaeval times to modern cultural industries, advertisments, different strategies,

different ways in that Deleuzoguattarian plays between paranoid, molar, and schizophrenic, molecular forces. The text, as the city, is a field of forces, desires, lines, routes, ways: desire for an end of narrative equals the desire to get out of the city or decipher its map. The Emperor's Atlas may be 'rotting like a corpse', devastated, or crystalline like a 'precious stone'. Still the quest for its final meaning never stops. Kublai Khan may be an internal reader, an internal cop, internal monomaniac, in the perusing of the whole. His quest for order, unity, may also be an allusion to modernist reading, always burdened with the strain between a particular text and the demand for textual unity.

On the other hand Marco Polo seems to resist subjugation by an abstract model of signs, of mathematical or scientific structure. Against the emerging order of Empire, he plunges into diversity, differences, an assemblage. He employs different strategies of communication, pantomime, emblems, and numerous things as substitution for words. The traveller produces a heterotopic confusion of multiform treasures. But, after all, he/she too pursues classification though wishing to preserve the Atlas's multiplicity. In order to 'protect' their rhizomic space, cities are narrated not only through Polo but through third person narrators, invisible narrators and ultimately the text itself.

The process of deciphering city plans and histories designates the same method, that of modern science – a laboratory where everything can be decomposed and again composed; literary theory – structuralism – strives at finding hidden, deep structures of literary work. Therefore, a metaphor of chess corresponds perfectly to the structuralist effort to create a model which accounts for all of the empirical manifestations in a system by finding deeper inner structures: invisible structures like the plans of the invisible cities. In addition to that, the number of combinations is inexhaustible: it equals the depth of the universe. Comparing the mind to a chessboard, amazed with the idea of infinite Ars Combinatoria, Calvino suggests that all "these are implicit in the overall code of mental plays according to the rules by which each of us, from one moment to the next, formulates his thoughts, swift or sluggish, cloudy or crystalline as they may be" (Calvino 8-9).

Kublai was a keen chess player; following Marco's movements, he observed that certain pieces implied or excluded the vicinity of other pieces and were shifted along certain lines. Ignoring the objects' variety of form, he could grasp the system of arranging one with respect to the others on

the majolica floor. He thought: 'if each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains' (Calvino 121).

Cannon's reading[13] of Invisible Cities suggests that Calvino contemplates the possibility of mapping the whole universe by finding "a cognitive code which would interpret and organise the universe" (Cannon 84) and by subsuming the whole novel under the metaphor of a chessboard that presents a method – a structural project. The analogy of a chessboard and grammar that make individual speech possible is usually used in Saussure's description of language. Cannon points out that through a similar analogy with the game of chess Khan strains to transform Polo's sometimes enigmatic or amorphous account into a map of his Empire. Supposedly, when he establishes 'the pattern' – discourse – he will have mastered the Empire. Just as Saussure notes that the use of ivory chessmen instead of wooden ones has no effect on the game of chess, says Cannon, so the Emperor discards Polo's trifles which cannot be classified under the system. Therefore the process of mapping implies a certain loss, especially when Polo's emblems and symbols have been replaced by an abstract arbitrary signifier. Abstraction reaches a higher level when Kublai Khan chooses a closed system of signs over the emblems, rendering Polo's travels superfluous. Interminable games of chess generate various combinations, which correspond to the invisible cities of his Empire. Finally, the structural mode, stripped to its essence, becomes a system of purely relational and abstract units devoid of content. As the reduction proceeds, the differences are abstracted and then erased and at the end "reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness" (Calvino 131). There is no straight line in Invisible Cities that would lead us to the nearest point, but a zigzag line, a rhizome, and Polo soon contraposes to that structural nothingness a myriad of new details. "The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai: Polo was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows"(Calvino 132).

Maybe Invisible Cities maps the universe which always pulsates from cosmic spirals of macrocosms to tiny particles of microcosms, but we still do not know the rules; as Hawkings says, we still do not have the divine mind. The chessboard might be the best metaphor for structuralism, but Calvino emphasises playing as well:

Just as no chess player will ever live long enough to exhaust all the combinations of possible moves for the thirty-two pieces on the chessboard, so we know (given the fact that our minds are chessboards with hundreds of billions of pieces) that not even in a lifetime lasting as long as the universe would one ever manage to make all possible plays (Calvino 8-9).[14]

If a chessboard best symbolizes the abstract structural model, the emphasis on movements is addressed to the player and the process of a game. To master the world of artificial signs by establishing the rules of the game as a total system independent of the 'reality' of his Empire hints at the ultimate collapse. Polo (like Calvino) is aware of the interminable continuity of the process, of a chameleon-like existence of signifiers changing their colours with each new 'movement' (context); the insistent activity of the signifier as it forms chains and cross-currents of meaning with other signifiers and, like the quantity of things inscribed in the little simple piece of wood, defies the orderly requirements of the signified. Who are the players? Are they stable, Saussurean subjects? Or do they too always change over the course of the game and conversation? Is not each movement of a chess figure launching into social space, contamination, interleaved, opaquely coloured by layers of semantic deposits resulting from the endless process of human struggle and interaction, even on the level of Beckettian misfits, outcast and beggars? As Calvino suggests, all that conversation might take place "between two beggars nicknamed Kublai Khan and Marco Polo; as if they sift through a rubbish heap" (Calvino 104) in an apocalyptic, futuristic landscape. The game of chess is thereby thrown from atlases, empires, histories-macrocosms to microcosms where the rules are the same: the game the beggars might play is an institution wielding power and domination by defining and excluding all wrong, 'mad' movements. The discourse of the game, according to Foucault, is always inseparable from power. Therefore, a metaphor of play (even though it cannot be separated from rules) better describes, in my opinion, Invisible Cities – as illustrating a transition from structuralism to poststructuralism, as a shift in Calvino's writing process from modernism to postmodernism.

Mapping The 'impossible' – Heterotopia And Rhizome

In these brief pieces, as in each episode in one of Gadda's novels, the least thing is seen as the center of a network of relationships that the writer cannot restrain himself from following, multiplying the details so that hidden descriptions and digressions become infinite. Whatever the starting point, the matter in hand spreads out and out, encompassing ever vaster horizons, and if it were permitted to go on further and further in every direction, it would end by embracing the entire universe (Calvino 107).[15]

Perhaps because of that the mapping of Khan's Empire seems so confusing. Hence, the various efforts of the critics to explain even the simplest routes remain unresolved. "The question which subtends the entire novel is whether such a map exists, whether the chaotic and disordered worlds can be reduced to a human law" (Cannon 84). Even the simplest statement of location proves to be too complicated, as some critics[16] strain to find the hints in 'the real city' that would unify the text: "This notion that Venice or some prototypical city unifies the text, a notion introduced at several points in both the frame and the accounts of particular cities" (Breiner 565), discredits and discards not only other possible places: for instance, beggars in the wasteland and the chain of association related to the industrial waste of modern cities, but also the interpretation of particular dreamlike travelogues. Breiner is aware of this interpretative violence claiming that notion is "of course explicitly rejected by Marco" (Breiner 565) and accuses Marco of perversity ("But Marco is often perverse" (Breiner 565)) in pursuing his interpretation. Bruno Ferraro[17] maps Invisible Cities by comparing its complex structure to the combination of "two sets of notions – narrative as a combinatory process and literature as challenger to the labyrinthine complexity of the world" (Ferraro 57).

Carol P. James[18] states that the novel shows a hesitant balancing on the threshold between the modern and postmodern: a double structure of narrativity and seriality. A secret numerology of the cities bears no relation to the narrative, "proper names … are also perceived as having no intrinsic meaning" (James 147). Also, despite palindromic aspects (the 5-4-3-2-1, the 1,2,3,4,5, the 11 sets of 5 + 55) and the symmetry there is a threat that 'mathesis universalis' prevails in some platonic metaphor suffocating the richness and uniqueness or narrative of a particular city. "The seriality of the cities forms an aporia with respect to the narrative. The strict (reversible but not expandable)

arrangement flouts the convention that narrative is going somewhere, is approaching an end or resolution" (James 148).

But aporia is not just between numbers and a narrative; each city is built on contradiction, on a paroxysm of opposition that freezes narrative in a crystalline structure in which inner existential tensions are illustrated in the city's architecture, in streets, in thousands of details or signs that create the rich texture and text of the city. And while the anxieties and dilemmas of their inhabitants are so clearly geometrized, the city plan, which would hence be expected to be most easily found, stays unresolved. "There is the city where you arrive for the first time, and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name: perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene" (Calvino 125). Opposition is in the vertical: "A sibyl, question about Marozia's fate, said: 'I see two cities: one of the rat, one of the swallow'" (Calvino 154). There is no simple line. Each line is blocked, forcing progression in multiplicity. As in the city of Esmeralda, the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line but a zigzag that ramifies routes. As there is no explanation of the frame, there is no way out of the city, no secure way.

In a sense, all attempts at mapping Invisible Cities illuminate something of their 'invisibility' – as a labyrinth, Venice as a prototype city, an aporia between seriality and narrativity, on the threshold between modernity and postmodernity – but at the same time they exclude the other: they fail to see the emerging of an unusual space. This space cannot be described by the old terminology since it is, as Eco[19] would classify it, an 'impossible world'. Invisible Cities are built on contradictions. In opposition to Western logic, they 'violate the law of the excluded middle', their travelogues encapsulate at the same time true and false. According to McHale (33), Eco refuses to regard worlds where certain propositions are both true and false as self-sustaining worlds.

> *The proper effect of such narrative constructions (be they sci-fi novels or avant-garde texts in which the very notion of self-identity is challenged) is just that of producing a sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort. So they arouse a sense of suspicion in respect to our common beliefs and affect our disposition to trust the most credited laws of the world of our encyclopaedia. They undermine the world of our encyclopaedia rather than build up another self-sustaining world (Eco quoted in McHale 33).*

Instead of meditating on the 'impossibility' of Invisible Cities, McHale puts emphasis on 'what': what kind of space is capable of accommodating so many incommensurable and mutually exclusive worlds.

Contradictions arise: how can three cities, each said to have absorbed the entire space of the Empire, coexist? If Trude is coextensive with the whole world, what room does that leave for Penthesilea or Cecilia, or indeed any of the other cities of the Empire? Perhaps Penthesilea, Cecilia and Trude are only different names for one and the same continuous city; but if so, why are their descriptions so dissimilar? What paradoxical kind of space does this Empire occupy? What kind of world is this? (McHale 43).

McHale's answer – heterotopia. It inspires my reading of the text.

The empire of Calvino's Great Khan is just such a heterotopia. Radically discontinuous and inconsistent, it juxtaposes worlds of incompatible structure. It violates the law of the excluded middle: logically, either. Trude is everywhere or Cecilia is everywhere: in the Empire of Invisible Cities, both are everywhere, and so are Penthesilea and the other continuous cities (McHale 44).

Heterotopia exists only as a relation between different elements rather than being derived from within itself. It is not the relationship within a space that is the source of this heterotopic relationship, for such an arrangement, seen from within that space, may make perfect sense. It is how such a relationship is seen from outside, from the standpoint of another perspective, that allows a space to be seen as heterotopia. In other words, being outside Kublai Khan's vision of his Empire enables us to perceive heterotopia, while the rhizome is always the inside. Heterotopia cannot be used as classificatory model of any narrative space, since in itself it resists the flow of a narrative by emphasizing isolated, incongruous, heterogeneous entities. In Borges' essay on the bizarre, impossible taxonomy of animals that belonged to Chinese emperors, boundaries are transgressed by a simple alphabetical order. But how can the boundaries be transgressed to enable the narrative flow and, at the same time, preserve the void gaping around things and fragments and sentences?

My thinking about narrative has concerned itself with two distinct kinds of space: the space of presentation (naively presumed to be the homogeneous space of the signified), and the space of

the model of the theory. According to Foucault, under a premonition of the worst kind of disorder that lurks somewhere beneath the lost grid, this heterotopic, unthinkable space can be only the language, enclosed in the text itself (Order of Things), or later (in his essay 'Of Other Places') it may be situated as a site outside the text. Postulated as a model to describe narrative (by McHale) it has been haunted like a structuralist, narratological imaginary by dreams of geometric purity, since numerous lines and gaps separate the narrative continuum, and as a site in 'reality' it generates confusion and anxiety by its unmasterable, unclassified profusion. Foucault, by comparing utopias with heterotopias, seriously suspects the narratibility of his own construct.

This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula; heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentence (Foucault xviii).[20]

Instead of heterotopic isolation, cities form a rhizome, a multiplicity that cannot be mastered by discovering a deep hidden structure. The cities constantly undermine postulated dispersion and their heterotopic exclusiveness by interweaving their thematic categories in a vague interrelation. The cities are not static, not examples or cases but nodes in circulation. Although their maps refuse to give themselves over to a thematic pattern that would support, replicate, or mirror the numerical pattern, cities are somehow connected: the reading of each city shows it to contain its other. The doubling within the cities takes many forms; they remain incomplete forever moving from one state to another: the city alludes to other cities. Narrative is a demand for narrative, and there is no absolute gap between the cities. Topology is never just the mathematical becoming rhetorical, as James claims, but maps and themes interconnect into an imaginary geography of Invisible Cities.

The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyoto-Osake, without shape (Calvino 139).

A Rhizome – A Web Of Constant Flow

I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language (Calvino 3)![21]

Although each city producing narrative and logical uneasiness is seemingly trapped in a paroxysm of contradiction, it bitterly resists unitarism, one-dimensional reading, it subverts the Centre, it screams and wages a war on all totalities (like Lyotard). And yet, Calvino's writing machine preserves, in spite of all obstacles, a desire for story, a desire for narrative. The activity of the reader, he predicts in his essay 'Cybernetics and Ghost', will increase in the futuristic electronic landscape enabling a limitless possibility of composing and decomposing. He says: "The work will continue to be born, to be judged, to be destroyed or constantly renewed on contact with the eye of the reader. What will vanish is the figure of the author" (Calvino15-16). The emphasis on the process of reading is preserved in Invisible Cities by asserting the importance of 'the ear':

I speak and speak… but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. The description of the world to which you lend a benevolent ear is one thing; the description that will go the rounds of the groups of stevedores and gondoliers on the street outside my house the day of my return is another… It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear (Calvino135)![22]

Therefore, these numerous instructions, though vague or puzzling or in contradiction to the possible mapping of the Atlas with its cities, the role of the reader's effort calculated into the baffling 'structure', sometimes to complete the story, sometimes to find his or her way out to the other cities – everything indicates a rhyzomic, not heterotopic space for Calvino's narrative.

Unlike heterotopia, rhizomes are not closed into separate compartments, into monstrous propinquity, but they form the texture and network of communication by which we establish our line of escapes from arborescent structures. The state and any Domination of forces lurk everywhere constantly moving to new lines. The rhizome, like heterotopia, contains juxtaposed worlds which are not totally separated but form a web of constant flow. In the introduction to A Thousand

Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Deleuze and Guattari analyze the rhizome once more, but this time in the much broader context of economy and the history of desiring production. The rhizome, and rhizomic space, is not just outside – like the galleries and corridors of Austro-Hungarian courts, invisible cities described by Marco Polo – but inside: "the two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd" (Deleuze and Guattari 3).

A parallel reading of the rhizome's approximate characteristics and an intrinsic web of Invisible Cities reveals many similarities: (a) any point of a rhizome can be connected to or must be connected to any other, as though imaginary city plans flow into Marco Polo's account or Kublai Khan's remarks, or an invisible narrator; (b) in the rhizome just as in Invisible Cities there are no points or positions, since multiplicity never allows itself to be overcoded; points of fixed meaning in Invisible Cities are eradicated by constant contradiction within each city (Moriana like a face on a sheet of paper "which can neither be separated nor look [looked] at each other" (Calvino 105) or on the whole Atlas; (c) a rhizome can be broken off at any point and reconnected following one of its lines ("in the seed of the city of just, a malignant seed is hidden" (Calvino162)); (d) the rhizome is antigenealogical, as the cities do not hide inner, deeper structure; (e) the rhizome has its own outside with which it makes another rhizome; therefore, the rhizomic whole has neither outside nor inside (Cities sprawl over the Atlas, through Marco Polo Accounts and the metaphysical presence of a third person narrator, like Derrida's explanation of language); (f) rhizomes as Cities are in a state of constant modification; (g) no one can provide a global description of the whole rhizome, as Kublai Khan could not master his Empire by an abstract system of signs; (h) a structure that cannot be described globally can only be described as a potential sum of local descriptions, which is mainly Marco Polo's intention; (i) whereas in heterotopia the gaze from outside prevails, Invisible Cities (like a rhizome) is a web of connections without an outside; and Marco Polo, as well as Kublai Khan (although from another angle and not through the immediacy of experience), can look at cities only from the inside.

Finally, the map of the rhizome as Invisible Cities is connected to the maps of promised lands, of the summation of all the cities into one, but not by hierarchy. Utopia cannot be a fable enclosed in

only one possible narrative, in any grand-narrative of modernist provenanceis; it is not fixed, it always changes intensities, it is not projected into a rosy future or the past. It might be becoming in the present, yet its map constantly changes its colours, its borders, its explanation. That is Polo's answer to the Emperor who asked to "which of these futures the favouring winds are driving us":

I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them. If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop. Perhaps while we speak, it is rising, scattered, within the confines of your empire: you can hunt for it, but only in the way I have said (Calvino 164).

This Is Not A Sentence: This Is Not A Map

Society manifests itself as failure, as landslide, as gangrene (or, in its less catastrophic appearance, as day to day survival); and literature survives, dispersed among the crevices and gaps, as the consciousness that no collapse will be so definitive as to exclude other collapses (Calvino quoted in Ricci 112).

Neither heterotopia nor the rhizome is an elaborated methodology of literary criticism, so they cannot be simply applied as an overall literal production nor inaugurated as a specific postmodern quality. Although they always beguile the reader into reading them as allegory or parable, in search of a second meaning beneath the surface of a narrative, the reader can never be sure what he or she 'hunts' because the perfect city always shifts and changes. Paradoxically, ambiguity, instability, is not just at the level of allegory, but sometimes pervades nouns, sentences, and assessments of heterotopic or rhizomic space – especially when the text is a priori burdened with parabolas, allegories and other hermeneutical strategies intended to penetrate to the hidden meaning. An unusual, bizarre juxtaposition of things, of cities marks out heterotopic characteristics of Invisible Cities. In order to preserve its heterotopic quality Calvino's language resembles Foucault's analysis of Magritte's painting in the essay 'This is not a Pipe'. Foucault argues that heterotopia signifies not through a metaphor (because metaphors through resemblance create hierarchy) but through similitude. Likewise the manner in which Magritte explores in his paintings:

meaning is dislocated through a series of deferrals that are established between a signifier and a signified rather than directly referent. Some of Calvino's cities resemble Magritte paintings, like a forest of pumps hanging in the air without buildings. This shift from modes of representing through resemblance to similitude is vital to a full understanding of the significance of heterotopia, suggests Harkness in his introduction to the English translation of Foucault's long essay on Magritte, 'This is not a Pipe'. Where resemblance presumes a primary reference that prescribes and classes copies on the basis of the mimetic relation to itself, the 'similitude's reference anchor' is gone: things are cast adrift, without any of them being able to claim the privileged status or model. "Hierarchy gives way to a series of exclusively lateral relations", concludes Foucault just as 'a quiver filled with arrows' produces an almost magical, uncertain space of monstrous combinations that unsettles the flow of discourse:

> *The connections between one element of the story and another were not always obvious to the emperor: the objects could have various meanings: a quiver filled with arrows could indicate the approach of war, or an abundance of game, or else an armorer's shop; an hourglass could mean time passing, or time past, or sand, or a place where hourglasses are made (Calvino 38).*

In a sense, as though they were the text, Polo's reports suffer from aphasia, the speech disorder defined by Roman Jakobson: the inability to combine elements in a sequence; 'similarity disorder', the inability to substitute one element for another. First one would produce a string of synonyms, antonyms, and other substitutions ('hut' –'cabin', 'hovel', 'palace', 'den', 'burrow', 'rhizome'). The other type would offer elements which combine with 'hut', forming potential sequences: 'a burn out', 'poor little house' (Lodge 73-77).[23] The two disorders correspond to two figures of speech – metaphor and metonymy – that lean toward a different literal style and the possibility of periodization of literature. Lodge traces the historical development from romanticism through realism to symbolism as an alternation of style from the metaphoric to the metonymic back to the metaphoric. Calvino's text, like some other postmodernist literary works, produces lateral spaces by simulating aphasia disorder – as though 'the quiver filled with arrows' cannot be subsumed under a unifying meaning, as though the aphasic disorder fills the text with gaps. Metonymic: 'the quiver' involves the shift from one element in a sequence to another; 'the hourglass' from one

context to another. Despite the fact that the metonymic style predominates and requires a context for its operation, the context is blurred, vague, and sometimes unknown. Even though a 'realistic' style offers the reader aspects, parts, and contextual detail, the reader sometimes cannot evoke the whole. But at the same time, Marco Polo's overall metonymic production aims at resistance to classification – subsumption – to any reading as allegory or parabola or an archetype of something. As a traveller and reporter he constantly produces peculiarities, collectables, 'narratables' against the invisible order of Empire, the multiform treasures that the Emperor finds superfluous. Even under a threat of collapse into the heterotopic gap, he exploits a rhizomic quality. To maintain a rhizomic flow, Deleuze and Guattari argue that:

> *expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sprouting. When a form is broken, one must reconstruct the content that will necessarily be part of a rupture in the order of things. To take over, to anticipate, the material … Kafka deliberately kills all metaphors, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation. Metamorphosis is the contrary to the metaphor … Language stops being representative in order now to move toward its extremities or its limits (Deleuze & Guattari 22-28).*

Hence the way to the promised lands not visited cannot be simply mapped. The task might be difficult to accomplish because of the aphasic disorder. Besides numerous diagnoses of our postmodern condition as an era of – cynicism, lonely crowd, hyperreal, millennium panic, new age imaginary, decentralism and so on – in my opinion, we can add one more characteristic, that of aphasia, spread through Baudrillard's types of consumers to the 'world'. The consumer is created by constant bombardment, by the tearing at his/her holistic integrity by commercials, information sickness, fragmented in hundreds, often opposite, 'heterotopic' needs, desires, so he/she loses the ability to connect, to sort things, just as the sufferer of the aphasia disorder does. Hence the map of utopia proliferates in numerous private dreams, utopia becomes heterotopia (Vattimo's idea of heterotopia as scattered herds, small communities).

On the other hand, utopia's map might be inexpressible, muted, because of a schizophrenic fear of being finally signified, caught again in grand narratives, in the net of the paranoid forces of the

State, and so on, or it might be due to the rhizomic flow, cultivated schizo-energy such as advocated by Deleuze and Guattari. Contrary to everything, the end of Invisible Cities reveals the possible impossibility of pessimistic optimism:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space (Calvino 165).

What is it???

New Spaces – Old Dreams

Think what it would be to have a work conceived from outside the self, a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic …Was this not perhaps what Ovid was aiming at, when he wrote about the continuity of forms? And what Lucretius was aiming at when he identified himself with that nature common to each and every thing? (Calvino 124).[24]

Invisible Cities produces a new kind of space by generating binary opposition, seemingly on the threshold between modern and postmodern, into impossible juxtapositions – heterotopia. McHale[25] in his descriptive poetic tries to classify all postmodern literary productions that create an 'impossible world' by opposing the scientific sense of order as a logic of excluded middle. But, as we have shown, heterotopia is a more descriptive model of heterogeneous, impossible hybridity of the world or some characteristic of the text seen from outside. For example, the futuristic metropolis LA of the next millennium certainly is heterotopia but the fight between replicants and humanoids is told through classical narrative. But Invisible Cities multiply a proliferation of spaces and interrelations among themselves, which constantly proliferate again and again, like the city of

Esmeralda with its innumerable intersections of different networks and branching routes. Thus, the readers, like travellers to the cities, confused and bewildered, are constantly forced to find their way, to satisfy their desire for narrative. On the way, the texts and cities grow and grow into newer and newer unexplored multiplicity, and Invisible Cities are more like the concept of the rhizome advocated by Deleuze and Guatarri in their obsessive horror of abstraction. Both heterotopia and the rhizome present different modes of thinking and reading that challenge the narratological imaginary and destabilize the unitary space, the univocal, irreversible, geometrical scheme that has become a model for traditional conceptions of structure as well as for the theory of narrative. In addition to that, Calvino's allusion to the journey to the core of hell indicates that political significance resides in a rhizome as well. Calvino's writing machine concept of the ideal text in his Six Memos for the Next Millennium, of literature worth pursuing, overlaps in some ideas with Guattari and Deleuze's idea of a tube, of the endless network that they called the rhizome. Calvino sees predecessors of the hypernovel in Proust, Floubert and Gadda. Hypernovel is encapsulated in Gaddas' description: "follow multiplying details, digressions become infinite spreading over and over in every direction until they 'would be embracing the entire universe'" (Calvino 107). Calvino describes Proust's prose as a vast network that links points in space-time occupied in succession by everyone, which explodes in an infinite multiplication of space and time, expanding until it can no longer be grasped. Calvino praises multiplicity as a thread that binds together modern and postmodern, hoping that it will be the main value of literature in the next millennium. He calls it hypernovel – a multiplicity of what may be narrated, a machine for multiplying narratives.

I have come to the end of this apologia for the novel as a vast net. Someone might object that the more the work tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it departs from that unicum which is the self of the writer, his inner sincerity and the discovery of his own truth. But I would answer: Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopaedia, a library, and inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and recorded in every way conceivable (Calvino 124).

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