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## Subjective Maps, Dense Cities: Literary Cartography and Urban Futures in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

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### Abstract:

This essay investigates the rhetoric of cartography in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, reading the dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo as a postmodern critique of Enlightenment cartographic rationality and its will to control space. It argues that Kublai's desire for exhaustive, algebraic maps of his empire re-enacts the Renaissance and imperial fantasy of a perfectly transparent, homogenous spatial order, while Polo counters this paradigm through what Calvino terms the "subjective urge": a mode of mapping grounded in memory, estrangement, and misunderstanding rather than exactitude. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, the paper shows how Polo's "map of memory" situates individual experience within an unrepresentable urban totality, offering a cartography of alterity that acknowledges what the traveller will "never have." Through close readings of cities such as Zaira, Tamara, Esmeralda, and Phyllis, the article examines how Calvino figures urban space as temporally and spatially dense: a locus where events, histories, and signs accumulate and exceed any single representational grid. The discussion mobilises Marie Beville's work on urban mapping and otherness, Roland Barthes's notion of the city as discourse, Aldo Rossi's theorisation of the city as a "theatre of human events," and Friedrich Kittler and Paul Virilio's accounts of infrastructural networks to demonstrate the city's resistance to linear, structuralist mapping. Finally, through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, the paper proposes that Calvino's literary cartography models a non-hierarchical, multilayered way of mapping cities as living, proliferating assemblages rather than static, legible objects.

**Keywords:** Literary Cartography, Cognitive Mapping, Urban Imaginaries, Rhizomatic Space, Subjective Mapping.

### Introduction

Italo Calvino in his essay "Exactitude" writes about *Invisible Cities* highlighting the reductionist gaze of the Kublai Khan authoritative cartographer who attempts to rationalise the geographical knowledge of his vast empire in form of narrative maps. Calvino opines that "At a certain point Kublai Khan personifies the intellectual tendency toward rationalization, geometry, and algebra, reducing knowledge of his empire to the combinatoria of pieces on a chessboard." (72) The text which emerges as a conversation between the Tartar ruler and his

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favourite cartographer, the Venetian traveller Marco Polo serves as a postmodern critique of Enlightenment ideals of cartography, particularly the focus on rationality and order in mapping. *Invisible Cities* challenge the authority of the mapmaker and highlight the inherent scepticism of postmodernism towards centralized power and knowledge, manifested in the novel in the form of the desire of an exhaustive map of the empire by Kublai Khan. The Khan as the cartographer, as the producer of knowledge at times wants to create a replica in exactitude, a map which perfectly reflects the territory, a map so detailed that it can replace the territory itself, much like the Jorge Luis Borges's self-containing cartographic metaphor of the map as territory in the allegory "On Exactitude of Science" where "the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it." (Borges, 1999, p. 45) Such a proliferation of the objective, scale to scale and archival simulation makes the map a tool for oppression through knowledge production and control.

In Calvino's portrayal of Kublai Khan one can discern the desire for an atlas in which maps all the different parts of his territories are mapped in a quantitative manner. Initially, in Kublai Khan we can locate the Renaissance cartographer's attempt of archive the varied aspects of the land through creation of a model in exactitude. The earlier European mappa mundi also had spaces to register different exotic races, distant lands, flora and fauna. Renaissance period saw a reconceptualization of space as secular entity and it had a profound effect on cartography. This recalibration of the spatial understanding was greatly responsible for the Enlightenment project and its geopolitical drive of Imperialism. Maps gradually lost their spiritual corners populated by angels and biblical figures and were drawn with secular objectivity. Space was conceived as abstraction and deemed homogenous. Maps soon became vital tools of colonial expansion through use of perspective and mathematical graphing. A similar desire to know and record is manifest in Kublai when he admonishes Marco Polo as his travels do not produce graphic or narrative account of the empire:

The other ambassadors warn me of famines. Extortions, conspiracies, or else they inform me of newly discovered turquoise mines, advantageous prices in marten furs, suggestions for supplying damascened blades. "And you?" the Great Khan asked Polo. "You return from lands equally distant and you can tell me only the thoughts that come to a man who sits on his doorstep at evening to enjoy the cool air. What is the use, then of all your traveling?" (23)

It is through what Calvino has termed as "subjective urge" Polo counters the desire to archive, categorise, sort and display the territory for Kublai. Polo's atlas of the invisible places emerges not from the certitude but from wanderings of "what ifs". Polo the cartographer, the traveller but also an exile removed from his native city of Venice experiences the vast empire of Khan as a "stranger". Georg Simmel defines "stranger", as a potential "wanderer" but he or she has not completely broken away from spatial rootedness, "he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going." (Simmel, 1950, p. 402) As a stranger Polo experiences the sense of spatial liberation and fixation together and the unique position of the "stranger" makes him inhabit the threshold of the conventional habit. This results in production of cartographic records devoid of the gaze of certitude, possession and excavation. In contrast to the other ambassadors and cartographers in service of Kublai who reproduced tracings of the places they visited with conviction and certitude, Polo produces maps of uncertainty and observes that "Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a part of his past that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places." (24) Polo's atlas of the 55 cities he visits is an exercise in mnemonic cartography which goes against the certainty principle of conventional maps. In this cognitive map of the traveller the foreign, unpossessed places act as triggers for the traveller's memories. In this "map of memory," each city represents a point on this map. As the traveller moves from one place to another, he pieces together fragments of his past, creating a mental map that spans different locations and times.

The atlas which Polo thus creates is incredible and rift with incredulity and “Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions.” (5) The body of knowledge produced by the “stranger” Polo to which the great Khan listens with “greater attention and curiosity” (5) than his other indigenous explorer is incommensurable as it does not confirm to any assigned episteme. Produced through cartographic performance the narrative descriptions of the cities are products of the “subjective urge” and even accommodate miss-readings and misunderstandings. Inhabiting the border zones where habits and cultures interact Polo as a stranger produce maps of cities full of serendipity. Umberto Eco in his book *Serendipities* (1998), serendipity as “false beliefs and discoveries totally without credibility” which “could then lead to the discovery of something true (or at least something we consider true today).” (Eco, 1998, p. vii) Eco deals with the intellectual misunderstandings of the historical figure of Marco Polo in the chapter “From Marco Polo to Leibniz” and comments how “We (in the sense of human beings) travel and explore the world, carrying with us some background books.” (Eco, 1998, p. 53) As a result, we always carry a preconceived text or map while interacting with a new habit and try to read it with help of the “background books” but these readings are miss-reading which not only lead to proliferation of multivalent meaning in the new habit but also drastically alter the nature of the “background books” and maps. Like the historical Marco Polo, the fictional Polo of Calvino’s novel is engaged in acts of misunderstanding, but he is conscious about these cognitive miss-readings and misunderstandings. He knows that his journeys alter the past but what he sought was always “something lying ahead,” (Calvino, 1978, p. 24) and Polo recognises the active nature of this enterprise of mapping for “the traveller’s past changes according to the route he has followed.” (24)

The rhetoric of cartography in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, inverts the Renaissance assurance of maps as definitive representations of reality. Polo’s experiences in foreign, unpossessed places trigger memories and create a mental map that spans different locations and times. This “map of memory” is archetypal and contrasts sharply with the exhaustive and rational maps desired by Kublai Khan. This “map of memory” acts as cognitive mapping as it “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.” (Jameson, 1992, p. 51) The representation of the cities by the Venetian traveller accumulates fragments of various perspective of different individuals, situational representation of citizens across different space and of different temporalities. Calvino writes “Marco enters a city; he sees someone in a square living a life or an instant that could be his; he could now be in that man’s place, if he had stopped in time, long ago. (24) According to Jameson cognitive mapping “require the coordination of existential data (the empirical position of the subject) with un-lived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality.” (Jameson, 1992, p. 51) Polo’s cartographic project similarly engages with the lived experiences and the un-lived possibilities, making him realise that for the traveller or even a cartographer “Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveller recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have.” (25) Such a map is also a map of alterity, giving cartographic space to the “other”.

According to Marie Beville “Our desire to map the city is a desire to map and to write the self: a process without closure that constantly reminds us of our own inherent Otherness.” (Beville, 2019, p. 1) The fractured nature of the city and the alterity - the othering of urban space are poignant theme in postmodern narrative as well as in cartography. There is an inherent fecundity in the act of mapping an urban space. It is a project without closure as the city is not a sedentary location but a conglomeration of events, networks and nonhuman entities, it always resists the process of narrative integration “in its flux and in its phantasmagoria.” (Beville, 2019, p. 2) As the city keeps evolving and changing the cartographer always discovers something in slippage, something which always resists the maps. Roland Barthes in his essay “Semiology and Urbanism” in *The Semiotic Challenge* (1988) discusses the discursive nature of city space - “The city is a discourse, and this discourse

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is actually a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by inhabiting it, by traversing it, by looking at it." (Barthes, 1988, p. 195) But Barthes recognises a "conflict between signification and reason, or at least between signification and that calculating reason which wants all the elements of the city to be uniformly recuperated by planning." (Barthes, 1988, p. 194) Cities possess an inherent difficulty for the cartographer's organising project. The signification system of an urban map has to contend with the city's dense, complex and varied signs. The compact and multifaceted nature of the urban space resists mapping with its diverse hybridity and intense proliferation of signs. Cities as discursive signs have numerous intersections, manifest innumerable desires and contain various point of views. They exist in multivalency- in terms of both their location and also as sign of alterity. Cities, their plans, and structures all suggest semiotic density. Polo the traveller/narrator is also a semiotician who travels the various cities of Khan's vast empire reading and feasting on these varied signs- often of alterity. For instance, in the city of Tamara Polo encounters the infinite deferral of signification. In Tamara "eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things." (9) Barthes points out it is easy to speak of the urban space through metaphors but "The real scientific leap will be achieved when we can speak of the language of the city without metaphor." (Barthes, 1988, p. 195) Metaphors can be superficial and may not capture the depth of how cities communicate and how we interpret them. The possibility of the empty or false signifier remains ever present in the urban space where the simulation is projected over the real and Polo recognises this in Tamara where "the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal you leave Tamara without having discovered it." (11) The structuralist enterprise of mapping fails here.

### Density of the mapped Spaces:

The cities of which Polo talk about in his conversation with Kublai Khan are dense spaces and they are abounding with the signs of the other- nonhuman, dead, phantasmagorical, photographic, architectural, and also the mundane and useless and illimitable all of which are found in the *Invisible Cities*. In the atlas created by Polo there are cities like Zaira which is composed of connections between spatial measurements and historical events; Melania, a city of the dead where everyone has multiple roles; Armilla, a forest of pipes, taps, and showers without buildings; Tamara, where citizens see not the things themselves but their images. The density of the urban space with its inexhaustible network of signification and its events in alterity, sets up an intriguing liminal precinct through the narrative dialogue between Polo, the expeditioner and the emperor Kublai Khan in description of the city of Zaira:

In vain, Great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. (9)

The dense nature of the urban space and its multimodal attributes cannot be represented by creating a map of its buildings and streets and high bastions alone. Stacking up architectural plans of all the buildings it contains and the coordinates of all its streets does not exhaust a city. The useful, the hermeneutic, the appropriable, fails to describe the cityscape of Zaira. Polo goes on to illustrate the city through an interrogation into the liminal, and the eventual which are synthesised by both the useful (measurements of its space) and the useless, that comprises of long forgotten trivialities from past such as "the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet...the tilt of a guttering and a cat's progress along it." (9) The density of urban site is also due to accumulation of events which occur over time and congeals in a network of causality. A city is a sequence of events unfolding over generations; deeds, dealings, acts, accidents, emotions, memories (both collective and individual) narrated, circulated and collated over time gives a city its narrative form. Italian architect Aldo Rossi in his conceptualization of the locus solus identified the role of event in

creation of place from the abstract space. According to him the city is “determined not just by space but also by time, by topography and form, and, most importantly, by its having been the site of a succession of both ancient and more recent events.” (Rossi, 1984, p. 7) He uses the metaphor of the “theatre of human events” (Rossi, 1984, p. 7) to define city, it is a site which absorbs and facilitates the unfolding of events while constituting an event in itself. Architectural constructs are “signs” of events which occur over a period of time in a particular site and according to Rossi the “threefold relationship of site, event and sign becomes a characteristic of urban artifact.” (Rossi, 1984, p. 7) The urban space as locus exists in the architectural materiality, in the inimitable events which unfold in those sites and also in the mental images they form in the minds of inhabitants and the architects. The singularity and peculiarity of an urban space is ensured by the events; through passage of time and re-iteration these events pass on from realm of history to that of collective memory and the city “grows upon itself and refers to itself, acquiring its own consciousness and memory.” (Rossi, 1984, p. 9) A city contains events and the feelings evoked by those events; they consist memory of history and a prospective memory of a future. Just as they do in narratives, events construct the urban space. Through a recognition of the other which haunts the urban cities and its events Tally notes that Calvino is able to create the literary cartography of the city. By recognizing that the eventuality and semiotic density of the spatial narrative the city space “Calvino’s point, that one cannot describe a place without also narrating the stories embedded in the site, makes explicit something that is arguably implicit in all writings, which must come to terms with the spatio-temporality of narrative.” (Tally, 2013, p. 52)

The city is dense and extensive not just temporally but also in its spatial expanse. The German media theorist Friedrich Kittler views the city as labyrinth of networks of interconnected systems, and in his essay “The City as a Medium” he also suggests a way to navigate the dense network of the city in the city is to visualise it as a “half grid” whose overlappings themselves belong to the system. (Kittler & Griffin, 1996, p. 720) This dense network of systems, of roads, of information and traffic makes linear mapping of the city a failed project. The city obstructs the structuralists project of order with infinite and disarranged networks as Paul Virilio notes city “is a world of dispersed or scattering structures whose amplitude -contrary to the structuralists - we can no longer measure.” (Virilio, 1991, p. 72) One of the Trading Cities visited by Polo that depict such density of network is “Esmeralda, city of water” where “a network of canals and a network of canals and a network of streets span and intersect each other.” (79) In this amphibious city which mimics Polo’s Venice to the greatest degree, to travel from one point to another the passerby always have “the choice between land and boat”- in the non-Euclidean space of Esmeralda “the shortest distance between two point ... is not a straight line but a zigzag” (88) and each passerby has multiple ways to travel by and it “increases further for those who alternate a stretch by a boat with one dry land.” (88) The density of city is folded on itself as “the network of routes is not arranged on one level, but follows instead on an up-and- down course of steps, landing, cambered bridges, hanging streets.” (88) Esmeralda represents the postmodern urban proliferation in which the dimensional geometry is obscured, it is a labyrinthine network of space in which “one does not need to sketch the visible connecting walls, rather their inverse: the visible passage between path and door.” (Kittler & Griffin, 1996, p. 720) In his essay “The Overexposed City” Virilio notes that the in the proliferation of the excess and incommensurability of the post-modern urban space “the substantial, homogenous space derived from classical Greek geometry gives way to an accidental, heterogenous space in which sections and fractions become essential once more. (Virilio, 1991, p. 25) Esmeralda is an overexposed city where “Combining segments of the various routes, elevated or on ground level, each individual can enjoy everyday the pleasure of a new itinerary to reach the same places.” (79) Adding to the city’s depth are the elements which are considered sacrilegious and impure. Esmeralda’s cats, thieves and illicit lovers navigate the fragmented paths of Esmeralda with acrobatic agility. Below this strata rats scurry in dark sewers, following each other, emerging from manholes and drainpipes, slipping through false bottoms and trenches, “crossing the city’s compactness pierced by the spokes of

underground passages.” (79)

The dense nature of the urban space owing to its spatiotemporal multiplicity, its eventuality and proliferation of infinite networks as exemplified by Esmeralda resist linear modes of mapping. Polo recognises this and notes that “A map of Esmeralda should include, marked in different colored inks, all these routes, solid and liquid, evident and hidden.” (80) There are no straight lines, no linear models that can graph the *Invisible Cities*, the rhizomatic zigzag characterizes the urban space for instance in the city of Phyllis “you follow zigzag lines from one street to another, you distinguish the patches of sunlight from the patches of shade, a door here, a stairway there, a bench where you can put down your basket, a hole where your foot stumbles if you are not careful.” (81) How can the spatial density of the city like Esmeralda or Phyllis be mapped? Such complex non-linear cities with their zigzag roads and dense network of connection makes an arborescent model of representation redundant as they are binary, bifurcate, treelike or punctual.

## Conclusion

In their *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have expressed similar views on the inherent limitations of the arborescent systems and the hierarchy such system creates, they note that “Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centres of significance and subjectification.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 17) The zigzag multivalent density of the urban space can be best represented as rhizome which like semilattice is a non-linear network. It is a model for knowledge and society that opposes traditional hierarchical systems like trees or roots. Instead, the rhizome works with no central point or origin, featuring multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation. According to Deleuze and Guattari “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 7) Rhizomes are prolific in their dissemination, Deleuze and Guattari frequently use the metaphor of bulbs and tuber to describe the rhizomatic network, but the urban space can serve to describe the rhizomatic system as well. In *A Thousand Plateaus* we can find one such instance of “Amsterdam, a city entirely without roots, a rhizome city with its stem-canals.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 1) Rhizomatic space resist striation like the Amsterdam with its stem canals, Venice with its amphibious routes, or Esmeralda where the passerby is confronted by ever exponentially increasing number of ways. Moving beyond fixity of patterns the rhizomatic city is reducible “neither to the One nor multiple.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 6)

The complex cities depicted in Calvino's novel convey the challenges involved in the project of urban cartography. The temporal density of the urban space with its accumulation of past events, histories and memories makes it clear that cities are constantly modified by continuous flow and flux of human experiences and actions all of which in course of time get ingrained in the urban tapestry. The spatial density with its stacked up, folded and overlapping physical structures and numerous pathways demonstrate the labyrinthine nature of urbanity. The spatial density of the city resists the linear organising gaze of the cartographer. The rhizomatic proliferation of the city as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari highlights the non-hierarchical and interconnected attribute of cities, where divergent passages and perspectives cohabit and associate. The spatio-temporal density of a city calls for a dynamic multilayered cartographic technique that acknowledges the city's evolving, interconnected and complex being. The literary maps narrated by Polo of the invisible cities incorporates the temporal, cultural and decentralised narratives and the network of relations that constitute the urban lived experience along with the physical structures of cities. By recognising the city's inherent alterity and its relentless transformation such maps offer a rich and nuanced urban spaces as living, breathing entities.

In conclusion, *Invisible Cities* exposes the rhetoric of cartography as a contested field in which power, knowledge, and desire intersect. Kublai Khan's dream of a perfectly legible, gridded empire enacts the modern fantasy of total spatial control, but Calvino persistently undermines this logic through Marco Polo's subjective, fragmentary accounts. Polo's "map of memory" reveals that what counts as a map is not an abstract geometry of points and lines, but a dense network of affects, histories, and signs that can never be fully stabilized. The cities he describes- Zaira's strata of memory, Tamara's proliferating signs, Esmeralda's overlapping routes, Phyllis's vertiginous repetitions- refuse to be reduced to a single, coherent cartographic language, insisting instead on multiplicity, opacity, and excess.

By mobilising the language of cognitive mapping, the dense city, and the rhizome, Calvino's text gestures toward alternative ways of imagining and inhabiting urban space. The city becomes not an object to be surveyed from above, but a living, proliferating assemblage encountered from within. In this sense, *Invisible Cities* does more than critique the limits of Enlightenment cartography: it offers a poetics of mapping that acknowledges crisis—of representation, of empire, of meaning- while opening onto less hierarchical, more relational urban imaginaries. Calvino's literary cartography thus anticipates contemporary attempts to rethink how we orient ourselves in complex, changing worlds, suggesting that any future-oriented mapping must begin by recognising the irreducible density and alterity of the spaces we inhabit.

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