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## Turning Place into Space: The Science of Cartography and the Speculation of Narrative in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

RUPAYAN MUKHERJEE

It is not down on any map; true places never are.

-*Moby Dick*, Herman Melville

#### ABSTRACT

This paper, through an engagement with the history of cartography, shall seek to substantiate modern cartography as a scientific and hermeneutic discourse which validates a historicised and homogenised truth of place. The paper, consequently, will seek to provoke the consideration of narrative as an alternative to cartography, if only to go beyond the represented, limited real called place into the experiential trans-reality called space. For this purpose, the paper will engage in a close reading of Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, where the ethics of oblivion overwrite the mnemonic remembrances of Venice and present a Venice which is not just a place, but also a trans-discursive and trans-historicised possible space.

The emergence of cartography has rendered a paradox; on one hand it has historicised and familiarised the unknown through the science of representation. Simultaneously, it has also validated an empirical reality as universal truth, denying the plurality of experiences which can otherwise, metamorphose place into a fluid possibility called space. Post-structuralism has deeply been critical of this hegemony of representation that the hermeneutic of cartography embodies. The paper through an enquiry into the discourse of cartography, shall seek to explore this ambiguity inherent in map-making as a science

and shall provoke the consideration of fiction as a surplus which can counter-validate the authenticity of map-making, if only to explore the parallel truths of experiential beyond the familiar contours of the represented.

*Keywords:* ethics of representation, cartography, discursive subject, founding subject, trans-discursive, hermeneutics, telos, speculation

Let us imagine a child pondering upon a voluminous world map where lines and signs are taken for wonders; comprising of borders, geographical and topographic features; all of which are clearly marked and outlined by relevant legends and convenient colour codes. For the pre-discursive subject, the contours and pictorial descriptions are appealing, but carry little or no relevance. The responsible and the erudite parent guides the growing child through them... “this is where we are, this is our country...this is our state...this is the neighbouring state”...the child learns what ‘we’ mean, what ‘our’ country is, the poetics and principles of sovereignty are validated before the empty yet curious learning mind by a pictorial demonstration of space, the familiar shaped in contrast and in retrospect with the necessary unfamiliar; the home validated in foil to the alien.

Cartography is the hermeneutics of spatial representation; it is a discourse that seeks to define, determine, formulate and appropriate the spatial. The diverse geographical realities are set as emblems, the symbolic order of representation seeking to condense a reality, a possibility, a happening and an event within the limits of a pictorial formulation. The perennial mark of interrogation persists; *how can representation validate/ authenticate reality?* The represented is appropriated within the economy of consciousness of the mediator (which stabilises the notion of a cartographic subject); its essence is moderated by the thought and language of a cogito that is armed with the intricacies of a discipline and systematics of a discourse. Michel Foucault observes in *The Order of Things*,

“the signifying element is not a sign. It can become a sign only on condition that it manifests, in addition, the relation that links it to what it signifies...In fact, the signifying element has no content, no function, and no determination other than what it represents: it is entirely ordered upon and transparent to it. But this content is indicated only in a representation that posits itself as such, and that which is signified resides, without residuum and without opacity, within the representation of the sign.” (Foucault 1989, 71)

The represented, in Foucault’s opinion, unveils within a sacrosanct discursive economy; the claim to authenticity that the signifying element turned sign posit in relation with the signified, is operative within a constricted paradigm that doesn’t survive beyond the enclosed field of representation. A foreknowledge of the ethics and imperatives of representation is essential to comprehend the relationality that the sign bears with the signified. One ought to know, what signifies what.

In his essay “The Order of Discourse”, Foucault would go on to trace the limits of representation by attempting to understand the politics of valorisation that is a predicament of any discourse and discursive module. The legends in a cartograph are annotated for the chosen few; it carries meaning within an encased system of knowledge production and propagation. The symbolic order of representation ceases to exist for the subject who is unfamiliar with the finitudes, hermeneutics and imperatives of the discourse in question. In other words, the discourse is validated only after it has enabled the birth of a discursive subject and Foucault puts it in his notorious proclamation

“...none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so.” (Foucault 1981, 62)

This discursive subject stands in opposition to the notion of a ‘founding subject’ and Foucault distinguishes between the two as follows

"A distinction must be made here. In the first place, I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere. I am very sceptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it. I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection..." (Foucault 1988, 50)

Cartography is the discursive field of knowledge that facilitates and constitutes the possibility of the birth of a geo-political conscious subject. It is through cartographic consciousness that a subject becomes a political subject, familiarised with the constructs of Nation, which in turn is founded on the principles of exclusion and inclusion. Like all other discourses, Cartography is a political and politicised discourse, where the politics of segregation, differentiation, exclusion is often operative in both overt and latent levels. The map validates an immediate truth; a particularity of that which is represented. The non-represented is a 'silence', which Harley comprehends as both "geographical limits to knowledge and a technological constraint." (Harley 57) The technological constraint has its nexus with power and Harley explores in detail about the relationship between power and map-making in his famous essay "Silence and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe". I will concentrate on the other side of politics; how maps tend to nominalise spaces and perception of spaces within a context of immediacy. Rolland G. Paulston and Martin Liebman observe that "social maps may help to present and decode immediate and practical answers to the perceived locations and relationships of persons, objects, and perceptions in the social milieu." (Paulston and Liebman 215) As such, the represented is the only validated truth, the only functional truth within the subject consciousness and the only reality which matters. The silences are redundant and yet as my paper will subsequently argue, the silences have their own relevance. They are not just the foil to the represented which serve as the background to the foregrounded, rather they are speculations which the discursive/ cartographic subject can

indulge in. The speculative surpluses are open ended possibilities which enable the subject to consider other truths and alternative possibilities. The immanence and the immediate doesn't necessarily evolve as a hegemonic truth, they are simultaneously openings to contemplate the infinitudes that evolve beyond the limits of representation. The paper doesn't refute Harley's understanding of cartography as a "privileged knowledge" (Harley 59) which shares its relationship with power in its exclusive and fundamental ideologues of representation. However, through a close reading of Italo Calvino's celebrated novel *Invisible Cities*, the paper shall attempt to trace the alternative possibilities of map-making through which place can be diffused into space, thereby sublimating the immanent into the transcendent.

Since the Renaissance, cartography has evolved as a discourse of power and has been controlled, institutionalised, scrutinised and kept under constant surveillance. The navigation adventures of Francis Drake and the subsequent map that he drew was confiscated by the state and was denied open circulation. (Wallis 136) Weak monarchies and growing capitalism were often intimidated by the possibility of an open access to cartographs. I intend to argue that the intimidation that maps and the culture of mapping generated owed much to its paradoxical openness; in its ability to reveal more than what is/was intended. De Certeau points out that the map has the ability to "collate on the same plane heterogeneous places, some received from a tradition and others produced by observation." (Certeau 122) The element of observation vindicates the subjective intervention into the map, it is through observing that the limits of tradition and the reckless beyond can be explored; the map opens up. The telocentric binary (sign forcing a singular meaning to the observer) and the utilitarian motives (the purpose of mapping) erodes as the map is susceptible to be interpreted from the observant's perspective. What was unintended and secondary for the map-maker and has managed

to survive in the map as redundant/ silent, has the possibility of becoming a subject of intense introspection to the observant. The immediate and the politics of immediacy through which maps tend to colonise space into place diffuses for the map starts to carry different intonations; it is no longer limited to the purpose with which it was drawn. de Certeau observes that the map alone “remains on the stage. The tour describers have disappeared.” (Certeau 122) It is the materiality of map that matters, in its autonomy it can both appeal to an immediacy and can transcend the immediate. It is now opened up beyond the intended topographic caricature of place and has the possibility of becoming a fertile arena which can incorporate spaces, ready to be discovered once again, depending on the interpretation, sensibility and interest of the observant.

The possibility of the sublimation of place into space is all the more conducive once contours are substituted by narratives and pictorial representation gives way to fictional speculation. In Italo Calvino's celebrated novel *Invisible Cities*, which Carolyn Springer describes as “an intricate epistemological puzzle” (Springer 289) a ficto-real Marco Polo attempts to map the cities which constitute the empire of the great Kublai Khan. Calvino presents before his readers two contrasting figures; the monarch lurking in his twilight of power who is also the eager observant in the novel and the erratic cartographer, mapping cities which linger in the interstices of fancy and reality, the probable and the actual. As the narrator-cartographer, Polo engages in a discourse of map-making which is more ‘space than place’ and adheres to the transformation of the locational into experiential. The spatial, owing to the contributions of postmodern critical thinkers like Edward Soja, has evolved as a trans-discursive reality which isn't necessarily confined by the materiality of place. Place is an empirical perception that is relevant and limited within a geo-politico-historical paradigm, which is often asserted by a humanised and humanist mode of thought and reflection. On the contrary, space is trans-human, it is dialogical in having

contained both the perceived and the experienced, the real and the imagined, the immanent truth and the alternative possibilities of truth, the form and the formlessness of form.

The emperor-observant in the novel seeks form, he intends to chart the limits of his empire and is in quest of "the tracery of a pattern".(Calvino 05) A discursive subject who is accustomed to the understanding of cartography as a science of form that concerns the immediate which it represents; Kublai is confident to assert:

"...my empire is made of the stuff of crystals, its molecules arranged in a perfect pattern. Amid the surge of the elements, a splendid hard diamond takes shape, an immense, faceted, transparent mountain." (Calvino 52)

In sharp contrast, the metaphysics of presence which is promised by form and which has the possibility to culminate into a culture of immediacy and materiality is absent in Polo's narrative accounts of the cities. Instead, they emerge as events which are not logocentric but embody the "essence of a logos" and are characterised by an openness.

"But what embraced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words. The description of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue; you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off." (Calvino 32)

Jean Luc Nancy conceives of the event as not an incomplete and partial understanding of the being, but as a further ontological quest into the beingness of the Being, which is never complete in itself but is consistently in a process of becoming, a becoming that is always present in the being as a possibility. (Nancy 163) Hence, Nancy prefers the conjecture "that there is" over "there is" (Nancy 164) to signify the 'being' as a relational and contingent truth, which can consistently evolve and resist a conclusive telos. The cities which Marco describes are not

determined and finalised truths usual to a cartographic description, rather they evolve as possibilities, with an openness that is perpetual to Nancy's conjecture of the event. Not the outcome or the finality but the process of becoming constitutes the essence of the event.

Polo's cartographic methodology is primarily arranged around but isn't limited to the schema of verbal narrative, instead "objects like ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes", (Calvino 18) pantomimes, gestures and silences evolve as signifiers and legends which only add to the unease in comprehension of the observant Emperor. It is not a complete denial of comprehension that pervades the observant, rather the unease rests in the multiplicity of possibilities that the legends appear to embody.

"...he (Kublai) never knew whether Marco wished to enact an adventure that had befallen him on his journey, an exploit of the city's founder, the prophecy of an astrologer, a rebus or a charade to indicate a name." (Calvino 19)

The hermeneutics of cartography is revised by Polo; the symbolic and the constituent emblems do not necessarily limit themselves to an exclusive co-relation between the signifier and the signified. Polo cautions the Emperor against the nominalising tendency of reading signs as perfect appropriations of reality. Such a stereotypic consideration often entraps the observant within a half-truth, where form is mistaken as essence and truth remains unperceived under the spectacle of empirical reality. Polo describes Tamara, an imagined city, as a space where signs mislead the observant into an illusion which appears to be the truth.

"However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it." (Calvino 12)

For Polo, signs do not necessarily lay claim to an economy of authentication; rather they are reflective interventions which

embody the promise of a possibility and not the actual. As such, the signs, symbols and legends are not apriori truths that can be blindly followed and which can often proclaim/ unravel a singularity of meaning. Rather, their significance and meaning are dependent on the interpretive agency of the observant. What is perceived stands valid only when it is interpreted by the observant and meaning is formulated, framed and consequently evolved as subjective truths; not objective discursive knowledge.

Polo's poetics of cartography and spatial representation do not demand the generation and evolution of a discursive subject who remains systematically bound to the *rules of the game*. Instead, it seeks the intervention of a 'founding subject', who can open up the possibilities that are contained in representation. Mapmaking for him isn't a telocentric enterprise where the unravelling logos guides the perceiving self towards an unconditional reality which is also a unanimous truth. Instead, he is more reliant on a cartography of rupture, where emblems are impregnated with possibilities rather than certainties.

Polo's homeland Venice survives as a possibility in narratives that he weaves in his description of the cities. It is the kernel; the basic residual essence which lies beneath the empirical conjectures of representation and the symbolic order of language. As such, the described cities are not merely places; they are spaces where Venice can co-habit as an irreducible possibility, amidst other possibilities and the consequent interpretations. Kublai Khan, the discursive subject, who relies blindly on the representational and is more accustomed in the valorisation of language over silence, initially fails to comprehend and recognise the possibility of Venice that larks beyond the immediacy of the said. In response to Polo's confession that he has exhausted his repertoire of cities explored having mapped them faithfully, Kublai observes

"There is still one of which you never speak."

"Venice," the Khan said." (Calvino 78)

To which Marco gently confesses

"Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice." (Calvino 78)

Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay "The Berlin Chronicle" observes that the discourse of memory isn't a discourse of closure, where finalities are evoked within an economy of the mnemonic. Instead, it is "...the medium of past experience...a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images..." (Benjamin 26) These images are not cartographic symbols that can systematically trace an evolution of remembrance by being 'means to end', finalised in the culmination of the 'remembered' as an outcome; rather they are possibilities that are inseparably associated with one another, a gradual unfolding of which only promises an essence and not the materiality of the remembered. As such, the images are foundational loci to the essence and not the materiality of the remembered; they are polymorphic, embodying within themselves a culture of discontinuity which enable them to be transfused into discourses which do not necessarily co-relate to their immediacy.

Polo's Venice thus survives as fragments of images, which are transfused into his descriptions of other cities. In response to Kublai's 'matter of fact' advice that Polo must stick to an authentic description of Venice 'not omitting anything you remember of it', the traveller responds

"Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased...Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it." (Calvino 78)

Polo realises that words are signifiers in a symbolic order and their relevance as symbols and legends in mapping Venice would impose on them the liability of a mimetic replication of Venice as a place. Venice preserved in words would only provoke the loss of Venice as an event of possibilities; the Venice

that can exist as an 'implicit' yet unrecognised truth in Polo's account of other cities. Polo's refusal to directly map Venice as a geo-political reality through the hermeneutics of presence enables the persistence of Venice as an absent presence; which in turn is devised on a poetics of silence. Polo refers to Venice without speaking of it; Venice lingers as a possibility and not certainty through the metaphysics of absence. The place of Venice becomes a space; it can intrude and exist at ease with other locational realities of place.

The metaphysics of absence gradually encroaches on the Atlas which validates Kublai's empire. It is no longer an Atlas that is confounded with forms which have referentials in the real. Rather there are now maps that represent "promised lands visited in thought but not yet discovered or founded." (Calvino 147) The empirical basis of cartography is subverted; it ceases to be a science of representation. Rather, through the intervention of the founding subject who is no longer a mere observant, cartography in the novel sustains as a fiction of speculation. Speculation, as Donald Phillip Verene puts it, involves the counter-hermeneutics of deciphering what sustains as unsaid in the tremors of said, a reflective enactment by the self that doesn't appropriate but experience. (Verene xxi) Calvino's exploration of the possibility of cartography as a speculative and not a representational discourse transforms place into space, where the binaries between reality and imaginary, history and fiction, matter and form dissipate, leading to the evolution of a multifaceted and polymorphous truth.

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