



This is a self-archived – parallel published version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details. When using please cite the original.

This version of the article has been accepted for publication, after peer review (when applicable) and is subject to Springer Nature's [AM terms of use](#), but is not the Version of Record and does not reflect post-acceptance improvements, or any corrections. The Version of Record is available online at:

DOI https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25855-8_14

CITATION Rennes, A. (2023). Unruly Utopia: Divergent Spatialities in Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities. In: Kelly, M.G., Paz, M. (eds) Utopia, Equity and Ideology in Urban Texts. Literary Urban Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25855-8_14

Unruly Utopia: Divergent Spatialities in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Aleksi Rennes, University of Turku

Literary utopias traditionally rely on the narrative device of a traveller returning from distant lands and recounting the discovery of an ideal society which stands in marked contrast to the failings of their own native country. In this way, the narration evokes a journey to dramatize the act of utopian imagination, that is, the invention of a new place where an alternative organisation for society can be envisaged. Accordingly, the journey itself spans across a 'topographical rupture' (Vieira 2010, 8–9) between real space and imaginary space: the traveller departs from a factual, geographically specified location, visits an imagined place with its utopian setting, and then returns home to report on the discovered society. A utopian voyage of this kind thus requires a particular composition of space which differentiates between two distinct modes of spatiality, establishes a rupture between them, and indicates a movement across this rupture in both directions. The traveller's passage over the rift – from reality to imagination and vice versa – registers as a pivotal moment in utopian literature, as this actual movement back-and-forth grounds and facilitates the more abstract comparisons of the two societies. In this sense, it is the dynamics of the topographic rupture that set the conditions for utopias' 'conflicting dialogue between the world as we know it and the better world that is not yet' (Moylan 2014, 37).

The centrality of the journey becomes apparent already at the very origin of the genre in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). More's text stages a dialogue with the Portuguese seafarer Raphael Hythloday who, on his return to Europe, gives an account of his voyages to the New World and particularly his five-year stay on the island of Utopia. Because he has encountered numerous differently organised societies during his travels, Hythloday can adopt a comparative perspective from which to identify flaws in European systems of governance. Throughout the first part of *Utopia*, then, he deplores their prevailing tendency towards injustice. His perhaps most poignant condemnation is directed against the policy of enclosures in contemporary England where the private appropriation of common land had resulted in extensive displacement and dispossession of the rural poor. (More 2014, 22–25). By contrast, the description of Utopia in the second part of More's book conjures up a society that has equity as its essential precondition. Its societal order relies on the abolishment of private property and the equal distribution of goods and labour.

As Utopia construes itself as the realisation of the ideal society, any prospect of a different, better organisation must become unimaginable. Accordingly, the social and political institutions of Utopia operate under the presumption of immutability: it is 'a commonwealth that is not only most happy but also, so far as human prescience can foresee, likely to last forever' (More 2014, 133). In this sense, the

history of Utopia ends in a state of anti-utopianism where safeguarding the existing system becomes the main principle of governance. Any potential for change or dissent must be suppressed. This is achieved through a strict regime of surveillance that leaves no place to hide from public view: ‘nowhere is there any chance to be idle [...] no occasion to be corrupted, no hideouts, no hangouts. With the eyes of everyone upon them, they have no choice but to do their customary work or to enjoy pastimes which are not dishonorable.’ (More 2014, 73.) This system of mutual supervision supports the totalising control over the space of the commonwealth which is partitioned in a way that fixes a specific purpose for all its segments and defines the possible modes of inhabiting each place. Despite Hythloday’s criticism of the enclosures, then, similar strategies of drawing boundaries and regulating access persist in the utopian ordering of space. As Gregory Claeys (2017, 274) notes, the collectivism and repression inherent to this system illustrate an ‘uncomfortably close proximity’ between utopia and dystopia. Thus, perhaps too much has been conceded in the pursuit of the ideal of equity.

In view of this problematic conflation of utopia, dystopia, and anti-utopianism, the conventional understanding of utopia as an ideal blueprint has lost much of its standing within utopian studies. This has resulted in a sustained effort to redefine utopia in various ways. In *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect*, David M. Bell provides an outline of this work of reconceptualization and its different strands, particularly paying attention to the notions of utopia as process, function, or method. While acknowledging the value of these approaches, Bell maintains that they are inclined to overlook the importance of place. In other words, the almost totalitarian organisation of classical utopian places, such as More’s Utopia, has led many scholars to forgo place entirely, equating it with unjust authority, stasis, and a negation of time. Bell diagnoses this as a kind of ‘topophobia’ that has made its mark in recent utopian studies. (Bell 2017, 5).

Yet, utopia has the idea of *topos* at its heart. It is a concept that explicitly designates a place and a practice of placemaking. Bell’s central argument is that the renunciation of place, that is, the advancement of a utopianism without utopia, runs the risk of losing this conceptual specificity of utopia as it becomes challenging to distinguish it from radical thought more generally. Thus, he identifies the need to reappraise the concept in a way that overcomes the dichotomy between ‘placeless utopia-as-process’ and ‘place-bound dystopia.’ (Bell 2017, 5.) This requires a methodology that focuses on the internal operations of utopian spaces, on what ‘utopia as place might be(come)’ (Bell 2017, 84). For Bell, such analyses reveal utopian space as fundamentally dynamic and productive in that it resists closure and any supposedly final form. Utopia is a place founded on ambiguity, and, similarly, any claim to utopia must be and remain ambiguous as well. (Bell 2017, 7.) I take Bell’s suggested return to the *topos* in utopia as the theoretical premise of this article. While he extends his research to areas such as musical improvisation and radical experiments in education, my approach remains within the confines of utopian literature and provides a

case study within the field of literary urban studies. My focus is on a singular literary *topos*: the urban space that emerges from Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* (*Le città invisibili*, 1972). I propose a reading of the novel as a critical and experimental reworking of the spatial presuppositions of the utopian genre, as exemplified by More's *Utopia*.

The connections between *Invisible Cities* and the utopian literary tradition have been discussed in a wide array of studies.¹ In relation to More's *Utopia*, specifically, the most evident parallel to Calvino's novel is their analogous narratorial perspective of a traveller reporting on his voyages: *Invisible Cities* is composed of fifty-five brief descriptions of different fictional cities which are framed as reports presented by the famous Venetian merchant and traveller Marco Polo about the fantastical, contradictory places he visited during his voyages. However, beyond such structural similarities, I argue that Calvino's novel can be seen, above all, as inverting the procedure of utopian placemaking in More's *Utopia*: Polo's descriptions compose an alternative type of utopian spatiality and thereby remould the figure of the city as the archetypal locus of the utopian imaginary. The next section strives to illustrate this difference through a comparison of two important cities – Amaurot and Venice.

From Amaurot to Venice

Hythloday begins his description of Utopia with a detailed account of the geography of the island and the spatial layout of its capital city, Amaurot. This layout is based on the urban plan designed by Utopos, the conqueror and founder of the utopian society, and it is reproduced as identically as possible in all fifty-four cities of the island. Hythloday notes the thoroughness of this repetition: 'If you know one of their cities, you know them all, so similar are they in all respects (so far as the terrain allows). And so I will describe one of them (it doesn't much matter which one).' (More 2014, 56). In this way, Hythloday's description construes the island space as a passive, uniform ground on which the blueprint of the ideal city can be repeatedly and unproblematically projected. The only minor reservation concerning the complete similarity of the cities is expressed in the words 'as far as the terrain allows.' However, this potential local variability and indeterminacy is promptly subsumed under Utopia's forced uniformity.

Thus, Utopia contains fifty-four iterations of the same city; Amaurot is the city that repeats. It is this propensity for unending repetition that makes it 'likely to last forever' (More 2014, 133). In Marco Polo's descriptions, on the contrary, the clarity of the Utopian order is replaced by an ambiguity and instability. If in Utopia every city is measured against the ideal and static model, the cities in Polo's descriptions are in a state of constant flux: after any short description, there follows an instant shift to the next incompatible description and then to the next one. Also, each individual city by itself is presented as fragmentary and multifaceted, thus always demonstrating its potential for change.

The status of the cities in Polo's narrations remains unresolved throughout the novel. His accounts are addressed to Kublai Khan, the thirteenth century ruler of the Mongol Empire, but it is not clear whether the individual descriptions are poetic retellings of real places or rather pure figments of the imagination. Several interpretations are given, but they always contradict each other. One possibility is that all these cities are shadows of home, of Venice:

[Polo's] repertory could be called inexhaustible, but now he was the one who had to give in. Dawn had broken when he said: "Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know."

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

Marco Polo bowed his head.

"Venice," the Khan said.

Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"

The emperor did not turn a hair. "And yet I have never heard you mention that name."

And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."

"When I ask you about other cities, I want to hear about them. And about Venice, when I ask you about Venice."

"To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice." (IC, 86.)

Here, again, is a city to which all other cities are referred. Yet, it is very different from the urban plan of Utopos. Amaurot and Venice follow two very different spatial logics: Venice is not the repeated city but the implicit city. It is the home of Polo's invisible cities which appear only for a moment, in a fleeting vision of invisibility. Other cities bloom and wither within Venice. Nothing there strives for eternity. It is a city of inexhaustible potential. The real and the imaginary are neighbours there. Venice holds so much within itself. Perhaps, paraphrasing Ernst Bloch (1968, 281), it could be said that Amaurot and its twin cities confine us in prisons of mere presence, but in Marco Polo's Venice we live surrounded by possibility.

Kaleidoscopic urban space

The constellation of cities in Polo's stories gives rise to a vertiginous, variable movement that has a certain kind of pull and enchantment to it, to the extent that at times it appears to take over the thinking of the listener as well:

Kublai Khan had noticed that Marco Polo's cities resemble one another, as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements. Now, from each city Marco described to him, the Great Khan's mind set out on its own, and after dismantling the city piece by piece, he reconstructed it in other ways, substituting components, shifting them, inverting them. (IC, 43.)

Besides presenting the effect of enchantment on Kublai Khan, this paragraph also describes quite accurately the movement that defines Polo's method for the narration of the urban: it is a movement of unravelling and reformation, substitution and inversion – the cities emerge in a kaleidoscopic effect of variation and exchange of elements.²

The cities become elusive by being caught up in this kaleidoscopic movement: '*Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else*' (IC, 44). They escape exhaustive interpretation and do not adhere to a clear set of rules. This secretiveness and the layered concealment stand in stark contrast to the transparency of Hythloday's Utopia where everything must be in public view, and a rigid set of laws is needed to repress the human tendency towards vice and its attendant injustices (Claeys 2017, 6–7). Yet, despite the underlying elusiveness, the idea that cities are composed of desires and fears provides a key way of understanding the complexity and dynamism of urban space in *Invisible Cities*. For later in the novel, these desires and fears are identified in more detail: the desires indicate the wish for a eutopian city while the fears express the possibility of a city descending into dystopia (IC, 164–165). Importantly, these figures are not described as the endpoints of an either successful or wretched historical process but rather as two vectors that underlie the constant transformations of urban space. As neither direction is predetermined, cities unfold in their endless tension. Thus, the kaleidoscopic variabilities and shifting combinations of Polo's cities can be alternatively pictured as a constant movement along the two vectors of the eutopian and dystopian.

These vectors can be articulated also in terms of justice and injustice, which becomes particularly evident in the last city that Polo describes, Berenice (IC, 161–163). The city contains a great number of different Berenices nested within one another like a Russian doll. These cities are alternately just and unjust. Each of them grows in its turn to become the actual Berenice for a little while before being superseded by the next one. Thus, Berenice, defined by a continual shifting along the two vectors of justice and injustice, condenses and captures the oscillating movement which spans all the cities and their transformations in the novel.

There are limits to the freedom of the kaleidoscopic movement of the cities imposed by the rigid formal structure of the novel itself. Namely, *Invisible Cities* follows a somewhat taxonomical organisation in which Polo's fifty-five descriptions are grouped into eleven themes so that there are five cities, also numbered from one to five, collected under each one. Thus, each city is identified by its own name but also by its thematic heading and number that assigns its position in the series of five cities belonging to the same theme. Furthermore, the descriptions are organized in nine chapters, each beginning and ending with a conversation between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo. The dialogues are set apart from the descriptions of the cities by their form but also typographically as they are in italics and lack a heading of

their own. The eleven thematic series open onto a considerable variety of subjects and allow the novel to experiment with many different dimensions of urban writing, such as semiotics (*Cities & Signs*), the relation between form and function (*Thin Cities*), and questions of temporality and mortality (*Cities & The Dead*).

In this complex whole, the sections that connect most clearly to my examination of the internal operations of utopian space include *Cities & Eyes*, *Cities & Desire*, and *Hidden Cities*. The first of these relates to the interconnection between spatiality, perception, and epistemology: the proliferation of cities entails a multiplication of perspectives on urban space, perspectives that are divergent and inconsistent, as opposed to the objective view of the urban planner that determines the identical layout of the cities of Utopia. The descriptions of cities under the second thematic heading highlight the two vectors that underlie the fluidity and changeability of urban space – desire and fear, eutopia and dystopia, justice and injustice. The last theme is similar to *Cities & Eyes* in its negotiation of the conditions of visibility but also indicates the playful fickleness of urban space. My analysis of the novel is guided mostly by these three thematic series as well as the dialogues between Polo and Kublai Khan.

In the next section, I will focus on how the dialogues establish a discordant relationship between Polo's unruly descriptions and the Khan's imperial order which tends towards uniformity and stasis. I trace this discordance to a tension between two incompatible models of space. With recourse to María Lugones' terminology of the logics of domination and resistance, I then suggest a reading of Polo's narrations as a utopian act of resistance against the hierarchical order of the empire. After that, I turn to a more detailed analysis of the representations of space in Calvino's novel, noting how the issue of spatiality intertwines with the problematics of perception. In this respect, I argue that the multiplicity of cities brings forth a perspectivist epistemology. Finally, in the last section, I propose Gilles Deleuze's concept of the any-space-whatever as a possible starting point for a theoretical understanding of Calvino's renewal of the utopian genre.

The desert and the city: two logics of space

In the novel, Polo's narration of cities participates in an extensive administrative practice of surveillance and reporting which involves a large network of envoys, ambassadors, and tax-collectors. They arrive in the capital city from all provinces of the empire and convert what they have witnessed into quantifiable data for the use of the emperor. This continuous influx of data functions as an essential tool of governance, but it has additional implications for Kublai Khan. Namely, the emperor is beset by the feeling that his empire is disintegrating (*IC*, 5) and he is no longer truly in possession of it. He repeatedly expresses his desire for genuine ownership of the realm in the dialogues with Marco Polo (*IC*, 23, 121):

it is the melancholic wish of an ageing ruler no longer able to lead his armies in conquest but forced to witness the sprawling empire slip from his grasp. '*My empire has grown too far toward the outside [...] The empire is being crushed by its own weight.*' (IC, 73.)

Through its unceasing, violent territorial expansion, the empire has come to contain a multitude of peoples, languages, and cultures in relation to which the Great Khan himself assumes the position of a foreigner (IC, 21). It is this experience of foreignness and disconnection in the face of the growing variety of the empire that underlies his inability to possess it. Notably, however, Kublai Khan sees the issue of possession primarily as an epistemic problem: what he lacks, above all, is a thorough understanding of the constitution of the realm in its increasing complexity (IC, 22–23, 121). For this reason, the empire-wide network of reporting plays a crucial role. The data it relays appears to be an essential precondition for the kind of possession Kublai Khan yearns for. It would allow him to impose a uniform, centralized structure over his lands which otherwise escape him in their foreignness and diversity. It is a question of enforcing a rigid order, of fixing a meaning.

However, Marco Polo's reports differ in nature from all the others. His descriptions of the fifty-five cities lack the utilitarian and informative function of standard reporting and do not allow for facile interpretation or straightforward extraction of data. Kublai Khan notes the discrepancy in the reports of the Venetian merchant: contrasting them to an atlas which contains all the cities of the empire and the neighbouring realms, '*[h]e realizes that from Marco Polo's tales it is pointless to expect news of those places*' (IC, 135). Instead, Polo's cities adhere to an imaginary geography and to divergent rules of cartography. They assemble into a shifting and non-linear textual meshwork which cannot be subsumed under the unifying and regulating practices of the empire. In this sense, the cities in themselves enact a kind of resistance to the emperor's desire for possessing them. Such tendency towards resistance can be traced back to the nature of spatiality in Polo's descriptions. From this perspective, two different types of space emerge from the novel. On the one hand, space is reduced to a static, ready-made, and homogeneous element that is particularly susceptible to all kinds of activities of standardization and regimentation. It is a space that can be universally mapped and known and ruled. It is a space which is easily commanded, a space in which it is easy to command.

On the other hand, the multitude of cities springing up in Marco Polo's accounts affirm a very different kind of spatiality. Here, space becomes ambiguous and difficult to grasp. One cannot locate oneself easily within it; orientations are always changeable and provisional. It is as if the playfulness of the cities' constitution implied a fluidity and malleability, even creativity, that belongs to space itself. This can be understood as a utopian space that oscillates between the gestures of affirmation and negation, always skirting the topographical rupture that directs the creative interplay between the real and the

imagined city. It is opposed to the uniform spatiality of the empire and its ideal of an entirely closed space – the Khan’s utopian dream drawing ever nearer to its dystopian end state.

Upon his arrival in the court of the Great Khan, Marco Polo does not yet share a common language with the emperor. Thus, at this early stage of their acquaintanceship, Polo is forced to communicate his reports in the form of pantomimes or with the help of objects he has brought from his journeys. These reports have only an obscure relationship to the cities they represent, vacillating between various potential meanings and interpretations. In this way, Polo’s wordless descriptions engage Kublai Khan in an uncertain process of deciphering which yields no fixed significations. Through this process, the realm manifests itself to the emperor as *‘a desert of labile and interchangeable data, like grains of sand, from which there appeared, for each city and province, the figures evoked by the Venetian’s logogriphs.’* (IC, 21–22.)

This image reveals an empire comprised of two constituent parts – the desert and the city – which epitomize quite precisely the two types of space found in the novel. There is the uniform desert extending itself over the whole empire, reducing true differences into abstract grains of data so that each part becomes absolutely knowable but also interchangeable with any other. But against this background, cities emerge like logographic riddles that obfuscate meanings and elude apprehension. They are like cryptical sprouts that surface from the desert and refuse to be appropriated by it. This refusal takes a different form in the different cities of the novel, but together they demonstrate an inherent unruliness of urban space and of the act of narrating these spaces.

The duality of desert and city in Calvino’s novel can be elucidated with the help of María Lugones’ spatial terminology in her theorisation of collectivity and resistance.³ Lugones distinguishes between two logics of constructing and inhabiting space: the spatiality of domination and the spatiality of resistance that works within and against the former. She describes the spatiality of domination as ‘a map that has been drawn by power’ (Lugones 2003, 8). This map delineates the spatial coordinates which restrict and regulate the lives subsumed under it. It designates the locations that are permitted, forbidden, or forced upon a given subject as well as the range of possible movements within and between these places. The map’s functioning itself is mostly hidden from view. Therefore, the first act of transgression would be to make it seen, to look for signs of its effects, the erasures and containments it fosters in oneself and in one’s everyday spatiality. This requires a subjective, embodied investigation of the spaces one habitually inhabits in order to come to understand the map that organises them. (Lugones 2003, 8–10.)

Lugones emphasises that an inquiry of this kind engenders, above all, an epistemic shift which makes possible ‘forms of noticing oppression *at* its logic and moving against it’ (Lugones 2003, 12). Namely, the map drawn by power effects a conceptual separation of resistance from domination in the sense that the possibility of resistance never becomes visible in it; the mapping of the spaces does not

allow for a resistant mode of their occupation. In other words, only by becoming conscious of the presence of the map of oppressions can one become conscious of one's own possibilities for 'trespassing' against its dictates as well as recognise others' violations of its ordered spatiality. These subversive acts connect to a logic of resistance and transformation that has the potential to redraw the map and its spaces. (Lugones 2003, 8–11.) Resistance, however, cannot simply be reduced to choosing one logic over the other. The necessary resistant epistemic shift is rather a question of being able to simultaneously hold both logics and the incompatible perceptions they produce – to see oppression and resistance at the same time. (Lugones 2003, 13.) It is as if two disparate realities and their constitutive logics incessantly interweave in an unstable and complex encounter.

In Calvino's novel, it is the network of reporting that is responsible for creating the map of oppressions. The narrations of the fifty-five cities, on the other hand, express the possibility of redrawing the spatiality of the desert and countering its logic of domination. However, there is no simple dualism here either, in the sense that the individual cities would be presented as straightforward loci of emancipation. Rather, as with Lugones, the urban spaces are simultaneously constructed by both logics in their tension, in the constant motion along the vectors of eutopia and dystopia, or justice and injustice.

Of course, the problematics of spatiality in Lugones and Calvino emerge from very different contexts. For Lugones, the discussion of space occurs within a feminist philosophical ethics that is rooted in a specific and urgent political struggle where theory and practice cannot be separated. This is quite far removed from Calvino's literary practice in the intersection between European modernism and postmodernism. However, acknowledging this discrepancy, my attempt to refract the spatial logic of *Invisible Cities* through Lugones' spatial terminology is based on the hope to reveal a politics of space from Calvino's novel which might otherwise be difficult to discern in its multifaceted composition.⁴ In other words, Lugones' conceptual apparatus provides me with the tools to highlight the resistant strand in the novel, necessary for a utopian reading of this book. In the next section, I will proceed to a closer analysis of the construction of such a resistant logic of space in Marco Polo's descriptions of cities.

Space and perspectivism

Some of Polo's narrations begin by giving brief directions for reaching the city in question. For example, the very first city he describes can be found in the following manner: 'Leaving there and proceeding for three days toward the east, you reach Diomira' (*IC*, 7). Other similar descriptions ensue: 'From there, after six days and seven nights, you arrive at Zobeide' (*IC*, 45); or 'Proceeding eighty miles into the northwest wind, you reach the city of Euphemia' (*IC*, 36). There is always something missing in these instructions. They might suggest a definite direction or distance, but not a clear route to the city. This is

because the actual starting point of the voyage, from which the direction might be determined and the distance measured, is never indicated. Thus, leaving towards Diomira or Zobeide, for instance, the point of departure lacks a specific referent; Polo's spatial deixis of 'there,' marking the place where the movement towards the city ought to begin, remains ambiguous.

In other cases, directions include more concrete landmarks to guide one's way: 'After a seven days' march through woodland, the traveller directed toward Baucis cannot see the city and yet he has arrived' (*IC*, 77); or 'Beyond six rivers and three mountain ranges rises Zora' (*IC*, 15). Yet, as these forests, rivers, and mountains are not truly identified by their name or their location, they still fail to make the directions to a given city any more tangible. There is nothing stable or certain to hold on to. It is as if the traveller begins in the middle of the journey, always already in movement, without pre-given coordinates, proceeding alongside the unfolding of a space that will not be charted. Giving directions from such a position does not amount to a mastering of space but rather works paradoxically as a gesture of disorientation.⁵

These descriptions of unspecified landscapes that need to be crossed in order to reach a city appear repeatedly in Polo's accounts. But the ambiguity and instability of Polo's spatial descriptions do not relate merely to making one's way to a given city but also apply to the cities themselves. A city often appears differently depending on the perspective from which one looks at it. For example, Despina (*IC*, 17–18), 'a border city between two deserts,' is characterized by its tendency to display a different face depending on the route along which one arrives there. If Despina is approached overland by traversing the desert bordering it, the city that appears at the horizon takes on the resemblance of a ship. If, on the other hand, one arrives by sea, the city assumes the form of a camel. In this way, according to the visitor's perspective and route of arrival, the city's appearance fluctuates in an interplay of concealment and revelation.

The multiplication of points of view in Polo's descriptions constitutes a kind of perspectivist understanding of the city. While an individual traveller is restricted to a particular perspective according to which the city will appear to them as either a ship or a camel, for instance, Polo's narration encompasses both and effectuates a continual cross-referencing between the two points of view. Thereby, his descriptions eschew any presupposition of a single dominating perspective on a city. There is no absolute view that one could adopt; each city contains several irreconcilable logics which constitute its spaces. In this perspectivism of the cities, each type of spatial organisation correlates with an epistemological point of view: the ship and the camel are perceptual states but also spatial forms. Thus, the plurality of perspectives is grounded in an always-multiple space, and the descriptions of the cities emerge through the linkage between territories and perspectives. This linkage is also explicitly remarked upon in a sequence where Polo obeys the emperor's command to describe the cities he has visited with the help of only a chessboard:

arranging on the board looming rooks and sulky knights, assembling swarms of pawns, drawing straight or oblique avenues like a queen's progress, Marco recreated the perspectives and the spaces of black and white cities on moonlit nights (IC, 122).

The game of chess dramatizes the interconnection of perspectives and spaces, while the alternation of black and white on the board recalls the duality of justice and injustice, the vectors of the eutopian and dystopian, at the heart of the cities Polo recreates.

The narratorial strategy of interweaving these multiple disparate perspectives and their corresponding spaces resonates with Lugones' methodological concern for being able to perceive the logics of oppression and resistance at the same time. Accordingly, her insistence on cultivating a 'resistant multiple interpretive vein' (Lugones 2003, 13) can be understood in a decidedly perspectivist sense. As she states, '[i]t is of great interest for emancipatory work that we can cross-reference different realities' (Lugones 2003, 15). The cities in Polo's narrations constitute such a multiplicity of co-existing realities. Thus, each city by itself and in their various constellations brings forth 'a multiple sensing, a multiple perceiving, a multiple sociality' (Lugones 2003, 11) which stands in opposition to the fixed and uniform perspective of the empire's network of reporting.

The multiplicity of space becomes most evident with the cities which are composed of several cities. They present a great variety of spatial configurations. For example, cities can be positioned in a vertical order. In Eusapia (*IC*, 109–110), there is an identical copy of the city built underground. This subterranean copy functions as a necropolis where the inhabitants of Eusapia can continue their former occupations even after death. A similar vertical organisation can extend even to triple cities, as in Beersheba (*IC*, 111–113), which is perched between a celestial and an infernal city – a eutopian dream suspended in the heavens above it, and a dystopian nightmare buried underneath. Alternatively, the multiplication of cities within a city can take place in a horizontal direction. The city of Eutropia (*IC*, 64–65) is defined by such a horizontal dispersion. It consists of many cities of equal size that are scattered over a vast plateau. Only one of these cities is inhabited at a time, and the citizens always move together from one city to the next following a regular rotation.

The layout of Eusapia and Beersheba is described in detail, yet these spatial determinations do not imply any solidification of their being. Rather they are caught up in a constant fluctuation and interlacing which seems to be a consequence of their manifold spatiality itself. Accordingly, the individual cities they contain are never solid or unified either. Nor are the relations between them fixed.⁶ In Eusapia, it turns out that the dead, every now and then, invent different kinds of novelties in their underground version of the city. These innovations are then copied in the city above. This reversal of the accustomed order leads to a wider uncertainty concerning Eusapia's constitution: it is no longer evident which one of the

two cities is the copy and which one the original. Polo's description of Eusapia ends with a further note of ambiguity: 'in the twin cities there is no longer any way of knowing who is alive and who is dead.' (*IC*, 110.)

Similarly, in Beersheba, the initial designations of the city are questioned: the spectrum from dystopia to eutopia that determines the organisation of this vertically built triple city suddenly loses its self-evident nature. Beersheba's inhabitants believe that the celestial city, the city of virtue, is built with the most valuable materials – a city of gold, silver, and diamonds – while the infernal city as 'the receptacle of everything base and unworthy' is constituted from their rubbish and sewage. But in the course of Marco Polo's description, these assumptions, too, are reversed with the suggestion that perhaps the citizens of Beersheba have misjudged their valuations. Now, it is the city underground that is constructed from the most precious materials, absorbed in an endless, miserly, and greedy accumulation of wealth. On the contrary, the city in the sky is formed from all cast-off things, finding its virtue in the rare moments of generous abandon and freedom. (*IC*, 111–113.) In this way, the ambiguity of urban space seems to infect also the inhabitants with a deep epistemological and moral ambivalence. For these city dwellers of Eusapia and Beersheba, the well-established distinctions between copy and original, life and death, or between good and evil, virtue and vice, lose their certainty.

In fact, virtually all fifty-five descriptions included in *Invisible Cities* involve a striking moment of reversal and transformation of this kind. They begin by presenting a clearly defined perspective, which is then complicated, contradicted, or overturned by what follows. These recurrent reversals in meaning bring forth an admission of uncertainty and hesitancy that is the counterpart of the novel's utopian space characterised by unceasing change. It stands in contrast to the dogmatic assuredness of, for instance, the anti-utopian acceptance of the present as necessary or the confinement of the future within a static image in traditional utopias.

The utopian whatever

In Calvino's novel, the five cities grouped under the thematic heading of Continuous Cities function as critical explorations of postmodern urban space. These cities contain the most sustained elaboration of the dystopian aspects in the novel. Their descriptions address issues like pollution, unsustainable population growth, and the uncontrolled and unplanned growth of cities. According to Fernandes and Silva, the descriptions of these five cities anticipate various later discourses on urban space within the fields of architecture and urban planning, such as Rem Koolhaas' (1995) *Generic City*, a city without identity or history, and François Ascher's (1995) *Metapolis*, a city that sprawls out over a large territory and incorporates within itself a set of highly mixed places. Beyond these connections, Fernandes and

Silva identify one concept that underlies all the others and ties the five continuous cities together: Marc Augé's non-place (Fernandes and Silva 2014, 12). With this notion, Augé (1995, 77–78) refers to characteristically postmodern spaces that 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.' They are places which have lost their meaningfulness for the subjects who dwell in them. His examples include places tending towards anonymity and intended only for passing through, such as airports, motorways, and supermarkets (Augé 1995, 96).

In an attempt to conceptualise the spatiality of Calvino's novel as an alternative type of utopian space, I will turn to a concept closely related to Augé's non-place, that is, Gilles Deleuze's any-space-whatever, which can be seen as revealing the hidden potentiality in such ostensibly barren places: it is not an indictment of the alienation produced in these spaces but rather an acknowledgement of their inherent fluidity. The any-spaces-whatever refer to amorphous, singular spaces that have lost their homogeneity. These are fragmented spaces where the components are no longer linked to one another according to some pre-defined common-sense naturalized order. Instead, their linkage can be established in an infinity of ways. (Deleuze 1986, 109.) This concept seems to capture some key attributes of the spatiality of *Invisible Cities*: the city spaces are fragmented and multiple, and Polo's act of narration functions as a variable linking of these fragments to the extent that each city is affirmed as a 'pure locus of the possible' (Deleuze 1986, 109). There is no privileged model that these linkages would follow, but rather the utopian aspect arises from their inexhaustibility, from the ever-renewed potential for being otherwise.

Towards the end of the novel, the number of cities and thereby also their fragments of space begin to multiply even faster when Polo's descriptions are supplemented by the content of the emperor's atlas that Marco Polo and Kublai Khan review together. Its last pages contain the maps of well-known eutopias and dystopias in literary history: places like New Atlantis, Utopia, and Oceana on one hand and Enoch, Babylon, and Brave New World, on the other. The novel ends with a dialogue on these two vectors of urban space and urban literature. The emperor asks Polo to pick from the eutopias the one which corresponds most closely to the future to come. Polo refuses a simple answer by insisting that the perfect city is made of fragments and the search for it can never stop. Then, the inevitable oscillation towards the other direction occurs, and Kublai reveals his fear that the world is heading towards a dystopian future. To this, Polo replies:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where 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 recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (IC, 165.)

This call for giving space, for the utopian practice of placemaking, constitutes the final words in the novel. It can be read as crystallising the method of urban writing with which Calvino reworks the utopian genre: giving space as a narrative practice, as the re-linkage of fragments, the interweaving of the perspectives of a whirling kaleidoscope, and the tending to seeds forever sprouting from under the desert sand.

References

- Ascher, François. 1995. *Métapolis ou l'avenir des villes*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob.
- Augé, Marc. 1995. *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Bell, David M. 2017. *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect*. New York: Routledge.
- Bloch, Ernst. 1968. Man as Possibility. *CrossCurrents* 18(3): 273–283.
- Calvino, Italo. 1972. *Le città invisibili*. Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore. English edition: Calvino, Italo. 1974. *Invisible Cities* (trans: Weaver, William). New York: Harcourt.
- Calvino, Italo. 1986. Cybernetics and Ghosts. In *The Uses of Literature*, 3–27. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Calvino, Italo. 2013. The Traveller in the Map. In *Collection of Sand*, 18–25. London: Penguin Books.
- Cerrai, Marzia. 2000. “Le città invisibili” e il genere dell’utopia. *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 5(2): 621–637.
- Claeys, Gregory. 2017. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1986. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fernandes, Eduardo and Ana Carina Silva. 2014. From Moore to Calvino: The invisible cities of 20th century planning. <https://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/bitstream/1822/32950/1/repositorium.pdf>. Accessed 20 Oct 2021.
- Koolhaas, Rem. 1995. The Generic City. In *S,M,L,XL*. New York: The Monacelli Press.
- Lugones, María. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes. Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Martins, Ana. 2018. Invisible cities: utopian spaces or imaginary places? *Archai* 22: 123–152.
- Modena, Letizia. 2011. *Italo Calvino's Architecture of Lightness: The Utopian Imagination in an Age of Urban Crisis*. New York: Routledge.
- More, Thomas. 2014. *Utopia. Second Edition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Moylan, Tom. 2014. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Rizzarelli, Giovanna. 2002. La città di carta e inchiostro: “Le città invisibili” di Italo Calvino e la letteratura utopica.” *Italianistica* 31(2/3): 219–235.

Vieira, Fátima. 2010. The concept of utopia. In *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys, 3–27. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹ See, for instance, Cerrai (2000), Rizzarelli (2002), Modena (2011), Fernandes & Silva (2014), and Martins (2018).

² The figure of the kaleidoscope resonates with Calvino's lecture 'Cybernetics and Ghosts' (1986) that discusses literature as a combinatorial game and asks whether this game could be performed by a 'literature-machine.' This possible escape from human authorship also connects to the unruly urban space of *Invisible Cities* which in its constant movement resists the forms and immobilisations of urban design and architecture.

³ Lugones' work does not belong to the field of utopian studies, and her scarce explicit references to utopianism have a negative tone, as she describes it as an emptied mode of hope that lacks the necessary connection to practice (Lugones 2003, 5). Yet, her nuanced analyses of placemaking as a form of resistance offer important insights in relation to the inquiry of utopian space undertaken in this article. Her thinking would also provide a compelling accompaniment to the feminist process utopianism of, for instance, Angelika Bammer and Lucy Sargisson whose denial of utopia as a blueprint often also discards the subject of *topos* altogether.

⁴ In its critical reception, *Invisible Cities* has often been perceived as an exemplary representative of the postmodern apolitical novel characterised by formal experimentation, self-referentiality, and abstraction. My approach aligns rather with Letizia Modena (2011, 12) who claims that interpretations dismissing the novel's politics have a 'diminishing effect' on the text and recognises the need for rediscovering its political engagement.

⁵ The positioning of Polo in relation to the cities and voyages he describes can be compared to a later essay by Calvino on cartography. In this essay 'The Traveller in the Map', he distinguishes two kinds of geographical maps: first, the most conventional type where the earth's surface is represented as though seen from far above, and, secondly, the simpler and more ancient maps with a linear form tracing the outline of a journey on long scrolls (Calvino 2013, 18–19). In one sense, both modes of mapping are intimated in Polo's descriptions as well. On the one hand, he adopts the viewpoint of a cartographer who considers the cities from a far enough distance to be able to apprehend their constitution and spatial organisation as a whole. On the other, his descriptions occasionally include a linear representation of the stages of the journey to arrive in the city. However, the general presuppositions of both modes of cartography are dismantled within Polo's narrations: the complex spatiality of the cities evades capture by a single objective perspective, while the effect of traversing a landscape does not allow the traveller to conclusively orientate oneself in view of the complete journey.

⁶ The city of Eutropia is an exception in this respect. When its inhabitants move to another city on the plateau, they are assigned a different role in the community, but the city itself continues to repeat its life cycle identically: the same scenes and roles are played out with merely the casting of the actors changing. Thus, Eutropia is described as the only city in the empire that remains always the same. (*IC*, 64–65.) The stasis of this city can also be seen as an allusion to the immutable order that guarantees equity in More's Utopia where the inhabitants exchange houses every ten years by drawing lots (More 2014, 57).