

INVISIBLE CITIES: THE TABLE OF CONTENTS AND THE LABYRINTHS OF REALITY

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Abstract

In *Invisible Cities* (1972), Italo Calvino contrasts a rigid outline structure with a flexible textual content. The tension comprised by the numerical structure proposed in the table of contents stands out against the set of polissemic texts which make up the subject matter of the book. The opposition between *form* and *content* point to a fruitful dichotomy in the conception of the novel linked to the theories of the open and closed work. This essay will investigate the structural construction of *Invisible Cities* by looking at its table of contents, seeking to discuss some models of formalistic representation proposed by the criticism and the specific contribution they may, or may not, provide. The objective is to analyse the pertinence of such theories in the light of historical and cultural approaches. Aiming to uncover possible meanings which arise from the debate, this essay will question to what extent structural complexities can be considered literary if they are not ultimately related to the culture in which a text is found.

Sinopse

Em *As Cidades Invisíveis* (1972), Italo Calvino contrasta uma estrutura rígida com um conteúdo textual maleável. A tensão se dá entre a estrutura numérica delineada no índice e os textos polissêmicos que formam a matéria-prima do livro.

Essa oposição entre *forma* e *conteúdo* aponta para uma dicotomia na concepção do romance ligada a teorias da obra aberta e fechada. Este artigo vai investigar a concepção estrutural de *Cidades Invisíveis* através do índice buscando discutir a validade de alguns modelos formalistas de representação propostos pela crítica especializada. O objetivo é analisar a pertinência de tais leituras em face de teorias históricas e culturais. Almejando descobrir os possíveis significados o presente artigo vai questionar a que ponto tais complexidades formais podem ser consideradas literárias se, em última instância, elas não são relacionadas com a cultura que lê o texto.

Keywords: Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, Concepts of open and closed works, Cultural theory.

Palavras-Chave: Italo Calvino, *As Cidades Invisíveis*, Conceito de obra aberta e fechada, Teoria cultural.



"It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless formless ruin." Italo Calvino

The use of the table of contents as reading possibilities

The opposition between the closed and open texts has its origins in early forms of post-structuralism (ECO, 1989: 43). This opposition defines the former as the ideological text, which seeks to position the subject within ideology through narrative closure, and the latter as the avant-garde or deconstructive text, which exposes conflicts rather than resolves them. Open texts are claimed to be politically radical because they do not position themselves within ideology but instead disrupt the subject's sense of coherence and problematise the relationship between ideology and culture. This section of the article will look at *Invisible Cities*' table of contents and how critics have interpreted it as a system of signification linked to the theories of the closed text.¹ By checking the table of contents, the reader will detect a total of nine chapters in the book. A more detailed inspection will reveal an

¹ Martin McLaughlin actually refers to the 'table of contents' as 'index', the critics states that "the complex index outlining the structure of the text appears at the beginning of the book and not, as it is more common in Italian fiction, at the end: this contents page is not only a list of chapters, but an integral part of the work's structure and meaning, the index and the individual sections of the book interacting on number of different levels with the text." (1998: 101).

interesting progression of titles and numbers. The observer will notice that this succession follows an orderly sequence and a keener eye will spot a principle of substitution in its organisation. The criterion employed by the author is surely no random coincidence. On the contrary, it indicates a method applied in the composition of the book. The numerical organisation observed in the table of contents is based on different combinations of the numbers 12345. Paradoxically, the numerical sequence opens up the reading possibilities, given that the reader may opt to explore the book in different ways. This non-linear reading could be done by examining the texts under specific topics (i.e. Cities & Desire, Cities & the Dead, etc.), or by analysing all the narratives which fall under the numerical sequences proposed in the table of contents (i.e. the reader could choose to read all the text listed under the number 5). All in all, the play with numbers in *Invisible Cities*' table of contents unlocks a range of reading possibilities.

On the other hand, although the book has the potential to be read in many directions, a linear reading cannot be completely discarded. That is to say Calvino does not trespass all the fixed rules of narration and realistic conventions, as expected of an open text. This verisimilar compromise can be observed in the encounter between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, which gives the book a solid foot in the historical realm. This dichotomy in the novel's composition makes it simultaneously an open and a closed work. In other words, Calvino conforms to a chronological past whilst simultaneously investing in different reading possibilities. Using Umberto Eco's book on the poetics of the open work as a stepping stone, Teresa de Laurentis refers to the "project" of the contemporary art work as being the use of "techniques of discontinuity and indetermination for the purpose of generating open series of performances or interpretations by the reader/listener/viewer" (De LAURENTIS, 2001: 37). Ultimately, the critic is saying that it is the reading process in itself that should be the focus of interest. The critic proposes that *Invisible Cities*' fragmentary and connective style may be thought of as a *hypertext* due to the way it multiplies the act of reading. Indeed, Calvino

balances the real and the fantastic by creating an ever-changing narration of kaleidoscopic visions, although there are limitations to the text's potential of expansion.

The entrances to the book are many, as its fascicular disposition allows the blocks to be atomised without loss of its entirety. The table of contents certainly provides a good way in, leading the reader to many possible reading combinations connecting the chapters freely within the novel. But *Invisible cities* can not truly be called a hypertext if it does not make references to extra-textual universes. The novel alludes to the work of other writers such as Borges, Cortázar, Pávitch, who also invested in literary games pending towards the multiplicity of realities (LJESTØL, 1994: 87-120). However, these connections are more critical theorisations than textual mentions. Calvino's defence of the novel as a network in *Invisible Cities* seems to have been textually captured in the cities of Octavia, the spider-web city hanging over an abyss awaiting for its destruction; and in the city of Ersilia, a ghost-town where all that remains left are strings indicating the connections among the people who once dwelled there. Ersilia is "a spider-web of intricate relationships seeking a form" (CALVINO, 1997: 75 and 76, respectively).

In essence, Calvino's procedure consists in using a "framework" to bring together the fascicular narratives which form the book, giving them a sense of closure. At the same time the disposition of the table of contents corroborates to recombine the texts, and multiply the interpretations; it also restrains the digressions, giving the texts limits and a sense of a unified, closed system. Calvino's structural approach to the composition of *Invisible Cities* also constitutes an important characteristic of his other works. His interest in literary texts which are somehow subject to a mathematical order derives primarily from his associations with OULIPO group (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*), the influence of the structural theories of Vladimir Propp, and the early works of Roland Barthes.

Calvino became interested in experiments which dealt with narrative technique, structure and linguistics due to his involvement with Raymond Queneau

and Georges Perec, who were members of OULIPO, a group which applied the principles of mathematics and science to the generation of a new literature. In 1967, Calvino translated the experimental work of Queneau, *Les Fleurs Bleues*, to Italian, becoming, *I Fiori Blu* (MARKEY, 1999: 21). This association played an important part in his formation as a writer and, although he diverged from it later in life, it remained an influence for all his posterior output. Earlier in the 1960's the studies of Vladimir Propp, on the morphology of Russian folktale, were starting to become known among European and American scholars. Propp's analysis of the structure of the folklore genre, revealing common basic traces among them, had a great impact on several areas of study, making way for the development of new investigations in areas such as Anthropology, Linguistics, and Literary Theory. Calvino's own interest in Italian folktales had also alerted him to similarities in the structure of all stories, making the author realise the important part structure had in the construction of texts (McLAUGHLIN, 1998:34).

The author Alain Robbe-Grillet and the critic Roland Barthes, in their respective works with the *nouveau roman* and *Le Degré Zéro de l'écriture* (1953), advocated a fresh literary aesthetics, pursuing a fiction that did not spoon-feed the readers (i.e. writing based on verisimilitude and omniscient narration), but instead provided only the observable elements from which the experienced readers could draw their own interpretations. Calvino was also interested in the studies of Ferdinand Saussure, whose science of Semiology, or the language of signs, had an impact on his 60's texts. According to Markey, the author was later on influenced by Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist theories and its sceptical critique of language as holder of the ultimate truth (1999: 18).

Although the origins of Calvino's affinities with scientific models are well documented, critics have been divided over the significance of mixing the preciseness of mathematics with the imaginary spirit of literature in his work. In fact, explanations in that sense are frequently contradictory. For example, Angela M. Jeannet claims that "*through the intricate pattern of numbers, words, lines, and blank*

spaces Calvino is hunting for the food that feeds another human hunger, the need to make sense of the world (JEANNET, 2001: 34). The critic defends the presence of a methodical structure set up in the table of contents as the writer's attempt to support, interpret and explain what is visible in human expression. In other words, the mathematically organised text would be a celebration of the signs, symbols, and logic devised by humanity to read the world.

Kathryn Hume refutes this explanation, coming up with a different reason to explain why Calvino employs such artifice. She believes the pattern to be arbitrary, as it offers an "exceptionally orderly world", instead she asserts that such "seriality embodies no values of beauty or taste; it is post-humanist and denies the network of cause and effect upon which our normal sense of order depends" (HUME, 1992: 135). Hume claims the division/units proposed in the table of contents are just generic names and numbers, evidently interchangeable among themselves and without a sense of purpose. "The overt orderliness is deceptive", Hume states. Alternatively, she proposes the cities themselves are the bottom line of Calvino's system, claiming the existence of "minimal units" within the text, which correspond to the appearance of repeated ideas or images throughout the book. Quoting Baker, she reinforces her incredulity about the form being an attempt at miming the reality of human expression and communication. She concludes that "the precision of structure set down in the table of contents is itself a concise comment on the contradictory nature of any attempt to give meaning to the labyrinth of reality" (HUME, 1992:135).

Understanding the table of contents

When referring to the mathematical structure in *Invisible Cities* it is common to see remarks about the formula $5 \text{ (sections)} \times 11 \text{ (topics)} = 55 \text{ (cities)}$, this being the simplest way of illustrating the book's organisation. Other representations will interpret the numeric succession as it appears on the table of contents. The

Above there are two different graphic representations of the table of contents, constituted either by numbers or letters. The chapters of the book are indicated by roman numerals on the left hand side. Take just one graph in consideration. Each number (or letter) accounts for a city described in the book. The first and the ninth chapters are the longest ones, containing the description of ten cities each. In the figure above they are represented by the first four and the last four rows, constituting the pointed parts, top and bottom, of the parallelogram. Between them, these chapters answer for the portrayal of 20 cities. The remaining chapters make up the middle section of the figure. There are seven chapters in the middle section holding the description of five cities each. They appear in turns of five by five, and jointly describe 35 cities. When added up the total number of cities described in the book is 55.

Calvino organizes the 55 cities descriptions under eleven topics, namely: 1) Cities & Desire, 2) Cities & Memories, 3) Cities & Signs, 4) Thin Cities, 5) Trading Cities, 6) Cities & Eyes, 7) Cities & Names, 8) Cities & the Dead, 9) Cities & the Sky, 10) Continuous Cities, 11) Hidden Cities. These topics can be thought as the columns for the graph above, intersecting with the rows (chapters) where the number of elements (city) does not exceed five.

The graph starts with the first city (Diomira), in chapter I, under the topic of *Cities & Desire*. On to the second row, another topic is added (Cities & Desire + Cities & Memories), and two different cities are described (Isidora + Dorothea). This development continues in every following row, recuperating the last topics and introducing a new one. No city is repeated during the process, only topics, until it gets to a total of five topics and five cities in a row. Then, in a movement that starts in the second chapter, the very first topic (Cities & Desire) is dropped after its fifth appearance, and a completely distinct topic is introduced, starting the process again. That substitution is the reason why the graph/figure runs sideways, as in a kite-shape, instead of straight down. As each row does not support more than five cities, with the introduction of a new topic, one has to be dropped,

making the figure slide.

McLaughlin's book, dedicated to the study of structure in the works of Calvino, represents the table of contents of *Invisible Cities* in a remarkable graphic way. He points out that a graph exactly alike was found among Calvino's posthumous drafts. The structural complexities of his critical study do not stop here; MacLaughlin links *Invisible Cities* to *Utopia* (1516), written by Thomas More, associating the number of cities present in both books. He also proposes that by adding the number of cities (55) to the number of chapters (9), the result obtained (64) corresponds to the exact number of squares on a chessboard, a preferential symbol of structural theories. The argument is explained by the presence of a chessboard in *Invisible Cities* (CALVINO, 1997, chapter VIII: 121), a famous passage in the book which I will return to later on. In another symbolic reference, the critic relates the geometric shape of the graphic to the mentioning of diamonds by Marco Polo and Kublai Khan.

It is absolutely believable that Calvino had that graphic model in mind when he wrote *Invisible Cities*. However, without discrediting the validity of McLaughlin's work, it should be pointed out that the symbolic relations attempted are rather farfetched. The shape is hardly a diamond and the addition created to arrive at the chessboard also seems quite problematic. Wondering how much we can read into the numbers I multiplied the number of italicised dialogues in the text by the number of cities, then added the number of topics to the result, producing the following equation: $18 \times 55 = 990 + 11 = 1001$. A point could be made here, relating Calvino's *Invisible Cities* to the classic Arab narrative *Thousand and One Nights* and still produce critical support to back up this arbitrary invention (McLAUGHLIN, 1998: 100; HUME, 1992: 163). The question I ask is how much can we (over)read into these mathematical models? Are not we here moving away from what should be the primary concern of studies in fiction: the text itself?

Critical books on the matter of the table of contents in *Invisible Cities* do not mention the significance of substituting numbers for letters, or the meaning of

having a progressive sequence and a regressive one. These structural models also fail to account for the 18 italicised texts present in the book, which work as preface and epilogue for every chapter. These texts represent the conversations held between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. Therefore, it could be claimed they are not cities (that being the reason they are not referred to) and so they can not be plotted in the table of contents or in the graph. But such an explanation is not convincing, as the italicised conversations are part of the book and together they describe the 55 cities in the book. Secondly, these conversations are materially present in the table of contents, represented by three dots (...). Furthermore, these italicised dialogues confer unity and stability, without them *Invisible Cities* would be a collection of loose texts without a sense of “plot”. The dialogues function as a formalistic device, a kind of “cement” binding together the narrative blocks formed by the description of the cities. Calvino seems to employ a similar construction in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller...* (2002), originally published in 1979. The 12 chapters, which address the Reader and tell the story of Ludmila, also operate as a frame to the 10 micro-novels, constituting its cohesive element. Despite the importance of the italicised conversations in *Invisible Cities*, structural criticism fails to comment on its function or attempts to find a place for them in the table of contents.

Nevertheless, the table of contents is a remarkable way of organising the text around a mathematical description. I do not believe Calvino ever intended it be taken too seriously, it was meant to be more of a fun game. The table of contents' significance has been rather overrated at times but exploring it as a reading tool may reveal amazing and amusing combinations. Whether or not Calvino was concerned about this particular question, the fact is that he demonstrates an understanding of the aporetic relation between the measurable and the incalculable, the palpable and the imperceptible. *Invisible Cities* amalgamates the quantifiable world with metaphysical elements. In part, this is a lesson he learned from his involvement with the Parisian structuralists. But the writer took it further

by making the structure a springboard from which a narrative could take off to higher grounds. While McLaughlin seems to derive most of his interpretations from the structural grid, therefore overlooking the textual evidence and turning the interpretation of the form into an end in itself, Calvino reaches beyond that in his composition. It is acceptable that the table of contents provides meaning in the form of symbols or mathematical charades, but the writer uses it as way of communicating the ideas in the text. Structural analysis is a powerful tool but, as its concepts evolved after Propp's first proposal, it becomes clear that a plain structural reading is rather sterile without a social-cultural background to relate it to.

Culture as a site of struggle

The configuration of the table of contents offers many reading directions, splitting nodes and possibilities of multiple interpretations. However, these reading combinations cannot be considered without the book's textual content. In the combined reading of *form* and *content* lies the key to the unmatched conception of *Invisible Cities*. There is a passage in the book which seems to aggregate the structural and the textual elements summarising the discussion. Marco Polo and Kublai Khan are playing chess. The passage is part of the italicised texts rather than a description. It is a nodal moment in the book that gives insight to Calvino's ideas about the dialectics of the open and closed work.

At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked aside by the winner's hand, a black or a white square remains. By disembodying his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire's multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes. It was reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness... The Great Khan tried to concentrate on the

game: but now it was the game's reason that eluded him. The end of every game is a gain or a loss: but of what? What were the real stakes? At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked aside by the winner's hand, nothingness remains: a black square, or a white one. By disembodiment his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire's multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes; it was reduced to a square of planed wood.

Then Marco Polo spoke: "Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibers are arranged? Here a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night's frost forced it to desist." Until then the Great Khan had not realized that the foreigner knew how to express himself fluently in his language, but it was not this fluency that amazed him.

"Here is a thicker pore: perhaps it was a larva's nest; not a woodworm, because, once born, it would have begun to dig, but a caterpillar that gnawed the leaves and was the cause of the tree's being chosen for chopping down . . . This edge was scored by the wood carver with his gouge so that it would adhere to the next square, more protruding . . ." The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai; Polo was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows . . .

(CALVINO, 1997: 131)

Symbolically, the chessboard and its mathematical possibilities epitomise the formal nature in *Invisible Cities*. On the other hand, in every textual unit there is the

potential to extrapolate the narrative and disperse the meanings. In the square in which Khan saw just an empty space Polo created a whole universe proposing a movement from structure to the texture. As a minimalist emblem of reality the chessboard provides logic, geometry and harmony. It also supplies a multitude of combinations and possibilities of reading the world.

Calvino seems to be suggesting that we live under a physically organised system, represented by the chessboard which, perhaps, could be read as Nature. However, there seems to be a rejection of structuralism's tendency to seek universal and hierarchical constructions. Instead Calvino argues for a numerous play of signifiers not attempting to impose or privilege one reading over another. The works of Roland Barthes negotiated this divide between structuralism and post-structuralism. In his essay *From Work to Text* (1971), Barthes puts forth the idea that a work contains meanings which can be traced back to the author, and in that sense it is closed. On the other hand, once emancipated from the authorial figure, new meanings emerge from what a reader can extract from the text. In that sense, all texts result from personal connections with other references and sources. In other words, meaning is brought to a cultural object by its audience and does not intrinsically reside in the object, being something that remains open. In this lies the idea presented by this article. Calvino provides a fictional account of how form can look at content without treating it as such. The rules of chess and limits of the board would represent the aspects we are submitted to in this life. For example, the edges of the board could correspond to our life span or our physical limitations, the black and white squares could stand for our dualistic nature and thinking processes. However, within that he insists there is an incalculable choice of moves, takeovers, or, like Khan, one can stare into the void. Interpretation is wide and Calvino's literature is the kind of material that lets the unconscious of the reader emerge, filtering and constructing its own explanations. This is how the cultural can explain and recontextualise what is structurally given.

The narratives in the book enter a territory of paradoxical explanations and

sensuous experiences imbedded in one of the most common human organizations: the cities. But none of them should be taken at face value. Calvino is not in search of mimetic cities. Calvino's cities definitely belong to the realm of the fabulous and possibly comprise allegorical dimensions. Like Voltaire's *El Dorado* and the sunken city of *Atlantida* his cities are untraceable territories. With this strategy Calvino escapes compromising with the verisimilar world and sets foot in the fantastic or legendary status. At the end of *Invisible Cities* Marco Polo talks about the possibilities of an ideal city that might be flourishing somewhere in the world. Not as a ready-made, totalising reality but rather as something scattered and fragmented. What matters, Polo says, is to look for this Promised Land visited only by the imagination, not known or founded. Faced with the Venetian's arguments Kublai Khan's reaction is to leaf through his maps and conclude: "It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us." (CALVINO, 1997:165). The Emperor destroys all hopes of utopia as he perceives something has been subtracted from his horizon of certainties. Playing against the authoritative man that decrees and generalizes, Marco Polo manages to put in a relativist counter-discourse: "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" (CALVINO, 1997:165). As proposed by Marco Polo, the relations between the elements used to describe the cities, giving body to the narrative, are not exactly clear to the reader. His discourse is permeated by metaphors, causing the words and the meanings to break down in many ideas. The reader may feel tempted to enter into this labyrinth of symbols, hoping to find a way out somewhere along the written lines. Others like McLaughlin may try to assemble the secrete signs, as one would do with a jigsaw. It is suggested in the chess board passage that, perhaps, the best way to approach the book is with the eyes of the imagination, rather than with the rational, scrutinizing eye.

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