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Two discourses on cities

Sociology and Literature
from Georg Simmel to Italo Calvino

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Introduction

A cultural perspective of metropolises perceives them as a social order produced through specific social processes and relationships. From this perspective, cities are viewed as a multifaceted social structure [Hannerz 1980]; as a quintessential place for interdependence [Simmel 1903, Park 1925] and a mosaic structure allowing the coexistence of varied and diversified social organizations, as a simultaneous place of risks and opportunities and a great social laboratory. All of this embodies a reading of urban space resulting from the blending of different factors, where the main protagonists are human beings and their interactions. Such interactions contribute to the formation and development of urban space; however, they get successively modified by them.

At the core of a cultural perspective on cities stands the analysis of the development of a particular subjectivity coming into being by means of experiences and interactions that are distinctively metropolitan. This kind of reading, finds its first theoretical setting in Georg Simmel who, by no means accidentally, entitled his work *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. He was followed on this path by The Chicago School Sociologists - Jane Jacobs, Richard Sennett and Hannerz . This same path is followed also by many novelists, attentive viewers and reporters of the metropolitan experience. Consequently, since the very beginning of the existence of metropolises, the dialogue between researchers and writers on metropolitan life intermingled.

I intend addressing this very dialogue.
There is a very important factor, however, that links the two discourses - the literary one and the sociological one - and which I am very keen about. Both discourses examine the city and the metropolis as temporal flows rather than spatial dimensions: they deal with the city as processuality. I shall try and demonstrate how this approach - overturning the dominant approach that is purely spatial and topographic - is present in Simmel, Jane Jacobs, a few others sociologists and in almost all metropolitan novels

I shall open with a literary reference.
Dreiser, at the end of *Sister Carrie*, places Balzac's book *Père Goriot* in the hands of the protagonist: this novel describes more than others the urban experience, the disruption of all traditions and the extremely fast social mobility that is required to keep up with the pace of metropolitan life. Carrie's transformation from a young country girl into a city dweller is portrayed as the story of a "metropolitan making". It is through this acquisition of an identity built on possibilities, incertitude and adaptability that Carrie becomes the sister not only to those thousands of American girls that used to leave the countryside for the big cities in search of work and fortune, but also to the metropolitan dweller described by Simmel. Carrie is Lucien de Rubempré's sister - the protagonist of Balzac's *Lost Illusions* - who must learn to understand the unwritten rules of a Paris that devours everything; she is the sister of Antonia and her friends - as described by Willa Cather in her novel *My Antonia* - who depart the countryside

to start new lives, adopting new views of the world and different lifestyles; she's Maggie's sister, the bad girl protagonist of Stephen Crane's novel by the same name; finally, she is the sister of all those *unadjusted* girls observed and reported by William Thomas in his study on female urban deviance cases [1923]. Young, bewildered women that have lost their selves in the impact with the city, in the rear of its glittering shop-windows, or who have anyway ended up finding themselves different from when they had arrived; in any case, restless young girls unable to "stay in their place", the place that had been assigned to them by tradition and that got wiped away by the air of the city. However, Carrie is also Mrs Dalloway's sister - the aristocratic lady strolling along London's streets - the protagonist of Virginia Woolf's novel by the same name; she is Leopold Bloom's sister - the non-hero of James Joyce's *Ulysses* - a vagabond in Dublin, for whom the loss of one's self and the loss of the perception of one's self follow each other in a stream of consciousness brought into being by the city; she is the sister of all those women and men whose lives are strictly mingled with the life of the city; a sister of all those, who still in our time, day after day, experience the metropolis as a place of serendipity where one "casually finds one thing while looking for something else" [Hannerz 1980]. "

1

SIMMEL

Simmel's short essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* represents the first analysis, and probably still the most significant, of the metropolitan experience. Many well known authors, as much as all the sociological researches on metropolises that were to follow, have been influenced by this essay.

Simmel has been the first to underline the coexistence, in metropolises, of risks and opportunities, of danger along with individual achievement and to view metropolitan life as the locale of freedom. All those who in spite of everything - either writers, artists, poets, intellectuals, scientists - have loved and love metropolitan life, all those who are strong supporters of individual freedom and of a collective life that transforms itself into a public discourse, hold within them and within their works the speculations of Simmel's essay.

The entire collection of Simmel's works implies metropolitan life; it implies Berlin. In a letter to his son Hans, Simmel wrote: "Berlin's *development from a city to a metropolis (in the years around and after the turn of the century) coincides with my own strongest and broadest development ".* The Berlin where Simmel was living had gone from one million residents in 1877 to two and a half million in 1900, and such an increase in population was mainly due to the moving of great masses of people into the new metropolis. As a result, the city that comes into being is a city where every single person is a foreigner and without roots, where everyone is at the same time a maker and a privileged witness of the becoming of a metropolis as well as of the transformation of his own human condition. Such a structural and cultural change - an objective change as well as a subjective one - defines the background and sets the foundation of Simmel's thought, of his conception of modernity as a condition where every single thing enters into a relationship with everything else, where the loss of the unity of the objective spirit coexists with a growing deprivation of the subjective spirit. The experience of the world becomes psychologism, a pure inner experience; and the self, even if fragmented, encounters a hypertrophic development. This is what is described in this essay on the metropolis and what Rilke described as well.

"*Yes, I am learning to see. I don't know why it is, but everything enters me more deeply and doesn't stop where it once used to. I have an interior that I never knew of. ... I am in Paris...."* (Rilke 1910)

This is Rilke in the first pages of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,* a novel written between 1899 and 1903, therefore at the same time as Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mentall Life*. The works of Impressionism and of *Jugendstil*, at first, and those of Modernism and Expressionism, later, stood in the background of Simmel's thoughts. Many of Simmel's theorizations mingle with those of the Berlin circle of the poet Stephan George, are influenced by Rodin's artistic production as much as by Ibsen's and Strindberg's theatre, and will also

influence the work of Walter Benjamin, Siefgried Kracauer and Rainer Maria Rilke.

The Impressionists, by means of artistic representations, and Simmel, by means of his thought, relate to the same turbulent and discontinuous experience of challenge which, though not always consciously, was growing into a pervasive human condition. *The Thinker* or *The Kiss* by Rodin as well as Simmel's *adventurer* or *player* convey to us the same experience of modernity, the same way of coming into contact with it and the same reading and description modes. However, it will be Modernism above all and Expressionism in particular, through the radical refusal of all styles and forms, which will best represent Simmel's thought. In fact Modernism, as well as Simmel, tried to voice contradictoriness and multiplicity by preferring dissonances and oxymorons.

Just think about a metaphor-title such as Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*, or Schönberg's dissonances and Strindberg or Ibsen's characters, or think about Grotz's, Nolde's and Kokoschka's figures. The contiguity between Simmel's thought and Expressionism stands precisely in the notion of a world where everything contains its opposite, where conflict, tension and contradiction are not ineliminable.

Furthermore, Expressionism through its placing subject and subjectivity at the centre of attention, through its interest in psychic life and to its developing into shape and substance, embodies suitably the essence of modernity as intended by Simmel. Possibilities, unforeseen or marginal *chances* of life are what generate significance in modernity.

In metropolises you learn not to react to every single thing, you learn to stay indifferent, to become, as Simmel says, *blasé*. In order to survive, a metropolitan subject needs to "intellectualize", suppressing emotions and feelings.

Metropolises have always been the core of the monetary economy and the development of such an economy entails and generates the annulment of individuality: money has to do only with what is in common with everything else and the value of exchange reduces all qualities to quantities. Likewise, the metropolitan dweller is indifferent to anything individual and he enters into a relationship with others only by means of his own interest in their objective activities. Monetary economy cannot base itself on anything except objective and unaffective relationships; it cannot comply with any diversion deriving from the unpredictability of human relationships. Modernity, monetary economy, marketplace, social differentiation and intellectualism are all interdependent phenomena and are typically metropolitan.

The metropolis has the capability - not only because of its size - of receiving a great amount of performances; however, also due to the concentration of such a vast number of individuals, each person is required to specialise. Simmel emphasizes quite sharply that metropolises end up creating new specializations

in response to corresponding new demands; however, new demands also end up being created incessantly, with the result that not only the performances become more and more diverse but also their demand. For this reason, too, we see an incessant drive towards individualization. The metropolitan individual needs to constantly fall back on his own uniqueness and distinction in order to draw attention towards him. In metropolises this produces the most bizarre oddities and a typically metropolitan character: *the eccentric.* During the short amount of time allocated to a meeting it is necessary to strike others in their sensorial components and convey to them a notion of oneself. The tension between individual and society proves itself in metropolises through its own irreducibility and endless tension, revealing itself as a substantial way of being of the human condition. What Simmel asserts - and this is where the innovative strength of his thought stands - is that modernity is not one of the many stages of the history of the relationship between individual and society, but is instead a kind of self-revelation, an epiphany of the human condition. Only in modernity, where society is no longer coherent, the conflict between individual and society finally appears as utterly internal to the individual: it is the conflict between his social being and his drive towards his own self-realization. The metropolis is the symbol of a *non-society*, of a *non-place* where the individual can never fully feel part of it. The metropolis signifies society in absence of society. This is why his essay on the metropolis can be viewed as one of the most important contributions to the theories on modernity. To society as a non-society, as a set of fragments, corresponds a personality that is equally disintegrated and eradicated: the permanent condition of being a *foreigner*, an *outsider*.

The foreigner is a typically metropolitan figure because great urban concentrations attract the most dissimilar figures - individuals coming from all kinds of places - and because they tolerate more diversity than what might be tolerated by a small community or a small village. It is precisely on account of this infinite diversity, however, of the incertitude and of being a temporary transit residence for the new urban nomads that even metropolitan dwellers end up feeling somehow foreign, never perfectly entrenched. The metropolitan individual wanders incessantly along roads and open spaces, attracted by - as Benjamin wrote - *"the magnetism of the next street corner, a distant mass of foliage, a street name…*"[Benjamin 1982, 1986, 544].

Baudelaire's and Benjamin's *flaneur* is Simmel's *blasé*: bored and at the same time restless, a foreigner - primarily to himself. It is the new social figure described by Edgar Allan Poe in *The Man of the Crowd"* and defined by Benjamin as a "*werewolf restlessly roaming a social wilderness*".

As a result, the metropolitan individual is at the same time eccentric, disenchanted, uprooted and, possibly also because of all this, free. Free from the strict social control exerted by small communities; free from ascribed affiliations; free to drift incessantly from experience to experience, but also at the same time permanently attached to the appeal of this incessant coming-into-being that draws him like a calamite. The representation of such individuality

finds an intense echo in many metropolitan novels, and particularly in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Leopold Bloom is the metropolitan subject by excellence: he perceives everything without focussing on anything. It is the metropolitan way: the way to avoid being run over by the huge humanity converging in big cities. Simmel's metropolitan subject proceeds through subsequent rationalizations; Bloom proceeds through daydreams and observations that are utterly casual. But the intellect that Simmel refers to is already distracted, jumping from one perception to another, incapable of focussing on anything. The key awareness of the metropolitan person that he describes is merely a necessary control of emotional and sensorial life; it is an awareness that does not return any meaning, neither to him nor to his environment. The rationalisation and the intellectualism that Simmel refers to - insofar as mere defensive acts - do not produce understanding, neither provide meaning, nor reciprocate unity to an irreparably damaged reality. Simmel's *blasé* is not only bored, but he is also unfocused, evasive and bewildered and, if aware of anything, he is only of his being *quantité négligèable*.

Such metropolitan subject is preparing intellectually and psychically to the birth of Leopold Bloom, to the subject whose attention is discontinuous.. Bloom has inherited such an unfocused way and such a way of perceiving things from Simmel's *blasé*, from Simmel's metropolitan dweller.

2.

Social scientists are *"indebted to writers of fiction for our more intimate knowledge of contemporary urban life"* writes Park(.Park1925) The descriptions of urban life, portrayed in a great part of modern and contemporary novels, enable the viewing of cities as complex phenomena and not merely as places. The first account is to be found in the first modern European poem, *Jerusalem Delivered* by Torquato Tasso, which is an epic poem illustrating the city. It was written between 1572 and 1577, at the time when the old town of Ferrara was being destroyed to create the first modern city based on the partition between the main road and the housing. The poem expresses the desperation caused by such disruption of the city *(*Farinelli 2003).

The literature that chooses a city as its protagonist, as the main engine for actions and events, describes - just as claimed by Park - an environment that even before its being spatial is moral, spiritual and mental. There is a very strict link and a mutual making between the development of the city and, at first, of modern novels, then later of sociology. Great cities embody simultaneously the arena and the engine for rebuilding and reinventing the social and political world, as well as the individual consciousness. The first description-analysis of this new place of life is the one of Manchester made by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. It is quite odd that this first description-analysis is a kind of cross-breed between a sociological reading, *ante litteram*, and an almost literary description. The first portrayal of the modern city comes into being as a contamination of genre, a "blurred genre" - and it could not possibly be otherwise - launching two potential discourses on the city: the analytical-sociological one and the descriptive-narrative one which, although developing through their own rhetoric forms and styles, will often end up crossing each other and in any case maintaining forever the marks of such a contamination, of that hybrid origin.

As underlined by Steven Johnson (2001), what Engels observes and describes is primarily the combination of order and chaos visible in big cities. How can these two aspects coexist? What keeps together, and makes function, this self-organized system that is in fact the city? These were the questions that Engels tried to answer and these are the same questions and the same problems that, from there on, all those who have dealt with the city have ended up being confronted with. The description of how individuals live, love, dream, fight and die in the seeming chaos of the metropolis - which is at the same time a perfectly integrated mechanism -, the account of how everybody's daily bustling around ends up creating that very disorder and ends up shaping that very organized chaos, not only produces the plots and the schemes of the new metropolitan novel, but marks its shapes, techniques and language.

Engel's bewilderment in Manchester - Johnson says - assumes a key role even in works of fiction such as the 19th century urban epics of Dickens and Flaubert and of more innovative works such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *Nadja*. With Dickens' and Balzac's novels the city breaks into literature; it breaks in as a chaos made intelligible at the very time when it is described. If it is Engels who outlines the

basis of the description-observation of the urban phenomenon, it is only through the works of fiction that the intelligibility of such a phenomenon becomes clear. It is the modern novel, in fact, that for the first time shows the city as a network, as a system of constant interferences. This will influence the sociological analyses to follow, which will always be marked - be it intentionally or unintentionally - by the point of view and the prose of novelists.Reading Metropolis and Mental life, for example, We can say that Simmel's superb views on the metropolis enclose Dickens and Balzac in the background, Rilke and Musil at their side, bouncing off to Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Don De Lillo. It is novels, novels and again novels that surround the sociology of cities and metropolises from side to side, which anticipate theories and analyses, which strengthen hypotheses and interpretations**.**

Another significant example can be found
In the first pages of *The Man Without Qualities* Robert Musil describes a non-existent city that could be anywhere, since he describes the spirit of the city:
Like all big cities it was made up of irregularity, change, forward spurts, failures to keep step, collisions of objects and interests punctuated by unfathomable silences; made up of pathways and untrodden ways, of one great rhythmic beat as well as the chronic discord and mutual displacement of all its contending rhythms. All in all, it was like a boiling bubble inside a pot made of the durable stuff of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions." (Musil).

This description contains all kinds of cities; it contains - almost in a concentrated form - the universal vision of the metropolis described by so many novelists before and after Musil and brought up by Joyce and Simmel, Dreiser and Park, Wright and Thomas, Burgess and Andersen.

The dialogue between metropolitan novels and cultural sociological perspectives on cities has been particularly intense in the Chicago School and the case of The Chicago School represents an example - probably unrepeatable - of an extremely fertile encounter of two different discourses on the world. Literary imagination and sociological imagination seem to bring into being and reinforce each other in respect of the studies on cities and of strictly urban novels by authors such as Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, James T Farrel, Nelson Algren and Richard Wright.

The great city - the great Chicago - attracts like a magnet and this force is emphasized, described and strengthened by literature and by sociology. The first chapter of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is, in fact, entitled *The Magnet Attracting: a Waif amid Forces.*

A few years later, Robert Park will make use again of the magnet as an image.
In Wirth's famous essay, *Urbanism as a Way of Life*,(1938) attention is drawn onto what is typically urban. Attention is drawn from the observation of the organization of spaces to the description of the thoughts and behaviour of urban cities' dwellers. So, the essentially cultural tradition of observing cities and metropolises - initiated by Simmel and still enduring - is resumed. There are

attitudes, behavioural patterns, relationship systems that do not occur inadvertently in cities but which, instead, are delightfully and exclusively urban products. The Chicago of those years produced concurrently the most interesting and fascinating researches on metropolitan life in addition to popular novels, stories, sagas and songs that are typically urban.

Literature such as the previously mentioned *Sister Carrie* by Dreiser, published in 1900, Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets,* published in 1893, or *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair of 1906, not only precede and anticipate the descriptions and the outcome of the Chicago School analyses but have probably also influenced its methodology.

The Chicago School will end up exerting a great influence on the Chicago Literature - that was to develop in this city between the 1930's and 1940's and which was essentially a metropolitan literature. An example is to be found in the juvenile gangs described by James T Farrel in the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, published between 1932 and 1935, and influenced by Frederick Trasher's research *The gang: a study of 1313 gangs in Chicago,* published in 1927. The world of thieves and prostitutes depicted by Nelson Algren or the black ghetto culture described by Richard Wright are very close to the detailed descriptions of ghettos by Thomas, Redfield and Wirth.

What occurs around the Chicago School reveals the indissoluble link between city and literature showing as well how the metropolis produces - among its own cultural objects - also a literature of its own that cannot be ignored by those who study urban contexts, especially if interested in a cultural analysis and approach. The literature of the city is itself a piece of the city. The Chicago School of Sociology and the literature of Chicago both represent an effect of the same urban vortex; they are at the same time product and producer. Through their descriptions and analyses, sociologists and writers contribute in creating the myth of the city but also of those metropolitan characters and behaviours later adopted and interpreted by the Chicago city dwellers who see themselves in the portrayed models.

3
What has occurred is that.
Through the affirmation of big cities, novels exit the confines of salons to face the open sea of boundless and potential encounters and unforeseen events. Novels begin to describe encounters and brushings occurring between strangers: in big cities you meet accidentally. In order survive through adventure - Moretti writes - there is no longer need to wreck on desert islands or to create monsters and vampires. A renewed reading of *Lost Illusions* is quite sufficient to understand how the reason of Lucien de Rubempré's failure is to be found, more than in the frailty of his own character, in the knitting of relationships and interactions, coincidences, unpredictability and interdependence that are so typically Parisian. (Moretti 1987)

Adventure is experienced daily in the city because everything is unpredictable and because day-to-day life is entangled with never-ending emotions and urges. This is the universal element seized by sociology and literature alike.

Even in *A Sentimental Education*, where everything seems to happen by reason of casual encounters, the impression is that Frédéric Moreau could have slipped into any of the hundreds of other stories simultaneously taking place in the city and that he has ended up in *A Sentimental Education* by sheer chance. Frédéric is in that story because he has taken - physically and not just metaphorically - a particular road rather than another, because he has come across those very people and not others.

From a sociological perspective Jane Jacobs theorizes and demonstrates what metropolitan novels have portrayed: that metropolitan life and the forms and activities characterising different neighbourhoods derive from all the various things that take place on the sidewalks.. People, details, special features are described at the same time by Jacobs with the technique of modernist editing and of ethnographic thick description. In particular, the people she describes are concurrently witnesses of a metropolitan experience and protagonists of a metropolitan novel. Her work testifies a deep contiguity between a certain kind of sociology and literature, in particular the modernist one. The city grows and changes - according to Jacobs - because of those infinite casual interactions that take place in the street. The theatre - that involuntary and constant performance occurring on the sidewalks - is already, in itself, a novel.

According to Jane Jacobs, local interactions - that mould the city as a self-organizing super-organism - are just like the plots and the inner schemes of the first metropolitan novels that set off from casual encounters. For Jacobs the casual encounters occurring between strangers in public places bring into being the life and the changes of big cities; interactions between strangers produce their effects on the city as a whole rather than on single individuals. It is wonderful to see how this notion of the city - that builds itself from the bottom to the top as a kind of complex and tidy setting produced by coincidence - is described by literature.

The life of the city is, in literature and in such sociological perspective epitomized, as the predictability of the unpredictable, as the waiting for the unforeseen: the dependence of everyone from each other entails an increase of the variables at stake, holding endless combinations.

The essence of the city as the place of the probable and of adventure is revealed by Calvino through this cutting description "Isadora is the city where the foreigner hesitating between two women always encounters a third". And it is this very fortuitousness, this endless possibility of combination that simultaneously symbolizes metropolitan life and the scheme of the metropolitan novel. It is no chance - Moretti says - that the making of the metropolis, the metropolitan experience, has to do unquestionably with the development of a specific literary rhetoric: the development of *suspense* novels.

The *suspense* plot - Moretti says - breeds and organizes a state of mind essential to the urban personality: as a result, a distinct rhetoric arrangement of events emigrates from literature to day-to-day life, probably becoming the most important filter through which the city dweller manages to assign a meaning to the world where he happens to be living, and to accept it with a good deal of contentment" (Moretti 1987, 138). *The Lost Illusions* or *Sister Carrie*, even though describing social environments and processes or urban organizations that are very different from each other - one is written and set in the Paris of the first half of the 19th century, the other in the Chicago of the early 20th century - portray events that cross each other by chance, events that happen on account of those very paces and organization that are truly metropolitan.

Certainly, the plot becomes less and less complex and the dimension of time decreases from the description of a whole life - such as in the case of Lucien or of Carrie - to the description of a single day, as in *Mrs Dalloway* or in *Ulysses;* however, that *suspense* is retained as a cipher of the metropolitan novel. The stream of consciousness, the epiphany, shared by Mrs Dalloway and Leopold Bloom, is a totally inner kind of *suspense* that drags us, though, into this accidental unveiling of the obvious, of common sense, and of the unveiling of each one of us to ourselves. The sudden grasping of bits of oneself happens at a crowded crossing of many streets, right in the middle of a crowd, through words accidentally overheard in a bar, in a street, in the presentation a face, by merit of an advertising billboard, and to the fact that only in a big city one is always among strangers.

The metropolitan individual must therefore take care to not only grab hold of the chances that the metropolitan happening constantly hands him, but also of these unexpected and unpredicted revelations of the self that will never recur again - in the same form and with the same intensity - simply because the metropolitan space changes continuously, and because the combinations that produce it are infinite. A kind of osmosis occurs between the metropolitan experience, the sociological reading of the metropolis and the narrative forms. What gets converted in the rhetoric forms of the novel or in sociological knowledge gets converted successively in behaviours, mental categories, aptitudes in social

reality. The subject analysed by Simmel or described by Balzac, Rilke, Joyc e or, in our time, by Don De Lillo, is successively affected and influenced by the studies and by the novels shaped on him. All of this happens because the metropolis produces a culture of its own that at the same time replicates and transforms such an experience.

4

Now if we look at Calvino's Invisible cities we'll find in a superb literary language a social theory of cities based on the same attention to human interactions as we have analyzed until now.Calvino himself asserts howthis book is a discourse about modern city. Calvino's greatest concern is to discover the secret motives that have drawn people to live in cities , motives tha wiil ever stand .

Sociologists and novelists have almost always tried to answer two questions:

- How can a city be described?
- What is a city made of?

Calvino, in addressing these issues writes - *There are two ways of describing the city of Dorothea: you can say that four aluminium towers rise from its walls flanking seven gates with spring-operated drawbridges that span the moat whose water feeds four green canals which cross the city, dividing it into nine quarters, each with three hundred houses and seven hundred chimneys."* (Calvino 1988, 9) This description, almost morphological, is a way of talking about a city by dividing it into pieces, listing the existing activities. Or, as Calvino carries on writing*, "...many people were hurrying along the streets toward the market, the women had fine teeth and looked you straight in the eye, three soldiers on a platform played the trumpet*" : this is, instead, the description of the urban experience.

This description looks very much like to Jane Jacob's description of life on Hudson Street :different figures and different performances are described by Jacobs just has done by Calvino. We don't know if Calvino has read Jacobs , and that is not important,but they share the same notion of citylife .

These two ways of recounting the city are not in opposition but can and must coexist. The city of senses is contained in the geometrical city and vice versa, and the morphological description can contain the unfolding of the pulsing life. When thinking of a city we bring back to mind its topographic image and at the same time its smells, colours and sounds. Writing about it must take into account this dual essence.

Calvino concentrates his attention on intangible elements such as memory, desire, looks, exchanges, names, signs. All cities are made up by all of these elements and they differ from each other through the varied combination of such elements. Calvino trough these elements provides thousand information for understanding the nature of one and all cities as well of.

Zaira, city of high bastions - Calvino writes - c*ontains all its past.* A past that needs to be discovered through the signs, the footpaths and the stories that cross it. This is not different from how Park had perceived the city: a formation of layers that are not only material but are also historical and of the conscience. Every description of the city recalls desires, because the city is itself desire and a desiring machine that never succeeds pleasing all desires. And that very desire that attracts towards the city often ends up in frustration "*when you are in the*

heart of Anastasia one morning your desires waken all at once and surround you. Since it enjoys everything you do not enjoy, you can do nothing but inhabit this desire and be content". This notion that Calvino has of the city as a producer of desires - to the extent of being identified with desire itself - is an altogether modern notion that began with the capitalistic metropolis and is to be found already in Simmel, Balzac and Flaubert. The "desiring subject" is, in brief, the new human type generated by the capitalistic metropolis, which he has remained in tune with since then.

Kublai proposes a model city that contains everything corresponding to the norm, from which all possible cities can be deduced. According to Kublai Khan, it needs only to foresee the exceptions to the norm and calculate the most probable combinations. To this model city, Marco Polo opposes his own model: a city made only of exceptions, incongruities and contradictions.

However cities that are logically deducible do not exist because, as Marco Polo will say in the end: "*I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real*"

This because Calvino as Jacobs believes that cities are result of multiple unforeseen interactions rather than a result from a rational plan.Jacobs and Calvino share the same notion of the city as a sort of *Commedia dell' arte,* where even if an informal plot exists, and roles are assigned each character improvises and creates something new and unexpected.This is what happens in cities according Jacobs , and that is what happens in the city of Melania :

"At *Melania, every time you enter the square, you find yourself caught in a dialogue…As time passes the roles, too, are no longer exactly the same as before, certainly the action they carry forward through intrigues and surprises leads toward some final denouncement, which it continues to approach even when the plot seems to thicken more and more and the obstacles increase. If you look into the square in successive moments, you hear how from act to act the dialogues changes , even if the lives of Melania'inhabitants are too short for them to realize it."*

Howard Becker defined Calvino an urban sociologist because by describing the city through subtleties and details each short description is rich in analytic possibilities; each detail could be the taking-off place for the analysis of an area of urban life. I agree with Becker and I think that Calvino has used, in writing this book, a kind of thick description in the same way as Clifford Geerts. Through *Invisible Cities* we learn to look at cities beyond the perceptible spatial order. The invisible cities described by Calvino are the possible cities, those that could be or could have been, they are unfinished spaces, places for constant potential options. For instance, "in the center of Fedora stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of different Fedora. These are the forms that city could have taken if, for one reason or another it had not become what we see today" This reminds us - Becker writes - that every city will do something with its possible futures; every

city might preserve, suppress, ignore or forget its futures (Becker unpublished paper). Through the reading of Calvino we learn some important things in order to understand cities:

1. The map of a city does not say much or says nothing at all about it. Calvino knows, like Carl Ritter, that charts and maps are to the essence of the world like the anatomy of a dead body is to the living substance of the heart. Cities are therefore invisible because they cannot be constrained into strict categories or classifications; they shun at being looked at with purely classifying aims and become invisible. Just like Deleuze, Calvino refuses the notion of a city as an information board, as a diagram where the existing has already blocked all the varieties of the future. Calvino, like Jacobs, refuses a city where abstract geographical schemes establish social contents and come before the needs of life

.

2. Cities can be understood as a network of relationships. In the city of Ersilia relationships are represented by strings running between places: "When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave, the houses are dismantled, only the string and their supports remain."

3. It is the social practices, dreams, projects, utopias, memories and stories that shape the city. Calvino describes the city, as if he had read Jane Jacobs, through the life and interactions that entwine it, and it is to the street that the author directs our looks. The urban space, through Calvino's point of view, is characterised by flows of people, money, goods and stories; by temporal flows. And this is where the modernity and importance of Calvino stands: in privileging the temporal dimension over the spatial one. For Calvino the city is mainly a temporal flow, a flowing of time rather than space.

I would like to finish off with a quotation from Italo Calvino which, in some way, links to Jane Jacob's analysis. Calvino notes down "I have written a last love poem to cities at a time when it becomes more and more difficult to live in them. Invisible cities are a dream that originates in the heart of the unliveable cities". Many years after its publication, even Jane Jacob's book appears to us as a poem of love and hope on the metropolis, and places itself within a tradition of celebration of metropolitan life existing among the most significant novelists and intellectuals who have given voice to modern culture. A tradition that is still lively to this day and is in opposition to the demonization of the metropolis; and even though forewarning on its crisis, it continues to find more than one reason to love the city. In *Underworld* by Don De Lillo, this is shown through the description of a violent and destructed Bronx, without any more rules left, but where significant relationships, empathy and forms of coexistence continue to subsist and which - as stated by Jacobs - can represent instead a good starting point for a new foundation of a collective life.

If the fear of contamination and of exposition to diversity has produced voluntary and endured segregations, if anomie and individualism have produced more and more privatism and have reinforced the myth of the great city as being wicked and dangerous, it is also true that metropolises, the great urban centres, remain the only places for elaborating the remedies to these very ills, the only places where the risk can transform itself daily into individual and collective opportunities, because of its always being and in any case a great social laboratory and the quintessential place of experimentation and contamination. At the close of his book Calvino invites us "to seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the mists of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space".

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