



Cities as Verbal Reconstructions: the Textual Classifications of Frames in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Dr. Sayyed Rahim Moosavinia

Department of English Language and Literature

Faculty of Letters and Humanities

Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Khuzestan, Iran

&

Masome Baji M.A

Department of English Language and Literature

Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Khuzestan, Iran

ABSTRACT

Though the classical narratology gives major priority to the temporal dimension of the literary text, the postclassical interdisciplinary approaches towards narrative examine space in relations to society, ethnicity, race and gender. None of these conflicting literary theories have studied the medium through which space is reconstructed in fiction. Accordingly, the present research elucidates the ways readers are involved in the textual structure of the abstract spaces of the fifty-five cities depicted in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* to argue that this structure of space is well defined in this novel through Ruth Ronen's classifications of frames. As the classifications of Gabriel Zoran's vertical textual reconstruction of space, the correlation between space and language is explained in terms of degrees of immediacy and factuality, modes of expressing and frame properties.

Keywords: space, frame, level of textual structure, setting, verbal structure.

I. Introduction

The significance of regarding space as a verbal structure is to elucidate how the transformation from space into a system of signs is affected by the selectivity of language, the linearity of the text and the latter's perspectival structure. In his "Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative", Gabriel Zoran suggests three vertical levels of structuring space that include topographic, chronotopic, and textual levels. At the topographic level, space is perceived as independent from the temporal dimension and verbal structure of the text (Zoran 316). The chronotopic structure of space is the result of the correlations of time, whether synchronic or diachronic, with space (Zoran 318). The last level, which is regarded as "the most immediate" one, is the result of "the structure imposed on space by the fact that it is signified within the verbal text" (Zoran 315). This paper concentrates on the textual level of structuring space because it takes literature as a verbal structure and defines space as the textual manifestation of spatial information regarding abstract places. For further clarifying this definition, it should be noted that the distinction between space and place respectively resides in the distinction between abstract and real places. Furthermore, the word "verbal" in the title refers to the use of words as textual indicators of space.

Furthermore, space as a verbal structure is classifiable in terms of frame. According to Ruth Ronen's essay "Space in Fiction", "a frame is a fictional place, the actual or potential surrounding of fictional characters, objects, and places" (Ronen 421). Textual expressions of this "spatial concept" are classified according to their "degree of immediacy and factuality", "mode of expressing" and "frame properties". Therefore, the present study provides an integration of Ronen's classification of frames and Zoran's textual level of structuring space to explain the structure of the textual level of space. According to Zoran besides the vertical structure of space – based on the differentiation between topographic,

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chronotopic, and textual levels – there is the horizontal structure that examines “the parts of space, its scope and boundaries” (322). In fact, the linearity of the text, its perspectival structure, and selectivity exert considerable influences on the degree of immediacy and actuality of the frames, the latter’s mode of expressing and properties.

Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* with its “space oriented” (Zoran 314) plot provides an appropriate context for studying and classifying frames. The transfictionality of this literary text links it to the thirteenth-century account called *The Travels of Marco Polo* and is evident in providing an appropriate context for the study of its fictional place. This novel includes Marco Polo’s depictions of fifty-five cities of Kublai Khan’s empire. The characters’ awareness of the problem of representation of space through language results in a growing recognition of the significant impact of this medium on the structure of space.

II. Classifications of Frames According to Degrees of Immediacy and Factuality

A. Degree of Immediacy

Ronen’s degree of immediacy of frames and their different categories can be adequately explained in the context of Gerard Genette’s narrative levels. Accordingly, the frame of “the most immediate” (Zoran 315) narrative level, that is called extradiegetic level, is the setting or “story space” (Ronen 425). In Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, setting or the first-frame category that is actualized by the extradiegetic narrator is where the interpersonal communication between Marco and Kublai is hypothetically established. In fact, there are two settings in Calvino’s novel so the story space does not remain constant. The first setting, as it is directly mentioned at the end of the first chapter, is Kublai’s palace at the garden of magnolias in Kai-ping-fu (21) which is “lightened by the lanterns hung from the cedars” (60). The fragments of information about this palace – like different pieces of a puzzle that should be gathered from the beginning and end of each chapter – incline the readers to look for further information; therefore, they can clearly imagine this frame’s topographic structure. The second setting is the ancient city “Kin-sai” and its surroundings that include:

the princely palaces whose marble doorsteps were immersed in the water, the bustle of light craft zigzagging, driven by long oars, the boats unloading baskets of vegetables at the market squares, the balconies, platforms, domes, campaniles, island gardens glowing green in the lagoon’s grayness. (85)

What distinguishes these two settings is the scope of their spatial units, and their included information about space. The second setting has the spatial scope of the scene, which is regarded as the largest spatial unit (Zoran 323). Its scenic description contains more information about the Great Khan’s second palace. In fact, this detailed information is due to the perceived importance of this palace that is referred to as “the latest pearl set[s] in the Great Khan’s crown” (85).

The fifty-five cities depicted by Marco Polo comprise the secondary frame of Calvino’s novel. These cities are the frames of the second level narrative depicted by Marco as the metadiegetic narrator of *Invisible Cities*. The dividing line between the first and second category frame is evident in the change of narrative levels.

The inaccessible frames are those cities described by Kublai as the “zodiac of the mind’s phantasms” (22). The inaccessibility of these frames resides in the fact that they are not actualized as the first frame category or setting because they cannot be or are not entered by Marco and Kublai. These cities include Kublai’s dream city of stairs that in Marco’s terms as everyone’s dream “is made of desire and fear” (44). Kublai’s second description of an inaccessible frame is the city with black water and high docks. Marco interprets this dream city as the real city from which no one returns (56). The city of Lalage is another inaccessible frame that Kublai depicts as a city with slender pinnacle on which the moon rest[s] and grants the city to grow in lightness (74). All these cities are the projection of Kublai’s dreams, therefore they are inaccessible frames.

In *Invisible Cities*, Venice is the spatio-temporally distant frame with respect to this novel’s story-space and story-time. While the story-space or setting of this novel is supposed to be Kublai’s empire, this city is “physically” restrained from becoming the immediate surroundings of Marco and Kublai’s

conversations. Furthermore, the temporal distance is evident in using anachronies such as analepsis and prolepsis for referring to this city. Genette, in his *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method*, studies the pseudo-temporal order of narrative in terms of anachronies that are “different types of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative” (Genette 36). While analepsis refers to memories from the past, prolepsis takes a form of anticipation. Marco’s use of analepsis and prolepsis in referring to Venice denotes the temporal distance of this frame from the present frame. The following excerpt is an example of using analepsis in referring to this temporally distant frame:

Marco Polo imagined answering (or Kublai Khan imagined his answer) that the more one was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more one understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there; and he retraced the stages of his journeys, and he came to know the port from which he had set sail, and the familiar places of his youth, and the surroundings of home, and a little square of Venice where he gamboled as a child. (28)

Therefore, this analepsisdemonstrates Venice as a temporally distant city. On the other hand, he distinguishes the way he will describe, “the cities visited on his expedition” (5) to “the groups of stevedores and gondoliers on the street outside” his house, from the way he will dictate his travels to a writer of adventure stories in the prison cell of Genoese pirates (135). Marco through this anticipation or prolepsis refers to Venice and Genoese as two spatio-temporally distant frames regarding his contemporary space.

The last frame, which is determined according to its degree of immediacy, is called generalized space or non-specific frame. In Calvino’s fictional space, as it is the case in other non-specific frames, this exceptional frame has the characteristic of ambivalence immediacy because it contains the first, second, and even third frames’ categories. This generalized space, or the “endless, formless ruin...” (5), is Kublai Khan’s empire that serves as the setting of the major characters’ conversations, Marco’s fifty-five cities, and even the inaccessible frame of Kublai’s dreams. The effect of linearity of text on this non-specific frame results in its undistinguishable boundaries from other frames. More precisely, in this case an ambivalent frame is evident in the non-specific verbal arrangement and is the effect of the verbal and spatial order chosen. The non-specific characteristic of this non-unified and disconnected space is created through the lack of clear-cut textual information in order to intensify the effect of globalization on the postmodern space.

B. Degree of Factuality

Determined by a set of modal utterances, degree of factuality classifies the frames into actualized and non-actualized. This study defines modality as the way through which language draws a basis for comparison between the actualized and non-actualized frames that are “not necessarily compatible” (Ronen 429) nor possibly co-exist with the former frames. This paper borrows the adjective “disnarrated” from Gerald Prince – who coins it to refer to those “textual elements that consider (in a negative or hypothetical mode) what did not happen but could have” (qtd. in Karttunen 419) – to refer to those spaces that are not actualized in the story. The importance of such utterances was emphasized by the rise of possible worlds theory in literature.

For example, Todorov regards obligatory, optative, conditional, and predictive modes as four modal operators of narrative propositions (Ryan 110). An extensive analysis of this theory is beyond the scope of this paper. Ruth Ronen in his “Space in Fiction” regards the non-actualized frames as the result of collateral information that is “about things that might have taken place but did not, alternatives that might turn out or not,[and] potential courses of action that did not take place” (429). Concerning fiction as an autonomous verbal structure whose actuality is measured against what is true in the story, and not what is true in reality, the actualized frame is the setting of Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. This frame, as it was previously mentioned, is Kublai’s two palaces or the actual surroundings of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan’s conversations.

In Calvino’s novel, hypothetical frames are the result of “hypothetical focalization” (Herman 1) is evident in the frequent use of modalizing locutions such as perhaps, seem, and appear. The present form of Zenobia, the city that stands on high pilings that are built on dry land, is “perhaps grown through successive superimpositions from the first, now undeciphered plan” (35). In addition, according to Marco

“your gaze scans the streets [of Tamara] as if they were written pages” because the function of every building is indicated by its position, form, figure, and signboard. Another hypothetical frame is the city of Marozia, which is transfigured “as if by chance” (155) according to the spoken words.

The carpet of Eudoxia, the arcades of Phyllis, and the houses of Leandra are examples of the counterfactual disarranged frames of this novel. In general, counterfactual utterances are conditional utterances with an antecedent and consequent. Michael Foucault in his “Of Other Spaces: Utopia and Heterotopias” introduces carpets as incompatible heterotopian spaces “in which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection” (6). This universalizing heterotopian space of Eudoxia is depicted in the following way:

If you pause and examine it carefully, you become convinced that each place in the carpet corresponds to a place in the city, and all the things contained in the city are included in the design, arranged according to their true relationship, which escapes your eye, distracted by the bustle, the throngs, the shoving. (96)

Furthermore, the arcades of Phyllis are the counterfactual frames that their joyous perception is conditional on a girl that went by there thirty years ago or the light that the inhabitants catches at a certain hour (91). Marco also believes that “if instead of a house, a huge block of fifty families is built in its place, then the tiny inhabitants of Leandra that live in the kitchens will be multiplied (78).

III. Classification of Frames According to Their Modes of Expression

According to the mode of expression and due to the selectivity of language, a frame is classified into directly or indirectly identified one. While the former is determined through “definite description”, the latter is distinguished through a descriptive account of an object that is either one of the frame properties or its boundaries. The distinction between these frames is the consequence of the effects of the selectivity of language. “The fact that language cannot express all aspects of space results in a certain measure of selectivity” (Zoran 320). The advantage of this classification is to find out the way through which the structure of space is influenced by the verbal structure of *Invisible Cities*.

In addition, in Calvino’s novel directly or indirectly identified frames are specified according to different fields of vision projected by the text. According to Zoran, “within the three levels of [vertical] spatial structure... a scene on the topographic level is a place, on the chronotopic level is a zone of action, and on the textual level is a field of vision” (323). For example, the detailed description of the ancient capital of Kin-sai, as a real place with spatial continuity at the topographic level is described by Kublai’s pointing to them while “extending his beringed hand from beneath the silken canopy of the imperial barge”(85). Therefore, this “place” is defined with and overlapped by the zone of action of pointing. On the other hand, the city of Fedora, which is indirectly defined through a collection of crystal globes, in contrast to Kin-sai is not a continuous series of objects seen together. These “miniature models”, made according to different utopian imaginations and desires of Fedora’s inhabitants, are the only mentioned property of this indirectly defined frame. In addition, the indirect identification of the city of Isaura is based on the description of the border of this city in terms of “an invisible landscape” of a buried lake that conditions the visible one (20).

IV. Classification of Frames according to Frame Properties

In spite of the inexhaustible aspects, features, and properties of space, the selectivity of language based on the textual level of constructing space imposes a certain choice of properties on the reconstructed space. Ronen classifies the represented properties according to their material feature, domain, and narrative situations. This paper applies this classification to Calvino’s novel in order to examine how the selectivity of language and its perspectival structures affect the construction of frames’ properties.

The lexical elements denoting the properties of physical features of the reconstructed space demonstrate the physical aspects, boundaries, position and necessity of the fictional frames. The first category of these properties indicates size, shape, color, and the material of the spatial objects (Ronen 430). For example, “the copper reflection of the ancient palace of Sung” denotes its color. The position of the settings of Calvino’s novel varies according to its spatial objects. “The carpets spread over the path” at

Kublai's feet refers to the interior position of the setting. A place-denoting noun may also refer to the definite or indefinite boundaries of the frame. Kublai's shift of attitude is evident in his description of the empire as "a corpse in swamp" to "a transparent mountain":

I know well that my empire is rotting like a corpse, in a swamp, whose contagion infects the crows that peck it as well as the bamboo that grows, fertilized that grows, fertilized by its humors... "And yet I know", he would say, "that my empire is made of the stuff of crystals, its molecules arranged in a perfect pattern. Amid the surge of the elements, a splendid hard diamond takes shape, an immense, faceted, transparent mountain. (59-60)

The degree of necessity of a property, whether accidental or essential, is determined by their projection of the normal laws of the physical universe.

The domains that are attributed to frames according to their set of properties are characterized by "the relationship between frames and characters or objects located in them" (Ronen 430). The dual nature of these domains classify frames into public or private, open or close, and personal or impersonal. In Marco's depiction of the city of Diomira, the border between the streets as the public domain and the houses as the private domain is a terrace from which a woman's voice is heard. In addition, the properties of openness and closeness are attributed to frames according to the accessibility of the information of one frame to the characters in another one (431). In the aforementioned example, the voice of a woman from the private domain is accessible to Marco who is in the public domain of the streets. Impersonal and personal frames respectively carry the imprints of objects and characters. The voice that Marco hears from the terrace is a personal property, while the multicolored lamps that have lighted the streets of Diomira on a September evening carries a mark of objects rather than characters.

Frames as "data structures" are classified according to their narrative situations that are distinguished as conventional and unique situations. The organized encyclopedic knowledge of the reader provides the possibility for structuring such "frames of references" (qtd. in Ronen 432). The incompleteness of the conventional or stereotyped situations inclines the reader to fill in the gap with their own network of knowledge. According to Ronen's "Space in Fiction", "a text can indicate a conventional situation by presenting the way in which a place is associated with other elements in the mind of characters and not necessarily in the actualized situation" (433). In *Invisible Cities*, Venice is associated in Marco Polo's imagination with his descriptions of the cities of Kublai's empire in a way that whenever he describes a city, he is saying something about Venice (86). On the other hand, a unique situation is presented "as a deviation from or the violation of a norm. The peculiarity of two tiny species of Leandra – that stand at the door or live in the kitchens – creates a unique situation, which is deviated from the conventional norm of regarding human beings as the only owners of a private property (78).

IV. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper has examined space as the verbal structure of the most immediate vertical level of structuring space that is the textual level. For doing so, Gabriel Zoran's and Ruth Ronen's theories of space were simultaneously employed to find out how the selectivity of language, its linearity and perspectival structures in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* affect the structure and classification of space as frame. It is suggested that degrees of immediacy and actuality, modes of expression, and properties of frames at the vertical and horizontal levels are determined by the verbal structure of Calvino's novel. The topographic and chronotopic levels of space can also be used for further clarifying the geographical and temporal structures imposed on the textual representation of space.

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