

# CITY: JOURNEY, MAP, *ARGO*

Miroslav MARCELLI\*

\* Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, 81801, Bratislava, Slovakia. E-mail: marcelli@fphil.uniba.sk

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ABSTRACT: The paper endeavours to identify three fundamental approaches to the depiction of the urban space. The first is that of the chronicling traveller, for whom the space is always identified with the aid of events and operations which transmute into performative markings. This approach was replaced at the beginning of the modern period by representation in the form of the map. The third approach is Barthes' perceptions of the city as the *Argo* and of the urban centre as the place of encounter. Here the urban space is determined through the active participant in play and by his body.

Keywords: semiotics, performative markings, symbolic thought, understanding of space, city, corporeality.

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### *1. The chroniclers of travel*

When we find ourselves in a large and unknown city, where not only is it our first time there, but we also do not understand the language its inhabitants speak, so that it is truly a labyrinth for us, in searching for a particular place, we normally try to find a guide or get hold of a map.

A guide saves us from getting lost quite simply by taking us to the place we seek; the environment in which we move in the process does not cease to be unknown to us, the language of its inhabitants remains incomprehensible, but we approach our goal by following someone who is on familiar ground. We do not try to decipher what this or that sign means, but instead accept our inability to understand their instructions and warnings, accept that we do not know where we are at any given moment, and yet advance in the faith that we are getting closer to the place where we

want to be. Perplexity from the inability to understand and communicate has receded the instant we have secured a trustworthy guide. From that moment on we are confident that we shall be led to our goal by the obedient following of his steps. We realise that we should not find the right way on our own, and this inability to get our bearings has condemned us to blind obedience. We do not read signs, we do not see the warnings; instead, we listen -to instructions such as "This way" and "Follow me". Someone who no longer needs to look where he is going -because he knows his way blindfold- leads someone who is aware that good vision would not help him, however much he looked around, and so prefers to listen.

Orientation by map offers us another possibility of freeing ourselves from bewilderment in an unknown environment. In this case it is not important to listen, but to look. Not, however, to look around oneself, where the language of images whose meanings we still do not understand prevails. Instead we adopt a viewpoint from where this confusing flood of colours and forms changes into ordered lines, understandable outlines and readable messages. In looking at a map, we leave -in our mind- our place amid the bustling street in favour of an elevated viewpoint which allows us even to see around the corner.

The map actually offers a very reliable aid in seeking a particular place in an unfamiliar terrain. In it we have acquired an instrument which permits us in our mind's eye to abstract ourselves from our present location, to detach ourselves from the individual details of our route, to forget what has gone immediately before. The unknown city may be deemed a modern form of labyrinth: the problems we encounter on our way to some place at the other end of an unknown metropolis are akin to those which must be addressed by someone seeking the way out of a labyrinth. In the metropolis and in the labyrinth there are paths which cross, twist and go off in all directions. If someone guides us reliably in an unknown metropolis our situation is similar to that of Theseus, who was guided in the Labyrinth of Knossos by Ariadne's string. Someone who has a map can take care of himself: he has merely to determine the place where he is, and the city and labyrinth lose all their mysteries.

In looking at a map we have before us an objectivised depiction of a space over which we acquire an overview and undoubtedly also a certain dominion. Michel de Certeau has examined the historical development which led up to the adoption of the map viewpoint in Western societies. He has noted that the first medieval maps usually depicted a space in relation to a journey undertaken and the individual activities occurring in its

course; these were "performative markings", by which the traveller captured the individual stages of the journey; such a map had yet to liberate itself from the itinerary. Only between the 15th and 17th centuries did it gradually free itself from narrative symbols and become an objective representation of a terrain. As it entered the modern age it shed the vestiges of a journeying to an unknown place. Of this map de Certeau remarks:

The map, a totalizing stage where elements of disparate origin are assembled to create the tableau of a 'state' of geographical knowledge, projects onto its before or after, as into the wings, the operations of which it is the effect or the possibility. It remains alone. The chroniclers of travel have disappeared (Certeau 1996, p. 85).

This liberation from itineraries and performative acts in favour of an objective totalising schema characterises the map to this day. It does not capture the history of an individual journey, but the internal relations between the places of a given space. It becomes representation, and in this function it is liberated from the particular circumstances which mark the immediate perception of space. The immediate sensuous experience is replaced by a geometric space arranged in accord with the rules of representation. Cassirer refers to this step, which the construction of even the most elementary maps presupposes, as the transition from a concrete perception of space and spatial relations to an abstract one. However thorough acquaintance with an object may be, and however much it is verified by long-term practices, it cannot of itself engender representation. What is required here is an act of entirely different character:

Acquaintance means only presentation; knowledge includes and presupposes representation. The representation of an object is quite a different act from the mere handling of the object. (...) To represent a thing it is not enough to be able to manipulate it in the right way and for practical uses. We must have a general conception of the object, and regard it from different angles in order to find its relations to other objects. We must locate it and determine its position in a general system (Cassirer 1945, p. 46).

With the penetration that is his hallmark, Cassirer here defines the basic prerequisites of the transition from the stage of presentation, characterised by an immediate -and perhaps also repeated and verified- relationship to the object, to the stage of representation, where the object becomes an element located in a general system of abstract relations. It should also be noted that although Cassirer pursues his line of thought by identifying differences between a concrete and an abstract understanding of space -and exemplifies these by supplying ethnological data on the inability of mem-

bers of some primitive tribes to draw the course of a river with which they are, nevertheless, quite familiar-, the conclusions of these reflections have a far wider reach and concern the definition of knowledge as such. The consequence is that one can speak of knowledge in the exact sense of the word only where presentation of the object and manipulation with it has been replaced by representation in a general system.

Cassirer reflects on when in the history of human culture this "great generalisation" first took place and ends up as far back as the Babylonian culture -more precisely Babylonian astronomy and mathematics. The remarkable progress of these was made possible, in his view, by the discovery of symbolic algebra; the Babylonians were the first to understand the significance of abstract symbolism and in so doing opened for themselves the path to knowledge of astronomical phenomena. Cassirer then ascribes to Descartes the decisive role in the application and elaboration of this symbolism in modern philosophy: "In this symbolic thought took another step forward which was to have the most important systematic consequences" (Cassirer 1945, p. 49). It is with Descartes that we associate the conviction that a clear and accurate knowledge of space is conditional on the creation of a new language.

Cassirer thus associates knowledge with representation and representation with symbolism. That Cartesianism opened the way to such an understanding of knowledge of space and made precise its terminological instruments is beyond question. Nor can there be any doubt that this venture was driven by the ambition to provide new foundations to knowledge as such, regardless of the nature of the objects under examination. The first step of knowledge acquisition was seen to be a transformation which changes things into elements of a symbolic system. The Cartesians of Port-Royal Arnauld and Nicole, in considering whom their new logic might serve, do not restrict themselves to science; their *Logique* has the subtitle The Art of Thinking, and they offer this art to the spirit for all of its undertakings, be they scientific or practical. At all events, we should not rely on the imagination and its nebulous fantasies; we must have recourse only to reason and its ability to understand things in the form of ideas. As Arnauld and Nicole emphasise, however, ideas may be of two kinds:

When we look at an object in itself and in its own being, without looking at what it might represent, the idea we have of it is the idea of a thing, such as the idea of the earth or the sun. But when we look at a certain object merely as representing another, the idea that one has of it is an idea of sign, and this first object is called a sign. The sign encloses two ideas, one of the thing representing, the other of the

thing represented; and its nature consists in exciting the first by means of the second (Arnauld, Nicole 1970, p. 80).

What we have here are the two essential preconditions of modern symbolism: the world is accessible to us as a set of ideas; these ideas either represent things or are signs in which the idea of the represented thing is replaced by another idea. The essence of sign representation is embodied in the map, where from every sign we get to an object and a relation of the represented terrain. At the same time the map demonstrates what an effective instrument such a representation affords us: before its raised viewpoint the mysteries of the labyrinth disappear and the world becomes transparent. The mysteries of cities retreat before the cartographic sight into underground spaces and hide in dark and dank catacombs. Everybody knows that this refuge is temporary: it is merely a question of time before cartography penetrates there too and draws all the nooks and crannies of the subterranean world. However, with such penetrations into the depths (and heights) of the world ascending symbolism has by no means exhausted its possibilities; before long it will find further opportunities for developing its methods in all areas of seeing. Of the significance that signs acquired in Classical thought Foucault tells us:

Before, they were means of knowing and the keys to knowledge; now, they are co-extensive with representation, that is, with thought as a whole; they reside within it but they run through its entire extent. Whenever one representation is linked to another and represents that link within itself, there is a sign... (Foucault 1970, p. 65).

The conception proclaimed by the *Logique de Port-Royal* identifies signs with representation and makes of representation the fundamental attribute of thought. The products of such representation -maps, tables, pictures-will document that for this line of thought the activity of knowing begins with the separation of the sign from the thing, or the idea of the sign from the idea of the thing, and the adoption of a corresponding detachment.

## 2. Maps

The map thus provides testimony of how Classical knowledge developed as a universal analysis of representation. The prerequisite of this analysis is the separation of the image from the thing, the denoting from the denoted, and the establishment of a relation of representation between them. However, the map -more precisely, the map of a city- may also disclose something more: it speaks not only of the detachment which representation pre-

supposes, and of the corresponding relation between the denoting and the denoted, but also of the principles of arrangement of the individual elements of the depiction. There can be no doubt that the map organises its elements on the basis of the objects which it represents; it is, after all, their image and its purpose is to assist orientation in their midst; but at the same time the map provides testimonies of what we understand by disposition and the underlying rules on the basis of which we construct organised wholes. The city has long provided a model of such an organised whole, so that on its maps we also find -in addition to the depiction of streets, square and buildings- characteristic signs of some fundamental types of thinking. Roland Barthes begins his reflections on types of cities thus:

Quadrangular, reticular cities (Los Angeles, for example) produce, so it is said, a deep unease: they wound in us a kinesthetic sense of the city, which requires that every urban space have a centre to go to, from which to return; a full place of which to dream, to which or from which to move, in a word, to invent ourselves in. For numerous reasons (historical, economic, religious, military), the West has understood this law only too well: all its cities are concentric; but also -conform to the movement of western metaphysics itself, for which every centre is a place of truth- the centre of our cities is always *full*: a marked place, it is in it that the values of the civilisation assemble and condense: spirituality (with the churches), power (with the institutions), money (with the banks), commerce (with the big stores), language (with the agoras: cafés and promenades): to go into the centre is to encounter the social "truth", to participate in the high plenitude of 'reality' (Barthes 1993, p. 44).

Barthes draws attention to the correspondence between the concentrated disposition of Western cities and the structure of Western metaphysics: in the one as in the other the principle of a single hierarchical order prevails -an order which prescribes that in moving from the periphery to the centre we come closer to what is more important, hierarchically superior and more independent, until in the very centre we find the bases of truth, the prime decisions and unquestionable values. In metaphysics the diversity, impermanence and finality of accidental characteristics in its centre rely on the subject, the substratum and substance, with their attributes of unity, continuance and independence; in cities we have at the centre the narrowest circle of the highest institutions and public spaces. Movement towards the centre is thus a movement in which we come closer to a socially acknowledged and metaphysically affirmed truth and reality.

A comparison of this principle of disposition with that which he found in Tokyo led Barthes to the realisation of an important difference:

The city of which I speak (Tokyo) presents this valuable paradox: it does indeed have a centre, but this centre is empty. The entire city revolves around a place which

is at once forbidden and indifferent, a residence concealed under greenery, defended by moats, inhabited by an emperor who is never seen, in other words, by literally we know not whom. Every day, in their driving -swift, energetic and expeditious like the trajectory of a shot- the taxis avoid this circle of which the low crest, the visible form of invisibility, hides the sacred 'nothing'. One of the two most powerful cities of modern times is thus built around an opaque ring of defensive walls, of water, of roofs and trees of which the centre itself is no more than an evaporated idea, existing there not to irradiate some power, but to give all the urban movement the support of its central void, forcing the traffic to a perpetual by-passing. In this way the imaginary deploys itself in circular fashion, by passes and by-passes along an empty subject (Barthes 1993, pp. 44-46).

As we see, the unusual nature of this urban ideogram occurred to Barthes when comparing it with the disposition of Western cities, where we always find in the centre the highest institutions of the religious, economic and legal system. And just as the full centre of European cities was the embodiment of a metaphysical tendency towards a sole, full and absolute outcome of all substantiations of individual judgements and the final criteria of their veridical value, so Tokyo with its empty centre, around which pulsates an intense traffic and social bustle, is the urban form of an entirely different type of thought. In terms of this thought, for a structure to emerge around a centre, there is no requirement that the centre be full; and for all movements to relate to it, there is no requirement that it be accessible.

Tokyo and its empty centre thus assured Barthes that it is possible to envisage a metaphysics which is not constructed so as to relate all conditional truths to a first absolute principle and derive them from it; that accidentally it need not rest upon a fixed foundation of substance; that in thinking it is not indispensable to proceed from external and temporary manifestations to an enduring subject. In short, he found a disposition which corresponds to a metaphysics without substance and without a full subject.

The manifestations of this substance-free and subject-free metaphysics are far from being restricted to Japanese culture. It must be said, too, that Barthes was not the only one who in his efforts to present reality as text came upon the empty centre of structures. His contemporaries, including psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, philosopher Michel Foucault and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, also noticed that in the centre of the arrangements they were studying there was often a strange, both present and non-present element. When Lacan analysed Poe's well-known story *The Purloined Letter*, he found at the centre of the text an ever-absent, ever-fleeing and yet ever-present letter. Lacan's follower André Green pointed out that

the scarf which circulates in *Othello* has a similar function. And Shakespeare provides another instance in the royal crown as perceived by the Prince of Wales when he decides between it and Falstaff. Taking up Lacan's observation, Deleuze expresses the nature of this item thus:

It is always displaced vis-a-vis itself. It has the quality of not being where we look for it and, conversely, of being found where it is not. It could be said that 'it is not in its place' (and therefore it is not something real). But also, that it flees from its own likeness (and therefore it is not an image) and that it flees from its own identity (and therefore is not a concept) (Deleuze 1979, p. 317).

The difference between these two approaches is actually quite radical, and it is no exaggeration to refer to it as the difference between two types of metaphysics. But we should not fail to notice that despite this fact there still remains one common presupposition. Let us look at how Barthes arrives at his ideogram of Tokyo. To apprehend and describe this strange, invisible and yet ubiquitous, empty and yet determinant centre of the Japanese metropolis it was not necessary to understand the signs on the Tokyo streets. In the movement forward and to the sides which draws our attention to the horizontal level of traffic and other signs, it was necessary at least from time to time to adopt the viewpoint of the observer who sees the city and its traffic from above. This is the way a map depicts it. However, even the map is not enough on its own to disclose the particularity of the city. In adopting an elevated viewpoint which neglects details -so important in movement towards specific goals- it was also necessary to see in the map something more than a simplified and objectivised picture of the city. Barthes discovered in the map an ideogram, a documenting of the idea of the city; and in this ideogram he noted that the central idea was in this instance empty, despite being the organising and motive element in the whole disposition of the city. It is evident that he must have approached the maps and schematics of European cities in the same way to find in them ideograms documenting a Western metaphysics.

### 3. Argo

The differences pointed out by those who have observed that the centre of arrangements can be empty are thus still differences within one common position, characterised by representation and its remove from the object. However, is it possible also to envisage an approach which eschews this basic presupposition or at least modifies it?



That it is the city in particular which furnishes the opportunity for pursuing such a line of thought is an insight we owe to the Italian writer Italo Calvino -in the first instance in his remarkable *Invisible Cities*. Here he was able, by trying out different conceptions of the city, to seize upon both the things that make cities similar to one another and integrate them into a unifying cultural framework and the ways in which they are different and manifest themselves as unique, changeable and ever-reidentified formations. Subsequently Calvino elucidated his approach in one of his *Six memos for the next millenium*, where he explained what the symbol of the city was for him: crystal and flame, geometrical rationality and a clutch of human existences; and above all, an electrical tension which is created between these two poles. To give this electricity and its charge an apt expression in text, he had to liberate it from the principles of a uni-directional and fixed hierarchy. Calvino's texts on cities resemble a grid in which countless routes can be drawn and ever-new connections made (see Calvino 1991)

The city as a grid: this model now makes it possible to express the mutable side of the urban organism, which in Calvino's understanding belongs to the flame and stands in opposition to the geometrical structures in which the city has immobilized itself on maps. With this conception Calvino has distanced himself from the presuppositions which we still find in images corresponding to structures with an empty centre. To our surprise, however, we find that at the same time he has come closer to another image of the city -one that originated with Roland Barthes. At the peak of his structuralist celebrity, Barthes spoke -in a lecture entitled *Semiology and Urbanism*- of the empty centre of urban organisation, but he also produced this image:

Every city is a little bit constructed, made for us in the image of the *Argo*, of which each piece was no longer an original piece, but which always remained the *Argo*, in other words a set of easily readable and identifiable significations (Barthes 1985, p. 271).

These words will come as a surprise particularly to those who thought of Barthes as a structuralist and in consequence noticed in his works only those ideas which testify to the endeavour to formalise and create systems. Nevertheless, as early as the 1960s Barthes had also noted, in reflecting on the city and its arrangement, its mutability and its process of becoming.

There is a Barthes, then, who applies himself to the constructing of systems; this Barthes discovered that it was possible to have in the middle of

these systems not only a firm support of substance and subject, but also an empty space. But there is also a Barthes who perceives changes of a kind which the position of the formalist inevitably neglects as they do not change the fundamental structural relations. This second Barthes, then, says of the centre of the city:

The city, essentially and semantically, is the place for encountering the other, and it is for this reason that the centre is the point of encounter for the whole city; the city-centre is instituted above all by young people, by adolescents. When these express their image of the city, they always tend to restrict, to concentrate, to condense the centre; the city centre is experienced as the interchange of social activities and, I would say, almost of erotic activities in the broad sense of the term. Further, the city centre is always experienced as a space where subversive forces, forces of rupture and play act and meet (Barthes 1985, p. 269).

Clearly, the question here is no longer whether the centre of the city is full and provides support for all elements of the system. What has come to Barthes' notice are activities and an interplay of forces which take place on the human level and are the manifestation of corporeality. Man enters upon the erotic activities of which Barthes speaks with his body. The observer has changed into an active participant in the game; instead of the objective eye comes the body.

Journey, map, *Argo*: three concepts of the city which have their corresponding figures: the chronicler of travel, the cartographer and the player. Perhaps with the third we enter not only the centre of the city, but also a new period of thought which begins, perhaps slightly paradoxically, with the realisation of the irreducibility of the body.

[Translation by Martin Ward]

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*Miroslav Marcelli* is Professor of Philosophy at Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University, Bratislava. He lectures on History of Philosophy and Semiotics. His major areas of research interest are History of Philosophy, Epistemology, Semiotics and Theory of Argumentation. He was Visiting Professor at the Clermont-Ferrand University, Visiting fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford and Visiting Professor at Masaryk University, Brno. His major works are *Rediscovery of time* (1989) and *Michel Foucault or to become someone else* (1995).