



Four Cities

Fluothia, Awuli, Willa, and Calisandra

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Abstract

This project is composed of an experimental film and an artist statement that aims to discuss the nature and perception of city based on the film. The experimental film is a combination of creative writing inspired by Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities* (1972), cinematic language, animated presentation, and authentic soundtrack. The making of this film starts with the creation, decontextualization, and reconstruction of travel footage and hand-drawn animations. Following the visual is the composition of acoustic expression, which features the diversity of sound effect and ambient mood, as well as solo and duet narrations. The film translates the creative writing about the description of fictional cities into visual representation by a variety of cinematographic methods – such as camera movement, animation transition, and ambiance creation. Being an open-ended creative project, it seeks to provide an immersive environment for the viewer to rethink the perception of cities.

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Acknowledgement

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I have carried the thought of doing a project that combines the ideas of space, image, and text as I moved from another program to Graduate Liberal Studies program. During my stay in the GLS program, Professor Donna Zapf has always been the supporting and inspiring mentor who shared both my confusion and confidence about intellectual creation. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Professor Zapf for her generosity and wisdom, which was an invaluable source of encouragement during my student life.

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Four Cities

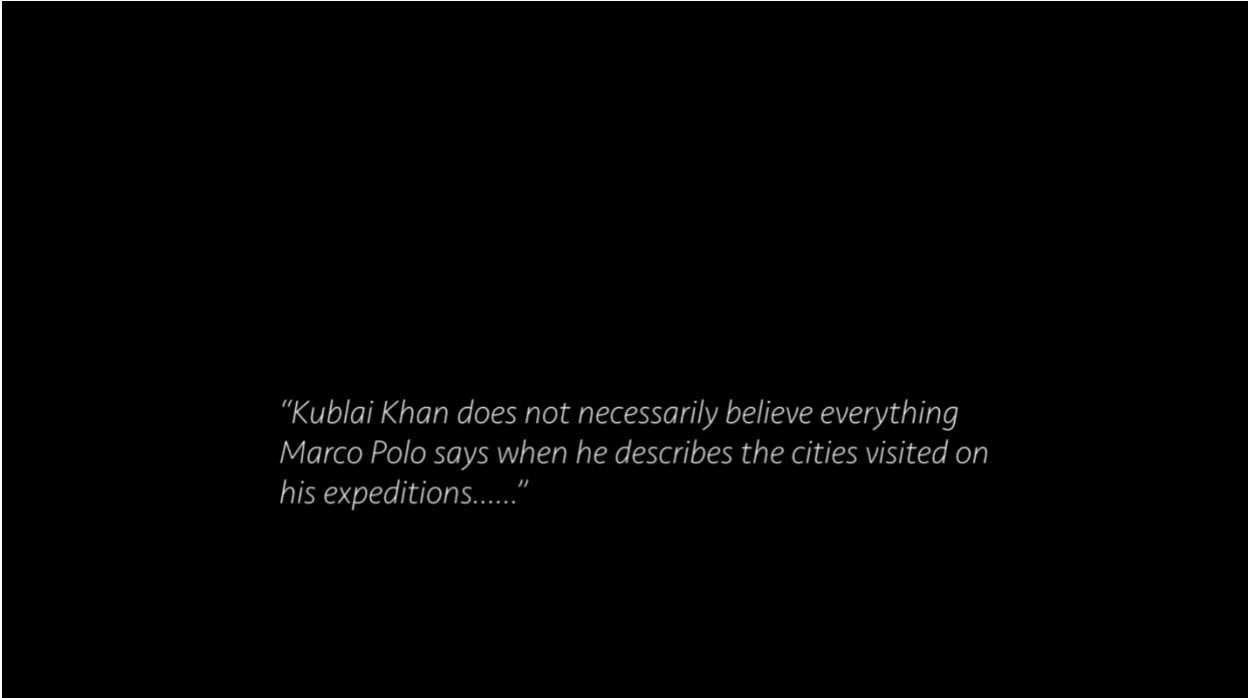
Fluothia, Awuli, Willa, and Calisandra

Chapter One: Inspiration

Cities exist in every aspect of human life. They are reflections and abstractions of our thoughts and beings. They are more than the agglomerations of plastic, concrete, and light. The experiences, feelings, and emotions gleaned by a traveler contribute to the formation of cities to the same extent. Italo Calvino in his book *Invisible Cities* displays an array of fictional cities, abstracting them from reality and empowering this expression by using language, ripe with cinematic possibility. To further this exploration, I try to illustrate the same idea in this project by using visual and auditory languages, and enrich the imagination with more technological and artistic tools.

The idea of the four cities in my project comes from my own personal experience of traveling and living in many cities of different scales and in various ways. Despite the homogeneity of many modern cities, I intend to find the uniqueness inherent in my imaginary

cities: being there, hearing cities breathing, and walking on a street while feeling the sheets of urban dust on the skin. The experience of a city is like the sound of boots sinking in fresh snow. The impression of a city can be so tactile, but also very easy to slide out of the memory. My goal in this project is to gather these experiences and convey them in an artistic way.



*"Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything
Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on
his expeditions....."*

Usually people like to talk about cities where they used to live or travel, and cities that they imagined, but did not dare hope to build. I want my project to be an exploration and a discussion of the possibilities of cities, the ways they look and the secrets that are buried within. Thus this film project is not meant to be a literal transformation from the text, but rather a recollection of imagination.

Chapter Two: Content

The film is composed of four parts. Each part is a description of a fictional city visited by Marco Polo on his way to meet Kublai Khan, the emperor of Mongol Empire. The context of these descriptions is an ongoing conversation between the two figures.

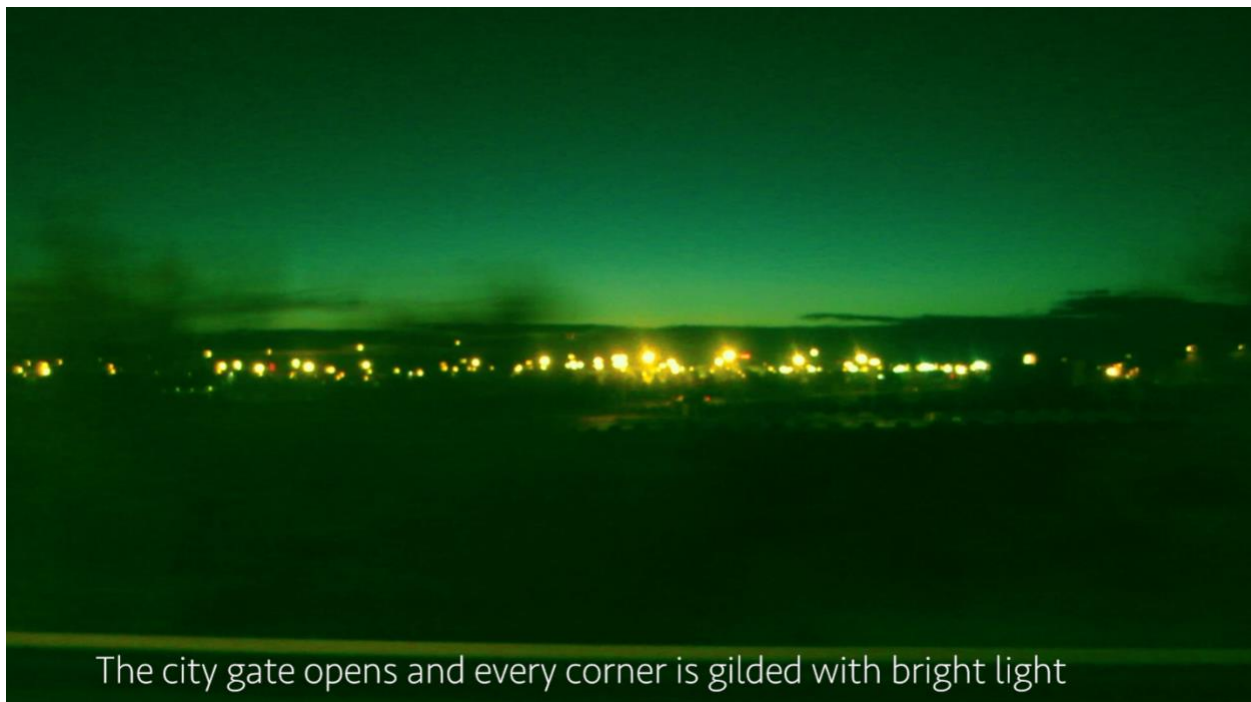
Marco Polo uses his rich language to convey messages to Kublai Khan about his impressions, reflections, and memories of these cities. The cities that Polo describes vary in degrees of abstraction. Some are the agglomeration of actual places such as swimming pools, skyscrapers, or abandoned castles. Some are just feelings and impressions intertwined together.

Contextualized in Calvino's book, *my cities* – Fluothia, Awuli, Willa and Calisandra – are four independent, but inter-related cities.



Travelers get confused with what they see in Fluothia

The first city is Fluothia (city and memory). The mechanism of human memory is complicated. Fluothia as a city, however, is a perfect object to show how the complexity of city can be compared to human memory. The first time people read about Fluothia is through textual and visual introduction. However, when people see Fluothia with their eyes and walk through the city in person, they are aware of how different the city is compared to their reading experience. They realize that their memory changed the impression of this city gained by the second-hand experience. Seeing is believing, they thought. But does seeing really mean believing? Why do they still question their memories after seeing the actual city? It turns out that memory is not the thing that we can trust. Maybe this is also the reason why people choose to believe the travelogue again. Life becomes worth living because of our constant fight with our own memory.



Awuli (city and desire), the second city, is about indulgence and release. Cities are built out of indulgence. The indulgence in money results in marketplaces for food, capital, and human luxuries. The indulgence in speed results in transportation and communication. The indulgence in emotional needs results in the network among citizens. The indulgence in indulgence results in alcohol and drunkenness and Awuli.



Willa (city and signs) is the city dedicated to those who explore and delve into a certain area of a city, but find themselves stuck there. It is a city built on frustration and sudden revelation. However, I prefer to interpret Willa as a connection between the signifier and the signified truth. There are certain places in the world where people go and find meaning in their lives, and these places are Willas. Before going to Willa, people know the word "truth," and they know what that signifies, but they do not know how and why. By chasing and gazing at the

shadows on the walls of Willa – a twinkling harbor light at the end of the cave– people start their journey of exploration.



All the cities are named by humans, and I constructed Calisandra (city and names) to show how ridiculous nomenclature is. People like to think about ways to make history because in doing so people are involved in a larger narrative. And sometimes history is good. It is dead, but at the same time it is alive. The history of cities also change. It absorbs the time and effort people spend on researching its past and understanding its names.

Chapter Three: The Film

Writing:

While reading Calvino's book several times, I recognized his ability of connecting the characteristics of his cities with the cinematic language. In doing so, Calvino brings the reader

into a world full of exotic objects and sceneries in his wild imagination. Following this writing style, I created my description of the four cities with a heavy sense of cinematography.¹ Calvino also categorized his cities into several groups based on their characteristics, such as city and memory, city and sign, city and names, and so on. I chose memory, desire, sign, and names as the four groups that my cities will belong to.

One of the hardest things when writing about the four cities is naming them. Fluothia, obviously, is the city of flow, of water, of erasing the past and recreating the new. Awuli is a name I adopted from a Nigerian girl name. The meaning of the original name is happiness and pleasure, which, I hope, would convey the atmosphere for the second city. Willa means protection, but its original meaning is helmet, which reminds me of helmet's function of separating the internal and the external. Hence the illegibility. The name Calisandra can be divided into two Greek words, Cali and Sandra, meaning "the most beautiful" and "defender". The compound name reveals the multiplicity of this city.

Throughout the writing, I intentionally use cinematic descriptions widely to bridge the unavoidable discrepancy between the two media types: visual and textual. For example, in Fluothia, I write "there are five instead of four bathhouses along the boulevard; children behind the shades play flutes not poker; the bridge arches over a grassland instead of a river. Even the swan and peacocks on the cover turn to grey and turquoise." By visualizing this description in the film with cartoonized footage, it is easier for viewers to immerse themselves in the scenario of displacement and replacement of memory.

¹ The descriptions can be seen in Appendix.

Apart from the cinematic language style, I have no intention to define the deeper meaning of the texts. After its creation, the texts should be examined in the context of the film by individual viewers. They can be understood as simply the description of four fictional cities visited by Marco Polo during his travel, the ambiguous description of four actual cities that exist in the real world, or four symbolic cities representing life journeys.

Footage:

The footage of this film is collected while I was traveling in Mediterranean. During the trip, I used a camera to document the various spaces encountered. The footage are mostly less than three minutes, which gives me an opportunity to experiment the sequence without changing their integrity. Ultimately the footage adopted a first-person hand-hold style, leading the viewers into the space within Medieval castle, Hellenistic library, or the empty square.

The footage was separated and regrouped according to their movement direction and their similarity of representing space. I then colorcoded the footage by different cities, linking them together, creating a sense of moving without stopping, the sense of leaving not turning back, and the sense of being farther and farther from where all the stories started.

Some of the editing techniques that I used for the footage include speed/duration adjustment, rescaling, specially added effect such as smoke effect, and cartoonization. The speed/duration of the footage is adjusted usually to meet the need of rhythm. For example, the spinning ceiling in the city of Awuli gets spin slower and slower, finally stops while the last breathe is made. The rescaling of footage is normally for a better and more smooth transition. An example can be found at the end of Canlisandra part, when the shape of water at the bottom of a Turkish cistern overlaps the shape of a downwards going staircase, which finally

leads to an open sea. The smoke effect is added in the Awuli part, where the narration mentions “the smog that hovers over the bus terminal”. Finally, the cartoonization of footage can be found in many parts of the film. The goal of this is to transform the key characteristics of the city from narration to visual expressions.

Animation:

From a technical point of view, the transition between two frames from different footage can be done easily in Premiere Pro. However, the animation in this film serves as the key transition between the general narration of the cities and the detailed list of images. For example, the animation in Fluothia starts with a silhouette of telescope, transforms into an eye quickly, and dissolves in a peacock feather at the same time when the narrator speaks out the words “peacock feather”.

The transition is animated partly for the contents, and partly for the form. Different from the realistic effect created by the footage, animation conveys idea in a more abstract way, and at the same time dramatically enriches the formal elements of the film.

Music and sound:

Music and sound is a heavy part of labor I devoted into this project. Different from the stories told by the narration and the visuals, acoustic effects create another storyline with changing distance from the main stories. I want to enrich the experience of viewers by diversifying the triggers of imagination that hides in the film.

I start the film with a long and light sound of water dripping, which brings the feeling of being inside a cave or under a frozen waterfall. As the dripping sound goes deeper, a sudden water splash sound appears, aiming to surprise the viewer. In the first city, Fluothia, I introduce

the ambiance by starting with a raining day and Bach's melody. The combination of the music's law and nature's call leads the imagination to a remote suburb place. Next, a list of descending bubble and wave sounds opens up the space, followed by the thunder and bell from far away. In the end, it returns to piano and rain again, showing a cycle of remembrance and forget.

In Anwuli, the twinkling drumming of middle eastern music begins the journey, cut by sporadic breath and a train braking sound. The hectic dream is conveyed by the rushing drumming, but stopped by a shattering of glass and little girl's scream.

The sound of scanner is the first sound of Willa. After introducing the cave in the narration, a Uyghur folk song is played, which creates an exotic feeling to match the ambiance in the cave. While the voices of the narrators echoing in the cave, I add the sound of stream to illustrate the depth of the cave. When the narrators start to say the quotation, the echoing and reverberation effects are added to the voice. The music repeats itself, like what the footage does: keep going up to the stairs and getting lost in the space. Finally, the siren from boat announces the destination.

In Calisandra the sound of car passing by is heard at the beginning. A science-fiction type of electronic melody with strong beats then introduces the city. When the narrators reach the sentence of "everyday objects", shouting from the crowds can be heard, to show that the collectiveness of this impression. Then the sounds of battlefield and sword fighting gradually disappear to end the film.

Narration:

I used my own voice to narrate the story because I have a relatively low and soft voice, which makes it very suitable for telling stories. The "duet effect" in some part of the narration is

to create the impression of being in the fictional cities with the collective voice from other people. And the occasional echoing sound is to create the reverberation and resonation from the exploration in the cave.

Appendix: narrative for the film



1) City and memory

Each year millions of delicately designed travelogues about Fluothia are printed and distributed to travel agencies and book stores all around the world. A green swan adorns the cover, surrounded by seven white peacocks. People read the contents, memorize it, and pin Fluothia on their maps.

When they finally reach Fluothia, the city always looks slightly different from what they read: there are five instead of four bathhouses along the boulevard; children behind the shades play flutes not poker; the bridge arches over a grassland instead of a river. Even the swan and peacocks on the cover turn to grey and turquoise. Travelers get confused with what they see in Fluothia. They question the travelogues.

Cities forget. Travelogues change. People get bewildered by the words. If they are asked by others about Fluothia, they raise the travelogues and explain what they saw by reciting the descriptions exactly the same as they read them the first time.

2) City and desire

Legend says that the city of Awuli only exists when you raise a glass. Whatever you drink, a glass of young wine or hot sake, Awuli shows herself immediately as long as she is seen through that liquid. First the black moat, then the starlight on the cobblestone lanes, finally the smog that hovers over the bus terminal.

As you drink, Awuli becomes clearer and more solid, until your drink flows into its black moat, its starlight and its smog. Strangely enough, it turns out that the happiness that accompanies the beverage becomes milder and more insipid. The flame that devours your stomach cools down and caresses your torso. The city gate opens and every corner is gilded with bright light.

You take the bus, enjoy the fully gentrified city center. Everything is wonderful until the city dissipates. The flame in your stomach grows again and Awuli fades out from your vision. The young wine or hot sake held in your hand spills out and forms a small pond on the floor.

3) City and signs

One day when I was about to refill my goatskin water sack, I noticed a huge polished cliff carving behind the flowering date palms. Not a single word from the inscriptions was legible, but within them I found an entrance to a cave. I walked several miles inside the cave, attaining

wisdom from the illegible inscriptions on the wall. From them I learned that Willa is the city this cave leads to.

“In there,” the inscriptions mumbled, “the tide ebbs four times a day. People are only allowed to have one dream every day. All the readers wear handcuffs and shackles.” I became intoxicated by the inscriptions. I still cannot read them, but Willa is crystal clear in my head. Even the darkness in the cave cannot prevent me from contouring Willa.

The cave is endless and boring, but the inscriptions show me a panorama: dancers sitting on the edge of fountains that generate underground tides; readers dragging handcuffs and shackles on the floor; dreams whipping the dreamers. As I walk, the inscriptions change their configuration. When I finally emerged from the cave, the dates were ripened and my goatskin water sack was full. Willa may or may not exist. It is the illegible inscriptions that led me there.

5) City and names

Calisandra used to have other names, but nobody remembers them. It was burned centuries ago, though no one knows the exact year.

In Calisandra there is an immense archive, decorated with red curtains and green lanterns. The archive, however, only opens once a year when the miming call of the mockingbirds resembles Calisandra’s original name.

Travelers go to Calisandra imagining themselves as historians and archeologists, attempting to unearth the past. After being denied entry into the archive, they find fragments

of stories on everyday objects: the corrosion on the bridge, an aged scar on the statue, the degree to which the palace inclines towards the sea.

They speculate about Calisandra's unmentionable battle and its forgotten names, without noticing that their speculations become part of the name and history of Calisandra. The scheming Calisandra takes advantage of travelers and their imaginations, galvanizing itself with their delirious ravings and galloping speeches.

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