

Imagining the Impossible: The Concept of the Unconventional City in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

MEHMET AKIF BALKAYA

Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Science and Letters, Aksaray University
Aksaray, Turkey

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of the imaginative cities, and how these cities are perceived by the author through the use of surrealism in Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities (1972). While doing so, the relationship between the characters: Marco Polo, Kublai Khan and the cities will be discussed with reference to the descriptions of the cities in the stories. While discussing on these cities, Khan and Polo talks on various ideas and topics. The cities are divided into eleven themes: memory, desire, signs, thin, trading, eyes, names, dead, sky, continuous and hidden. It will be concluded that there is no reason behind the form of the impossible and/or invisible cities since there exists no such real places which are the products of the creative subconscious.

Key words: Surrealism, City and Literature, Travel writing.

Introduction:

First, it might be helpful to briefly consider Italo Calvino's, Marco Polo's and Kublai Khan's backgrounds. Italo Calvino was born in 1923 in Cuba and died in 1985, Italy. Calvino was an Italian novelist, journalist and short-story writer "... whose

whimsical and imaginative fables made him one of the most important Italian fiction writers in the 20th century” (“Italo Calvino: Italian Author.”). Regarding Calvino and his works, Harold Bloom states that “[h]is literary career stands as a restless search for the newest approach to storytelling, with each successive work opening another door of the imagination” (14). Among Italo Calvino’s works are *Our Ancestors* trilogy (1952-59), *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1957), *the Cosmicomics*, a collection of short stories (1965) and one of his novels *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979).

Marco Polo, lived between 1254 and 1324, was an Italian merchant and adventurer, “... who travelled from Europe to Asia in 1271–95, remaining in China for 17 of those years, and whose *Il milione* (“The Million”), known in English as the *Travels of Marco Polo*, is a classic of travel literature (“Marco Polo: Italian Explorer.”). Kublai Khan (1215-1294) was the “Mongolian general and statesman, grandson of Genghis Khan. He conquered China and became the first emperor of its Yuan, or Mongol, dynasty. He was thus at the same time the overlord of all the Mongol dominions ... and the ruler of his own realm of China” (“Kublai Khan: Emperor of Yuan Dynasty.”). In Calvino’s work, Kublai Khan listens to Marco Polo, who talks on the imaginative cities in Khan’s empire. Regarding Khan’s and Polo’s relationship, Beno Weiss states that

The son of a Venetian banker, Polo spent about twenty five Years traveling and exploring the Asian continent and seventeen years as ambassador to Kublai Khan, whose empire reached from the Yellow River in China to the shores of the Danube in Eastern Europe and from Siberia to the Persian Gulf. (145)

Surrealism in *Invisible Cities*

Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* was published in 1972. The book consists of imaginative dialogues between the emperor Kublai Khan and the traveller Marco Polo, who briefly describes 55

female-named cities. While discussing on these cities, Khan and Polo talks on various ideas and topics. The cities are divided into eleven themes: memory, desire, signs, thin, trading, eyes, names, dead, sky, continuous and hidden. Also, the cities are numbered from one to five; therefore, the book contains fifty five stories concerning the made up cities.

Marco Polo describes the cities through his imagination. Some of the imaginative cities are named as: Diomira, Zaira, Dorothea, Despina, Tamara, Isaura, Ersilia, Baucis, Leandra, Adelma, Thekla, Trude, and Berenice. There are no characterization or plot in the narration of the cities, and regarding this narration, the writer Calvino states that

Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his. (5)

The imaginative cities and descriptions are known by the Emperor but he listens to this western traveller with great attention. Although the cities are invisible, both the emperor and the reader tries to shape images in their minds through the representations of the buildings, social practices and the geography of the cities. The first city is Diomira, titled as "Cities and Memory 1". It is narrated as such: "Leaving there and proceeding for three days toward the east, you reach Diomira, a city with sixty silver domes, bronze statues of all the gods, streets paved with lead, a crystal theater, a golden cock that crows each morning on a tower" (Calvino 7). It is clear that Diomira, like some other cities, are built and furnished by jewelleries such as gold, and silver. The next city is Isidora, "a city where the buildings have spiral staircases encrusted with spiral seashells, where perfect telescopes and violins are made, where the foreigner hesitating between two women always encounters a third, where cockfights degenerate into bloody

brawls among the bettors” (8). Men and women, in this unfamiliar city, seem to be always in the streets. Beautiful women walk around the streets while men bet on cockfights. However, as time passes and the people in Isidora grow older, such incidents turn to be memories as Polo narrates: “In the square there is the wall where the old men sit and watch the young go by; he is seated in a row with them. Desires are already memories” (8). The third story is about Dorotea in “Cities and Desire 1”. The city has an original but a different imaginative architecture:

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. (9)

Similar to the differentness and originality of its architecture, the customs seem to be unique and specific to its people: “the nubile girls of each quarter marry youths of other quarters and their parents Exchange the goods that each family holds in monopoly- bergamot, sturgeon roe, astrolabes, amethysts ...” (9). However, there is no cause and effect relation of the architecture or the customs for these cities.

Such features of Calvino’s work can be associated with “surrealism”, which is traced back to Andre Breton’s 1924 work *Manifesto on Surrealism*. Therefore, it can be stated that surrealism, as a literary movement, originated in the 1920s together with its new way of expression, called automatic writing (Abrams 357-58). Professor M. H. Abrams defines and explains this movement as such:

Surrealism was a revolutionary movement in painting, sculpture, and the other arts, as well as literature; and it often joined forces, although briefly, with one or another revolutionary movement in the political and social realm. The effects of surrealism extended far beyond the small group of its professed adherents such as André Breton, Louis Aragon,

and the painter Salvador Dali. The influence, direct or indirect, of surrealist innovations can be found in many modern writers of prose and verse who have broken with conventional modes of artistic organization to experiment with free association, a broken syntax, nonlogical and nonchronological order, dreamlike and nightmarish sequences, and the juxtaposition of bizarre, shocking, or seemingly unrelated images. (Abrams 357)

The characteristics of surrealism fit to those of Calvino's work, in which the cities are dreamlike ones that have their own characters. Also, the narrator describes the cities through a non-chronological order. Furthermore, regarding the aim of surrealism (or super realism) Abrams remarks that "[t]he expressed aim of surrealism was a revolt against all restraints on free creativity, including logical reason, standard morality, social and artistic conventions and norms, and all control over the artistic process by forethought and intention" (357). No logical reason or social conventions seem to be followed by Marco Polo as he narrates the lives of unordinary people in unordinary cities. That feature is established by the way of the writing because "...surrealists turned to *automatic writing* (writing delivered over to the promptings of the unconscious mind), and to exploiting the material of dreams, of states of mind between sleep and waking, and of natural or drug-induced hallucinations" (Abrams 357). Although it is mentioned at the very beginning of the work that Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe in all the dreamlike cities, he listens to Polo with great attention since he gets bored with his messengers' or travellers' stories concerning the cities. The language of the imagination and the interesting city-characters bring both Khan and the reader into deep states of mind as if they hypnotize. Combining reality and artifice, each city, having woman's name, has its own unique characteristic and sight. Therefore, it can be claimed that Calvino is a master of language since he makes these fantastic and dream-like cities

memorable and believable. Therefore, it can be claimed that “the world of the unconscious mind – as expressed by fantasies and dreams – has a reality superior to that of the phenomenal world” (Haghighi 247). In that way, the surrealist writer Calvino goes “... beyond realism (normal perception of the outer world) deep into the inner world of the unconscious mind” (Haghighi 247).

Dream-Like Cities

Kublai Khan does not believe in all told by Polo as the unknown narrator has put it: “Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions ...” (Calvino 5). Khan realizes that the descriptions of Polo are the creations of the traveller’s unconscious mind. The conversation between Polo and Khan, put among the parts, illustrates this situation: “[y]ou cross archipelagos, tundras, mountain ranges. You would do as well never moving from here” (Calvino 27) because “[t]he other ambassadors warn [Khan] of famines, extortions, conspiracies, or else they inform [Khan] of newly discovered turquoise mines ...” (Calvino 27). However, interestingly enough, the two do not speak the same language at first, Polo and Khan speak, in a way, in sign language through mimics and body movements. The narrator describes this situation as such:

... when the young Venetian made his report, a different communication was established between him and the emperor. Newly arrived and totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks-ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes-which he arranged in front of him like chessmen. Returning from the missions on which Kublai sent him, the ingenious foreigner improvised pantomimes that the sovereign had to interpret ... (21)

As time goes on, Polo learns Khan's language and tells the cities with Khan's language. But it seems that Khan wishes Polo did not learn his language since it was the gaps that was fill in by Khan when Polo did not know Khan's language while describing the cities. The narrator explains the relationship between Khan and Polo as such:

Newly arrived and quite ignorant of the languages of the Levant, Marco Polo could express himself only by drawing objects from his baggage- drums, [and] salt fish ... The connections between one element of the story and another were not always obvious to the emperor ... But what enhanced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words. The descriptions of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue: you could wander through them in thought: become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off. (Calvino 38)

That the two cannot understand well at first makes the cities more mystical to the emperor. In a way, the cities become desirable for Khan as Marco Polo has put it,

With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else. (Calvino 44).

Polo states that the cities can be fantasized just like dreams but then they can turn into fears or desires as if they were some kind of puzzles. In the description of the city Euphemia under the title of "Trading cities 1", Polo describes such a fantasized city in which trading people tell stories to each other as Polo says that

You do not come to Euphemia only to buy and sell but also because at night by the fires all around the market, seated on sacks or barrels or stretched out on piles of carpets, at each

word that one man says –such as "wolf," "sister," "hidden treasure," "battle," "scabies," "lovers" –the others tell each one his tale of wolves, sisters, treasures, scabies, lovers, battles” (Calvino 36).

Such exchange of stories remind us “Canterbury Tales” or “Stories of One Thousand and One Nights”. Therefore, the trading in this city is an artistic and literary exchange since in Euphemia memories and words are told by each person in exchange for a story from another person. However, as aforementioned, some cities remind and excite the feeling fear as Hypatia does:

I entered Hypatia one morning, a magnolia garden was reflected in blue lagoons, I walked among the hedges, sure I would discover young and beautiful ladies bathing; but at the bottom of the water, crabs were biting the eyes of the suicides, stones tied around their necks, their hair green with seaweed. (Calvino 47)

In some instances, Kublai Khan is tensed with Polo's imaginary lands as Khan says “[y]our cities do not exist. Perhaps they have never existed. It is sure they will never exist again” (Calvino 59). Yet still, Khan listens to Polo with great attention and asks questions concerning the positions and the places of the cities. The dialogue below illustrates the case:

“There is still one of which you never speak ... Venice,” the Khan said.

Marco smiled. “What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?”

The emperor did not turn a hair. “And yet I have never heard you mention that name.”

And Polo said: “Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.” (Calvino 86)

The Venetian traveller seems to depart from Venice in his imaginative travel “... [t]o distinguish the other cities' qualities ...” (Calvino 86). Gradually, Marco Polo seems to “... depict not

actual locations visited by the explorer but rather nostalgic imaginary variations on Polo's home town, Venice" (Cavallaro 66). Polo describes a city which is close to Venice. That city is Esmeralda under the title of Trading Cities 5.

In Esmeralda, city of water, a network of canals and a network of streets span and intersect each other. To go from one place to another you have always the choice between land and boat: and since the shortest distance between two points in Esmeralda is not a straight line but a zigzag that ramifies in tortuous optional routes, the ways that open to each passerby are never two, but many, and they increase further for those who alternate a stretch by boat with one on dry land. (Calvino 88)

Similar to Venice, Esmeralda is a city of water with canals, and the people need to take a boat to travel on the zigzag lines. The city is portrayed by Arthur Johnstone as such:



Another city associated with water is Armilla under the title: Thin Cities 3. There are no houses with walls in this city, the water pipes are every where as described by Polo:

The fact remains that it has no walls, no ceilings, no Boors: it has nothing that makes it seem a city, except the water pipes that rise vertically where the houses should be and spread out horizontally where the Boors should be: a forest of pipes that end in taps, showers, spouts, over Bows. (49)

The city does not seem to be like an ordinary one; instead, the pipes remain far and wide. In Armilla, women take their showers as if it were their only duty or pleasure, which is described as such:

At any hour, raising your eyes among the pipes, you are likely to glimpse a young woman, or many young women, slender, not tall of stature, luxuriating in the bathtubs or arching their backs under the showers suspended in the void, washing or drying or perfuming themselves, or combing their long hair at a mirror. (Calvino 49-50)

The city and its inhabitants become visible since there are no walls or houses around; that is, "... the city is seen from inside or outside, from afar or close up, from the plains, desert, mountains, or sea" (Modena 93). The artist Arthur Johnstone draws the city as below:

Figure 2: Armilla



Under the title "Cities and Eyes 5", Moriana is described with its transparent gates, aquarium-like villas where girls are dancing. Polo, in a way, displays the city as such:

When you have forded the river, when you have crossed the mountain pass, you suddenly find before you the city of Moriana, its alabaster gates transparent in the sunlight, its coral columns supporting pediments encrusted with

serpentine, its villas all of glass like aquariums where the shadows of dancing girls with silvery scales swim beneath the medusa-shaped chandeliers. (105)

Arthur Johntone draws Moriana as such:



Kublai Khan has an atlas, on which utopic lands take place: “[t]he Great Khan's atlas contains also the maps of the promised lands visited in thought but not yet discovered or founded: New Atlantis, Utopia, the City of the Sun ... [and] the cities that menace in nightmares ... [as] Brave New World” (164). As realized, these are utopian and dystopian lands as Tommaso Campanella’s *the City of the Sun*, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, which do not exist literally like Polo’s cities. However, on Khan’s atlas, “the traveller recognizes Constantinople in the city which from three shores dominates a long strait, a narrow gulf, and an enclosed sea ...” (Calvino 136). Calvino’s stories, in that way, comprise both imaginary, utopian and real cities. However, “[i]t is not a description of a utopian perfect society based in a unique urban ideal, it is a dissertation on the complexity of urban realities” (Fernandes and Silva 3). Yet, Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* consists of the narration of fifty four cities on an island by the sailor Raphael Hythloday. In that sense, such similarities draw attention since both works tell the impossible cities as if they were real.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the cities described by Polo to the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan are not real ones; these are imaginary cities which, for Polo, are the shadows of Venice created in the unconscious mind. In that sense, it can be said that the author is inspired by Venice, which is perceived in many ways as the starting point of his journey. However, the only characters of the book are Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, who "... remain[ed] in China for 17 years ..." in the 13th century ("Marco Polo: Italian Explorer."). Through all the descriptions, Khan seems to be aware of the fact that the cities are imaginative ones as Khan says "It seems to me you have never moved from this garden" (Calvino 103). However, "...Polo's cities hold an undeniable power to fabricate limitless spaces and time zones" (Cavallaro 66-67). As a surrealist work, it can be stated that there is no reason behind the form of the impossible/invisible cities since there exists no such real places. The cities, like the work itself, are the products of the creative mind.

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