

# Italo Calvino and His Illusory World: A Postmodernist Study of Invisible Cities

## Abstract

With the advent of Postmodernism, there has been a marked shift from the absoluteness of reality to the realm of signs, images, illusions and fantasy. In a pluralistic Postmodern world where nothing is absolute, reality and illusion merge in a way that the age-old stronghold of reality is lost forever. In a world of 'simulacra' where the 'hyperreal' replaces the real, the perception of the world through the eye of reality no more suffices. Italo Calvino's famous novel *Invisible Cities* is a significant book which explicates the vulnerability of reality in a Postmodern world in a scenario when illusion and fantasy make frequent inroads into the realm of reality to assert the former's vulnerability. The descriptions of the real cities by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan in the novel are frequently disturbed by sudden intrusions of fantasy so that the reader gets thoroughly confused regarding whether the cities exist in reality or not. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is a perfect example of the dismantling of absolute reality in the Postmodern condition of existence.

**Keywords:** Postmodernist Study, Invisible Cities, Illusions and Fantasy, Former's Vulnerability

## Introduction

The blurring of the boundary between illusion and reality is one of the most prominent defining features of Postmodernism. Christopher Butler, in his book *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, says that "... [an] attack on realism is absolutely central to all types of postmodernist activity" (27). Paul Sheehan, in his important article "Postmodernism and Philosophy," reflects on French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's declaration of the disappearance of the "real world" in the realm of Postmodernity and says:

Attending to the Post modern condition of media saturation, Baudrillard charted the disappearance of a different kind of 'real world': the concrete material foundation to which human systems of signification point. Thus, instead of the couple sign/object, with its promise of a substantive 'ground' beneath the various forms of cultural representation... there are only representations themselves, mere 'simulations' of concrete reality. (30)

The undertones that the statements of these two notable critics of Postmodernism carry establish the very essence of the Postmodern condition of existence, i.e. a newly experienced threat to reality—a threat that culminates in the complete disappearance of the same in a Postmodern world. What replace this absent reality are signs or images or allusions that provide us with an unbelievable semblance of reality. Baudrillard calls this reproduction of reality through images and signs 'simulation' and lets us know that we live in a world of 'simulacrum' or the 'hyperreal' which looks more real than the real. In simpler terms, what emerges from Baudrillard's declarations is that there is no definite place of absolute reality in a Post modern world where images, signs, illusions and fantasies keep on replacing reality.

This typical Post modern theme of the loss of the absoluteness of reality is well-explored in Italo Calvino's famous novel *Invisible Cities* where he persistently shakes the ground of reality by making illusions and fantasies intrude frequently into the realm of the former. Based on these precepts, this article endeavours to explore and analyse Calvino's attempt to establish a typical Post modern condition of existence where reality loses its absolute grounding through the persistent invasion of fantasy into its realm.

It is through the descriptions of different cities by Marco Polo to the great Kublai Khan where the dividing line between illusion and reality is deliberately effaced that Calvino is able to reinforce his intended theme of the rejection of the absoluteness of reality. The description of the city of



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Fedora in "Cities & Desire. 4" can be taken to be a clear example of such a theme. Through Marco Polo's descriptions, we come to know that the city of Fedora has a museum where different glass globes of little Fedoras are preserved so that the onlooker can imagine the shape of the real and bigger Fedora according to the glass-globe little Fedora that he chooses. A careful look at the above sentence will reveal that we are not sure whether fedora is a city having a real, tangible existence or a city that can only be imagined. Finally, the narrator clarifies that neither of the Fedoras (whether bigger or smaller) is real. He describes:

On the map of your empire, O great Khan, there must be room for the big, stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in glass globes. Not because they are all equally real, but because all are only assumptions. The one contains what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so; the others, what is imagined as possible and, a moment later, is possible no longer. (Calvino, *IC* 28)

Hence, the narrator's revelation that both the bigger Fedora and glass globes of little Fedoras are "only assumptions" completely erases the boundary between truth and illusion. Once the boundary between truth and illusion is erased, illusion invades into the realm of the former thereby foregrounding the illusory nature of the Postmodern world. Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his pioneering work on Postmodernism *The Postmodern Condition: A Report Card on Knowledge* explains this intrusion of illusion into the realm of the real in the following line: "Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions . . . for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality" (81-2).

A statement by the narrator at the concluding part of Part-2 of the book gives us another glimpse of the intrusion of imagination into the realm of reality. Commenting on Marco Polo's descriptions of different cities before Kublai Khan, the narrator says: "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, *IC* 32). What is observable from the above statement of the narrator is that during his realistic descriptions, before Kublai Khan, of the cities he visited, Marco Polo also leaves some imaginative spaces for the King to fill with his own thought and imagination. This therefore becomes a classic case of Postmodern narrative where reality loses its firm grounding and imaginary elements start capturing its stronghold in a way that they become more real than real.

In the beginning of Part-3 of the book, we find another notable instance of the replacement of reality by imaginary elements. It is found that the cities Marco Polo described before Kublai Khan are imaginatively dismantled and concomitantly recreated by the latter in his mind, according to his own ways. The narrator describes:

Kublai Khan had noticed that Marco Polo's cities resembled one another, as if the

passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements. Now, from each city Marco described to him, the Great Khan's mind set out on its own, and after dismantling the city piece by piece, he constructed it in other ways, substituting components, shifting them, inverting them.

(Calvino, *IC* 37)

Evidently, Kublai Khan is able to dismantle Marco Polo's real cities and reconstruct them in his imagination according to his own choice. In other words, he could replace the real cities by his imagined ones. In a way, it is an instance of providing imaginary alternatives to the real ones so as to convince us that in the Postmodern world, there are always imaginary substitutes available to replace what is thought to be the reality. Such a scenario thoroughly challenges the absoluteness of reality by dismantling the barrier between itself and imagination.

The erasure of boundaries between reality and imagination is further reinforced through the instauration of the analogy between cities and dreams as the narrator describes: "With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, . . . 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, *IC* 37-8). The fact that certain imaginative components like dreams and desires are considered to be the constituents of the real city reaffirms the typical Postmodern notion that reality and imagination are not distinctly separable entities, rather, entities that could metonymically substitute one another in a way that the 'real' becomes 'imaginary' and on the contrary, the 'imaginary' becomes more real than the real.

The chapter "Cities & Desire. 5" is another exemplary exposition of the typical Postmodern conversion of the dreamy and illusory experiences into the real ones. In the end-part of the chapter, we come to know that the people who came to the city "recognized something of the streets of the dream [which they had dreamed before entering the city]" (Calvino, *IC* 39). It is evident therefore that the city contains traces of the dreams that the people had dreamed before entering its premises.

The assertion of the 'realness' of imaginary entities is further traced in the concluding portions of Part-3 of the book where Kublai dreams of a city with high docks over black waters and instructs Marco Polo: "Set out, explore every coast, and seek this city . . . Then come back and tell me if my dream corresponds to reality" (Calvino, *IC* 47). Marco Polo says in answer: ". . . my lord, there is no doubt that sooner or later I shall set sail from that dock. . . . The city exists . . ." (Calvino, *IC* 47). Noticeably, Kublai Khan's imagined city is immediately attested by Marco Polo's to be a real one that he will encounter during his voyage—an affirmation that proves once again how imagination takes over reality in a Postmodern condition of existence.

The beginning portion of Part-4 presents a glaring contrast between illusion and reality where we observe illusion taking over reality in the end. At the beginning, we see that Kublai expresses his disbelief that the cities described by Marco Polo exist. At the

same time, he tells Kublai that he knows that his empire is no more than a rotten place. He describes about the real, miserable condition of his empire in the following lines:

Your cities do not exist. Perhaps they have never existed. It is sure they will never exist again. Why do you amuse yourself with consolatory fables? 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 by its humours. Why do you speak to me of this? Why do you lie to the emperor of the tartars, foreigner? (Calvino, *IC* 51)

However, it is also interesting to note that Marco Polo is able, towards the concluding portions of Part-4, to seduce the emperor into the world of illusions so that Kublai changes his opinion and finds his city to be full of richness. He says:

And yet I know . . . 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. Why do your travel impressions stop at disappointing appearances, never catching this implacable process? Why do you linger over inessential melancholies? Why do you hide from the emperor the grandeur of his destiny? (Calvino, *IC* 51-2)

It is evident from this altered perception of Kublai that Marco Polo is able to allure him into a euphoric world of illusions into which Kublai completely adapts himself by accepting the illusory world to be a real one. It seems as if Marco Polo is transporting Kublai into the realm of the 'hyperreal' and 'simulations' (to use the terms of Baudrillard). It must be reminded here that famous French sociologist Jean Baudrillard uses these concepts to let us know that we no more live in the world of reality, rather in that of images and illusions that the already vanished world of reality has left behind itself. However, the images or illusions are found to resemble reality so much so that they look 'more real than the real (hyperreal). In the Postmodern world, therefore, there are only simulacra which are produced through endless simulations of reality. Tim Woods explains it by saying:

With simulation, there is a generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. . . . here the distinctions between the real and the unreal become so blurred, the word 'hyperreal' is used to signify more real than real, where the real has been produced by the model. Hyperreality is the state where distinctions between objects and their representations are dissolved, and one is left with only simulacra. (26-7)

In a similar vein, Marco Polo is able to create a make-believe world of simulacra through simulations of a real world of crystals and diamonds—a world into which Kublai gets readily absorbed. Tom Kando in his influential article "Postmodernism: Old Wine in New Bottles?" explicates this typical Postmodern blurring of the boundary between reality

and its simulacrum in the following lines: "The chief feature of Postmodern society is the increasing blurring of reality and models of reality, of real life and art or fiction, of reality and signs, symbols, ideas, and concepts which refer to reality. This is what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal" (22).

The inter-transference of illusion and reality becomes all the more evident through the description of the intermingling of the two cities of Aglaura; one real and the other imaginary. We come to know from the descriptions of the narrator that there are two manifestations of Aglaura: one, "that is reported" and another "that is visible" (Calvino, *IC* 59). The reality-illusion mix-up is taken to another height when the narrator describes: "In this sense, nothing said of Aglaura is true, and yet these accounts create a solid and compact image of a city . . ." (Calvino, *IC* 59).

Finally, we are informed that the inhabitants of Aglaura conceptualize the city as an invisible one constructed only in language. The narrator therefore describes:

Therefore, the inhabitants still believe they live in an Aglaura which grows only with the name Aglaura and they do not notice the Aglaura that grows on the ground. And even, I who would like to keep the two cities distinct in my memory, can speak only of the one, because the recollection of the other, in the lack of words to fix it, has been lost (Calvino, *IC* 60).

The inability of the narrator to keep two cities (one real and the other imaginary) distinct tells us again about the inseparability of reality and illusion in a Postmodern world.

Towards the concluding portion of Part-4, we come to know that Marco Polo imagines a model city which is "made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions" and finally, he says: "I would achieve cities too probable to be real" (Calvino, *IC* 61). The point that is made clear here is that reaching at a real city, for Marco Polo, is an impossibility.

In the beginning of Part-5 of the book, we come to know that Kublai dreams of a city and Polo tells him that the city is Lalage where the moon, during its journey through the sky, can rest on the "slender pinnacles" (Calvino *IC* 66) of the ever-expanding spires of the city. It can be observed from the description of the city that we first we encounter the real city of Lalage which however, leads to an imaginarily large city having ever-expanding spires on which the moon can rest. Hence, we clearly observe how reality gives way to imagination through the description of the city of Lalage.

The voyage of Marco Polo to the city of Pyrrha in the chapter "Cities & Names.3" adds another dimension to the substitution of reality by imagination. After visiting the real city of Pyrrha, Marco Polo observes that there is a logical connection between the name of the city and its structural pattern. Accordingly, he is able to form different cities like Gettulia, Odile, Euphrasia and Margara in his imagination in a scenario where the structural patterns of the cities has similar logical connections with their respective names. So, Marco polo's real experience of visiting Pyrrha leads towards the generation of

many illusory cities through a logical formula developed from the link between the structure of Pyrrha and its name. This is a clear case of how the very experience of reality cannot be kept in separation from that of illusions.

The description of the city of Adelma is arguably one of the most powerful expositions of the intrusion of illusory perceptions into the world of reality. In Adelma, Marco Polo encounters a series of illusory experiences where he sees his dead kith and kin come to life and appear before him like momentary phantoms in real human faces. Firstly, he encounters an old man "loading a basket of sea-urchins on a cart"—a man who looked like a fisherman whom Polo knew during his childhood and "could no longer be amongst the living" (Calvino *IC* 84). Secondly, Polo traces his father's image in a fever victim who has "yellow eyes and a growth of beard" (Calvino *IC* 84) exactly like his father when he died. What is discernible here is that illusory phantoms from the past keep invading the present even though for a few moments and make us realize that in the Postmodern world the realm of illusion and fantasy can always manifest itself through what we call reality.

The biggest moment of confusion arises when Polo is not able to decide whether Adelma is a real city or only a dream. He says:

I thought: 'If Adelma is a city I am seeing in a dream, where you will encounter the dead, the dream frightens me. If Adelma is a real city, inhabited by living people, I need only continue looking at them and resemblances will dissolve, alien faces will appear, bearing anguish. In either case it is best for me not to insist on staring at them. (Calvino *IC* 84)

The return of the dead into the world of reality through illusory human forms is further ascertained when Polo finds the vegetable vendor to be his grandmother and the vegetable-purchasing girl to be the one who had committed suicide for the sake of love in his village.

Now, we are presented by Polo with a world that contains both the living and the dead and where the dead faces are presented as old forms or masks for the new ones. Polo describes: "You reach a moment in life when, among the people you have known, the dead outnumber the living. And the mind refuses to accept more faces, more expressions: on every new face you encounter, it prints the old forms, for each one it finds the most suitable mask" (Calvino, *IC* 84-5). In this mingled existence where the dead represent the 'illusion' and the living represent the 'real', we come to the realization that 'illusion' is very much a part of the 'real.' Moreover, the fact that the dead outnumber the living further ascertains that probably 'illusion' has overpowered the 'real.'

The illusory world of the dead had captured the city of Adelma so much that Marco Polo feels as if he is meeting people who are known to him, but are dead by now. Polo feels like getting absorbed into the kaleidoscope of eyes, wrinkles and grimaces. He describes:

But I could not take my eyes off them; if I turned my gaze just a little toward the crowd that crammed those narrow streets, I was assailed by unexpected faces, reappearing from faraway, staring at me as if demanding

recognition, as if to recognize me, as if they have already recognized me. Perhaps, for each of them I also resembled someone who was dead. I had barely arrived at Adelma and I was already one of them, I had gone over to their side, absorbed in that kaleidoscope of eyes, wrinkles, grimaces. (Calvino, *IC* 84)

Finally, Polo thinks that he himself belongs to the realm of the dead as he says: "Perhaps Adelma is the city where you arrive dying and where each finds again the people he has known" (Calvino *IC* 85). Polo's final realization pushes him towards an understanding that he has been living in the world of illusions from the very beginning—a world which he had mistakenly thought to be a real one.

At the beginning portion of Part-7 of the book, we find the inter-transference of reality and imagination through the conversation between Kublai and Marco Polo where they change their positions imaginatively from the garden to the cities and from the cities to the garden respectively. First, Kublai tells Polo: "It seems to me you have never moved from this garden" (Calvino, *IC* 93). In answer, Polo explains to him by saying that through concentration and reflection, he finds himself in the emperor's "august presence" at the same time when he would be "moving up a river green with crocodiles or counting the barrels of salted fish being lowered into the hold" (Calvino, *IC* 93). In response, Kublai tells him that he, while "strolling among the porphyry fountains" of his garden, could at the same time be "conquering the lands" which Marco "will have to describe" (Calvino *IC* 93). The point that becomes evident here is that both of them are able to shift positions imaginatively not only through the physical space, but also through the timeline.

In the final analysis, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, through the inter-transference of illusion and reality, becomes a true representative of the convoluted nature of postmodern narrative. The fictional world that Calvino creates in his narrative leaves the reader in an illusory plane where illusion intrudes the realm of reality and vice versa in a way that they become one and indistinguishable. The conversations, debates and recounting of experiences between Kublai and Marco Polo let us know that their perception of the world involves both real and imaginary experiences. So, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is a true example of the thoroughly illusory and confusing nature of the Postmodern condition of existence where an unassuming merger between reality and illusion is duly noticed.

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