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Tourism, Cultural Globalization and Postmodern Travel

Writing: Reading Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities

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Abstract

This essay aims to explore the intricate relationship between tourism, cultural globalization, and travel writing by reading Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* against the background of current debates in this field. Reading Marco's traveling in the empty cityscape as a parable of the nature of touristic behavior, the first part of the essay sets out to provide a critical analysis of tourism as a global phenomenon by investigating the problem of visual consumption and hence cultural commodification in global tourism. The second part contrastingly examines the role tourism plays in the dynamics of change and transformation to culture in a globalized world, in view of the interdependence of the traveling and dwelling of both people and culture as it is manifest in Marco's hyper-traveling in Calvino's invisible cities. The third part discusses the ethics of reading postmodern travel writing by focusing on Calvino's concern with language and representation. Read as a piece of travel writing, Calvino's performative text not only anticipates but interrogates the world of postmodern travels, calling for a reformulation of some accepted assumptions to take account of the complexities of tourism as

part of the process of cultural globalization.

KeyWord: Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities, tourism, cultural globalization, postmodern travel writing

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觀光業、文化全球化與後現代旅遊書寫：
閱讀《看不見的城市》

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摘要

本文擬藉由閱讀卡維諾的小說《看不見的城市》一書，來探討觀光業、文化全球化與旅遊書寫之間錯綜複雜的關係。第一部份從馬可遊歷過程中所見空洞的都市景觀出發，分析全球觀光潮流下所浮現的視覺消費與文化商品化等問題。第二部份則從卡維諾小說中人與文化的游動／定居辯證關係切入，來理解觀光業在全球化情境的文化變異下所扮演的積極角色。第三部份由卡維諾對語言與再現困境的關注，來討論後現代旅遊書寫的閱讀倫理問題。作為一個旅遊書寫的文本，卡維諾的小說不僅呈現後現代旅遊的情境，也對此潮流提出批判，讓我們重新檢視觀光業作為文化全球化的一環所涉及之複雜議題。

關鍵詞： 卡維諾 看不見的城市 觀光業 文化全球化 後現代旅遊書寫

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Introduction

At the dawn of the new millennium, “globalization” has become the new academic buzz word. Tourism is, above all, as Held et al. point out, one of the “most obvious forms of globalization” (1999: 360). The development of tourism as a massive global industry is increasingly perceived as interrelated aspects of the overarching process of globalization. Just as globalization reaches out to others, resulting in the exchange of money, items and information, encouraging trade and communication, so does tourism. In terms of export, the tourist attraction is simply another commodity embedded in a network that spreads overseas. Images, dreams and expectations are sold for future consumption as the media attract the clients. Moreover, as a result of the cultural turn in the social sciences, we now understand the tourist places, spaces and sites not merely as objective physical surfaces but as political and contested socio-cultural constructions.

One of the current orthodoxies within tourism analysis is that the intrusion of commodification associated with the global political economy into ‘other’ cultures leads to their standardization, shallowness and inauthenticity. These tourist- and tourism-related discourses generally convey an idea that there are two broadly opposing types of tourism and tourist places: the vulgar, fun-loving type taking place in contrived sites; and the real, authenticity-seeking type occurring in real and natural settings (Urry 1990; Cohen 1995; Munt 1994). It is further assumed that today there is a general shift from the natural and authentic to the artificial and contrived tourist attractions and places. What is being consumed is amalgam of received cultural categories which include expectations, desires and

wants, ideas of what is important to view and record, to maintain and discard. The dominant approach towards such issues in tourism has largely been derived from Foucauldian notions of the gaze which draws attention to the social and controlled aspects of discourse and representation within modernity. Places are made into sights or sites while being commodified for forms of tourist consumption which involve a visual component.¹ We gaze at what we encounter. And this gaze is as socially organized and systematized as is the gaze of the medic.

The scenario presented above creates a vision of tourism as generative of the non-places of hypermodernity, eroding the innate and specific values of places. These places all seemingly entail the production of standardized experiences for consumers, targeting a mass market and homogenizing the world to produce a generic experience. Tourism is thus associated with the McDonaldisation of travel. However, the process of tourist commodification and consumption is more complex than involving simply the exchange value of commodities. For one thing, tourists are not simply driven in determined causal ways. That is, people are not passive consumers but active agents in the construction of the symbolic economy. Besides, local forms of knowledge are not necessarily corrupted by tourism, which itself can become a resource for creating and maintaining cultural distinctiveness. The notion of the tourist gaze is

¹ The privileging of the visual in tourism appears to parallel the ocularcentrism of Western philosophy. In the history of the West, sight has been typically taken as the noblest of the senses. But in the twentieth century the denigration of the central role of the visual has been developed by many critics (Jay 1993). The critique of the visual is similarly reflected within travel discourse in the ways in which the mere sightseer has come to be universally denigrated, as someone who is necessarily superficial in their appreciation of peoples and places.

thus problematic in that it accords importance to one aspect of the tourist system at the expense of others. In view of this, Borocz comments that although the gaze is an “unremovable part of consumption”, it is only one part (11).

Some recent approaches to tourism analysis thus focus on the interplay between the production and consumption of tourist spaces, emphasizing practices of public/private narrative, the tensions and overlap between them and their relation to the formation of place-identity and self-identity. As part of the process inherent in modern capitalism, tourism has often been conceptualized as a global process involving flows of people, capital, images and cultures (Clifford 1997, Frow 1997, Lanfant 1995). Moreover, if cultures are conceptualized as systems, which continuously borrow and adapt from each other, then a more dynamic and complex picture emerge. Contra the modernist fears of homogenization (MacCannell 1976, Greenwood 1989), contemporary anthropologists of the “global cultural economy” (Appadurai 1990, Hannerz 1996) are finding fluidity and diffusion, disjuncture and difference in what they consider to be a new dynamics of indigenization.

It is against this background that I intend to read intertextually Calvino’s novel (or anti-novel) *Invisible Cities*, which is one of the texts of which Calvino was most satisfied, for in it he had managed to “say the maximum number of things in the smallest number of words” (Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* 71). Indeed, Calvino’s novel could be read at many levels and from different points of view. As a novel based on and rewritten from *The Travels of Marco Polo*, it fits well to be read as a parable of the nature of touristic behavior and cultural globalization. But far from a mere critique of tourist industry,

Marco Polo's recits, like his travels and the cities he visited, are constituted of differences, deferments, apparitions that vanish and return in slightly different forms, traces of sensory stimuli stored in memory, overdetermined symbols of objects seen or imagined, visited or dreamed, hypothesized or depicted on the Protean atlas of Kublai Khan. All of these places are filled with curious and contrary discoveries that the first modern tourist, Marco Polo, ponders with the Khan in an ongoing travelogue, both quietly philosophical and playful.

The first part of the essay focuses on issues such as alienation and falsification in terms of visual consumption involved in global tourism. Touring in Marco's empty cityscape is to be blamed for leading to the erosion of authentic ways of life because it tends to destroy other cultures by turning them into mere spectacles for touristic consumption. The second part contrastingly examines the role tourism plays in the dynamics of change and transformation to culture in a globalized world. In its emphasis on the interplay between tourism, landscape, experiences and identities, and the interdependence of the traveling and dwelling of both people and culture, Calvino's text shows that culture is better conceptualized as dynamic systems, not as collections of self-contained essential characteristics. The third part discusses the ethics of reading postmodern travel writing by focusing on Calvino's concern with language and the problem of representation. As an experiment that shares the semiotician's skepticism of words as fixed values, Calvino's performative text not only plays the role in interrogating the stability of the writing/traveling subject and in re-visioning the space of representation but reminds the readers of their ethical responsibilities in approaching travel narratives which are

inevitably unreliable but potentially inspiring.

Seeing the Site/Sight: Visual Consumption in Empty Cityscape

In Marco's trip to the city Tamara, "Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things" (IC 14)². Tourists to Tamara arrive with their guidebooks and camera in search of signs. Indeed, various commentators have indicated that tourist practices, in the trend of the commercialization of leisure, do not simply entail the purchase of specific goods and services but involve the consumption of signs. As Craik has pointed out, "Observation, witness and hearsay were techniques of the eye and became the new form of travel—sightseeing" (27-8). As "sites" turn into "sights", tourists have constructed what is worth going to 'sightsee' and what images and memories should be brought back. MacCannell regards tourism as an expression of "the semiotics of capitalist production" (1976:19). Places and cultures are instantaneously communicated around the world, both intentionally through place-marketing and more generally through the economy of signs. Culler further argues that tourists are themselves semioticians: "All over the world the unsung armies of semioticians, the tourists, are fanning out in search of signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behaviour, exemplary Oriental scenes, typical American thruways, traditional English pubs" (127). Admittedly, the gaze is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs. Events become

² In the pages that follow, all references to Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (abbreviated to *IC*) will be designated in italics.

sensation sights which mobilize travelers to visit them.

While tourists are attracted to spectacular vision, the typical experience of tourism are usually regarded as superficial, reflecting the unwillingness of the consumer to immerse themselves in the culture other. In distinguishing tourists from what he designates as true cosmopolitans, Hannerz argues that tourism is concerned with the pursuit of home-plus: "Spain is home plus sunshine, Indian is home plus servants, Africa is home plus elephants and tigers" (1990: 241). One of the most important attractions for a visitor to a cultural site is its difference from daily life. Put differently, the essence of tourism is to allow individual to escape from the quotidian. However, periods of residence elsewhere are of a short-term and temporary nature. There is a clear intention to return 'home.' While the tourists have not any intention to go deep into the visited city, the city thus turns to be "the magnet for the eyes and thoughts of those who stay up above" (IC 124). As it was in Phyllis,

At every point the city offers surprises to your view "Happy the man who has Phyllis before his eyes each day and who never ceases seeing the things it contains," you cry, with regret at having to leave the city when you can barely graze it with your glance. But it so happens that, instead, you must stay in Phyllis and spend the rest of your days there. Soon the city fades before your eyes. (IC 91)

In other words, "*for those who pass it without entering it, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it*" (IC 125).

Therefore, for many people the crucial element in a touristic experience is that it should not threaten, or allow them to feel uncomfortably deprived of the comforts of home. As Bauman puts it,

the tourists symbolize “the needs for safety, pleasure, the homely, the cosy” (29). They choose the elements to jump into according to how queer, but also how innocuous, they are. Many visitors demand to be enclosed in an environmental bubble to provide protection from many of the features of the host society. They will do all they can to “take comfort aspects of their local culture with them and limit the dangers of intercultural encounters” (Featherstone 93). Some tourism creates enclaves of ‘tourist only’ space, insulating tourists rather than expanding their experience, cosseting them inside the air-conditioned bus, moving them from airliner to hotel. This mode of tourism is about expanding the space of home rather than visiting the other. A display of spectacle and signs are consumed by viewing from a position of reasonable safety. It’s no wonder that “*however the city may really be . . . you leave Tamara without having discovered it*” (IC 14).

Tourist consumption is not only a sign-driven and home-plus consumption; it is also a media-driven practice. People always travel with a set of expectations derived from various media such as brochures, TV programs, the Internet and the popular genres of travel writing. The spaces of tourism are constructed, more or less consciously, to fulfill such expectation.³ The phrase “see the place before the tourists get there” is a familiar homily to readers of journalistic travel pages. Urry suggests that the ways in which people gaze at sites are in part “determined by the existence of narratives which frame expectations and prescribe what should and should not be gazed at” (Urry 1990: 85). Accordingly, tourists inhabit in a mass-mediated culture in which the prevailing discourse serves as

³ An advertising expert once remarks: “Research told me that what American tourists wanted to see in Britain was history and tradition. So that is what I featured in the advertisements” (qtd. in Fowler 152).

powerful tour guides that can produce ideals, identities, and role models for tourists and establish the boundaries of their gaze. What is even worse, as attempts to inform the potential visitors of what they will see and experience, representations of tourist destination rely on certain culturally based stereotypes and received images. The messages the tourists take away are thus to a certain extent pre-conditioned and conditioned. As such, travelers return from the city of Zirna with the same exotic memories: “*a blind black man shouting in the crowd, a lunatic teetering on a skyscraper’s cornice, a girl walking with a puma on a leash*” (IC 19). The city becomes “*redundant*” (IC 19) because the same stereotypical images and conventional clichés are renewed over and over, sticking deeply in the tourist’s mind.

In order to meet the requirement of selected market needs through media, a tourist sight is usually managed as a special location which is distinguished from everyday life by virtue of its natural, historical or cultural extraordinariness. However, in the face of massive expansion of capitalist commodities, an ever-increasing portion of the world comes to be characterized by the same empty forms—shopping malls, hotel chains, and the like. In the case of tourism, there has been a loss of distinctiveness between places with an increase in forms of tourist attractions, such as theme parks, historic properties, museums and urban heritage. In other words, while many tourist sites have tried to construct themselves as irreducibly extraordinary, people are nevertheless surrounded by an increasingly similar network of signs which are manufactured and remanufactured according to the dictates of the market. These processes appear

homogenizing, as Debord puts it, "Tourism, human circulation considered as consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities, is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal" (168). The tourist space of sign and spectacle is one in which there is no real originality. Jakle calls the eradication of distinctive places and the generation of a standardized landscape as the production of "commonplaces" (3). The commercial touristic sights are unifunctional landscapes which become even more uniform in appearance while large corporations develop chains of look-like and standardized establishment.⁴ Ritzer and Liska further argue that tourist sites had been increasingly "McDisneyized," becoming places in which people seek tourist experiences which are "highly predictable, highly efficient, highly calculable, and highly controlled" (99-100).

The city Trude described in Calvino's text exemplifies certain features of standardization and homogenization of commonplaces. "*If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off*" (IC 128). Despite its tidy suburbs and shops, Trude is a tiresome metropolis whose houses, hotels, and downtown are identical to any other Trude, unequivocally the same in all particulars. Indeed, the reader might easily relate it to any one of a number of drab global cities, bedecked with identical strip malls and fast food restaurants. The traveler thus asks himself:

Why come to Trude? I ask Myself. And I already want to leave. "You can resume your flight whenever you like," they said to me, "but

⁴ A similar scene is represented in *Lolita*, where Humbert Humbert concludes: "We have been everywhere. We have seen nothing" (qtd. in Jakle 198).

you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end. Only the name of the airport changes.” (IC 128)

Tourists wandering in these invisible cities are obsessed with the question: “*outside Penthesilea does an outside exist*” (IC 138)? They are caught in the staged “tourist space” from which there is no exit. Even for places which are seeking to distinguish themselves from each other through generating narratives of a distinctive imagined past, MacCannell observes in them the inauthenticity and superficiality of modern tourism. In the vogue for nostalgia, what has been conserved was considered as the authentic embodiment of the indigenous culture or even the nation. Fascination with heritage and the past results from comparison and contrast against other realities, often modern urban and industrial life:

In Maurilia, the traveler is invited to visit the city and, at the same time, to examine some old postcards that show it as it used to be The magnificence and prosperity of the metropolis Maurilia, when compared to the old, provincial Maurilia, can not compensate for a certain lost grace, which, however, can be appreciated only now in the old postcards, whereas before, when that provincial Maurilia was before one's eyes, one saw absolutely nothing graceful and would see it even less today, if Maurilia had remained unchanged. (IC 30)

Rojek argues that the added value provided by heritage attractions is that they provide a reassuring link to the past for postmodern tourists who are “emigres from the present” (1990: 34). In other words, the heritage represents some kind of security, a point of reference which seems stable and unchanged, even though the modern

tourist site, as the city cited above, no longer has any resemblance at all to the original place. “*And in any case the metropolis has the added attraction that, through what it has become, one can look back with nostalgia at what it was*” (IC 30). The past is thus transformed from being the intrinsic local roots of a place to a palatable slice of nostalgia which fuels a robust heritage and cultural industry in capitalist economies.

Besides, while cultural tourism and cultural components of tourism may revitalize an existing tourism industry and cultural production, such developments can also threaten the culture of the destination and longer term cultural integrity. MacCannell, in his analysis of tourism and modern society refers to “the current structural development of society as being marked by the appearance everywhere of touristic space. This space can be called a ‘stage set’, a ‘tourist setting’, or simply a ‘set’” (1976: 100). MacCannell argues that aspects of the lives of others such as rituals are decontextualised and thus rendered inauthentic and, following from that, indigenous crafts and artifacts become degraded if they are produced not for internal use but for external tourist consumption.⁵

On the other hand, it has recently been argued that some visitors—what Feifer terms “post-tourists”—almost delight in the inauthenticity of the normal tourist experience. Post-tourists find pleasure in the multiplicity of tourist games. They know that there is

⁵ Benjamin’s discussion of the waning of aura helps to contextualize the feelings of skepticism or indifference that we have in much tourist experience. Benjamin’s discussion suggested that the mechanical reproduction of ‘original’ objects fatally corrupts our sense of the authenticity of the object. But as Rojek puts it, Benjamin’s work seriously underestimates the extent to which fragmentation, differentiation and now de-differentiation typify ordinary social condition. See Rojek 1997: 58-61.

no authentic tourist experience, that there are merely a series of games or texts that can be played. These arguments propose that there is a sense in which all cultures are “staged” and inauthentic. Cultures are invented, remade and the elements reorganized. Authenticity in this sense should be understood as a quality of a process rather than an object; it concerns representation and performance. James Clifford asserts that “authenticity is something produced not salvaged” (1988: 250). Likewise, while exposing the form of falsification and alienation in modern tourism, Calvino’s representation of the cities at the same time argues for the need to move away from viewing culture and heritage as a static object, to be evaluated as either real/authentic or ideological, and towards seeing it as an interactive process.

Games, Memories, and Stories: Culture Traveling in Global Tourism

KUBLAI: I do not know when you have had time to visit all the countries you describe to me. It seems to me you have never moved from this garden.

POLO: Everything I see and do assumes meaning in a mental space . . . At the moment when I concentrate and reflect, I find myself again, always, in this garden, at this hour of the evening, in your august presence, though I continue, without a moment’s pause, moving up a river green with crocodiles or counting the barrels of salted fish being lowered into the hold. (IC 103. Calvino’s italics.)

As a virtual or hyper traveler, Marco takes his armchair- travel in

his stream of consciousness and the unedited flow of his thoughts.⁶ Marco travels in a new space created for tourism: in this space, tourists travel in a “world where the only frontiers are in your mind”, in which “being there” is a combination of selective subjects and partial objects (Lury 89). It is a space of the in-between, in which dwelling and traveling are rendered indistinguishable. It is a space of artefacts and flows, or what might be termed “playscape.”⁷ It is also a space in which time-space compression occurs and thus most suitable for the post-tourist who finds it less and less necessary to leave home. Post-tourists are seen as simply playing a series of games; they play at and with touring; they recognize that there is not authentic tourist experience. Marco’s travels span ancient China and modern megalopolises and yet the imaginary cities do not appear on any of the Khan’s maps, nor is it clear if they exist in the past, present, or future because their temporal and spatial locus is in Marco Polo’s fluid consciousness. For him, it is the “eyelids” that separate reality and fiction (*IC* 104). We are repeatedly invited to wonder whether anything of what we read is actually happening, even within the world of the fiction. This is where we may see the collapsing of the supposed dichotomies between real tourism and contrived tourism, and between the real type and the fun type of tourist. The tourists are willing and able to indulge plentifully in authentic experiences with ‘other’ peoples, and at the same time to play with Disneyesque

⁶ Umberto Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986) and Jean Baudrillard’s *America* (1988) are two examples of contemporary travel narratives that play ironically on the perceptions of the virtual or hyper traveler.

⁷ My use of the term “playscape” draws from Appadurai’s (1996) theory of globalization as a set of unequal cultural flows that help construct transnational worlds, where “fantasy and images are an important part of social practices” (Lofgren 93).

experiences of fantasy and fun. There is no longer an either/or situation, but one where the poles of the postmodern continuums are inextricably mixed. In the world cultivated by Calvino, the reader is encouraged to take free-wheeling attitude towards living, to make the most of his aimless sojourn on earth, to travel, to see the sights, and to dream dreams

The postmodern touristic ethos as such refers to the apparent trend characterized by a particularly kaleidoscopic and hedonistic tourist experience and uncompromising consumption. Approaches such as Urry's gaze argument and MacCannell's staged authenticity have yielded insights regarding the social construction of tourist space, yet for post-tourists, they display a tendency to downplay the practical accomplishments of creating meaning, while at the same time overemphasizing the normative and controlling elements involved in tourism production.⁸ Put differently, the deployment of such paradigms cannot account for multiple, different, and even conflicting interpretations of sites/sight. In order to arrive at a more nuanced account of tourism, attention needs to be focused at the same time on the relationship between the production of the gaze or discourse on the one hand, and the practices of consuming on the other, and the contradictions, anomalies and paradoxes that this entails. By looking at the narratives of place, the stories, histories and myths that are associated with people and place, and by acknowledging the

⁸ For instance, Watson and Kopachevsky argue that the tourist as a consumer should be conceptualized as an active agent capable of reflexively organizing experiences into forms of self-identity, rather than being a passive recipient at the end of the commodity chain. They thus note that MacCannell's formulations can only result in an "overgeneralized view that the modern tourist is a metaphor for the shallowness and inauthenticity that are endemic in . . . modern life" (645).

complexities involved in the ways in which people actively engage with their environment, together with the tensions between expectations and realization, we can arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of the production and consumption of tourist spaces.

First of all, a concern with the interdependence of the traveling and dwelling of both people and culture and the importance of their mutual interrelationship is needed for an understanding of the nature of contemporary tourism. Tourism has been traditionally considered in terms of people traveling to places as cultures in a mapped space. This is an understanding of cultures as situated in places. In the last few years, however, there has been an increased interest in “traveling cultures.” One of the most influential critiques of the earlier approaches is Clifford’s problematization of the fixity of the opposition between dwelling and traveling. Clifford advocates a concern with specific dynamics of dwelling/traveling, of passing through-ness, of borders and criss-crossings. In this sense, culture should be seen as dynamic; hence a society that does not take on broad new ideas, or adapt to changing global conditions, is in danger of cultural retrocession. The world will eventually forget the city which “*is forced to remain always the same,*” like Zora, the city Marco is unable to visit again because it “*has languished, disintegrated, disappeared*” (IC 16). Therefore it is problematic to claim that there is a universal category of authenticity composed of innate, essential cultural attributes. Instead, authenticity needs to be seen as a category that is created and recreated in contingent circumstances. As Hannerz sums it up, culture is “fitted to new circumstances” (1996: 51).

In a world where people and places become objectified for the purposes of the global, tourism is inevitably seen as an all pervading

and corrosive destroyer of cultures. Yet the diversity of tourism should not be ignored and it can be adequately explored by adopting an approach that focuses on the dynamic process of localization and globalization, of production and reception. As is the case in the city Leandra, “roots” and “routes” are coexistent and subject to change:⁹

Gods of two species protect the city of Leandra The true essence of Leandra is the subject of endless debate. The Penates believe they are the city's soul, even if they arrived last year; and they believe they take Leandra with them when they emigrate. The Lares consider the Penates temporary guests, importunate, intrusive If you listen carefully, especially at night, you can hear them in the houses of Leandra, murmuring steadily, interrupting one another, huffing, bantering, amid ironic, strifled laughter. (IC 78-9)

Hence cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things.

What is more, in the process of “glocalization,” neither is space, as an abstract concept, nor place, as specific socialized manifestations, an empty container.¹⁰ Place is usually understood in everyday language to be nothing other than a particular locality. It is used in this way in relation to tourism which is assumed to be ‘place- based’. However,

⁹ Tomlinson argues that, while stasis and purity of culture no longer hold, simply inverting the way that views culture as essential qualities of people or places to one that views culture as nomadic and rootless does not solve the problem. It is not a matter of replacing “roots” with “routes” but seeing both as being subject to change through the processes of globalization (Tomlinson 29).

¹⁰ The term “glocalization” derives from Ronald Robertson’s contention that contemporary globalization in its most general sense is a form of institutionalization of the two-fold process involving “the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism” (1991: 77).

place is more than mere locality or geographic reference. All places include experiences, memories, histories, language and thoughts. “As *this wave from memories flows in, the city* 【Zaira】 *soaks it up like a sponge and expands*” (IC 10-11). Therefore, places are the medium within which a more or less defined set of activities takes place which consist of both material and metaphorical elements. Place is thus derived from the particular way that localities are described and narrated in time and space. That is, all places are simultaneously spatial, temporal and cultural. Accordingly, a tourist destination cannot be understood as a place without people being oriented in a particular location and engaging sensuously with its particular physical attributes to build personal and temporal narratives.

In addition, touristic sites are not uniformly read and passively accepted by visitors. Visitors frame and interpret the visit in ways not expected or planned by its designers. Gable and Handler (2000), in their analysis of the heritage museum at Colonial Williamsburg, note that the production of memory among the visitors is not the simple acceptance of one dominant ‘reading’, but instead is produced through a complex process of interaction. Meethan further indicates that experiences of travel involve the active engagement of people in “memory work” (7).¹¹ “And you know that in the long journey ahead of you, you start summoning up your memories one by one . . . on your return from Euphemia, the city where memory is traded at every solstice and at every equino” (IC 36-7). To certain extent, Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* becomes a magnificent exploration in memory and

¹¹ Meethan here further relates traveling experience to the negotiation of life course and identity: “Every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a narratable self—immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory” (Cavareno 33).

dream-work. In his narration of all the cities with wonderfully arcane feminine names, Marco is simply narrating his memories of the same city— Venice, which is lost, remembered, and perhaps recaptured. When the Great Khan starts to recognize the similarities, Marco Polo suggests that “*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*” (IC 44).

Accordingly, tourism as a practice involves not just gazing and viewing. It is also about games, memories, and most importantly, storytelling. Tourist destinations are like volumes with written pages, like stories told by imaginative and well-travelled tellers. In discussing the existence of the Khan's empire, Jeannet holds that the cities live in Marco Polo's narration: “Since there are only two characters, and no plot at all, the cities are also the only adventure” (32). As a storyteller, Marco's task is to live and relive all the real and imagined cities, and to detect their intimate logic within their surprising diversity. Yet in contrast to traditional appeal to the “authenticity standard”—i.e., to envision the possibility of “new” and “genuine” experience and to present the destinations as ontologically secure—Marco's narratives more often than not invite a healthy skepticism from the reader. His rhetoric of travel is somehow associated with the “disruptive” discourses of postmodernism with such relativizing features as foregrounding the instability of the human (traveling) subject and mingling the world of reality and textuality.¹²

¹² Musarra claims that Calvino's later works are postmodern because he uses a “series of devices,” which include the deferral of responsibility from writer to reader,

While revealing the delights in “postmodern possibilities” in the dissemination of places and culture, this novel best expresses the antithetical position of postmodernism by illustrating at the same time anxieties associated with it. In its insistence on the inseparability of travel and writing, Calvino’s text nevertheless implies that travel narratives are extremely unreliable and that they can never capture a travel site. In an attempt to delineate readers’ responsibility in the face of (postmodern) travel narratives, I set out to explore in the following section Calvino’s concern with the inadequacy of language by focusing on the self-reflexive construction of the writing/traveling subject and the re-visioning of the space of representation.

Ethics of Reading Travel Writing

Travelers, or more specifically travel writers, from Herodotus to Darwin had made it their business to bring back facts and true stories for their readers. They continue by and large to assume stable experiential identities, and to present their destinations as securely guaranteed by geography and history. A search for authenticity, wholeness, and meaning often drives their journeys as it did for travel writers in the past. Yet, beginning with the self-doubts of the (post)modern period, the efficacy of knowing the world by this method of “us and them,” “true and false,” “right and wrong,” is scrutinized and hotly debated. The understanding that authenticity is not a stable entity, but a predicament of culture, is most often the final realization of most recent travel writing. Eco’s and Baudrillard’s fascination with the possibility of Absolute Fakery restates a preoccupation of travel

self-reflexivity and metafictionality within ‘framing’ narratives (137-38).

writing with the manufacture of illusions that test the boundaries of the real. Travel writing, after all, is a pseudoscience of observation; inhabiting the indeterminate area between fact and fable, history and myth, it has thrived on a diet of half-truths, rumors, mysteries, and illusions.

While Eco and Baudrillard see hyperrealism as essence of travel writing, a more fruitful approach is that which sees travel writing as occupying a space of discursive conflict relevant to the traveling and writing subject. In other words, as 'fictions of factual representation,' travel narratives claim validity by referring to a highly personal vision. Hence travel writing charts the tension between the writers' compulsion to report the world they see and their often repressed desire to make the world conform to their preconception of it. One source of anxiety here is the awareness of complicity; travel writers obviously participate in the tourist industry they claim to scorn. Under the acute tension, travel narratives, as well as their writers, tend to conceal as much as they reveal. Being aware that travel literature can recapitulate a (travel) site, but can never capture it, Marco points to the ambivalent, shifting valences of words and things that are so germane to travel writing.

So, if I wished to describe Aglaura to you, sticking to what I personally saw and experienced, I should have to tell you that it is a colorless city, without character, planted there at random. But this would not be true, either You would like to say what it is, but everything previously said of Aglaura imprisons your words and obliges you to repeat rather than say. (IC 67-8)

In his description of Livia, Marco further reminds the reader that

“the city should never be confused with the words that describe it, even though there might be a connection between the two” (IC 61).

Indeed, the first sentence in *Invisible Cities* indicates that the fictionalized protagonist/narrator Marco Polo is utterly unreliable: “Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions” (IC 5; Calvino’s italics). In the thirteenth-century travel narrative—*The Travels of Marco Polo*—Marco Polo, the diplomat, offered the world narratives of his voyage. While much of *Travels* is written in the first person, the extent to which the personality of the narrator emerges is minimal. His “I” is another medieval authority and Marco Polo is like an overbearing guide pointing here and there at the things he sees, pushing the reader along with his very direct and impersonal prose. On the contrary, Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* reflects on its own status as a text on travel, insisting on the irreducibility of cities. The cities are invisible in as much as they are imaginary both to Marco and the emperor, who readily acknowledges that the Venetian is presenting him “truly a journey through memory”; that although his accounts are “most precise and detailed”, his “words and actions are only imagined,” and he is just “smuggling moods, states of grace, elegies” (IC 98; Calvino’s italics). Self-reflexivity and instability, both as theme and style, offer the writer a way to show the effects of his or her presence in a foreign country and to expose the arbitrariness of truth and the absence of norms. For if travelers are dependent on a sense of stable identity from which to experience and interpret difference, they also tend to claim another, rather special identity as travelers: one that is experientially open and interpretively flexible, generous. It is in this sense that Chambers has described postmodern, metropolitan travel as

experience of “the dislocation of the intellectual subject—and his the gender is deliberate—mastery of the word/world” (95).

The historical Marco Polo describes his travels and in so doing he reveals (makes visible) a world hitherto relatively unknown (invisible) to the West. However, while purporting to write a book for the benefit of those Europeans who could not see the wide world with their own eyes, Marco Polo merely confirms his readers' terror and resistance to wilderness and supports their own world view.¹³ It is a good example of the tendency of all travelers until very recently to carry with them the unexamined values and norms of their own culture and to judge foreign cultures in light of those habits of belief, thus establishing a kind of control over them. On the other hand, in Calvino's self-reflexive text, the West has been forced to listen:

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 reconstructed it in other ways, substituting components, shifting them, inverting them.

Marco, meanwhile, continued reporting his journey, but the emperor was no longer listening. Kublai interrupted him: “From now on I shall describe the cities and you will tell me if they exist and are as I have conceived them.” (IC 43. Calvino's italics)

As an interlocutor, Kublai Khan speaks back and disputes the claims of what were once assumed to be the universal cultural centers of the world. Like Kublai Khan, we readers are cultivated not to

¹³ Marco Polo's book is full of the wonders and grotesque beings that his world had come to expect from the mysterious East. Of the inhabitants of Zanzibar he reports: “They are quite black and go about completely naked but for a loin-cloth. Their hair is so curly that they can only comb it when it is wet Anyone meeting them in another country would mistake them for devils” (175).

necessarily believe everything that Marco Polo describes.

Calvino's preoccupation with self-reflexive construction of the writing/traveling subject derives mainly from his distrust of language. Realizing that in order to understand Hypatia's language he has to rid himself of the images that in the past had announced to him the things he sought, Marco nonetheless admits finally that "*there is no language without deceit*" (IC 48). Upon being told to begin each tale with a full description of Venice, Marco replies that he is afraid of losing it all at once if he speaks of it—"Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased" (IC 87). Marco even worries that by speaking of other cities he "*has already lost it, little by little*" (IC 87). The fear of losing the ideal city by speaking of it reminds us of Calvino's observation, regarding Cervantes' great novel, that "literary inventions are impressed on our memories by their verbal implications rather than by their actual words" (Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* 17). At the core of Calvino's questions is the structuralist/semiotic notion that the relation between words (signifier) and things/ideas (signifieds) in mind when words are used is vague and circumstantial. This uncertainty creates a "play" of language that readers are compelled to confront. Meaning, which is neither constant nor precise, is to be found not in words but between words; not in things but between things. Meaning thus results from differential relations. Signs, things, and ideas are meaningful only in relation to each other because in language there is only difference.

Calvino's reader might recall here the effect of those travel accounts that lead from one locale to another, differentiating successive destinations through comparison and contrast, and often inducing a kind of exhaustion and even exasperation, not unlike that brought on by

the Khan's responses to Polo. The unknowable individual cities, in relation to the City as a systemic entity (Venice), are like Saussure's parole in relation to langue: "*each man bears in his mind a city made up only of differences, a city without figures and without form, and the individual cities fill it up*" (IC 34). The cities could be regarded as constellations of signs that reduplicate, rearrange, and even project their own mirror and shadow systems. Like a literary text in Barthes's sense, Calvino's invisible cities remain in a state of production, have no fixed signifieds, and exist in the movement of discourse.

Calvino's poetics thus shows that he loves and distrusts and displaces language, driving it to its limits. It would be a mistake then not to take seriously his conviction that language is often a form of failure rather than success. Calvino's fiction, with its dazzled and dazzling allusions to the denser meanings of the visible world, is a monument to one of literature's most important half-truths: when you write, you always write the wrong book. Calvino's ambivalence toward language is clearly manifest in Marco Polo and Kublai Kahn's conversation. At first, the Venetian is unable to speak the Khan's language, and can recount his travels in the empire only with gestures, leaps, and cries, and by exhibiting various objects he has brought back with him. "*The Great Khan deciphered the signs, but the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain*" (IC 21). However, as Marco gradually masters the Tartar idiom, he and the Great Khan experience the shift from gestures to words chiefly as a loss: "*Obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused*" (IC 22). Words are more precise, of course, "*more useful*

than objects or gestures in listing the most important things of every province and city,” but Marco finds he can’t put the daily life of those places into words, and goes back to “*gestures, grimaces, glances*” (IC 39).

However, Calvino’s (or Marco’s) sense of failure in representation is to certain extent substantial and willed, a discreet and calculated punctuation of silence. Throughout his career, Calvino always teases with representations of reality: “Different levels of reality also exist in literature; in fact literature rests precisely on the distinction among various levels, and would be unthinkable without an awareness of this distinction” (Calvino, *The Use of Literature* 101). It is in the writer’s “use of the words,” which is “a perpetual adjustment to their infinite variety” that different levels of reality are shown (Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* 26). Put differently, in the crevices between words, there exists an unspoken (Derridian/Lacanian) “space” reserved just for representation. In Marco’s varying representations of the archetypal city, we thus witness the dissemination of “the places possible” (Hutnyk 122) which does not de-materialize place, but leads to mixed up, imbricated relationships between objects, imagination and signs. For Calvino, it is in this unlimited expanse that man’s ultimate freedom lies. Just as the space produced by postmodern is inevitably overdetermined, travel narratives tend to produce semiotic spaces in which we can begin to refine, revise, and deconstruct the clichés that have reduced zones of great historical range and cultural complexity to a clutch of ‘instant’ images and one-dimensional stereotypes.¹⁴

¹⁴ In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale uses ‘zones’ to denote the ontological scrambling that he sees as characteristic of postmodernism. In

Most importantly, the responsibility for making meaning lies not only in the writer but in the reader. Reading, therefore, is not only a structuring activity but a form of writing or rewriting: "Once we have dismantled and reassembled the process of literary composition, the decisive moment of literary life will be that of reading" (Calvino, *The Use of Literature* 15). For him, the reader is a participant who by reading changes the text. Hence, each city, like a text, has plural meanings because it involves the reader in the process of producing meaning. Besides, the reader is imposed the responsibility to read carefully, which is manifest in Marco's reading of the chessboard. What Marco Polo sees in the chessboard is a presence filled with other presences, the past of the present case, what was there (here) before the chessboard became what it now is. "*The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai*" (IC 132). Calvino does not offer us easy answers on how to read and write; instead, he playfully exposes the dichotomy that lies at the core of the postmodern controversy: Do we want to continue to engage in the mere pleasure of reading as we know it, trusting the crafty author with our textual satisfaction? Or do we opt for the bold journey to where no one has gone before, leaving behind the securities as well as the confinements of tradition? In fact, in the frame tales the Khan functions as the reader of a text as he asks questions, discusses, contradicts, and tries to find a pattern that would allow him to make sense out of Marco's (the writer's) imaginative descriptions concerning

postmodernist fictions, according to McHale, geographical space is continually reconstructed. The space produced by such fictions is inevitably overdetermined: it needs to be seen in ideological and mythical, rather than merely geographical terms (47).

his own empire. Calvino's intent as a writer is to open up his text for the reader the way Marco Polo the explorer opened up the continent of the Asia for European society, and for the Khan as well.

With the global spread of tourism, travel writing—like travel itself—has been made available to a wider audience. The reader is at the same time confronted with the symbiotic relation between travel and travel account. Contemporary travel writing has invoked a number of late-capitalist features, among which commodification is the most notable one. Even those books that seek to disrupt the flow of the market invariably show their complicity with it. Similarly, the reader, like travel writers, inevitably participate in global tourism: they contribute, if indirectly, to both its benefits and its worst excesses. Therefore, while travel writing is a significant and effective medium for the global circulation of cultural information as well as a useful vehicle of cultural-perception, it is the reader's task to treat travel narrative as culturally biased texts and ideologically bounded discourse instead of documents of pure fact.

It does not mean that travel writing should be dismissed for its inauthenticity and disorientation. What should be acknowledged is that travel writing, as well as travel, is a potentially rich way of "knowing" the world: it mediates knowledges that are all in some sense "disciplinary" through a special kind of lived experience; and these knowledges in turn mediate the personal experience of travel. Located in an age of depletion and exhaustion, Calvino's cities index the abstracting and reduplicative tendencies of travel description. Travel becomes primarily a textual activity. Nonetheless, while hyperrealism and virtuality prove useful in foregrounding incongruity and anomaly, insistence on the fake and the primacy of the perfect

surface will subvert the travel book's project to provide a sense of experiential depth.

Concerning this, Calvino is, unlike most avant-garde faction, bent on recuperating the real and positive components of a popular and indigenous tradition displaced by the ruling class for its own purposes of dominance. He is, in other words, very careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water, not to further alienate from their creative sources the real addressees of his message. Hence *Invisible Cities* ends amiably when Marco Polo insists that the inferno need not be the last landing place, if only we “*seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space*” (IC 165; my emphasis). The message is that we readers must be constantly vigilant and apprehensive in order to distinguish between the type of writing that is little more than a promiscuous mixture, and the one that subtly modulates between different literary registers and cultural resources, and to distinguish the type of writing that serves as an agent of (Western) cultural domination, and the one that might be seen as transgressive, an instrument of self-critique.

Conclusion

Calvino once remarks that *Invisible Cities* is the book “that is most finished and perfect” because in it he “built up a many-faceted structure in which each brief text is close to the others in a series that does not imply logical sequence or a hierarchy, but a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple, ramified conclusions”

(Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* 72). In so doing, Calvino poses many questions and seldom provides any answers. Calvino offers no answers because in today's world the solutions have become the problems. By way of literary experimentation, Calvino continuously refashioned himself as he explores ways of examining the human condition. He vigorously criticized his own work, and the virtuosity of his experimentation is inextricably linked to this self-criticism. For him, McLaughlin argues that the "critic's first job, in Calvino's own words, is to discern the different layers of writing beneath the uniform surface of art".

Hence in my reading of this novel as a piece of travel writing, I've sought to discern the different layers of his writing, from the revisionings of space, site, and destination to various self-reflexive constructions of the traveling subject. In so doing, this essay reflects and reflects on the concurrent debates that have occurred in contemporary tourism study field. These involve conceptualizing tourism not only as irreducibly associated with the production and consumption of tourist site/sight but as a global process mediated at various levels, from the macro level of a global tourist system to the micro level of lived experience. As has been obviously revealed, the milieu surrounding tourism, globalization and culture is complicated and needs to be considered as dynamic systems of change and interaction. Therefore, we can no longer think of tourism in simplistic terms as either being a blessing or a curse; rather, tourism is one element that needs to be dealt with, perhaps to be resisted, perhaps to be incorporated, perhaps to be changed and modified in the process.

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