Invisible cities: utopian spaces or imaginary places?

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Abstract: Like Raphael Hythloday, Marco Polo narrated his journey to Kublai Khan, the Emperor of the Tartars, presenting a catalogue of places and a cartography of 55 cities. The magic realism of Italo Calvino, the lush and synaesthetic descriptions in Invisible Cities (1972) construct a symbolic imaginarius of utopian paradigms. The taxonomy of all these cities sheds light on their relationship to man: cities and memory, cities and desire, cities and signs, cities and eyes, cities and names, cities and the dead, cities and the sky, continuous cities and trading cities. Some of them have an indivisible existence whilst others contain contradictions, some are more ethereal and others much more tangible, but all of them are real in the imagination and only inhabit an abstract space. Could we define them as “non-places” or “good-places”? Their geometries are different and whilst some represent what is necessary but does not exist yet, others represent what is potentially imaginable and credible but not achievable: could this be a coherent definition of utopia? Are there cities that are too believable to be true? This article...
aims to reconstruct the main lines of Utopia’s genealogy, regarding the socio-political desire for the ideal state, from Plato to Italo Calvino, answering these two main questions: are ideal cities utopian spaces or imaginary places? Does utopia therefore fail where reality begins?

Keywords: magic realism, boundaries and limits, utopian city, imagination

I UTOPIAN AIDS AND THEIR SCOPE

0.1. THE MAGIC REALISM OF INVISIBILITY

The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai; Polo was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows… (CALVINO, 1974, p. 132)

Italo Calvino presents a catalogue of places, a cartography of fifty-five invisible cities, constructing a symbolic imaginarium of utopian paradigms described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan, the Emperor of the Tartars and all these descriptions are intertwined by eighteen dialogues between both. Six specific groups of critics can be identified, distinguished by their methodology and overall perspective on Calvino’s work: the first usually assumes that philosophy is the fundamental aspect of his work; the second emphasises the relationship established with the reader and his horizon of expectations from a rhetorical and aesthetic point of view, exploring the ekphrastic nature of language; the third typically analyses him as a unique literary figure, highlighting
the features of magic realism from a poetic point of view; the fourth explores a nexus of values mainly concerned with morality and the ethics of social interactions; the fifth reflects on the semantic and pragmatic evolution of the term, with reference to the ambiguity of "outopia" and "eutopia"; finally, the sixth group discusses the political potential of the ideal state from a historical point of view, ranging from Plato and Aristotle to More’s model of justice and his influence on Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Tomasso Campanella, Guillaume Budé, Thomas Lupset, Ulrich Von Hutten, Lorenzo Valla, Boccaccio, Rabelais and Erasmus during the Renaissance, but also shedding light on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, a thoroughgoing analysis of Calvino’s utopia would involve an interdisciplinary approach, since utopia itself displays an enormous range of configurations and is an intriguing polysemic subject that contains both ideological and literary aspects.

In *Invisible Cities*, accordingly Ernst Bloch (1988), the potential of utopia is determined by its anticipatory illumination and illusion, as an image through which we gain a sense of truth in reality. Therefore, if we want to answer the question are invisible cities utopian spaces or imaginary places this must involve several key concepts and their hyponymic hierarchy: desire, myth, truth versus verisimilitude, memory, symbol, scheme, fruitfulness, power and humanism. Undoubtedly, *Invisible Cities* emerged from Calvino’s desire to write about ideal cities and ideal human relations, for this reason, the cities themselves are not simply sad or blissful, utopian or dystopian, disconnected from human desires and their shadows, their social networks and aspirations. The author reveals