The Confines and Expression of Language in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Vince Jia-lin Lu

Abstract

Novel writing and reading have been radically challenged in various aspects related to the development of postmodernism.   The semiotic and deconstructive strategies in the fiction provide an artistic work.   For the reader, the literary work is a piece of art, employing multiple representations and representationality as a "collage.[1]"

The paper attempts to analyze how Italo Calvino employs Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstructive stratagems to produce an aesthetic construct and how he deals with the medium of language and the problem of representation through the dialogues between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo in *Invisible City*.

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[1] Fredric R, Jameson argues that pastiche is the appropriate mode of postmodern culture.   The properties are that materials can be collaged, remixed, reproduced and represented into another realm of a fresh form, like collage.

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伊塔羅‧卡爾維諾的《隱形城市》中
受限語言之展現

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摘 要

　　小說之閱讀與書寫方式一直遭受到激進攻擊，然不可否認的或多或少是受到後現代主義發展有關。小說本體也在借用符號學與解構策略中成為一新的藝術。對我們讀者而言，文學作品就像是一件藝術品。此作品並藉由再湊合、再製造、與再呈現而成為新的形式，就像是「雜匯[1]」一般!

　　本論文主要探討伊塔羅‧卡爾維諾在《隱形城市》之中忽必烈汗和馬可波羅對話過程，並運用拉崗之心理分析以及後現代解構策略，來體現吾人欲以語言為媒介再現真實不足之企圖。

關鍵詞：後現代主義、後設小說、拉崗心理分析、結構/解構主義、符號學。

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In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino deliberately juxtaposes different chronotopes (spatial and temporal).   On the one hand, there is Calvino's development of the malfunction; on the other, his literary skill in exposing the frame-break.   In the traditional literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one concrete whole.   Time becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.   It is precisely the spatial and temporal that provide the ground essential for the representability of events.   Thus, the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation.   However, in *Invisible City*, Calvino strategically employs the malfunction, the alternation of frame and frame-break to deconstruct the center for concretizing representation.   In 1271, 17-year-old Marco Polo traveled from Venice to meet the great ruler of the East, Kublai Khan.   When Marco Polo returned 25 years later, he wrote *The Book of Marco Polo*.   In *Invisible City*, Kublai Khan has sensed the end of his empire coming soon.   Marco Polo diverts the emperor with tales of the cities he has seen in his travels around the empire; however, in the novel we find some of our contemporary modern events are abruptly referred to.   We can find many examples in the novel.   In the dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, Kublai Khan sometimes deliberately reminds readers to question our traditional reading attitude.   Kublai says: "Perhaps this dialogue of ours is taking place between beggars nicknamed Kublai Khan and Marco Polo; as they sift through a rubbish heap, piling up rusted flotsam, scraps of cloth, wastepaper, while drunk on the few sips of bad wine, they see all the treasure of the East shine around them" (104).   Obviously this is a self-reflexive dialogue.   According to Patricia Waugh, it brings the reader up against a "paradoxical realization" (33).   Normally we appreciate novels because of our suspension of disbelief.   We know that what we are reading is not real, but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment.   So, when self-reflexive dialogue is shown in the novel, it exposes the gap between reality and unreality which results in a paradoxical realization.   It is another way of strategically using the malfunction of language.   Calvino employs intertextuality and self-reflexive dialogues in this novel.   The effect of this is not to reinforce our sense of a continuous reality but split it open, to expose the levels of illusion" (33).   So, we are forced to recall that the world of the fictional work can never be the "real" world of our own experience.   The malfunction of the frame-break lays the gap between fiction and reality bare.   These are most important meta-fictional devices that Calvino uses in his *Invisible Cities*.

As Albert Sbragia points out, "the all-powerful despot Kublai Khan yearns for Marco Polo to provide him with the tracery of a pattern that will give meaning to the formless ruin of his empire" (292).   Calvino uses the italic passages between Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan to aid the reader in figuring out the meanings behind Marco Polo's depictions of the cities.   At first, when Marco Polo newly arrives in the empire, he doesn't know the languages of the Levant.   He can express himself only by drawing objects from his baggage and pointing to them with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder or of horror, imitating the bay of the jackal, the boot of the owl.   His communicative media is his body posture.   Kublai Khan may not know what Marco Polo is expressing exactly.   The connections between one element of the story and another are not always obvious to Kublai Khan.   To Kublai Khan, everything could have various meanings.   Kublai Khan tries to decipher Marco Polo's means of expression but the meaning remains unlimited.   Marco Polo's expressive ways are quite dynamic, so no matter how difficult it is for Kublai Khan to decipher the real meaning, he enjoys it quite a lot.   We can see this clearly in the passage, "In the Khan's mind the empire was reflected in a desert of labile and interchangeable date, like grains of sand, from which there appeared, for each city and province, the figures evoked by the Venetian's logographs" (22).

As time goes by, Marco Polo learns the Tartar language.   He begins to master all kinds of idioms and tribal dialects, so his accounts become more and more precise and punctual.   Or we can say that Marco Polo has fallen into the trap of stable language structure step by step.   When he describes issues, words begin to replace objects and gestures in Marco Polo's tales.   We can see the procession which he accepts this language structure step by step: first exclamations, isolated nouns, dry verbs, then phrases, ramified and leafy discourses, metaphors, and tropes (38).   Here, each signifier begins to refer to another fixed signified.   He can detail the Kublai Khan's wish and there is less and less question or curiosity which his words don't satisfy.   But when Marco Polo gets control of the Tartar language totally and can use the most precise words to describe cities, Kublai Khan becomes unsatisfied.   Why?   In my view, it is because the dynamic and creative meaning of the invisible cities has been confined by a stable symbolic system of language[1].

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[1] According to Beno Weiss, Carvino is pointing to Barthe's distinction between a readerly text and a writerly text.   In the first, the transition between signifer and signified is obvious and predetermined. In the second, however, readers must participate and be aware of the interrelationship writing / reading; furthermore, they must also be aware of the nature of language itself and the interplay of signs.

Just as Marco Polo says, "Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased . . . Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it.   Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little" (87).   Jacques Ehrmann in his famous article "The Death of Literature" relates that, "[w]hether it be past or present, the meaning remains a false meaning; we are setting out on a closed road.   We are therefore living in the error (and the wandering) of deciphering signs" (250).   So we can consequently see this situation which follows:

But you would have said communication between them was less happy than in the past: to be sure, words were more useful than objects and gestures in listing the most important things of every province and city-monuments, markets, costumes, fauna and flora--and yet when Polo began to talk about how life must be in those places, day after day, words failed him. (39)

So far as Saussure is concerned, this is a symbolic world (particularly in a linguistic way) and he regards symbols as signifiers that exist in fixed relationships to signified objects.   They have form, meaning, and utility relative to other symbols in a social system. Because of this, symbols represent.   That is, they form proxies for the things which they symbolize.   By symbolizing, true meaning exists.   In other words, meaning derives from the stable referring structurality of signifying.   We can decode Marco Polo's steps in entering the Tartar language according to Lacan's psychoanalysis.   Lacan has divided the process by which we go into this signifying world into three steps: the pre-mirror stage, mirror stage, and symbolic world.   When we have developed our knowledge of the symbolic world, we are immersed embedded in one stable system.   In this system, language is no longer fluid.   Each word seems so rigid there, just like Marco Polo's accepting and appropriating the language.   No wonder Kublai Khan is not interested in Marco Polo's stories any more and finds 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" (43). Consequently, "day after day, evening after evening, words failed him, and little by little, he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces, glances" (39).

When Marco Polo continues reporting his journey, Kublai Khan is no longer listening. Kublai Khan finds that there is something wrong with the way Marco Polo relating his stories.   Since Marco Polo has learned Tartar language to describe invisible cities, Kublai Khan tries to find another way for Marco Polo to use.   Kublai Khan says, "From now on I shall describe the cities and you will tell me if they exist and are as I have conceived them" (43).   He also says, "I have constructed in my mind a model city from which all possible

cities can be deduced" (69).   Kublai Khan tries to transcend the limitation of language; however, Marco Polo's answer seems to declare he has the same power to create a model city from which he deduces all the others but still fails to transcend or escape from this disgusting structurality of language!!   Marco Polo says, "I have also thought of a model city from which I deduce all the others . . . . But I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit" (69).   However, Kublai Khan never succumbs to this.   He tries another way to make Marco Polo tell his city stories.   One day, returning from his last mission, Marco Polo finds Kublai Khan awaiting him; seated at a chessboard, he invites Marco Polo to sit opposite him and describe, with the help only of the chessmen, the cities he has visited. We know that no matter whether it is a set of chess or a chessboard, it is a man-made structure.   Each chess piece is just like one signifier which refers to some other arbitrary signified.   It's only another structure generated from a language structure.   Kublai Khan's failure can be predicted from the narration that "each game ends in a gain or loss: but of what?   What were the true stakes? . . . The empire's multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes.   It was reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness" (123).   Kublai Khan's search for a new way for Marco Polo to describe his invisible cities reveals an embarrassing situation in which they want to get rid of the confines of language but cannot help accept this media desperately.   That is, without a structure, they can not deconstruct the structurality.   They are ambivalent, contradictory counterparts.   The most obvious situation is as follows, "Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: Why do you speak to me of the stones?   It is only the arch that matters to me.   Polo answers: Without stones there is no arch" (82).

Here, Kublai Khan wants to get the whole vision of the arch without mention the structural elements of stones.   However, he is refuted by Marco Polo immediately.

Can we conclude that it's the death of language?   Can't we do anything to prevent from it?   In my opinion, living language never dies.   Just as John Barth has said, "artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work" (205).   So far as Derrida is concerned, fixed relationships between signifying symbols and signified objects are nothing but trash. Meaning is produced through linguistic differences, and the linguistic system has an infinite capacity to produce differences.   The linguistic system is not simply that words are arbitrary, but that there is no cosmic rule forcing us to stay within the boundaries of the terms we inherit within any particular field of discourse.   Language, in fact, with its

infinite capacity to generate more and more differences, provides the way to break beyond the established boundaries and think in new, broader, and open ways.   Italo Calvino challenges the stability of language, and he also tries to overturn and make it a dynamic one. Now, let's see how he recuperates the so-called stable language.

Calvino deliberately sets his setting in a twilight, dream-like place.   Why does he put more emphasis on dream-like narration?   Calvino just wants to get rid of the man-made symbolic order.   According to Ragland Sullivan, "Lacan has called the first six months of human life the pre-mirror stage and describes it as a period in which an infant experiences its body as fragmented parts and images.   During this time, the infant has no sense of being a totality or an individual unit, because pre-maturation at birth marks human babies as uncoordinated and physically helpless" (17).   Obviously the setting of *Invisible Cities* belongs to Lacan's pre-mirror stage.   The language of the pre-mirror stage is undifferentated.   It is also the most fluid language.   This language of relational discordance eschews man-made signifiers in the real world.   No wonder, when we read this novel, we felt free when we were brainstorming.   We can no longer tell which are dialogues between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, dialogues between Calvino and his readers, or dialogues between other and ourselves because everything is so dream-like that we seem to be lost in the language funhouse!!

Throughout the work, some of our even modern contemporary events are referred to. For example:

When the camel driver sees, at the horizon of the tableland, the pinnacles of the skyscrapers come into view, the radar antennae   (17)   And rings for children's games, cable cars, chandeliers, pots with trailing plants.   (75)   If, dissatisfied with the answers, someone puts his eye to a crack in a fence, he sees cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffoldings that embrace other scaffoldings, beams that prop up other beams.   (127)

What will happen?   According to Patricia Waugh, "This brings the reader up against the paradoxical realization that normally we can read novels only because of our suspension of disbelief.   Of course we know that we are reading is not "real," but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment" (33).

Calvino employs the way of intertextuality in this novel.   As mentioned above, the effect of this "instead of reinforcing our sense of a continuous reality" is to split it open, to expose the levels of illusion.   (33)

Language seems to confine our imagination; however, it also seems to multiply much

more meaning through its metamorphosis.　As Alessia Ricciardi points out, "Calvino's *Invisible Cities* takes us back to the end of the thirteenth century in Marco Polo's China and to the Tartar Empire's relentless program of conquest and domination.　Over this rich historical canvas, however, the Italian author elaborately paints abstract maps of idealized geographical itineraries and in so doing redefines the limits of writing as the borders of the world" (1063).　Because of this, meanings are released from a fixed boundary to free-playing dimension.

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