

Time, Space and Human Experience: A Heterotopian Analysis of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

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Abstract

*The dialectic tension between space and time has always manifested in literature. The postmodern times reimagined and reanalyzed the society's spatial structure and customs. Michael Foucault coined the term "heterotopia" to describe regions outside of society's customary constraints. These regions are physically or socially separated from the rest of the community and are frequently accompanied by a sense of otherness or distinction. Heterotopia are counter sites to all the other real sites that can be found within a culture which are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 3). It not only juxtaposes "different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other," but also forms a "pure symmetry of heterochronisms" (Foucault 334). Italo Calvino's postmodern novel *Invisible Cities* uses various ways to explore the notion of heterotopia philosophically. This paper seeks to examine the various heterotopias and their purposes in the postmodern novel *Invisible Cities*. It also seeks to present the service of literature as a mirror to reflect the postmodern times' social, spatial, and cultural transformation.*

Keywords: Spatiality, Heterotopia, Heterochrony, Postmodernism, Literature.

The postmodern times marked a radical socio-cultural shift from epistemological to ontological perceptions of life. The postmodern shift embraced and celebrated fragmentation, scepticism, and contradictions. This perception permeated multiple facets of human experiences resulting in a profound shift not just in art, literature, and science, but also in temporality, spatiality, and language systems. Philosophers, scholars, and artists critically redefined societal norms with literature and art reflecting and interrogating these constraints and limitations. In literature, the postmodern condition led to texts being dissolved, disintegrated, and erased, leaving behind only traces that echo the movement's ideals. In his lecture "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," which was later published as an essay in 1984, Michel Foucault reimagined the social and cultural spatial configurations of the postmodern times.

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* exemplifies Foucault's concept of heterotopia and its six principles. Heterotopia are counter sites to all the other real sites that can be found within a culture, which are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 3). There might be several heterotopias overlapping in a piece of work.

It emphasises that these spaces have their distinct laws and systems that mimic and defy the “real world.” Several of the cities described in Calvino’s novel function either as discrete heterotopian sites or as intersections of multiple heterotopias, thereby illustrating how spatiality is reimagined and reconfigured in the postmodern era.

The primary heterotopia occurring in the novel is heterochronies: Heterotopia of Time. This particular heterotopia starts operating at its fullest when people arrive at a rupture with the conventional time. The cities of Fedora, Zobeide, Sophronia, and Euphemia demonstrate two distinct forms of heterotopia: heterotopia of accumulation and heterotopia of festival.

The city Fedora encompasses a museum where various miniature Fedoras are displayed in tiny crystal globes. These petite Fedoras, displayed inside the crystal globes, are the miniature models of inhabitants’ ideal Fedora which has “been until yesterday a possible future [has become] only a toy in a glass globe” (Calvino 28). Fedora’s museum is critical to understanding the city; without it, Fedora sheds its significance. As an essential element of Fedora City, Fedora’s Museum functions as a heterotopic place. The museum represents a heterochrony of accumulation. The numerous petite Fedoras within the glass globes initiate the conversation about ‘other’ times, ‘other’ futures, and ‘other’ designs all gathered in one physical space, the Fedora Museum. As a result, the city of Fedora, notably the Fedora Museum, represents a heterotopia of accumulation in which ‘other’ futures and ‘other’ forms of Fedora are contained within a stationary place that exists outside of time.

Likewise, the city of Zobeide is another ideal instance of heterochrony of accumulation. The founders of the city constructed it based on an identical dream they shared. All men “saw a woman running at night through an unknown city ... They dreamed of pursuing her... (however) each of them lost her” (Calvino 39). Following the dream, the men journeyed to discover this unknown city but only found fellow companions, never the city. Upon constructing the city, each man laid the streets according to the routes of his pursuit, and “at the spot where they had lost the fugitive’s trail, they arranged spaces and walls differently from the dream, so she would be unable to escape again” (Calvino 39). Zobeide embodies heterochrony of accumulation because the city is constructed upon the similar yet distinct experiences of these men. These experiences mold and influence the city’s form. Without them, the city would cease to exist. As a result, the accumulation of identical yet distinct experiences serve as a collective repository, providing structure to the city.

Furthermore, the city perpetually alters when new young men join them and alters the structures of Zobeide to prevent the fugitive from fleeing. The city has no permanent form; it is constantly evolving. It integrates events from the past, present, and future. The former Zobeide is the culmination of the experiences of the men who erected it before the arrival of a new group of men who proceeded to make their modifications to the city. The construction of Zobeide continues indefinitely. Thus, the city of Zobeide functions as a library by sheltering the numerous experiences that demonstrate “the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place” (Foucault 7).

While Fedora and Zobeide act as heterotopias of accumulation, the city of Sophronia serves as the other heterochrony: the heterotopia of festival. The city is segmented into two sections: one with a roller coaster, a Ferris wheel, motorcycles, and a carousel, and the other with banks, factories, slaughterhouses, palaces, and schools. While the former section is transient, the latter is a permanent section of the city, separate from the former, “transplanting it to the vacant lots of another half-city” (Calvino 55). Both of these components of Sophronia complement one another and cease to exist as half-Sophronia “must wait before the caravan returns and a complete life can begin again” (55).

When Foucault discusses heterotopias that contradict the accumulation of time, such as libraries and museums, he uses the example of transitory festivals. He states that “these heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal; they are rather absolutely temporal [chroniques]. Such, for example, the fairgrounds, these’ marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclitic objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers, and so forth” (Foucault 7). This fairground is a vital part of the city of Sophrania, literally and metaphorically, as it provides meaning and purpose to the city. The permanent half of Sophrania cannot function without its fleeting half, as Foucault rightly articulates in his essay, “there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. That is a constant of every human group” (4).

The city of Euphemia is distinct from previous cities, as two heterotopias overlap within the city. It operates as a heterotopia of festival which is transient because the traders from the seven nations gather only on solstice and equinox and return with various materials. Marco Polo when describing Euphemia accounts “The boat that lands there with a cargo of ginger and cotton will set sail again, its hold filled with pistachio nuts and poppy seeds, and the caravan that has just unloaded sacks of nutmegs and raisins is already cramming its saddlebags with bolts of golden muslin for the return journey” (Calvino 31). Moreover, it is essential to note that Euphemia trades memories as well as material commodities. The interchange of these memories adds intrinsic significance to the city. When the traders retire to their home countries, they exchange experiences, whereby one’s conflict and story becomes another’s.

In addition, the third principle, Heterotopia of Juxtaposition, is also found in the city of Euphemia. Euphemia “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 6) as it is a place “where the merchants of seven nations gather at every solstice and equinox” (Calvino 31) to trade their memories and material commodities. The city functions as a universalising heterotopia, comparable to a garden, in which multiple objects are juxtaposed in a single location. Euphemia embodies “the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world” (Foucault 7).

Furthermore, the novel uses heterotopia of compensation. These spaces are real places that are “perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault 8). These heterotopias reveal the disorganised and anarchic nature of seemingly well-organized and regulated public settings. The city of Eutropia best illustrates the heterotopia of compensation in the novel. Eutropia has numerous cities, but only one is occupied at a time, leaving the others unoccupied. Happening in a rotation,

When Eutropia’s inhabitants feel the grip of weariness and no one can bear any longer his job, his relatives, his house and his life, debts, the people he must greet or who greet him, then the whole citizenry decides to move to the next city, which is there waiting for them, empty and good as new; there each will take up a new job, a different wife, will see another landscape on opening his window, and will spend his time with different pastimes, friends, gossip. (Calvino 56)

This is analogous to the Puritan colonies that Foucault mentions in his essay. When the old life and city become monotonous, the citizens of Eutropia seek new ones. The necessity to perpetually occupy a new city to reach perfection reveals the disarray of a previously efficient public space.

Accessing these heterotopic places requires strict adherence to the norms and requirements. As Foucault states, “Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place” (Foucault 7). Similarly, the city of Eusapia has an identical city, the underground city where corpses are placed to continue their former activities. Most of the living inhabitants desire a fate after death that does not mimic their life in the living city. The task to keep the corpses in

their desired place in the necropolis is assigned to the “confraternity of hooded brothers. No one else has access to the Eusapia of the dead and everything known about it has been learned from them” (Calvino 98). To enter heterotopic settings, one must be submitted to their ceremonies of purification, or forced admittance, as in prisons. The city of Eusapia’s necropolis is exclusively accessible to members of the confraternity of hooded brothers, indicating that it is a penetrable yet isolated location.

Moreover, the city also functions as a heterotopic locus of illusion. The necropolis of Eusapia functions as a “space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned” (Foucault 8). As Marco Polo accounts of the people in Eusapia, “to be sure, many of the living want a fate after death different from their lot in life: the necropolis is crowded with big-game hunters, mezzosopranos, bankers, violinists, duchesses, courtesans, generals more than the living city ever contained (Calvino 98). The necropolis acts as a space of illusion for the city’s inhabitants after death, allowing them to carry out their desired actions without consequences in the living city. Another overlapping heterotopia in Eusapia is the heterotopia of accumulation. The necropolis outnumbers the living city due to the accumulation of the preferred fate of former inhabitants of Eusapia.

Apart from the cities that act as heterotopias, it is critical to note the emperor’s atlas, which demonstrates Universalising heterotopia. This atlas is multifaceted as it encompasses:

The Great Khan owns an atlas where all the cities of the empire and the neighboring realms are drawn, building by building and street by street, with walls, rivers, bridges, harbors, cliffs... drawings depict the terrestrial globe all at once and continent by continent, the borders of the most distant realms, the ships’ routes, the coastlines, the maps of the most illustrious metropolises and of the most opulent ports... The atlas depicts cities that neither Marco nor the geographers know exist or where they are, though they cannot be missing among the forms of possible cities an atlas in which are gathered the maps of all the cities: those whose walls rest on solid foundations, those which fell in ruins and were swallowed up by the sand, those that will exist one day and in whose place now only hares’ holes gap. (Calvino 123-125)

The prescriptive temporal and spatial configurations of the world are completely inverted, challenged, and juxtaposed in this atlas. This atlas is a “symbolic atemporal terrain that is filled not only with many spatial overspills across dissolved territorial frontier” (Panigrahi 94) disrupting and contesting the traditional spatial structure of the kingdom. Furthermore, the atlas “reveals the form of cities that do not yet have a form or a name... visited in thought but not yet discovered or founded ... cities that menace in nightmares and maledictions” (Calvino 126, 147). The atlas forms a space where contradictory sites are contested, exemplifying the heterotopia of juxtaposition. Thus, it is observed that this atlas, in a real place, encompasses the possible and impossible spatial configurations of Kublai Khan’s empire. It is a “place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself” (Foucault 9); therefore, the atlas acts not only as a heterotopia of juxtaposition but also as a heterotopia par excellence.

In addition, Foucault discusses that a mirror acts both as a utopia and a heterotopia, enabling joint experience. A mirror is a placeless place where one can be seen in an “unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface” (Foucault 4) of the mirror, where the individual is not. It allows you to perceive yourself in a space where you are not physically present. A mirror is a heterotopic site because “it exerts a sort of counter interaction on the position that (one) occupies” (Foucault 4). Likewise, the city of Valdrada offers this shared experience, acting both as a utopic and a heterotopic place. Built on the shores of the lake, the traveler, upon arriving in Valdrada, “sees two cities: one erect above the lake, and the other reflected, upside down” (Calvino 45). The mirrored city of Valdrada reflects everything as “nothing exists or happens in the one Valdrada that the other

Valdrada does not repeat because the city was so constructed that its every point would be reflected in its mirror” (45). Furthermore, the people of Valdrada recognize that every action is made up of not just their action but also its mirror reflection that “possesses the special dignity of images” (45). The reflected city of Valdrada is a utopian site as it is a “placeless place”. However, it is also a heterotopic site since it opposes, inverts, and disputes the real Valdrada that is erected upon the shore.

Thus, through the methodology of close reading, this paper critically explores Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* as a philosophical and metaphorical illustration of Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. While some cities prominently display the heterotopias existing within them, others inconspicuously portray them alongside other postmodern ideals. Through a heterotopian analysis of various cities described in the text, this paper demonstrates how literature reflects the social, spatial, temporal, and cultural shifts during the postmodern times.

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