

A N Y W H E R E

'I think you recognise cities better on the atlas than when you visit them in person,' the emperor says to Marco snapping the volume shut. And Polo answers, 'Travelling, you realize that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents. Your atlas preserves the differences intact: that assortment of qualities which are like the letters in a name.'

Italo Calvino Invisible Cities

OPENING SEQUENCE

The scene is familiar. An aeroplane cruises slowly into frame across an anonymous sky. The Camera pulls back to reveal a busy airport. There is a closeup of wheels hitting the tarmac in a brief cloud of smoke. A long-shot of the plane as it taxis along the runway. The telephoto lens makes the whole scene appear crowded. It isn't possible to make out the name on the front of the terminal.

Inside, a crowd waits in front of a door marked EXIT. Suitcases, overnight bags and the occasional package or trunk slip past on the baggage carousel. A man with his jacket over one arm and a briefcase in his hand enters through the door. Two people make contact in the crush of bodies and leave the shot via an up escalator.

The two men sit in the back seat of a car. Mostly they look straight ahead, with the occasional glance out of the side windows. They are not talking. The city is gradually revealed through the back window as they make their way to an inner city hotel. On the screen the view is of any city, one street looks much like all streets, only a couple of familiar landmarks give the game away.

SECRET TRACES

While she was away she maintained contact with him by regularly sending postcards. Before she left she made a conscious decision not to look for the eccentric or picturesque. Rather, she decided to seek out the spirit of each place she visited, via its own premeditated public face, its monuments. In each city she carefully examined all the available postcards and selected from them a single image; a war memorial, a statue of one of the city's founding fathers, an ornate fountain, or the facade of a significant public building.

Upon returning, she discovered that he had grouped all her cards together, stuck to the door of the refrigerator. In the familiar surroundings of the kitchen, she became strangely detached from the images. They no longer seemed to relate to specific cities, but came to represent something more general, as if everywhere she had visited had only been one big somewhere else.

Later, they were moving house and all the postcards were taken down. It was only then that a clear relationship between the specific places she had visited and the cards emerged. Sitting at the kitchen table removing the sticky stuff off the backs of them, she once again read through her little messages. But it was not what she had written that pulled her away, it was more the visual combination of the stamp, postmark, airmail sticker and the home address. These things formed a strange collage which combined with the actual form of her writing to somehow represent both the distance from home and the specific atmosphere of each of the cities she had visited. It appeared strange, but she also thought that she detected a definite difference in the style of the writing on each postcard, as if these places had somehow materially left their mark.

INVISIBLE TOPOGRAPHY

A man stands at the top of a flight of stairs leading to an underground railway station. It is late afternoon and occasional long fingers of sunlight cut across the road and busy median strip. Office workers are going home. The man has worked his way up the stairs against the tide. It isn't easy as no one really looks where they are going. Everything is already too familiar.

Against the railing at the top of the stairs there is on one side a newspaper stall, on the other a map of the city. In the middle of the map an arrow points. It is attached to a little sign which says YOU ARE HERE.

Standing in front of the map it is difficult to see much beyond the significant municipal building on the right and a few small side streets and shops on the left. The map itself is a very inadequate representation. Its clean quiet lines and pure colours are in direct contrast to the surrounding confusion. The process of simplification rather than capturing the essentials has completely overlooked them. For example, the first side street climbs steeply for about 400 metres, eventually offering the pedestrian a reasonable view of a good portion of the city. The way the river fits into the scheme of things is more difficult to explain.

FAMILIAR ORIGINS

In the magazine all paintings take on the same quality, lines become cleaner and the reduction of the images seems to heighten the colours. The articles seem to make these pages the centre of everything rather than any particular place. However, only one city seems to emerge from all these various fragments; reviews, interviews with artists and dealers, notes, gossip, wild assertions, and of course, whatever happens to be the latest in-thing.

He received bi-monthly packages which seemed to contain the whole art world, the real art world of everywhere else. However, when he flicked through the pages his own work, his own special sites, none of these things were ever there. It was as if he lived only at the receiving end of every means of communication. Things reached him, but he never sent any messages back. He spent hours day-dreaming, trying to imagine what it would be like to be part of that magazine city, living there, at the heart of the world.

Once, a visiting writer came to see him in his studio. They talked and some photographs were taken. However, when the next package arrived and he saw the images and noted the few brief references, the conversation with the writer, his own paintings, seemed somehow distant. They no longer had anything to do with him. In fact, the only thing that he recognised was his name, and that was something someone else had given him.