“The Misplaced Familiar”:
Aesthetic Crisis in China Miéville’s

*The City & The City*

Justin Prystash
Department of English
National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

**Abstract**
China Miéville’s novel *The City & The City* (2009) presents the city as a massively ramified ecosystem that comprises humans, other species, and objects, and is also embedded in larger systems like capitalism and environmental catastrophe. Cities are so deeply textured, and so continually scattered by the circulations of their component parts, that we cannot perceive them as a whole; the borders we use to define them are ultimately arbitrary. I argue that this perceptual disorientation, or aesthetic crisis, embodies the politics of the novel. Miéville depicts the continuous crises of urban existence—chemical spills, refugees seeking asylum, even a weed growing in the wrong place—as so many possibilities for metonymically grasping the larger ontological and political reality. Crisis does not entail a specific political (or artistic) response, however, since it can traumatize into complacency and xenophobia just as easily as expand one’s commitments. The same kind of aesthetic crisis is provoked by the novel itself, because it frustrates expectations and eludes a clear genre, and readers can respond in analogous ways: with the urge to impose allegorical meaning and genre borders, or with a more refined perceptual sense. Thus, the form of the novel cleverly reflects its content and, in both cases, we are pushed to renew our sense of wonder at the strange alterity that inheres in the familiar and proximal.

**Keywords**
China Miéville, *The City & The City*, crisis, aesthetics, genre, societies of control, hyperobjects, accelerationism
China Miéville’s 2009 novel, The City & The City, is set within two cities that intricately overlap: Besźel and Ul Qoma. Although they share the same “crosshatched” spaces and architecture, their convoluted borders are maintained by a brutal secret police known as Breach, who enforce citizens’ compulsory “unsensing” of the city to which they do not belong. For instance, Tyador Borlú, a Besźel police inspector and narrator of the detective plot, has internalized the stricture against perceiving “border-perforating catastrophes” and so, when an Ul Qoman house next to his own catches fire, he can only watch through the mediation of Ul Qoman television (66). In passages like these, Miéville depicts the contemporary city as a particularly intense—often intensely absurd—psychic and physical coagulation of the flows, concentrations, and fractures that the recurring crises of global trade imbalances, financial disasters, and ecological catastrophes entail.¹ Because these crises and crosshatchings extend through and beyond the city itself, cities can no longer be seen (by the characters or readers of the novel) as singular or isolable, despite the best efforts of Breach to strictly demarcate them—so strictly that even a nearby fire must be ignored.

Recent scholarship has redefined the city as a “web of urbanization” that problematizes the urban/rural distinction, as a “complex checkerboard” of various segregations imposed by disparities in wealth and power (Harvey 404-05). Cities are multi-dimensional, layered, a “palimpsest” (Harvey 417; Maczynska 66).² In his novel, Miéville similarly depicts the city as an ecological system comprising the ramified, often conflicting relations among humans, other species, objects, and even supernatural phenomena. This raises several important questions. What are the limits of human perception in grasping such ontological depth? How do these perceptual limits arise, and how are they maintained? What is the function of literature in extending or rearranging perceptual limits? These are all fundamentally aesthetic questions in both the ancient (i.e., aisthetikos, related to perception) and modern (i.e., related to the perception of art, specifically) senses of the term, but Miéville also ties them directly to their political implications. Thus, by analyzing the ways in which aesthetics is presented in and by The City & The City, we can approach Miéville’s politics from an often overlooked angle. In this essay, I will argue that the novel’s aesthetics is its politics: perception, even the most obvious,

¹ See Fujita’s Cities and Crisis for an economic analysis of these three mutually reinforcing phenomena.
² Cities can also be compared to what Eyal Weizman, in his discussion of Israel and Palestine, calls “frontiers”: “deep, shifting, fragmented and elastic territories. Temporary lines of engagement, marked by makeshift boundaries, are not limited to the edges of political space but exist throughout its depth” (4). See Duggan for a reading of Weizman and The City & The City.
commonplace perception, is a political event; in turn, the act of perceiving a work of art is itself political, beyond or in addition to its political content. Sometimes, just seeing something opens up the potential for wonder and enlightenment—as well as the temptation to incorporate it within the status quo.

_The City & The City_ implies that ordinary perception—say, looking at a fire—is a political event because it provokes a micro-crisis in the subject, and in this way, acts as a metonym for the city itself, which is continually cut and sewn back together through large-scale crises. This relatively banal and passive conception of politics is often overshadowed by critical readings that emphasize the Manichean oppressions and transgressions of powerfully active (human) political forces. Perhaps because Miéville is a committed socialist, as well as a former (albeit lapsed) student of continental philosophy, most scholars understand _The City & The City_, and his work in general, as an optimistic call for leftist revolution against “hegemonic power” or “dystopian panopticism” (Stacy 228, 231). The interplay between Breach and the blinkered citizens of Besźel and Ul Qoma is read as an allegory of mass struggle against total ideological oppression. Analyses typically detect evidence of “creative resistance” (Maczynska 66), “subversive currents” and “utopian potential” (Modestino 72-73), and “a disruption in the ruling ideology” (Kuehmichel 354). While not opposed to such readings, I believe that they may not capture the entire picture. First, although the anti-Breach insurrection at the end of the novel is often interpreted as a sign of resistance—Carl Freedman calls the rebels a “left-wing” organization whose membership would include Miéville himself (Art 90, 96)—it is ruthlessly quashed by Breach, which now has the support of Borlú, our erstwhile agreeable narrator. Such a “deflationary” denouement, to use Freedman’s term, is reminiscent of similarly thwarted crises and revolutions in Miéville’s well-known Bas-Lag trilogy.

---

3 For the earlier version of Freedman’s chapter on _The City & The City_, see “From Genre.”

4 Like _The City & The City_, the plot of _Perdido Street Station_ (2000) is structured around crisis. Isaac, a renegade scientist, develops a “crisis engine” to defeat moth-like creatures that are invading the sleep cycles and dreams of New Crobuzon’s citizens (symbolizing devouring capital, the moths feed on the crisis created by their colonization of leisure time; cf. Crary). Isaac therefore uses crisis to overcome crisis itself. However, the political ambivalence associated with crisis is shown by the motives of other groups who want to obtain or destroy it. For instance, the “construct council,” a confederation of sentient robots, harnesses crisis to further their ontological break with humanity, while the government and business sectors of the city scramble to find and destroy the crisis engine in an effort to retain power. Ultimately, the novel’s ending sustains this ambivalence. On the one hand, the moths are destroyed. On the other, the power of the totalitarian government is only augmented by Isaac’s rebellion, and it ultimately crushes the resistance and the construct council.
The novel’s deflationary tone is further strengthened by Mahalia Geary, who fails in her quest to undermine unjust power (because she has an inadequate perception of urban reality). A graduate student, Geary smuggles artifacts from an archaeological site in order to uncover the cities’ hidden mechanisms of power. Unbeknownst to her, however, the smuggling is at the behest of Sear and Core, a multinational eager to profit from the plunder. The narrator derides her naïve desire for “abhistory, the comforts of paranoia, a cosseting by the man behind the curtain” (283). She only becomes a political danger when she realizes that she’s not “righting antique wrongs or learning any hidden truth,” but simply maintaining the status quo and even furthering its interests (285). This is one of the reasons why Professor David Bowden, a toady for Sear and Core, kills her. The other is because he vainly wanted Geary to continue to believe in his debunked scholarship on the subversive potential of interstitial spaces. Such deflationary, or cautionary, events suggest that Miéville does not consider crisis and “the power of the interstice” (Kuehmichel 350) to be necessarily helpful models for a politics of resistance. In an interview appended to the novel, Miéville remarks that “Interstitiality is a theme that is simultaneously genuinely interesting and potentially quite useful, and also a terrible cliché, so if you’re going to use it, it helps to be at least respectfully skeptical about the wilder claims of some of its theoretical partisans” (323). In response to a question about whether his novel’s intriguing concept of perception changed his own vision of London, he replies in the negative.

So on the one hand, *The City & The City* provides a robust depiction of the ontology and aesthetics of the modern city; on the other, it gives a tempered portrayal of the political efficacy of crisis, transgression, interstitiality, and the like. As I suggested above, these two aspects of the novel can be resolved by claiming that the aesthetics of the novel *is* its politics. The novel’s aesthetics (which, again, refers to the perceptions activated in and by the novel) is not necessarily intended to lead to any particular political action other than a renewed engagement with perception itself and with art as a technique for doing so. In other words, the novel is more descriptive than prescriptive. Nevertheless, as Miéville writes elsewhere, aesthetic experiences continually beguile us with strangeness, confront us with alterity, and ignite a “sense of wonder” with the “misplaced familiar” that surrounds us (“Cognition” 244, 247n37). This is the positive political potential of the novel’s aesthetic crisis, which encourages us to open up to a broader, more ecological view of the decussating forces that compose our world/city.

---

5 The neologism “abhistory” presumably means an external or alternate history.
In the following sections, I explore this conception of aesthetics with regard to the content and form of *The City & The City*. In the first section, I examine the relation between blinkered perception and crisis. For Miéville, cities are zones within a larger “threatening geography” (*The City* 18) whose unseen connections become obliquely visible during a crisis. Just as Timothy Morton claims with regard to hyperobjects, 6 Miéville suggests that we begin to perceive the massive distribution of a city through “border-perforating catastrophes” and other “acute events” such as chemical spills and gas explosions (*The City* 66-68). However, echoing several critics of contemporary capitalism, including Jonathan Crary and Steven Shaviro, crisis is revealed as the norm, not the exception. Crisis is now both utterly banal (in the novel, an inter-city car accident, or smelling a pie that sits on a foreign windowsill, is a crisis) and continuously recuperated by structures of power (through the endless succession of crises, Breach is there, “organising, cauterising, restoring” [66]). The novel thus demonstrates the process whereby power and identity perpetually emerge, molten, during times of crisis. It offers an example of what Shaviro calls “aesthetic accelerationism,” which “does not claim any efficacy for its own operations. It revels in depicting situations where the worst depredations of capitalism have come to pass, and where people are not only unable to change things but are even unable to imagine trying to change things. This is capitalist realism in full effect” (No 40). Still, human systems are not the only forces that (dis)compose the city, and we need to more deeply consider the role of non-human agents in Miéville’s fiction.

In the second section, I turn to questions of form and genre, since *The City & The City* clearly plays with the borders between detective fiction, science fiction, and fantasy. What is the political function of genre, and literature more broadly? I begin by considering the longstanding debate surrounding the hierarchical distinction Darko Suvin makes between science fiction and fantasy. 7 Subsequent scholars have attempted to further delineate (Freedman) or complicate (Miéville) these generic boundaries, and I believe *The City & The City* provides a literary instantiation of the latter argument because, like the cities it describes, it frustrates categorical containment. In “Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory,” which, significantly, was published in the same year as *The City & The City*, Miéville argues against the academic “border guard” (237) that patrols and evaluates genre, much like Breach. He further contends that—as evidenced by the citizens of Beszel and Ul Qoma—an aesthetic experience is an act of passive submission to another outside us (238). Such submission is often voluntary, as when we watch a fire or read a novel, but it is impossible to move “beyond” the

---

6 See Morton, “Sublime Objects” and *Hyperobjects*.
7 See Suvin, *Metamorphoses*. 
authority or ideology such things manifest. The generic implication here reflects the theme of perception within *The City & The City*: readers and scholars should not only struggle with and impose order on aesthetic objects—for surely such activities are useful—but they should also simply see and wonder at them on their own terms. In this way, novels and other aesthetic crises can help illuminate, and potentially reconfigure, the obscure ecology that swathes us. By folding together literary content, form, and criticism, Miéville suggests that the borders of genre, like the edges of a city, are metastatic and mercurial, emerging through perforation, contamination, and crisis. By using genre fiction as a self-reflexive mode in *The City & The City*, he reveals that the attempt to definitively locate a text within genre is an unfulfillable injunction, akin to the absurdity of Breach’s law or the pre-Darwinian desire to place immutable species within fixed genera.

**The Ecology of Crisis**

As we have seen, many readings of *The City & The City* adopt a Foucauldian perspective because the novel so keenly evokes a disciplinary, panoptic society. Even the slain graduate student, Mahalia Geary, is an avid reader of Michel Foucault (87). Despite this interpretative invitation, the novel can also be understood as depicting the passage from the disciplinary society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the control society of the twenty-first. In his elaboration of this shift, Gilles Deleuze argues that a “generalized crisis” has developed with regard to “enclosures” and “interiors” (3-4) because capitalism no longer primarily exerts control through architectures of discipline such as factories and prisons, but through the puncture, modulation, and dispersal of borders, through the continuous “erosions of frontiers” (7). Similarly, in *The City & The City*, crisis has become generalized to the point where it continuously emerges from the movement of organisms and objects between the borders of urban architecture, infrastructure, and routes of circulation. In Besźel and Ul Qoma, every breach is a crisis: the “somatic breach” that occurs at hearing a foreign car misfire (52); money that breaches new zones of urban development (144); refugees breaching national borders (275); the breach of wandering animals, disease, and rain (54, 195); rubbish breaching in the wind (65). These breaches have given rise to Breach, which territorializes their flows into a stifling bureaucracy. This bureaucracy then selects which crises to strangle (such as the unificationist revolution) and which to allow (Sear and Core’s capital flows). Thus, Deleuze and Miéville both describe the paradoxical nature of contemporary urban crisis. Crisis is *banal* because it is a continuously operating,
ubiquitous process that is therefore often overlooked. Crisis is extraordinary because it deforms the borders that previously delineated a stable identity, and it facilitates the intensification (and possible disruption) of power. Politically, this suggests the need to aesthetically defamiliarize crisis. Such an attempt to defamiliarize the defamiliarizing would work to clarify the complicated interconnections that crisis embodies, and to recognize which crises can be accelerated in order to create different configurations of power.

Various groups in *The City & The City* have learned to harness crisis for their own ends. As we have seen, Breach and the cities’ bureaucracy have a vested interest in perpetuating crisis because it sustains their power. On the other end of the spectrum, the unificationist rebels hope to accelerate crisis by “weaponising” the “urban uncertainty” of refugees (43). But crisis—which could be defined as the (com)plication of borders—is not just related to human aesthetics and politics. It also emerges in the non-human reticulations of the cities, in rain, rubbish, and buildings. For example, Copula Hall, where the cities’ government is situated, exemplifies the architectural crisis of the control society:

Its inside was complicated—corridors might start mostly total, Beszel or Ul Qoma, become progressively crosshatched along their length, with rooms in one or other city along them, and numbers also of those strange rooms and areas that were in neither or both cities, that were in *Copula Hall only*, and of which the Oversight Committee and its bodies were the only government. Legended diagrams of the buildings inside were pretty but daunting meshes of colours. (131; emphasis in original)

Copula Hall, which acts as a border check between the two cities, is an extremely convoluted Möbius strip that is purposely “daunting” and overcomplicated. The deeply layered borders of Copula Hall and the cities as a whole work to stupefy citizens because, as Rem Koolhaas and Annabel Jane Wharton have argued, myopia and disorientation serve the interests of power. Koolhaas notes that, like Copula Hall’s diagrams, “Where once signage promised to deliver you to where you wanted to be, it now obfuscates and entangles you” because “the more erratic the path, eccentric the loops, hidden the blueprint, efficient the exposure, the more inevitable the transaction” (181). In her discussion of modern casinos, Wharton suggests that their barely legible maps and incoherent architecture deliberately
induce sensory dissociation in order to maximize profit (119-50).\footnote{For more on the relation between economy and architecture, see Jameson, *Postmodernism*.} Wharton insists, however, that while buildings are designed by humans, they are themselves agential; as her subtitle puts it, they have delusional, abusive, addictive lives of their own. By invoking Bruno Schulz’s “mendacious and delusive streets” in his novel’s epigraph, Miéville similarly pursues a radical breach of ontological borders, revealing just how deeply humans, other species, and objects are mutually constitutive. *The City & The City* pushes us, in other words, to view politics from an ecological perspective.

Kevin Modestino offers a powerful reading of “ecologically distributed agency” (54) in the novel, drawing on naturalism and sociology to suggest that “emotions” are the primary means of dispersing ontological boundaries: “While state-controlled emotions, like fear and paranoia, can suppress ecological awareness, other feelings and political desires bring people together with their environment, forming new collectives built on a shared openness to ecological interdependence” (73). I also believe such interdependence needs to be emphasized, but “new collectives” and “shared openness” are mere glimmers on the textual horizon. Just as in *Iron Council*, Miéville only gives intimations of utopia. Moreover, the term “emotions” retains too much of a human tinge (despite efforts by Charles Darwin and others to expand it beyond our species). Unlike emotions, aesthetic crisis exceeds the human, problematizing the very idea that there are “people” who need to be reunited with “their environment.” In fact, humans are often indistinguishable from their surrounds, as when Borlú sees people who “looked like landscape, like they were always there” (17). The city decomposes Geary’s body as much as her murder does: “All the rubbish had done was roll into the dead woman and rust her as if she, too, were old iron” (32). Through such instances of hylomorphism, as well as the various anthropomorphisms of the city—its “delusive streets” and “depressed zones” (12)—Miéville makes of the city an ecological object that puts constant demands on the human perception it enfolds. In this sense, his cities are “hyperobjects”: “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. . . . they exhibit their effects interobjectively; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1; emphasis in original). Because it can only be grasped partially, aesthetically, the city as hyperobject is necessarily “changing human art and experience (the aesthetic dimension)” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 2). Like Morton
and other speculative realists, Miéville explores the aesthetic determination of ontologically deep systems that extend through but exceed the human.  

Miéville adds further layers to the ecological, aesthetic, and political complications of the city by making archaeology and evolution important themes in the novel. The strata and epochs associated with archaeology, along with the species and ecosystems of evolution, are satirized as so many arbitrary borders that are routinely breached, threatening ontological catastrophe for the cities. As Morton reminds us, however, “the catastrophe, far from being imminent, has already taken place” (Ecology 28; emphasis in original). Indeed, the crisis has already taken place and, what’s more, is already being recuperated. The languages and architecture of Besźel and Ul Qoma “share a common ancestor,” but it is “almost seditious to say so” (42), and scholarly histories have been written to explain the categorical distinctions. The archaeological excavations in Ul Qoma reveal a confusing mishmash of artifacts and strata, a “chaos of our material history, an anarchy of chronology, of mismatched remnants that delighted and horrified investigators” (50). Yet these objects are labelled, pigeon-holed, dissertated on, and eventually smuggled to Sear and Core for profit (Miéville makes it clear that capitalism is a powerful component of the urban hyperobject). A more evolutionary example of crisis is provided by winter buddleia, which is “a traditional urban weed in Besźel, but not in Ul Qoma, where they trim it as it intrudes, so BudapestStrázs being the Besźel part of a crosshatched area, each bush, unflowered at that time, emerged unkempt for one or two or three local buildings, then would end in a sharp vertical plane at the edge of Besźel” (44). The plant’s deviation into a foreign ecosystem is meticulously pruned. All of this is absurd, of course, as many of the characters recognize. Qussim Dhatt, a detective from Ul Qoma, jokes that unification would be a “Fucking catastrophe! Unity is strength my Ul Qoman arse. I know they say crossbreeding makes animals stronger, but what if we inherited, shit, Ul Qoman sense of timing and Besź optimism?” (161). The joke is funny because “crossbreeding”—as well as crosshatching—has already taken place. The cities’ boundaries are ultimately arbitrary and absurd.

And yet they are real, and have real political effects. In addition to the sensory controls executed by Breach, the flows of organisms and capital associated with crisis are allowed to circulate at different speeds in different zones, keeping the urban ecology in a state of uneven development. The cities’ ghettos and refugee camps are a powerful example of this, but Miéville repeatedly emphasizes that

---

9 For an aesthetic approach to speculative realism, see Shaviro, *The Universe.*
plants and animals are also unbalanced by the cities’ liminal politics. As we have seen, Besź weeds are prevented from sprouting into Ul Qoma, while its “shy cold-weather lizards” will die if “exported” (92). Animals are dissected just as strictly as the cities’ human inhabitants:

Pigeons, mice, wolves, bats live in both cities, are crosshatched animals. But by unspoken tradition, the majority of the local wolves—mean, bony things long-since adapted to urban scavenging—are generally if nebulously considered Besź: it is only those few of respectable size and none-too-vile pelt, the same notion held, that are Ul Qoman. Many citizens of Besźel avoid transgressing this—entirely unnecessary and invented—categorical boundary by never referring to wolves. (92)

The asymmetrical wolves—their differing access to resources confused with the differentiation of species—are analogous to the staggered economies of Besźel and Ul Qoma. Besźel’s “faltering markets” are “a street mongrel, maybe, or a scrawny milkrat,” while Ul Qoma is known as “the New Wolf economy” (92). Freedman notes that such “uneven development” is the “chief socio-economic problem” confronted by the novel (Art 99). Although he considers its relation to architecture—traditional buildings are being “destroyed by the newer styles associated with multinational finance capital” (Art 101-02)—his perspective remains seated within human politics. But Miéville suggests that the entire urban ecology is agential—even the rain, reliably “disrespectful” of borders (The City 54), falls on this side of human politics.

So how do we reconsider politics from this vantage? As indicated earlier, I do not believe Miéville gives a very clear answer. The novel is certainly not utopian. Utopia is as distant a reality as fabled Orciny, the third city-within-a-city upon which Bowden built his scholarly reputation (yet this deeply flawed character, as I will argue in a moment, offers a strong example of a counter-politics). Rather than utopian or dystopian, perhaps it is more appropriate to think of The City & The City as traumatic in the sense developed by Catherine Malabou. In The New Wounded,

10 Borders that restrict human movements also have a profound effect on animals. 30,000 kilometers of border fencing have been constructed in Europe and Central Asia (the general setting of The City & The City), largely in response to crises of terrorism or the migration of refugees. In “Border Security Fencing and Wildlife,” Linnell et al. argue that, by fragmenting populations and impeding gene flow, these fences are pushing several endangered species closer to extinction.
she shows that sociopolitical traumas and natural catastrophes both have the same effect on the “affective brain” (xviii; emphasis in original), causing their victims to behave with “odd unconcern” or “disaffection,” “as if they had been separated from themselves” (15, 16). Of course, self-alienation is a major theme in Miéville’s novel, and Bowden and Borlú, along with several other characters, have the flat affect associated with trauma. The novel’s unrelenting crises and breaches are both described as traumatic. Borlú is rattled by information from Ul Qoma that arrives like “an allergen . . . a kind of trauma” (37). The parents of Mahalia Geary, stricken with grief, are “insensitive with loss. The dangers of their breaching were high” (76). A Besź visitor to Ul Qoma will have to confront “the potentially traumatic fact” of “unseeing” her home city and shifting her gaze to Ul Qoma (133). As these examples suggest, the disassociation experienced by victims of trauma traps them within the logic of crisis itself. The various responses include hygienically insulating oneself from crisis to the point of embracing fascism (Borlú), accelerating crisis (the Gearys, the unificationists), and reconfiguring one’s aesthetic sensibility (the Besź visitor, Bowden). Despite the different valences of these responses, it remains unclear whether one can wholly escape the traumatic crises of late capitalism. This is the grim conclusion of Shaviro’s accelerationism:

Crises do not endanger the capitalist order; rather, they are occasions for the dramas of “creative destruction” by means of which, phoenix-like, capitalism repeatedly renews itself. We are all caught within this loop. And accelerationism in philosophy or political economy offers us, at best, an exacerbated awareness of how we are trapped. (No 34)

Miéville’s novel provides what Shaviro calls “aesthetic accelerationism” (No 40). By intensifying crisis to absurd (yet uncannily familiar) extremes, it heightens its readers’ awareness of the complicated trap that springs around them. In this sense, the novel is both traumatic and therapeutic, asking its readers to reflect on their own responses to the trauma of the everyday.

If urban crisis can trap one in the myopic, disassociated aesthetics on display in Besźel and Ul Qoma, how does one escape? It would seem to involve seeing more deeply into the ecological frame—developing an aesthetic finesse that, in clarifying the mechanism of the trap, allows one to imitate and elude its movements. Such a political response is shared across the disparate theories I’ve raised so far. For Deleuze, the control society is “science fiction” just beginning to become real, and therefore requires an aesthetic sensibility, the ability to discern and carefully
“describe” control mechanisms, which are as complicated as the “coils of a serpent” (7). For Morton, because there is nothing “behind or beyond or above (in other words, outside!) the inside-outside distinction” (Ecology 78), we must aestheticize things such as nuclear waste and Styrofoam cups, seeing them for what they are: metonyms for the hyperobject (Hyperobjects 77). For Malabou, trauma produces the very plasticity required to overcome it: “these people became strangers to themselves because they could not flee” (Ontology 13). Several accelerationists make the same point. Because there is no place without borders, “the only way ‘out’ is to plunge further in” (Mackay and Avanessian 13). As Benedict Singleton argues, the pursuit of qualified freedom requires the capacity to “understand how one is implicated in the mechanism of one’s entrapment. To be prey is a lesson in predation, and this recognition is the precondition of escape” (504).

In The City & The City, Miéville similarly suggests that such “escape” requires a focused attention on and mimicry of the trap itself. Near the end of the novel, Bowden attempts to escape from the cities after Borlú realizes he is Geary’s killer, and this attempt is the closest any character comes to evading the fascisms that urban crisis can engender. Bowden (almost) escapes Breach by strolling out of town with a gait that perfectly mimics breach. Neither here nor there, in both places at once: his gait and mannerisms turn him into a walking aesthetic crisis that modulates borders as it passes through them. His gait is “rootless and untethered, purposeful and without a country. . . . He did not drift but strode with pathological neutrality away from the cities’ centres, ultimately to borders and the mountains and out to the rest of the continent” (296). Purposeful, pathological neutrality—a nomadic march that connects the city to its natural periphery. Perhaps this response to crisis, facilitated by being a “consummate” urban observer (297) and a “student of the cities” (308), is the best response. Then again, in typical Miévillean style, even this possibility is deflated, not only because Bowden’s escape attempt fails, but also because both he and Borlú are repugnant characters. By tying together the supremacy of Breach with the solution of the detective story, Miéville frustrates readers’ expectations in the act of delivering them. This leads us to consider his conception of genre and the aesthetic function of literature, ideas that complement the content of The City & The City.

---

11 Morton argues that spent plutonium should be encased in gold and put on public display (Hyperobjects 120). Although capitalism as hyperobject isn’t a central focus for Morton, it does of course play a role in the concatenation of the hyperobjects we call “global warming” and “city.”
Genre Crisis

Jacques Derrida remarks that “the law of the law of genre” is “contamination” (206); while all texts participate in genre(s), “such participation never amounts to belonging” (212). The inherent instability of genre that Derrida accentuates has been heightened by the formal experimentation and self-reflexivity of much post-war literature, and the generic contamination of Miéville’s novels should be placed within the context of the growth in popularity of genre fiction since World War II and the increasing “hybridisation” and “proliferation of genres” since 1970 (McCracken 618). It is notoriously difficult to identify the genre of Miéville’s work, and The City & The City is no different, departing from the “New Weird” of Miéville’s early novels, while retaining elements of fantasy and science fiction within the overall structure of detective fiction.

The question of the novel’s genre is further complicated by the metafictional way it draws attention to its formal experimentation. For instance, Dhatt remarks that “There is no case, . . . There’s a series of random and implausible crises that make no sense other than if you believe the most dramatic possible shit. And there’s a dead girl at the end of it all” (195). Here Dhatt amusingly encapsulates his own experience of the mystery along with the theme and structure of the novel itself. Like Dhatt, readers must suspend their disbelief in “the most dramatic possible shit” in order to make sense of urban crisis. They must submit to the absurd premise of Breach in order to better understand its very real implications. They must submit to the authority and ideology of the author in order to enjoy, absorb, or creatively deform his aesthetic vision. Aesthetics, the novel seems to suggest, necessarily involves submission. Miéville explicitly makes this argument in “Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory,” which, published in the same year as the novel, acts as its theoretical counterpart. The focus of this essay is Darko Suvin’s distinction between science fiction, which uses “cognitive estrangement” as a form of rational critique, and fantasy, a genre politically flawed by its irrational and reactionary mysticism.13 In line with the accelerationist strategy of escape through

12 He also emphasizes the continuity between artistic genre and the taxonomy of nature, as suggested by the etymological twins “genre” and “genus” (205-06).

13 Miéville also critiques later developments of the Suvinian model, especially Freedman’s “cognition effect,” which refines Suvin’s definition by claiming that the cognitive basis of science fiction is immanent to the text itself rather than something that can be externally determined. For Freedman’s rebuttal, where he defends the cognition effect but allows that it can also apply to fantasy, see Art (138-54). For Jameson’s comparison of science fiction and fantasy, see Archaeologies (57-71).
Concentric 43.2 September 2017

embrace (a strategy that is also, as Freedman points out, deconstructive [Art 147]), Miéville explains that his “intervention starts not from opposition, but submission. Here I accept the predicates and concomitant heuristic efficacy of the SF/fantasy distinction, and from there attempt an immanent critique” (233).

Submission often carries a negative connotation, and readings of The City & The City usually try to explain how submission to organizations like Breach can be actively overcome. But submission can also be understood positively, as when we respectfully submit to the authority and integrity of something other than ourselves, whether a strange person, an ecological force, or an interesting novel. Negative or positive, voluntary or not, submission at some scale is necessary because power pervades all ontological and aesthetic relations. Miéville writes,

There is no call to be po-faced about this: ideological this “suspension of disbelief” may be, but as a literary-level “consensual” surrender, it is inextricable from enjoyment of the genre [science fiction], and strictly in and of itself at the level of form (i.e. irrespective of the concrete ideologies of specific texts) inherent genocidal apology or the maintenance of capitalism it is not. Nor, however, is it innocent—not even of all relation to those most extreme articulations of modern barbarity. (“Cognition” 240)

This suggests a number of things. First, science fiction (and by extension, literature) is part of an ecological system, even if it only has a tenuous relation to systems of real barbarity, such as capitalism and genocide. Second, literature is ideological, operating through the consensual submission of the reader. Third, aesthetic enjoyment requires such submission. Literature therefore carves out a space—I am tempted to say border—for the enactment of submissions, in the double sense of yielding and proposing, allowing in and sending out. Quite ingeniously, The City & The City is a performance of submission in both content and form. The many submissions that occur along the borders of Besźel and Ul Qoma compel us to contemplate how power and ideology flow through the intricate borders of urban ecology. In addition, by creating a palimpsest of fantasy, science fiction, and detective fiction, and by frustrating many of the expectations engendered by these genres, the novel proposes a similar deformation of the borders that preserve literary form: a genre crisis.

The City & The City, which is very much like the cities it describes, thus places its readers in the same position as its blinkered characters: under the strong
influence of Miéville’s authority, who leads us to see some things while concealing others, we are in a state of aesthetic crisis, and we can respond in the same ways as his characters: we can prise the novel into clear allegorical themes (Breach bad, breach good) and formal categories (“this is a detective novel”); or we can wonder at its intricacies. Perhaps it is impossible not to do both; indeed, it is right and good to do both. But I believe that Miéville’s novel is making a clever political point about the function of literature, a function we tend to neglect: literature offers a complexity and disorientation that mimics, rather than allows us to transcend, our experience of living within the urban hyperobject. Literature can therefore train us to reflect on our necessarily partial view, better visualize complicated systems, consider our responses, and open us to wonder and change. At least, this is what Miéville’s novel achieves: aesthetic, rather than cognitive, estrangement.

In his essay, Miéville ridicules some scholars’ overzealous attempts to define genre, using much the same terminology as his novel. Literary theory should not be overly concerned with demarcating genre categories, for that would reduce it to “the job of a mere border guard” (237). Like the smothering bureaucracy of Breach, academics and academic concepts can operate like a “layer of technocrats” (239), constructing “epistemological firewalls” (243) that hinder the free play of aesthetics and cultivate favored genres at the expense of others. Suvin and Freedman cultivate science fiction because they feel it is better at creating politically valuable cognitive estrangement. Miéville’s response to this position is worth quoting at length:

It might be claimed that the continual efforts to parcel out a separate realm of estranging fiction corralled by a nostalgic, neo-Fabian and ideological conception of legitimate and illegitimate modes of cognition has been a stunting factor in the development of a radical, aesthetically estranging and narratologically rigorous literature of literalised metaphor and alterity.

Of course that might be hogwash. Or, trivially and most likely, both the boundaries and their breaching might continue both to enable and constrain creativity and innovation in fantastic fiction. At the very least, however, it is to be hoped that the theoretical focus might shift from the conventional but epiphenomenal distinctions that have long been deemed definitional to the field, to the fundamental

---

14 Cf. Clute, who dispenses with the border altogether, subsuming fantasy, science fiction, and horror within one genre: “fantastika” in *Pardon*. 
alterity-as-estrangement shared across the field: what it does; how it does it; and what we might do with it. (244; emphasis in original)

This passage contains several provocative claims that, when unpacked, further complicate our understanding of The City & The City.

Miéville begins by interrogating the boundaries of cognition: what is legitimate cognition, and what illegitimate? Should mystical modes of cognition, for example, be ejected from the realm? What about a perception I have that is never fully cognized? Who gets to create and evaluate this distinction? He goes on to make a further distinction of his own between cognitive estrangement and a more radical, more general, aesthetic estrangement. The former is the experience of alienation or defamiliarization that arises from pushing the boundaries of one’s rational expectations regarding “the empirical world and its laws” (Suvin 8). The latter arises, as I argued above, from passive acts of submission. The former is a mental process; the latter exceeds and precedes this mental process because it is (also) affective and somatic. The former focuses on the experience and consequences of estrangement for humans; the latter encompasses an ecological system that includes but exceeds humans. Despite these differences, the two modes of estrangement operate similarly because they both involve “boundaries and their breaching,” where breaching marks the arrival of “alterity” (Miéville, “Cognition” 244), or what Suvin calls “a strange newness, a novum” (4). We see boundaries and their breaching everywhere in The City & The City, which describes the continuous arrival of alterity. In Besźel and Ul Qoma, the faintest smell, a sprig of buddleia, and a raindrop are all potentially alienating arrivals that can revive a “sense of wonder” (“Cognition” 244) in everyday objects and experiences. This essentially Romantic sensibility asks us to submit to the sublime, a sublime that inheres in all things, at all scales of being. Thus, submission (to Breach) is a crucial failure of the characters in the novel, but so is their failure to submit (to alterity).

The City & The City, like many of Miéville’s novels, suggests that cities are particularly suitable places for engaging alterity because urban ecology is so deeply textured: the complex web of organisms and objects spun in the streets, in the buildings, in the surrounding air, and beneath the city’s surface presents a deeply entangled vision of being. This aspect of the novel, especially the passages on

---

15 Indeed, Miéville calls for the “articulat[ion of] the sublime and numinous as a misspoken emancipatory telos” (“Cognition” 247n37). This seems to suggest that we need to revisit the emancipatory potential of the sublime and the numinous, even though this articulation is misspoken (like utopia, the telos will never arrive as we speak of it).
archaeological excavation, also presents a commentary on literary genre and the task of interpretation. Earlier, I explored the archaeological digs in Ul Qoma, which reveal a hodgepodge of artifacts that defy logical stratification and destabilize spatial and temporal borders. Additionally, the archaeological theme brings academic boundaries into question. Isabelle Nancy, a professor in charge of the digs, is “amused and sad” that Geary was “more interested in Foucault and Baudrillard than in Gordon Childe or in trowels” (87). Even though “the edges of disciplines are getting vague” (87), she criticizes academics who, like Geary, avoid getting their hands dirty with real objects: “My more philosophically oriented colleagues would . . . well, I wouldn’t trust many of them to brush the dirt off an amphora” (91; ellipsis in original). Yet these overlooked objects are most deserving of wonder—they are whimsical, possibly even magic objects that give the novel a dash of the fantasy genre.\footnote{Jameson remarks that magic in the fantasy genre may be read as “a figure for the enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualization of everything latent and virtual in the stunted human organism of the present” (Archaeologies 66).} The artifacts were made by “witch-citizens by fairy tale” and include “intricately cast insect toys” (150-151) and the strange “bulb full of gears” that Bowden uses as a weapon (303). Nancy argues that if archaeologists believe they will arrive at a true explanation of the cities—an account of their origin—by bounding such objects within their proper strata, they are missing the point (so too is Sear and Core, who merely want to commodify them). Rather, the truth of the matter arrives when you simply look: “We had to learn to stop trying to find and follow a sequence and just look” (150). The alterity of a strange object should be comprehended aesthetically, not cognitively.

Texts are also strange, wonderful objects, and should be approached similarly. In Borlú’s search for clues to Geary’s murder, he tries to decipher the complicated marginalia she wrote in her copy of Bowden’s monograph, *Between the City and the City*. At first, he tries to impose chronological order: “I could discern phases of annotation, though not in any pagewise chronology—all the notes were layered, a palimpsest of evolving interpretation. I did archaeology” (258). His epiphany arrives later, when he learns to read synchronically, looking carefully at each page in isolation: “I had been trying to be an archaeologist of her marginalia, separating the striae. Now I read each page out of time, no chronology, arguing with itself” (266). The reader gains insight—or a different kind of insight—by abandoning the desire to corral the idiosyncrasies of the text and instead simply submit to them on their own terms. Rather than try to make allegorical sense of *The City & The City*—which, in Dhatt’s memorable formulation, is “a series of random and implausible
crises that make no sense other than if you believe the most dramatic possible shit” (195)—perhaps it makes more sense to look at each crisis as a crisis and nothing more. “That was just the city,” Borlú reflects, “it wasn’t an allegory” (22). Of course, this undermines my own attempt to fit these crises into an overarching interpretation, as an allegory of the traumas and submissions that occur in the late capitalist urban ecology. But the point, a corrective one, is that the novel should be read allegorically and on its own terms, as a spectacle of crisis.

Indeed, this oscillation between perceiving the particular instance and the general system, the inside and the outside, the familiar and the strange, forms an aesthetics of crisis. The characters of *The City & The City*, bombarded by breaches, constantly fluctuate between looking at Besźel and then, more dimly, Ul Qoma; feeling a raindrop and then, more softly, the ecological hyperobject; colliding with a neighbor and then, more faintly, a revolutionary movement sparked by the arrival of refugees. This makes scale an invaluable optic, predicated as it is on the uneasy familiarity of supposed radical strangeness, rather than any truly fundamental break with any known. This is a topological translation of something I would consider key to the “wonder” in the “sense of wonder”: precisely the necessary failure of alterity, the inevitable stains and traces of the everyday in whatever can be thought from within it, including its estranged/estranging other. Without such guilty stains, there could be no recognition or reception—true alterity would be inconceivable, thus imperceptible. We gasp not just at the strangeness but at the misplaced familiar within it. (Miéville, “Cognition” 247n37; emphasis in original)

The city as hyperobject is colossal and daunting, but also easily approachable: each building, tree, work of art that we see is a metonym connecting us to the whole: a political lever that can dislodge me and scatter the entire arrangement. At a time like the present, when borders are being more tightly drawn around the nation state in response to economic, diasporic, and terrorist “crises,” Miéville’s conception of aesthetic and ontological contiguity is especially prescient. A more inclusive

---

17 In the interview appended to *The City & The City*, Miéville claims he has “very little sympathy” with allegorical readings that attempt to “work out what [the story is] ‘about,’ or, worse, what it’s ‘really about’” (320). Overly allegorical readers don’t see too much in a story, but too little (321), much like the citizens of Besźel and Ul Qoma.
politics can proceed by carefully observing how the coils of this trap are strewn, and by working “within it.” By doing so, we may gasp with wonder at the strangeness of the other side, a strangeness that was continuously clamoring, and always close at hand. The City & The City is thus not about transgression and the interstitial, because it reveals that there are no longer, or never were, separate compartments—only scale. There are no absolute boundaries to cross; the borders have already been breached. To better navigate this tortuous terrain, we need to perceive and mimic its oxymoronic structure: continuous crisis, routine trauma, fluid border, labyrinthine map, systemic object, embrace escape, defamiliarize defamiliarization, purposeful neutrality, subversive submission, everyday alterity, hard-boiled Romanticism, misplaced familiar, the city and the city.

Works Cited


—. Introduction. Mackay and Avanessian 4-47.


**About the Author**

Justin Prystash is Associate Professor in the Department of English at National Taiwan Normal University. He has published, or has forthcoming, several articles on Victorian literature and culture, Darwin and evolutionary theory, and contemporary Taiwanese science fiction. He is currently writing on the legacy of Romantic idealism, especially as expressed in Coleridge’s Eastern-inflected philosophy and as it is later developed by Bataille and Irigaray. He is also interested in exploring the relation between British idealism and fin-de-siècle science fiction.

[Received 22 January 2017; accepted 18 May 2017]