

"My two great passions are socialism and the fantastic," writes China Miéville, "I've always had an inchoate sense that, for me at least, the two are linked." In his best-selling fiction, as well as interviews and essays, Miéville doesn't just invite the question of how these passions relate to each other - he summons it in all its tentacle-waving complexity, blaring the "absolutely familiar and completely un-representational"ⁱⁱⁱ sound of a *Star Trek* phaser as it mounts the barricades.

As one might expect of one of the still-new century's star authors in the intermingled zone of fantasy, science fiction, and horror that he has at times referred to as Weird fiction, Miéville's writing makes its impact most immediately through its exuberant style and inventive use of genre conventions and clichés. This is no accident. "Our monsters are about themselves," he writes in an uncharacteristically aphoristic summary of his relationship to the many genres in which he works. But then, of course, he goes on. "... and they can get on with being about all sorts of other stuff too, but if we want them to be primarily that, and don't enjoy their monstrosity, they're dead and nothing."ⁱⁱⁱ

"The fantastic," for Miéville, is a space where language, too, turns wild and fecund. Even his recent novel *The City and the City*, which sits firmly - if a little Weirdly - within the bounds of the police procedural, overflows that genre's customary laconic style, describing (for example) an archaeological dig's "floor of compacted earth [...] broken by inorganic shapes, strange breaching fish: shattered jars, crude and uncrude statuettes, verdigris-clogged machines." (150) This verbal efflorescence - gleefully scattering metaphors and similes, energetically re-animating unfashionable words, fearlessly deploying neologisms - is one of his recognized hallmarks.

But as he says, just as constant in his work is the presence of radical political movements within the worlds he creates, regardless of genre.

Striking longshore workers joining hands across the species line that divides the human and amphibian parts of the workforce. An urban uprising during the end stages of a botched imperial war, desperately holding its barricades with thaumaturgical and clockwork weaponry. An industry-wide strike of magicians' familiars, from animated brooms to ravens. An anti-privatization riot against YuleCo's intellectual property claim over Christmas™. The insurrection of our own reflections, bursting from the mirrors that constrain them to mimic us.

These fictional radicalisms are about themselves, too. In some cases - the Liverpool dockers and Paris Commune analogues I've cited, for instance - they deliberately "get on with being about" events in our world, too, but always as echoes and imperfect translations, not allegories or transplants. The socialism intertwines with the fantastic, rather than bringing it down to our familiar Earth.

Before going further into the exact relationship between the two, however, there's a third Miéville hallmark begging for attention: cities. Or, better, the metropole, the capital, the city-state - The City. Or, really, Miéville's native London as The City.

The trains that enter London arrive like ships sailing across the roofs. They pass between towers jutting into the sky like long-necked sea beasts and the great gas-cylinders wallowing in dirty scrub like whales. In the depths below are lines of small shops and

obscure franchises, cafés with peeling paint and businesses tucked into the arches over which the trains pass. The colors and curves of graffiti mark every wall. Top-floor windows pass by so close that passengers can peer inside, into small bare offices and store cupboards. They can make out the contours of trade calendars and pin-ups on the walls.

The rhythms of London are played out here, in the sprawling flat zone between suburbs and center. (*King Rat*, 15)

The river twists and turns to face the city. It looms suddenly, massive, stamped on the landscape. Its light wells up around the surrounds, the rock hills, like bruise-blood. Its dirty towers glow. [...] Fat chimneys retch dirt into the sky even now in the deep night. It is not the current which pulls us but the city itself, its weight sucks us in. Faint shouts, here and there the calls of beasts, the obscene clash and pounding from factories as huge machines rut. Railways trace urban anatomy like protruding veins. Red brick and dark walls, squat churches like troglodytic things, ragged awnings flickering, cobbled mazes in the old town, culs-de-sac, sewers riddling the earth like secular sepulchers, a new landscape of wasteground, crushed stone, libraries fat with forgotten volumes, old hospitals, towerblocks, ships and metal claws that life cargoes from the water. (*Perdido Street Station*, 1-2)

The buildings had been unhappy for days. They were rearing and breathing steam, purging themselves of the biorigged parasites they bred, that were Arieke furniture. Look out from the Embassy, where the city began, an organic vista like piled up body parts, and the motion of the architecture was clear. The wrongness endemic.

[...] When they regrew the city the Ariekei changed it. In this rebooted version the houses segmented into smaller dwellings and were interspersed with pillars like sweating trees. Of course there were still towers, still factories and hangars for the nurturing of young and of biorigging [...]. But the housescape we overlooked took on a more higgledy-piggledy aspect. The streets seemed steeper than they had been, and more various: the chitin gables, the conquistador-helmet curves newly intricate. (*Embassytown*, 179, 255)

Bellis looked from her window across the vista of reconfigured masts and bowsprits, a cityscape of beakheads and forecastles. Across many hundreds of ships lashed together, spread over almost a square mile of sea, and the city built on them.

[...] But the city had not been bounded by the ships' existing skins. It reshaped them. They were built up, topped with structure; styles and materials shoved together from a hundred histories and esthetics into a compound architecture.

Centuries-old pagodas tottered on the decks of ancient oarships, and cement monoliths rose like extra smokestacks on paddlers stolen from southern seas. The streets between the buildings were tight. They passed over the converted vessels on bridges, between mazes and plazas and what might have been mansions. Parklands crawled across clippers, above armories in deeply hidden decks. Decktop houses were cracked and strained from the boats' constant motion. (*The Scar*, 47)

These kaleidoscopic reimaginings of London are where Miéville's writing is at its most compelling. His loving entanglement with the city he lives in - so complete that it is recognizably itself whether placed where it now sits on the Thames, on the Gross Tar river in a fantastical other world, surrounding the farthest human outpost of an interplanetary empire, or afloat as a piratical city-state - is deeply endearing. His ear for the textures of city life is nearly pitch-perfect, whether describing a semi-anonymous handwritten exchange between costermonger and customer doing business by way of a basket dropped from a high window, or the deep unease created by living in an apartment where the angle of view from the windows hides the city's ground level and human activity. The basic fascination of experiencing cities as "palimpsests of culture, architecture, history, ethnicities, politics, and just about everything else you can think of"^{iv} is always present.

And his word - "palimpsest" - is key. Much of Miéville's most effectively Weird writing is grounded in the impulse to read down through the erased and overwritten layers of the world and find a pattern in it, and in the suspicion that there is always one to be found - more likely sinister than not. Several of his short stories are explicitly structured as tales of this pervasive pareidolia, this compulsion to find meaning, with the title of "Details" tipping us a hint at where in the story the Devil can be found. Above all, the city is the matrix in which Miéville's characters seek and find patterns, and in which his fiction traces them. The city becomes, over and over again, a surface in which the erased layers linger, interweaving and tangling the text, raising the possibility that, as the narrator of "Details" says, "in that dark infinity of markings, I could make out any shape I wanted." (*Looking for Jake*, 123)

This, it seems to me, is one of the things that draws together Miéville's love of the Weird genres and his political orientation. For him, "the rigor and fascinated seriousness and systematicity" of building a world, "the pulp map-making tradition"^v is a key part of his writing process. In his work, there always *is* a pattern to be found, though it may not be the one that characters and readers first see. Chance, coincidence, and serendipity are rare. When the cavalry rides to the rescue, the railroad magnate has sent them. When one character's unforgivable act is revealed, it is the one another character has just suffered. The person who made the mysterious phone call is in the dissident cell at the top of the police's raid list. To some extent, this constant pattern-making is the necessary working of plot, especially in the genres that seek to deliver a "ripping yarn". But it's also precisely what Miéville points to as a key to his Marxism:

Marxism - historical materialism - was theoretically all-encompassing: it allowed me to understand the world in its totality without being dogmatic. [...] Marxism was able to make sense of all the various social phenomena from a unified perspective.^{vi}

This link between "socialism and the fantastic" - or better, perhaps, between Marxism and the Weird - through concern with deep, unifying pattern is one answer to the question of literary form and politics in Miéville's work. He describes using different genre conventions as "literary rules, protocols that you think of as enabling rather than restraints. . . . genres as a kind of pulp fiction Oulipo."^{vii} What matters, and what inspires, is the pattern, the deep syntax, just as no matter what the genre or situation, "if you're a socialist, if you're a Marxist, then class - and certainly other issues, like racism or sexism, but class in particular - is a structuring mode of society. . . not an optional add-in"^{viii}.

In many ways, however, this pareidolia is also central to the overt political content of Miéville's writing. The worlds he creates are varied and uncanny even - especially - when they share a geography with the one we live in. But part of what makes the explicit politics in his writing so satisfying to a radical reader is their transparency, their familiarity, the ways that the uncanny setting parts to reveal a pattern we know. The themes are the ones our daily struggles contend with: invasive foreign investment and the economic stagnation created by its absence; colonialism, industrialization, and prison labor; xenophobia and nationalism; the surveillance state and the militarization of policing; labor struggles in workforces divided by gender and race. The forms of struggle are similarly part and parcel of our experience: underground newspapers; trade and industrial unions; affinity groups and decentralized direct actions; armed guerrilla units.

This is true even with his most explicitly inhuman creations. In *The Scar*, one climactic scene satirizes the notion that strange creatures act from mystical motives ("For this you think we came? . . . For hocus-pocus in trinkets?" (242)) only to reveal a textbook realpolitik motivation: to prevent an enemy state from gaining access to "those hungry trade partners and those untouched miles of resources" which are "the source of all their power, their interests, and existence" (243-4). Similarly, among the alien Ariekei in *Embassytown*, cultural conservatism and a nihilism borne of economic and social collapse combine into violent forms in ways that are instantly recognizable from the past century of our own planet's history. The patterns are there; a familiar unifying perspective, deeply informed by Marxism, hovers within the Weird phenomena.

This makes the pleasures of reading Miéville rather different from those involved in reading other radical writers of the fantastic. Samuel R. Delany's work gives us worlds whose phenomena may be quite similar to those we see around us, but whose basic structures are skew to our own in ways that change the nature of the political, of the economic, in disorienting ways - in *Triton*, for instance, presenting (among other things) the problem of what dissent can look like in what might be called a libertarian post-scarcity technocracy. In another direction, in her justly lauded Xenogenesis series, Octavia Butler places her near-contemporary human protagonists opposite an extraterrestrial species whose basic motive force - genetic exchange with other life forms - is quite flatly alien to us. The joy in reading these novels is that of making sense through the disruption of our basic premises, an experience quite unlike the pattern recognition that is so enjoyable in Miéville's work.

There are, of course, exceptions. They are, of course, revealing. (The book review is a genre no less structured by pattern-seeking than fantasy, science fiction, or the police procedural.) An exemplary one is to be found in the contrast between the resolutions of two of the novels set in Miéville's "secondary world" of Bas-Lag, both turning in part on a character's denial of others' ability to choose. In *Iron Council*, a would-be revolutionary messiah dies, in Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's (Miéville-endorsed) phrase, "for the presumption that salvation was his to offer in the first place"^{ix}, and for the arrogant intervention to which that presumption led him. *Perdido Street Station*, by contrast, ends with the protagonist forced to decide whether to honor or reverse a punishment meted out by a society which defines justice in terms entirely different from his own - in terms solely of "choice-theft". The former gives us a fundamentally familiar situation, on

which the drama of radicalism has relied for decades: an individual's subversion of a radical collective process and action. This, we know how to critique, though we may think the result positive or negative, agree or disagree with the offender's analysis. The latter, however, steps outside our experience, asking us to think differently about acts and actors and saying explicitly that while we may recognize the act in question as grievous wrong-doing, we "cannot translate [it] into [our] jurisprudence" (609), or indeed into jurisprudence, period:

To take the choice of another . . . to forget their concrete reality, to abstract them, to forget that you are a node in a matrix, that actions have consequences. We must not take the choice of another being. What is community but a means to . . . for all we individuals to have . . . our *choices*. [...] Your **magistrates and laws** . . . that sexualize and sacralize . . . for whom individuals are defined abstract . . . their matrix-nature ignored . . . where context is a distraction . . . **cannot grasp that**. (607, 610 - bold emphasis mine; italics in original)

Here, briefly and almost uniquely, Miéville looks to what genuinely *other* worlds could be possible, beyond existing patterns, breaking with the restraint that usually binds him to familiar visions of the political. This is in part a restraint freely chosen, based on the political insight that "if we take seriously the scale of social and psychic upheaval represented by a revolution, a post-revolutionary society is unthinkable: for someone not born in a post-revolutionary situation, it takes the process of going through a revolution to fully imagine it."^x But I believe it is no coincidence that it is also one of the only times that Miéville's writing takes seriously the structural insights that have come out of contemporary radical movements, echoing both Zapatista ideas of community and horizontalism and the rejections of legalistic, abstract conceptions of justice that come from anarchist, autonomist, feminist and queer sources.^{1*}

¹ It is also telling that the choice-theft addressed here involves rape. It would take another essay at least this length to properly explore why Miéville's work is so unsatisfying in its relationship to gender and sexuality, but a few things are worth mentioning here.

The passage I've approvingly quoted above is made possible by an implicit premise that the society involved is fully gender-egalitarian. This premise - always implicit - recurs here and there in Miéville's work (most notably in *Embassytown*). Almost never, however, does his world-making involve fleshing out the dynamics of power around gender, except to indicate that they are essentially identical to contemporary British or U.S. norms. For instance, a strike by female sex-workers plays a key role in the plot of *Iron Council*, but it is dealt with almost exclusively as a labor struggle - which is hardly the experience of actual sex-worker organizing, which rarely if ever has the luxury of ignoring gender politics to focus so completely on class. This may be related to the fact that when he discusses his politics, while asserting feminist convictions, Miéville almost always mentions feminism as the insufficiently "all-encompassing" perspective he rejected when he became a Marxist.

Similarly, Miéville has expressed great pride in what he describes as "a love story" between two of the male central characters in *Iron Council*. (http://www.believermag.com/issues/200504/?read=interview_mieville) Reading the book, however, it's almost unnoticeable. What comes through, by way of the omniscient narrator, is precisely the obsessive, one-sided yearning we're familiar with from the classic pulp cliché of the Tragic Homosexual Sidekick, but with hardly any of the camp sensibility that leavens those books' hostility toward their queer characters. There is indeed something that looks like a love story - or at least a love sub-plot - in the book, but it's to be found in the heterosexual relationship that's steadily contrasted with the homosexual one, and given far more complex characterization.

As Miéville continues to expand the genres that he works in - his three most recent novels have spanned crime (*The City and the City*, 2009), apocalyptic "shaggy-god story"^{xi} (*Kraken*, 2010) and anthropological science fiction (*Embassytown*, 2011) - I look forward to more of these moments of rupture. They provide the other term in the dialectic involved in the radical potential of the fantastic. Another kind of monstrosity to enjoy.

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A New Reader's Guide to Miéville

For those new to reading Miéville, the best place to start depends largely on your relationship to genre, and your thematic preferences. Here are a few suggestions:

Those suspicious of genre fiction, as well as those who like crime novels and thrillers, should begin with *The City and the City*. This tale of a city more perplexingly divided than partitioned Berlin, Jerusalem/Al Quds or San Diego/Tijuana may be Miéville's most immediately accessible novel. It shares some elements with John Le Carré's recent politicized work, others with Bruno Schulz or Orhan Pamuk.

Those with an appreciation for Victorian popular fiction, from Dickens and Conrad to Sue and Verne to Wells and Conan Doyle, should pick up one of the three Bas-Lag novels, *Perdido Street Station*, *The Scar*, and *Iron Council*. The three - respectively an urban mystery, a nautical epic and a Western - are a trilogy in that they share a common world, but have no narrative throughline or shared protagonists.

Those who enjoy the uncanny and eerie, those who look for writers dealing thematically with recent events, lovers of shorter fiction, and horror fans (whether partial to Machen, Lovecraft, or Kafka), should find a copy of Miéville's story collection, *Looking for Jake*. It includes some of his funniest writing as well as some of his most disturbing; some of his most straightforward as well as his most overtly experimental.

Those who prefer science fiction, whether for its aliens and technological speculation or for its anthropological investigations, should open *Embassytown*. Placed in a colonial outpost on a distant planet, its setting owes a great deal to classic 'hard' SF. Its themes, however, draw far more on writers like Ursula Le Guin, with a particularly large debt to the novels in which Samuel R. Delany used semiotics and other linguistic/critical theory to re-invent space opera.

Those already immersed in fantastic or Weird writing, Londonophiles and psychegeographers, and those with a geeky or pop-culture sensibility should start with either *Kraken* or *King Rat*. The former with a comic sensibility, the latter with a more menacing one, each plays changes on the mythic strata of Miéville's favorite metropolis, at times with a nod to Gaiman and Moorcock, at others drifting closer to Rushdie or Kureishi territory.

And those for whom an author's most recent work is always the most interesting should look online for Miéville's most recent short stories, including "Covehithe" (in the *Guardian*)^{xii} and "The Rope Is the World" (in *Icon Magazine*)^{xiii}.

ⁱ <http://crookedtimber.org/2005/01/11/with-one-bound-we-are-free-pulp-fantasy-and-revolution/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.avclub.com/articles/china-mieville,43139/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.jeffvandermeer.com/2009/06/16/god-thats-a-merciless-question-china-mieville-interview-from-weird-tales/>

^{iv} <http://www.revolutionsf.com/article.php?id=2391>

^v <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/mievilleinterview.htm>

^{vi} <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/mievilleinterview.htm>

^{vii} <http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman.com/sos-review/China-Miville-interview-The-China.5272750.jp>

Oulipo, an experimental writers' group, is dedicated to the use of formal constraints (composing a novel without the letter "E", for instance) as a way of devising new structures and patterns for writing. Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, and Georges Perec are among its best-known members.

^{viii} <http://www.isreview.org/issues/75/interview-mieville.shtml>

^{ix} <http://crookedtimber.org/2005/01/11/with-one-bound-we-are-free-pulp-fantasy-and-revolution/>

^x <http://crookedtimber.org/2005/01/11/with-one-bound-we-are-free-pulp-fantasy-and-revolution/>

^{xi} <http://www.avclub.com/articles/china-mieville,43139/>

^{xii} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/apr/22/china-mieville-covehithe-short-story>

^{xiii} <http://www.iconeye.com/read-previous-issues/icon-080-|-february-2010/china-mieville-the-rope-is-the-world>