

Miriam Loth (Göttingen)

“I was hemmed in by people not in my city” Power, Space and Identity in China Miéville’s *The City and the City*

From New Corbuzon to UnLondon, China Miéville’s works show a preoccupation with the city which transcends the function of setting and serves as a subtext to the plot.¹ As one of the most prominent representatives of weird fiction Miéville constructs cityscapes that fascinate the reader with their eccentricity and strangeness, but also with their social, historical and architectural complexity. In *Perdido Street Station* the eponymous landmark in New Corbuzon is essential for the denouement of the plot rather than merely a backdrop. The city is a character in its own right. This is also and especially true for Miéville’s 2009 novel *The City and the City*. Here, the city seems at first normal, then alien and in conclusion utterly quotidian. The way the literary space and place is built permeates everything in the novel: the way the characters act, the crime plot, the philosophy and mood. At the core, *The City and The City* captures the everyday creation and maintenance of social space and illustrates the human capacity to deal with conflicting, layered realities of communal life and the human condition.

The City and the City is set in the twin city states of Beszel and Ul Qoma that occupy much of the same geographical space, but are *perceived* as two very different cities. The borders between the cities are invisible and intangible, but reinforced by citizens by ‘unseeing’ and ‘unsensing’ the other one. Meaning: someone in Beszel must ignore everything Ul Qoman even what is right next to them. Some parts of the cityscape are totally in one city but quite a few are ‘cross-hatched’, meaning in either city depending on what is unseen. Unseeing is an acquired habit, but one that is performed unconsciously. To unsee the other city is an integral part of being a citizen and important in the socialization of children. Acknowledging the other city even accidentally is a serious crime called breaching punished by an all-seeing, all-powerful agency named Breach. Why and

¹ Cf. Monica Germanà: “Beyond the Gaps: Postmodernist Representation of the Metropolis”. In: Christine Berberich (ed.): *Land & Identity: Theory, Memory and Practice*. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2012, p. 213–259, p. 214.

how the state of separation between the cities came to pass is unknown: an event ambiguously called ‘cleavage’ split or united the cities.

The City and the City won several awards for fantasy writing, although it is fantastic only in one aspect and – plotwise – the novel is crime fiction: a police procedural with noir and hard-boiled touches – genres that lay claim on gritty realism. It is precisely this uncertainty of genre that allows a subversive reading of the text and contributes to the social criticism therein. In the novel Inspector Tyador Borlú from Beszel investigates the murder of foreign student Mahalia Greary across the cities and uncovers a conspiracy to exploit the cities’ cultural heritage for profit.

The construction of city and identity

Territory, borders, identity and how one informs the others are underlying themes in *The City and the City*. At the same time racism, alienation and xenophobia occur throughout the novel like the background noise of traffic: incidents like a murder motivated by xenophobia or immigrants harassed in the streets are mentioned. Even tourists are barred from visiting the city unless they pass extensive unsight training lest they breach. Overall, mixing and foreignness evoke fear or hatred in citizens. They find security in clear division and borders and where there are none, divisions are created and imagined. Borders imply separation, order and security by excluding the other and confirming group identity. In literal geography no borders run between Beszel and Ul Qoma, but the division of the cities is created and maintained in the minds of people. The imagined separation becomes real because everyone adheres to it.

The cities are indeed different in architecture, wealth and lifestyle. Beszel has an old-fashioned Eastern European culture with a corrupted democracy and a downfallen economy, while Ul Qoma is oriental, communistic and economically successful and both cities are marked as such by appearance as well as history, language, foreign relations and customs. Nonetheless, as cultural anthropologists often argue, cultural difference is not given but produced.² In order to secure their identities, the differences between the cities are emphasised by style of clothing, architecture, gait and food. Thus citizens know what to unsee, fear or hate. This stress on the differences, however, serves to cultivate a difference to the other city as well as veil ruptures and heterogeneity within each city itself to assess and secure the community’s identity. So the artificial spatial separation of the cities serves to support the artificial cultural division. To claim “citizenship [of one city can be seen] as a process that fixes identities, delineates

² Cf. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson: “Beyond ‘Culture’ – Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference”. *Cultural Anthropology* 7:1 (1992), p. 6–23, p. 17.

boundaries, and disciplines the meanings and practices of social space".³ Owning citizenship is inevitably connected to owning the respective culture.

Sociologists, cultural anthropologists and philosophers like Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre have suggested that space is a category of identity⁴ and that understanding the use and appropriation of space is crucial for understanding social structures.⁵ Likewise Doreen Massey in *Space, Place and Gender* says that space is not given. Instead we should think "of space [...] as constructed out of social relation. That what is at issue is not social phenomena in space, but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations [...] [which] are inevitably everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism".⁶ A city is a man-made landscape and as such the urban environment, architecture and borders inform, consolidate and construct identity, culture and lifestyle and the other way around. Miéville's novel is a literary reflection on how urban space is charged with power and how public places are sites of contested identities.

Quoting geographer Anna Secor "cities are prime sites where identities are staked, belonging is negotiated, and rights are pursued".⁷ Identity, though, is of course not only defined by what one is, but mostly by what one is *not*. The self is constituted by setting it apart from the other. "While the diversity of cities has been celebrated and urban public spaces idealized as arenas of tolerant encounter, cities are also marked by processes of exclusion, segregation, and repression [...] identity can be seen as a strategic move that stakes a claim to space [...] by asserting unity and power over and through that space".⁸ The politics and practises of the cities concur to that. Beszel and Ul Qoma are physically one, but via seeing or unseeing – i.e. exclusion – citizens lay claim on space against an exteriority.⁹

At first glance, the practise of unsight is an alien concept, but in fact it is an everyday strategy in the real world as will be shown further down. Sociologist Harold Proshansky in his essay "The City and Self-Identity" writes about place identity as a subcategory of identity and more specifically about "urban place identity".¹⁰ He defines: "Place identity is expressed in a

³ Anna Secor: "'There Is an Istanbul That Belongs to Me': Citizenship, Space, and Identity in the City", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 94:2 (2004), p. 352–368, p. 353.

⁴ Cf. Victoria E. Thompson: "Telling 'Spatial Stories': Urban Space and Bourgeois Identity in Early Nineteenth-Century Paris". *The Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003), p. 523–556, p. 526.

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 1 f.

⁶ Doreen Massey: *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity 1994, p. 2–3.

⁷ Secor, "Citizenship, Space, and Identity in the City", p. 353

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 353/360.

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

¹⁰ Harold M. Proshansky: "The City and Self-Identity", *Environment and Behavior* 10:147 (1978), p. 147–169, p.155/161.

variety of behaviour system reactions [...] a pattern of beliefs, feelings and expectations and, even more importantly, a dimension of competence [...] [for] appropriating and developing [...] territory”.¹¹ A behavior that he claims comes with urban place identity is that of “strategic co-present interactions”¹² – methods to cope with the presence of many strangers in public places to keep contact non-personal. These methods are used unconsciously by people e.g. when using public transport or to navigate in crowds.

Basically, unsight is such a strategic co-present interaction. And really: the concept of unsensing is not that fantastic. The way citizens unsee each other reminds of the selective perception we employ everyday. Living at close quarters with many other anonymous people creates anxieties. Pollution, advertisements, decay, homelessness, traffic, crime, chaos, violence, corruption, poverty – these are the things that we ignore or push to the background on a daily basis to lessen the anxiety, to function and to protect our sense of individuality in an urban environment. Strategic co-present interactions like unsight provide relief from having to deal with multiple competing cultures, versions of history, customs and politics. Both help to function in an increasingly complex world by narrowing down the complexity. Thus unsight in *The City and the City* is urban living taken to the extreme.

In the novel ‘breaching’ – disregarding the invisible borders between the cities – is the greatest taboo and is punished severely. Breachers are arrested by Breach and are never seen again. In order to understand the severity of breaching it is necessary to see unsight not only as a psychological method of coping, but also as a social practise. In its essence breaching is a social transgression, because it questions the social and cultural reality of the cities. The knowledge gained by acting within a new set of parameters can not be put back in the bottle. “But if you breach [...] you can’t come back from that”¹³ is an accepted truth in the novel. Breaching has to be contained because it breaks down borders that give structure and order to the community. Once somebody breaks the self-affirming circle of denial, unseeing stops to work – not just for the breacher, but for everybody affected. Much like Adam and Eve, the breacher must leave paradise. A breacher will be removed from society, because he threatens the very fabric of that society.

Double and third space

Tying in with xenophobia and othering, an underlying theme of the novel is that of binaries and the double. The same crosshatched river or street

¹¹ Ibid., p. 167.

¹² Ibid., p. 166.

¹³ China Miéville: *The City and the City*. New York: Del Rey 2010 (2009), p. 310.

has two different names – each in one city. Characters often appear in pairs or are mirrored in each other. The citizens are used to seeing the world in binary opposition: us and them, here and there. It is their mode of living and the way the world in *The City and the City* functions. However, underneath the surface of binaries, the possibility of a third space emerges. In the novel the third space is a place of power, both destructive and productive. For one, the agency that enforces the cities borders – Breach – is such a third entity as it belongs to no city. Breach itself seems to have preternatural powers and is described as “alien”.¹⁴ But Breach itself fears another alternate place: Oriciny – a city that according to legend exists between the cities in places that each city thinks belongs to the other. Oriciny is believed to have immense power and evil intentions even though it is never proven that it exists. It is perceived as a threat by Breach because it cannot be controlled. Again the unknown, the uncategorized space is reason for fear and hatred.

Also, while keeping within the borders gives citizens security, those who transcend the borders gain power. The villain of the novel shows no respect for the borders or cultural practices and consequently manages to escape unpunished. Likewise the murderer tries to make his escape in an uncanny way: by walking through the cities without committing to either city in gait or mannerism. As “Schrödinger’s pedestrian”¹⁵ he is untouchable to everyone, because to acknowledge him would be Breach. This gives him power not only because he behaves in a way that marks him as cityless, but also he has developed the ability and dares to do so.

The separatist thinking runs so deep in the minds of Besz and Ul Qomans that merging and hybridity causes panic. Towards the end of the novel, a group of unificationists try to unite the cities by provoking a breach of epic proportions.

the unifs still fought to mobilise populations deeply adverse to their missions [...] It must be an intoxication to step through the border and greet their foreign comrades across what they made suddenly one street, to make their own country even if just for seconds at night in front of a scrawled slogan and a broken window.¹⁶

Again, a social practice – in this case greeting – is what constitutes the spatial unity here, because in literal geography the street is already just one street. And it is the lack of social practice – citizens retreating into their homes instead of joining in – that keeps the cities separated. Despite the dystopian undertones of the novel, the separation of the cities is not forced on citizens as much as welcomed by them. Unity undermines everything

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 64

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 295

¹⁶ Miéville: *The City and the City*, p. 280.

the citizens have been taught and more importantly lived and practiced daily all their lives. A unified city would mean giving up their identity for something else – something unknown and untested. Thus, *The City and the City* is a tale about the practises humans adopt to cope with the unknown, but also about the limits of this mindset.

Crossing borders, identity and power

A common plot in fantasy writing is that of the quest, a voyage that leads to self realization. *The City and the City* complies and I propose that this is reinforced by the crime plot because crime fiction also revolves around the search for truth and identity (that of the murderer). Central to *The City and the City* is Inspector Borlú's transition both spatially and concerning his identity, in fact the two go hand in hand. In accordance with Jagannath, I propose that although space is an outward bound experience, it is linked to the inward bound sense of identity.¹⁷ The space around us and how we position ourselves within it has a deep influence on our identity. Moving in space can be political statement. For example after a visit to the unificationists, a group of people who believe the cities should be united, Inspector Borlú visits Beszel's 'Little Ul Qomatown', a colony of Ul Qoman expatriates, as an act of "provocation".¹⁸ This cultural enclave looks, smells and feels like the other city, but is not. Borlú assumes that he is under observation by Breach, because of the sensitivity of the murder case. The simply act of drinking tea in Ul Qomatown is enough to show that he is not impressed or threatened. However, the existence of Ul Qomatown affirms the separation of the two cities rather than undermining it: expatriates reconstruct their home away from home to ease their longing for their city of origin.

On the other hand, the familiar architecture of the home city can be soothing for the main character. It is necessary to anchor Borlú firmly in his home city. Early on, Borlú receives a disturbing call from Ul Qoma that makes him accessory to breach. On his way home he tries hard to keep from breaching:

It was, not surprisingly that day perhaps, hard to observe borders, to see and unsee only what I should, on my way home. I was hemmed in by people not in my city, walking slowly though areas crowded but not crowded in Beszel. I focused on the stones really around me – cathedrals, bars, the brick

¹⁷ Thejas Jagannath: "Public Space Determines Personal Identity." *Urban Times*. (14/11/2012), <http://urbantimes.co/2012/11/public-space-determines-personal-identity/> (11/03/2014).

¹⁸ Miéville: *The City and the City*, p. 53.

flourishes of what had been a school – that I had grown up with. I ignored the rest or tried.¹⁹

Borlú hangs on to physical markers of his city, because he is very aware of the fragility of the borders and it scares him. He looks for comfort by deliberately seeking out the local buildings, the actual brick and stones that make the city. Physical place is used as a means to confirm the given psychological state of being.

Although Borlú is not literally on a quest – he never really leaves the city during the course of the novel – he crosses borders from Beszel to Ul Qoma to Breach and with each crossing Borlú does not only gain knowledge and understanding how the cities work, his identity transforms at the same time. Borlú's investigations into Mahalia's murder forces him to reflect on the social reality of the city and question it. As borders unravel for him, so does his identity. From Ul Qoma Borlú phones his subordinate in Beszel:

“What's your contact like?” Corwi said. “Your Ul Qoman me?”
 “Actually I think I'm his you.”²⁰

This short exchange, although playful, illuminates spatial identity and shows how people's identity relates not only to other people, but also to place and space.

Later in the novel Borlú starts his own independent investigation and plans to smuggle Mahalia's friend Yolanda out of Ul Qoma in order to save her life. The moral obligation to protect a potential victim becomes stronger than his duty to obey the rules, though he still observes the artificial borders. But when Yolanda is shot, Borlú is ready to give up even that. His need for justice and the search for truth are incongruent with the rituals of pretence and more important to him than observing borders: Borlú chases after her murderer although they are in different cities. First, he follows the sniper staying within the city limits, but finally Borlú shoots him across the border therefore committing the worst crime: breach. Borlú is arrested by Breach agents and locked away in a cell.

In Breach, Borlú is in limbo in every way. He is isolated from his friends and his home city. His role is yet undefined: he is “prisoner, condemned, consultant”²¹ simultaneously when he is asked to continue the murder investigations as a way to defend his breach. He is also spatially in between, in both and neither of the cities and when he realizes this, his awareness changes radically:

¹⁹ Miéville: *The City and the City*, p. 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²¹ Miéville: *The City and the City*, p. 259.

My sight seemed to untether as with a lurching Hitchcock shot, some trickery of dolly and depth of field, so the street lengthened and its focus changed. Everything I had been unseeing now jostled into sudden close-up. Sound and smell came in: the calls of Beszel; the ringing of its clocktowers ... , the old smells, they came in a tide with the spice and the Illitan yells of Ul Qoma, the clatter of a *militiya* copter, the gunning of German cars. The colours of Ul Qoma light and plastic window displays no longer effaced the ochres and stone of its neighbour, my home.

[...]

[Ashil] tapped by chest. "Breath".²²

For Borlú this is a rebirth ("Breath") and only afterwards he is free to move between the cities. Now, he is able to gather an important piece of evidence, solve the murder case and make an arrest. This state of in-betweenness is temporary and he needs to consolidate his place in the city and therefore his identity. At the end of the novel, he sheds his former identity and assumes a new one: "Inspector Tyador Borlú is gone. I sign off Tye, avatar of Breach".²³

However, this state of being does not mean freedom from the division of the cities although Borlú is able to transcend the borders between the cities both physically and psychologically. While it is true that he gains more insight and power, Breach is a sterile place. It is isolated from both cities, feared and unseen by both populations. Physically, it is wedged in between the cities and populated by rejects from both cities, all breachers themselves, i.e. criminals. No children are born there. This third space is a dead end within the novel and what is more: it supports the existing structures by making Borlú a tool of Breach.

All in all, Borlú's investigation is not only a search for the identity of the murderer, but for his own identity as a citizen and how it relates to the space around him. Borlú's quest brings to light the inner workings of the society he is living in. He is told:

It's not just [Breach] keeping them apart. It's everyone in Beszel and everyone on Ul Qoma. Every minute, every day. We're only the last ditch: it's everyone in the cities who does most of the work. It works because you don't bunk. That's why unseeing and unsensing are so vital. No one can admit it doesn't work. So if you don't admit it, it does.²⁴

Here is the novel in its essence: identity is shaped by everyday practice. According to Doreen Massey how people interact with their environment gives it meaning and every act reinforces norms and beliefs.²⁵ The separa-

²² Ibid., p. 254.

²³ Ibid., p. 312.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 310.

²⁵ Cf. Massey: Space, Place and Gender, p. 1–5.

tion of the cities exists because everyone behaves like it does. Unseeing is impossible: unseeing means that something is first seen. Unseeing may become an efficient habit, but it intrinsically means that everyone is making the choice to unsee the other and act accordingly. The city, then, is not a given space, but a performed one. To borrow the words of Duggan, the practise of unseeing is “a self-induced blind spot cultivated to ignore a presence that might complicate or threaten the national narrative of belonging”.²⁶

Alternate identities

So this far the picture painted is a bleak one: there is no unity between the cities, on the contrary. The differences between them seem inmountable and borders impenetrable. And while Borlú achieves a better understanding of the world he is living in, he has to give up his old life and live in exile. However, *The City and the City* does offer alternative ways of living. For one: Borlú, Cowi and the Ul Qoman detective Dhatt work together across borders during a crisis and prove that individuals can overcome their perceived cultural differences. But more importantly, the novel offers a real alternative to the strict separation of the cities, which is true to the theory of thirdspace:

A common form of establishment, for much of Beszel's history, had been the *DörplirCaffé*: one Muslim and one Jewish coffeehouse, rented side by side, each with its own counter and kitchen, halal and kosher, sharing a single name. Mixed groups would come, greet the two proprietors, sit together, separately on communitarian lines only long enough to order their permitted food from the relevant side, or ostentatiously from either or both in the case of freethinkers. Whether the *DörplirCaffé* was one establishment or two depended on who was asking: to a property tax collector, it was always on.²⁷

The *DörplirCaffé* offers an alternative form of coexistence for two cultures. In the context of the novel, it is a protest against the cities uncompromising method of guarding identity and culture. Coffeehouses have long traditions of being places for communication, communal life and the clash of different opinions. Also, food has always been a source of identity, in this case more specifically religious identity. Interestingly, the core of each café is separated from the other: the kitchen and counter. Thus, the centre of the respective cultural identity remains untouched. Note that the inner walls between the houses are removed as an architectural marker of open-

²⁶ Robert Duggan: “The Geopolitics of Inner Space in Contemporary British Fiction”, *Textual Practice* 27:5 (2013), p. 899-920, p. 915.

²⁷ Miéville: *The City and the City*, p. 22.

ness. Thus, the fringes of the cafe are open allowing exchange, fluidity and protest – in accordance to the third space theory by both Soja and Bhabha. Moreover, the merged name of the cafes implies hybridity. The space of the coffeehouse is thus politically and culturally charged. The *DörplirCaffee* lives the counterexample to Ul Qoma and Beszel: sharing a space without giving up one's identity is possible. It is not even necessary to commit to whether it is one place or two, except of course when it comes to paying taxes.

Conclusion

As I have lined out, the novel touches upon real life issues: split cities and counties like Jerusalem, Berlin and Ireland are evoked. Racism, xenophobia, social taboos, alienation, indifference and the unquestioned power of authority are topics that are explored. The interconnections of self-awareness and space, borders and identity and the relationship between society and the individual underlie the novel. This social criticism is even more pronounced because the novel never fully commits to the fantasy genre – the existence of the city and the city can be explained in rational terms. There is no magic, only the mundane. Or as one reviewer put it: “We are all living in the city and the city”.²⁸

²⁸ Allistar Brown: “The Unscience Fiction of China Miéville’s *The City and The City*”, *The Pequod* (10/10/2013), <http://www.thepequod.org.uk/essays/litcrit/thecityandthecity.htm> (24/10/2013).