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Feature Interview

Weird Fiction

Dandelion meets China Miéville

Tony Venezia



There are things that one can do with the fantastic as an aesthetic in fiction, and indeed in other media, which you can't do with realist fiction.

— China Miéville, November 2009

FOR THE FIRST ISSUE OF *DANDELION*, on the topic of genre, we are very pleased to have invited the writer, academic, and activist China Miéville. I met with him in November 2009, shortly after the publication of his novel *The City and the City*, at the Tricycle Theatre café in Kilburn. We started by discussing his most recent book, and then moved on to talk about the importance of weird fiction, the thorny issue of postmodernism, and the continuing and cyclical, if slightly tired, debate between genre fiction versus literary fiction. Since the interview was conducted and edited, *The City and the City* has won both the Arthur C. Clarke and the British Science Fiction Association awards for best novel. Miéville has now won the Clarke award — the most prestigious UK science fiction award — an unprecedented three times. Coinciding with *Dandelion*'s first issue, Miéville has published another novel, *Kraken*, which has only recently hit the bookshops. The podcast also features comments from

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Roger Luckhurst, Birkbeck's own expert on matters of genre, and fellow Birkbeck academic Laura Salisbury.

Though primarily known as an author of fantasy fiction (especially the monumental trilogy of *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *The Scar* (2002) and *Iron Council* (2004), the latter set in the vividly realised fictional world of Bas-Lag), Miéville's writing has always been characterised by what might be termed 'genre bleed', a tendency to incorporate elements from across a spectrum of fantastic generic tropes. Miéville came to prominence as part of a boom in British science fiction/fantasy writing during the 1990s. He was affiliated with the loose grouping of writers associated with the 'new weird', especially the post-new wave author M. John Harrison, who is credited with coining the term. Miéville's fiction aims, in the words of Sherryl Vint, to rediscover 'the fantastic's capacity to make the familiar strange and to provoke us to see how the world might be otherwise' ('Introduction: Special Issue on China Miéville', *Extrapolation*, 50.2, 2009).

Miéville has contributed to literary discourse with a growing body of criticism that attempts to redefine the fantastic and the weird, which he sees as intertwined. In our conversation, we discussed how the fantastic becomes a general rubric encompassing the unreal genres of science fiction, fantasy, and the gothic. We discussed the way that the fantastic, roughly similar but distinct from the weird, crosses over into the suggestive category of pulp modernism. The category of the weird encompasses both the weird genre bleeds of the classic pulp fiction of the 1920s, best exemplified by the science fiction–horror–detective narratives of H. P. Lovecraft, and the weird affect brought about in such narratives by contact with an irreducible alterity and the consequent vertiginous retro-historicisation that such encounters engender.

My conversations with Miéville, Luckhurst, and Salisbury have led me to think through this hybrid character of the weird and pulp modernism, as it strains against the very impulses felt towards genre most broadly — critically, fictively, and politically. This can be opened out through thinking along the boundaries of genre and fiction, the 'problem' of postmodernism amid the field of the fantastic, about definitions of old weird and new weird, and some reflections on Miéville's book, *The City and the City*.

Perhaps the prime example of the weird is the sublime cosmicism of Lovecraft's stories, in which alien gods are revealed to have been among us for aeons, the realisation of which induces the weird affect. The term directly invoked the pulp tradition of the old weird of Lovecraft and his contemporaries, but sought to move beyond simplistic classifications and reactionary politics by seeking inspiration in later writers such as Mervyn Peake and Michael Moorcock. Peake's gothicised fantasy in his *Gormenghast* trilogy is an obvious and acknowledged influence on Miéville's urban fantastic, while Moorcock played a key role in the gestation of the experimental new wave of science fiction as both writer and editor for key journal *New Worlds*. Following on from Peake and Moorcock, Miéville's writing is explicitly set against more conservative forms of generic fantasy, and especially the mythical consolations of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Roger Luckhurst discussed this context for Miéville's writing. 'There was that moment in the 1990s when it became clear that something odd was happening,' he told me, 'in that there was a space that

opened up in Britain as opposed to America which seemed to be fostering an incredible amount of activity.'

What this meant was a reinvention of the machinery of science fiction and fantasy from Miéville and some of his contemporaries; work with a political edge that, as Luckhurst adds, gave the boom 'a really interesting flavour, a sense of urgency to it, that perhaps genre was allowing them to do things that other fiction couldn't'. In a manifesto statement published as 'Long Live the New Weird' in 2003 in the magazine *The Third Alternative*, Miéville wrote that genres, 'fuzzy sets at the best of times, are all of a sudden fuzzier than ever' ('Long Live the New Weird', *The Third Alternative*, 35, 2003). Miéville disavowed the term as it swiftly became a marketing category; nonetheless the phrase retains a certain resonance, especially regarding *The City and the City's* hybrid of police procedural, urban fantasy, and Eastern European Surrealism. Such concerns dovetail with Miéville's commitment to political activism: 'this is post-Seattle fiction', he writes. If capitalism is a fantasy, then fantastic genres such as the generic hybrids of the new weird are potentially critical symbolic forms capable of a metaphorical social commentary that the confines of mundane realist fiction inhibit. It is this potential that Miéville's fiction both embodies and realises.

On *The City and the City*

At a conscious level I was interested in questions of political borders, and national borders, and cultural borders, and so on, and their supposed hermeticism and in fact their regular porosity.

— China Miéville, Interview

The City and the City (2009) starts with the discovery of the body of a murdered young woman in the fictional Eastern European city of Beszál. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that this is no ordinary city: Beszál inhabits the same space as Ul Qoma, an entirely separate metropolis with its own customs, history, and economy. The inhabitants of these two cities have learnt to co-exist and 'unsee' any inconvenient encounters, while a mysterious authority known as The Breach polices the permeable border, administering harsh penalties for any transgressions. Travelling from one city to the next requires passage via diplomatic checkpoints. Inspector Borlú of Beszál's Extreme Crime Squad investigates, and becomes, in effect, a guide for the reader. The murdered woman in *The City and the City* is an archaeology student whose research raises the possibility of a mysterious third city, Orciny, existing somewhere in the interstices of Beszál and Ul Qoma. One way of reading this complex crosshatching of material environments is to see them as analogous with the instability of genre boundaries themselves, with how genres are inherently overdetermined hybridic formations that overlap, intersect, and mesh with others. This is often manifested in unstable and disorientating topographies throughout Miéville's writing, and *The City and the City* is no exception:

An elderly woman was walking slowly away from me in a shambling sway. She turned her head and looked at me. I was struck by her motion, and I met her eyes. I wondered if she wanted to tell me something. In a glance I took in her clothes, her way of walking, of holding herself, and looking.

With a hard start, I realised that she was not on GunterStráz at all, and that I should not have seen her.

— *The City and the City*, p. 12

While it would be a mistake to read the novel purely as a treatise on the boundaries between genres, the narrative operates as a kind of 'weird noir', probing the porous borders of crime and fantasy fictions. Yet the book can also be read as having no fantastic elements at all, as Miéville pointed out when we met, having outlined its realist and crime fiction contours. 'And yet most people still read it to some extent as a fantastic book,' he notes, 'which I'm not criticising.' This issue of the fantastic, and the related but distinct category of the weird, is important to gain an understanding of Miéville's fiction.

Old Weird, New Weird

This category of the weird: obviously there's a question about whether it is a useful category. Now, I think it is. I think there's something distinct about these aesthetics which makes them, while indelibly part of the fantastic tradition, also have a specificity which is useful to look at and try and learn something from.

— China Miéville, Interview

Miéville teaches a course at the University of Warwick on early twentieth-century weird fiction, in which he has theorised a 'para-canon' of the weird in which certain key names recur, notably William Hope Hodgson, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and of course, Lovecraft. This is the *locus classicus* of the 'haute weird', roughly spanning the period 1880–1940 and particularly associated with the journal *Weird Tales* (1923–1954). Pulp fiction, according to this schema, shadows the modernist avant-garde and replicates its autocritique of modernity in crisis. To invoke that suggestive category which Miéville and others have proposed, the weird can be read as an iteration of 'pulp modernism'. As Miéville puts it, Lovecraft's extravagant prose captures 'the careful and precise hysteria of "Pulp Modernist" Weird Fiction' (*Weird Fiction*, p. 512).

Lovecraft's notorious prose, with its constant adjectival deferral of descriptive nouns, encapsulates this pulp modernist aesthetic. The narrator of one of Lovecraft's most well-known stories 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928) starts by saying: 'The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.' Yet this is precisely what the reader is called upon to do: to organise the collage-like collection of documents into a coherent whole that constantly threatens to disintegrate. The fragmented and citational structure recalls nothing so much as the collage cut-up of T. S. Eliot's

The Waste Land, which was itself the subject of a vulgar parody by Lovecraft entitled *The Waste Paper: A Poem of Profound Insignificance*. Somewhat bizarrely, Lovecraft and Eliot were similar in many ways, both being classicist pseudo-patrician Anglophiles with a strong streak of anti-Semitism. The importance of this Old Weird on the New Weird is a point taken up by Luckhurst:

What's striking about the new weird is it rediscovers a weird fiction from the 1920s, associated with *Weird Tales*, and H. P. Lovecraft's significance has ramped up as a consequence. Not because it was always there — but actually he was this embarrassing figure who can't write and has terrible, clattering adjectives all over the place and so on. It's only subsequently, it's only through really compelling arguments by China Miéville and others, that actually this is a really interesting, lateral, subversive, hybrid form — pathologically racist, obviously — but also really quite interesting in terms of its genre slippage.

— Roger Luckhurst, Interview

This is an important point. In our interview, Miéville talks of how the weird and high modernisms are 'exactly linked': they are 'a differently inflected statement of the same concerns, the same anxieties, the same attempted solutions'. Mark Fisher has argued that this kind of 'pulp modernism reacquaints modernism with its disavowed pulp doppelgänger', and places a special emphasis on the decisive role played by Edgar Allan Poe, from whom twin genealogies of modernism — through Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, and subsequently Eliot — and pulp (Lord Dunsany, M. R. James, Lovecraft) — '(d)evolve'.¹ There has been a wider movement to rehabilitate Lovecraft, who, according to contemporary literary critic Edmund Wilson, was nothing more than a hack who peddled bad art. The institutionalised hierarchies that separate high and low cultures contaminate each other, and this infective cross-pollination, like Lovecraft's alien gods, has always been with us. They are not simply assimilable to the convenient and comparatively recent theories of postmodernism.

The Problem of Postmodernism

There has been a tendency over the last probably decade and a half, maybe longer, which is a sort of flattening out of the sharp edges of theory within certain kind of arenas, and one of the effects is that certain types of concerns have become default associated with particular theoretical paradigms. So if you come across a text which is anyway interested in interstitiality, or marginality, or subalternity, there's a notion that *ipso facto* this can be thought of as a 'postmodern' text.

— China Miéville, Interview

As a writer associated with genre slippage, Miéville's writing is sometimes labelled postmodernist, a problematic term that is linked to both aesthetic and

theoretical paradigms — as he points out when I raise ‘the “p” word’. A common defining characteristic of postmodernist models is the perceived erasure of boundaries between elite (or ‘high’) culture, and populist mass culture, along with a suspicion of explanatory grand narratives such as Marxism (even as postmodernist theory itself turns into a totalising grand narrative). More narrowly, postmodernism has been chronologically defined as a new mode of art having come *after* modernism, dating from roughly the immediate post-war period and covering visual art, literature, and architecture. Unsurprisingly for someone who identifies himself so closely with Marxism, Miéville has resisted the postmodern label. As he has pointed out, voguish categories of interstitiality or marginality do not have to be claimed solely by postmodernism. Fredric Jameson offered a compelling, if controversial, Marxist mapping of the postmodern in his essay ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ (1984) which identified disparate cultural symptoms to the same diagnosed totality, a product of the latest stage of global capitalism.

For Jameson, the supreme literary expression of postmodernism was to be found in the sub-genre of science fiction, cyberpunk. Jameson has written extensively on science fiction, and has followed something of a Marxist party line on differentiating between science fiction and fantasy. This is an echo of the work of Marxist academic Darko Suvin, which has sought to valorise science fiction, as concerned with radical transformation, at the expense of fantasy, demeaned as consolatory — arguably in much the same way that modernism has sought to disavow its pulp doppelgänger. Like the great modernist writers and artists, Miéville proposes that ‘Weird Fiction writers are responding to capitalist modernity, entering, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period of crisis in which its cruder nostrums of progressive bourgeois rationality are shattered’ (*Weird Fiction*, p. 513).

Miéville’s writing, in the stance he adopts in his literary and cultural criticism, and in his fiction, can clearly be read as much against this Marxist formulation as against postmodern theory. His fiction clearly embodies and foregrounds the hybrid status of genres, but hybrids make sense only if there are categories to fuse, as opposed the more generalised de-differentiation proposed by postmodernist theory. While it may be possible to argue that there has been an interpenetration of high and low cultures, as any student of contemporary fiction can testify, it is equally clear that borders are crossed only to turn up elsewhere (as the plot of *The City and the City* metaphorically shows). While literary fiction has in some cases quoted, adopted, or revised the tropes, themes, and structures of generic fiction, the borders between the two are enforced and policed by gatekeepers such as literary prizes and journals.

Genre vs. Literary Fiction

The aesthetic offers certain things. It’s like Oulipo. You know, a constraint is both a constraint but can also be enabling, and indeed both at the same time. The pulp narrative forms of science fiction and fantasy I think can sometimes be quite stunting narratologically.

But equally the fantastic aesthetic can be liberating and emancipating
and illuminating in a way that other forms can't.

— China Miéville, Interview

The tedious standoff between genre and literary fiction has a tendency to flare up sporadically, and has even included Miéville himself, if only tangentially. In 2003 the magazine *Granta* nominated its third top twenty of young writers, following lists made in 1983 and 1993. Editor Ian Jack explicitly excluded genre writers, and backhandedly acknowledged Miéville even as he dismissed his fiction as 'dark fantasy' (somewhat inconsistently, the crime writer David Peace was included). This returns us, via a fairly circumspect route, to *The City and the City* and its doppelgänger streets. Writing in the science fiction/fantasy magazine *Locus* in February 2010, Gary K. Wolfe called up Miéville's writing as 'one of the best and most important' examples of the genre. Evoking Miéville's densely metaphorical model of crosshatched streets, arbitrary policing, and bureaucratic checkpoints, Wolfe comments on the current relationship between genre and literary fiction: 'No matter what version of 2009 we choose to look at, we're vaguely aware that there's *another* version that others are seeing.' Wolfe points out that just as some writers associated with the literary shelves of a bookshop, such as Jonathan Lethem, are content to freely incorporate and acknowledge generic elements into their writing, there are others, such as Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson, who seem only too keen to disavow such an association, even as their writing draws on identifiable generic tropes. For Wolfe, this reminds us that 'the mainstream can be accessed only through an elaborate diplomatic checkpoint'.

This is something Miéville himself touches upon in our conversation, albeit indirectly, in pointing to the spat over the 2009 Man Booker prize. The respected American science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson had lambasted the judges for ignoring British science fiction, proposing that the prize go to *Yellow Blue Tibia* by Adam Roberts (like Miéville, a left-leaning academic and science fiction/fantasy author). While Chair James Naughtie conceded Robinson had a point, fellow judge John Mullan, professor of English at University College London, responded by suggesting that science fiction had become a self-enclosed ghetto relegated to 'a special room in bookshops'.² Mullan reiterates a tired accusation that science fiction was essentially for infantilised anoraks, in opposition to Robinson's contention that the genre represented the best British writing today. These positions have been rehearsed many times before, and always risk turning into a stale debate about status anxiety and legitimisation. Miéville did not reference Mullan by name, but his reflection on the furore was apposite:

This recitation of really tired, meaningless, lame clichés that were so pitiful. You get the sense that, if they were actually meant, one just felt sorry for him. Charitably, they seemed to be designed to sort of deliberately *épater les geeks*.

Miéville's fiction is a model of writing that manages to foreground its generic features while exploring the creative potential of those constraints. It is

not surprising that Miéville directed me to the Oulipo, the group of 1960s European writers who promoted and practiced constrained writing, the deliberate use of restrictive rules to open up creative possibilities. This opening up of creativity under constraint returns us to the quote that began this article. China Miéville is a testimony to the capacity of the fantastic genres to allow writers to do things that default realist fiction inhibits. Such fantastic hybrid fictions allow us to think and unthink the world and our relation to it.

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Kraken is out now, from Macmillan.

The City and the City is available from Pan Macmillan.

China Miéville is best known as a writer of fantasy and science fiction, and has won and been nominated for many awards for his fiction. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck's School of Law and has a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics. His doctoral thesis, a critical dialogue with Marxist legal theorist Evgeny Pashukanis, was published as *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law*, in 2005. He is a well known activist for the Socialist Workers Party. He teaches Creative Writing at Warwick University and has published a growing body of scholarly work on speculative fiction, including editing the 'Marxism and Fantasy' special issue for *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* (2002) and co-editing the recent anthology, *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* (2009) with Mark Bould. This interview and article were undertaken prior to the release of China Miéville's latest novel, *Kraken*. Miéville's short story 'Tis the Season' is available to view online [here](#). Miéville has compiled an annotated list of 'Fifty Fantasy and Science Fiction Novels That Socialists Should Read' on the Fantastic Metropolis website: see [here](#) for details.

Notes

1. Mark Fisher, 'Memorex for the Krakens: *The Fall's* Pulp Modernism', *k-punk* (8 May 2006) <<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007759.html>> [accessed 19 May 2010]. For information about a 2007 seminar both Miéville and Fisher participated in on 'Weird Realism', see Mark Fisher, 'Weird Realism', *k-punk* (19 February 2007) <<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/009048.html>> [accessed 19 May 2010].
2. Alison Flood, 'Science fiction author hits out at Booker judges', *Guardian*, 18 September 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/sep/18/science-fiction-booker-prize>> [accessed 18 May 2010].

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- 'M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire: Weird; Hauntological versus and/or and and/or or?', in *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, 4 (2008), 105–28 (Online version available at <http://blog.urbanomic.com/urbanomic/archives/2009/09/collapse_volume.html> [accessed 14 May 2010])
- *Un Lun Dun* (London: Macmillan, 2007)
- *Looking for Jake and Other Stories* (London: Macmillan, 2005)
- 'Reports of Certain Events in London' (2004), republished in *Looking for Jake and Other Stories*, pp. 53–78
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- *Perdido Street Station* (London: Macmillan, 2000)
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