

THE UNSEEN CITY
THE CITY IN *THE CITY* & *THE CITY*

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Abstract

Following the classical tradition of a certain line of SciFi anticipatory literature to contribute to a political reflection on the nature of spatial urban processes and possible [urban] futures, British writer China Miéville's 2009 novel *The City & the City* is perhaps the most original recent one. The scenery of this extremely complex novel, a *noir* plot, is a complex system of two partially crosshatched cities, this is to mean, two different cities that almost practically share the same space but are legally obliged to ignore and *unsee* each other. The people, social and economic structures in a city work without taking into consideration what is happening in the other one because everybody has simply been taught to *unsee* everything concerning the foreign city. The subtle mechanism here is that the border is really a construction of collective psychology.

This original situation can be used as a starting point of reflection on a lot of consciously or unconsciously ignored, *unseen* urban spaces which have become invisible by means of a sort of negative collective memory. Many times because of some kind of *trauma* or unresolved conflict, most of the time due to the necessity of repression of a historical event that took place in a precise place, exceptionally some vast spaces are *unseen* by the city, establishing a very original relationship with the formally accepted one. Often these places/spaces evolve in a parallel way to the rest of the city but, as if they are not where they really are, urban processes adopt original forms, both inside and in the border or buffer zones.

By reading Miéville's novel from a planner's point of view, we establish some conclusions that can be useful in the consideration of the nature of urban evolution and development, the nature of difference and borders as tools or methods for understanding cities. Our hypothesis is that these spaces are a very interesting laboratory to analyze the real nature of urban processes, evolution, and cognitive, communicative or informational structures in cities. This paper presents some materials coming from spatial-timing event history (Schlögel, Koselleck) which could be of application to different identified cases of urban *unseeing* of different origins (in Spain, East Europe-Former Yugoslavia, Near East and Latin America).

Keywords: Difference, Recognition, Divided Cities, Narratives, Complexity and Communication

A map says more than a thousand words.
But it also silences more than what could be said in a thousand words.

Karl Schlägel: *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit.*
(*In Space We Read the Time*).

1. INTRODUCTION

The body of a young student of Humanities appears thrown in a wasteland of a town, somewhere in Eastern Europe in the Balkans or Carpathian regions, sure a place once Ottoman Empire. Police investigations indicate from the very beginning that it is a murder, and that it has taken place in another city in the same region and the corpse has been transported from one to another, the purpose is not clear. It is the starting point of a *noir* novel, a turn on the screw over the topic of two police officers of different corps, from different cities, to whom both necessity and legal indeterminacy forces to cooperate in the resolution of a common case. What is most original in *The City & The City*ⁱⁱ (China Miéville, 2009) is that both cities, City-States with very different cultures and languages, with different political and economic systems, which implies both very different geopolitical links as permanent international tensions between the two cities, are *topol ganger*, they are "crosshatched" one with the other. Territorially separated, the city and the city, Beszel and Ul Qoma, are not spatially but the same city. The place where the crime has been committed and the place where the corpse has been thrown are not physically separated more than a few hundred yards, but the Euclidean dimension here is not relevant. In no city in the world straight line indicates the shortest route between two points; the topology is complicated for many reasons, spatial, functional, legal ... In Beszel and Ul Qoma, travel from one point in a city sharing geographical coordinates to the one on the other is an international trip, visas and passports needed. For a Beszeli it is easier and more natural to travel to Athens or Budapest than to the crosshatched Ul Qoma. But it is also easier to get any kind of information from those, for the citizens of both cities have been educated to "unsee" the other one, the only possibility for maintaining the identity of each one.

2. THE CITY IN *THE CITY & THE CITY*

The scenario of *The City & The City* is probably the most original and complex scene so far of this century narrative. Its author, China Miéville, born in London in 1972, is considered one of the most important writers of fantasy genre in recent years, most of his works belonging to the genre of science fiction. Socialist, Marxist declared, his work continues a line of use of this genre as a critical approach many times also linked with utopian-dystopian sub-genre. We should remember that the modern origins of the subgenre, apart from classical roots (More, Locke, Swift...), adopt a preference for urban scenarios, and that is contemporary to the origins of modern urban and town planning in the second half of the 19th century. Because dysfunctions and imbalances caused by the synthesis industrial revolution/economic

liberalism within the framework of the urban capitalism were, throughout the revolutionary century, more sensitive in the progressively exponentially overcrowded urban environment, population concentration in new cities or unrecognizable neighborhoods in mature cities because the masses who emptied the camps following the concentration of the modern means of production in factories against which traditional craft family techniques could not compete. Besides the alternative New Zealand of *Erewhon*, by William Butler (1872), the future Boston of *Looking Backward: 2000 - 1887*, by Edward Bellamy (1887) and, above all, the future London of *News from Nowhere, or An Epoch of Rest*, by William Morris (1890), the literary Socialists contemporaries of anarchist geographers such as Élisée Reclus or Piotr Kropotkin, or the German urban modern handbooks, with the Spanish Cerdà as a precedent. Without the synthesis between technique-theory-narrative that Ebenezer Howard put in *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*ⁱⁱⁱ (1898), and his seminal putting into practice in the Garden Cities program, nothing of what we see, and potentially *unsee*, around us would be as it is. *To-morrow* can indeed be read as a text of anticipatory science fiction and, just because of it, as the criticism of the liberal industrial city that it is. Through the large windows of the scenarios of *Things to Come*, the movie directed by William Cameron Menzies in 1936 showing the reconstruction of the world after a devastating war in the form of a utopia of peace and well-being, it is possible to recognize urban forms that unequivocally recall the radial-concentric models proposed by Howard. The same way that a handbook can be read as a narrative, the story of a process, so the novel *News from Nowhere* can be read as an urban project. Morris, the man who made some of the best 19th-century designs, tapestry, textiles, furniture and houses is not just writing at the end of his life, while organizing the Socialist League, a simple fantasy tale, even if full of criticism as it is. *Nowhere... is*, without a doubt, the project of a city, of a society, a world: the project of a social order.

Nowhere... is, with no doubt, from his same title, the reference for *Neverwhere*, the TV series created by Nel Gaiman for the BBC in the 1990s, one hundred years after the publication of the book of Morris. Perhaps, a hypothesis, the 20th century has completed time-travel as a trigger for a possible discussion on alternative worlds. Perhaps it is simultaneity as provided by the literary invention of the *ansible* by Ursula K. Le Guin, what may us overpass the inquiry from the future, not anymore necessary projection but, according to Fredric Jameson, archaeology. The uncertainty of the future can somehow subtract force to a necessary criticism that, in any case, refers to the present. Here it can be reinforced another literary tradition, that of the *doppelganger*, bilocated double that can materialize elsewhere, in a simultaneous and parallel space, our shadows and darkness. Like an individual's double, it can also bilocate in its double a city, a society, a territory in its often subterranean *wonderland*. The spatial overlap of the city and its double provides precise biunivocal relations, overlapping strata which allow in a hypothetical game of opacity and transparency the outstanding of a reality that is no more than the double in the surface, through an elevator as in *Metropolis* or the *Tower of the Seven Hunchbacks* in the Morería quarter in Madrid.

As in *Alice*, the well and the mirror are the doors to worlds that are the same in the work of Miéville. In *Un Lun Dun* (2007), the two protagonists girls enter the underground UnLondon in chase of an broken umbrella into a world inhabited by London rubbish, which have turned animated and invisible to it, and where the almighty Big Brother is a ubiquitous cloud of living smog who periodically climbs the surface world. In the Novella *The Tain* (2002),

Miéville takes up from Borges the idea of the *imago* and narrates the revolution from the world on the other side of the mirror against this to which that one is subjected. London is the recurrent setting, sharing *steampunk* imaginary with Dr. Quatermass, with Francis Blake and Philip Mortimer in *La Marque Jaune* and *L'onde Septimus*, with *Neverwhere*. These worlds that extend below the surface of the perceived sensitive world, or on the other side of the mirror, work as representation at scale 1:1 of this one. They are even more ambitious than the maps described by Borges in the *Universal History of Infamy*, and some way resolved in the paradox which make for Umberto Eco impossible the project of a map of the Empire at the scale 1: 1, since it is not a representation, a *normal* map, but, as the actual pictured one, dynamic.

The city is, since the 19th century, the main scenario for crisis, conflict, catastrophe, in their broader senses of destruction/creation, of permanent, sometimes accelerated, always latent, (r)evolution, theater of interests, combat and of violence, of winners and losers, life and death. Because the city is, above all, a relational space, perhaps nothing more than a relational space, hence the importance of the space-time topology, the topology that can be extremely simplified with overlapping or mirror mechanisms. Franz Kafka in an implicit way, Bruno Schulz quite explicitly, translated the double to the surface, this side of the mirror, and made him walk with us, not alternately like Jekyll and Hyde, but at the same time. It cannot be otherwise than the homage that opens *The City & The City* is a literal quotation of Schulz's *Sklepy Cynamonowe* (Cinnamon Shops, 1934). Because the city and the city, double the one of the other, can only be crosshatched in the same space. UnLondon, New Crobuzon, Embassytown can be and have been for Miéville perfect scenarios to face topics such as xenophobia and racism (*Perdido Street Station*), language (*Embassytown*) or religion (*Kraken*) using the weird tale; in many cases they are not but a weird London, nothing more than an intentionally deformed London, classic and simplified comic or tragic scenes inseparable from the argument. When it is space, not only the political and social structures and categories, which needs to be recognizable, deformation is not possible just in space, it is only possible in the relational world.

Possibly the most famous tale in *Cinnamon Shops* is "Ulica Krokodyli"iv ("The Street of Crocodiles"). Schulz describes a "old and beautiful" plan of the city, "made in the Baroque style" in which the printed has "managed to express all the complex and multiple flurry of streets and alleys", and in which a district, the street of crocodiles, "shines as a white emptiness, the same with on geographical maps it usually indicates the polar regions, the unexplored lands of dubious existence. Only lines representing some streets were drawn in black and marked with a simple letter, unadorned, unlike the noble writing of Roman characters of other writings. Apparently, the cartographer refused to consider this part as an element of the city and expressed his objection on the subsequent print." Schulz explains the cartographer's reasons for its consideration as "a parasite", "pretentious", inhabited by "the slag, the mob [...], for the true moral waste", of which the rest of the citizens were kept away, to continue describing the area as a mixture of depravity, modernity, urban degeneration and uncertain, capricious, codes, of "partial and hesitant" reality. Actually the entire book takes place in the city in which that "objective reality - i.e., the empirical world of the senses - is always shaking to the edge of disintegration" v, an almost Platonic world, metaphysical stage, where the tailor dummies are created as in the image and likeness of men as men "in the

image and likeness of the mannequins"^{vi}, a "physical world as a mirror of double reflection"^{vii}, a territory which runs parallel and beyond conventional space and time, disfigured maybe because of a collective trauma.

The map becomes part of the device between the reality of the human and the reality of the puppets in *Street of Crocodiles*, the animated movie made by the Quay Brothers in 1986 based on Schulz's story. The map is a representation of a desire that can be positive or negative, repressive. Because, as Karl Schlögel points, if anything that happens happens in time and space, "we can find any spatial correspondence in the form of a map to anything"^{viii}. Maps indicate, show knowledge, but above all they indicate interest; they represent, but also "the world changes its appearance on maps that are made according to the angle of view and the position from which is regarded" as well, as if it were a double reflection mirror. "Maps", Schlögel says, "speak the language of the authors and silent what the cartographer does not want to talk about or do not know how."

The map can even project the desire, as in the anticipatory novel by William Morris, and then it becomes a plan. The famous plan of final image made by the team of architect and urban planner Josef Paul Kleihues, Curator of the *Internationale Bauausstellung* (International Exhibition of Architecture) of 1980 in West Berlin, shares some similarity with the map described by Schulz in *Cinnamon Shops*. If there it was the Street of Crocodiles, here it is the entire East Berlin which is veiled, denied his knowledge and interest in the terms of Schlögel, so that the new urban developments, mostly planned for social housing for lower classes and immigrants, adopt a peripheral position; what lies beyond is the "empty white of the unexplored land of dubious existence". A plan which tries to present a final image gives us so much information on the form as on the topology, on relational aspects, in this case on the absence of them. The map says more because of what it is silent. The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 restored the communication, transmission of information, knowledge and interest, between both parts of the formerly divided city: a minimal change in the physical form, superlative in the geopolitical. In the specifically urban realm, topologically, the wall would be the equivalent of as if for twenty-eight years the crossing of the seven bridges of Königsberg which Euler toured in the 18th century would have had prohibited for any reasons. Relations do not always depend on the physical. A barrier, an order, fear, can be more effective than explosives.

3. .

The Beszéli inspector Tyador Borlú, in charge of the murder investigation, asks the agent Lizbyiet Corwi if she had ever left Beszel.

"Sure," he said. "I've been to Romania. I've been to Bulgaria."

"Turkey?"

"No. You?"

"There. And London. Moscow. Paris, once, a long time ago, and Berlin. West Berlin as it was. It was before they joined."

"Berlin?" she said. [...] "So you were in Berlin. Do you speak German then?"
"I used to," I said. "" *Ein bisschen*. "
"Why were you there?"
"I was young. It was a conference: "Policing Split Cities". They had sessions on Budapest and Jerusalem and Berlin, and Beszél and Ul Qoma."
"Fuck! "
"I know, I know. That's what we said at the time. Totally missing the point."
"*Split Cities*? I'm surprised the acad let you go."

The surprise, almost offensive, to the delegations of Beszél and Ul Qoma in that Police Conference is their comparative with cities divided or split into two territories. Because the city and the city are actually two cities which share the same space. Although they once were a single city they are not to be so, the reasons are not clear, instead they have become two, without having to build a wall, fly bridges, change the form. The mechanisms of creation of these topologically engaged cities consist of an absolute rupture of relations, just topological, not necessarily physical mechanisms. In systemic terms of communication, the basic, seminal, operation is just differentiation, establishment of limits, of a virtual border. The space that once comprised a unique city becomes, in Beszél and Ul Qoma, either *total* space of one or another, *alter* to the other, or *crosshatched*, shared by both. The required operation of any constitution of an urban system, observation, is just simply forbidden.

Beszélis and Ulqomans have been educated "unsee" the city other, the space, buildings and objects, animals, people. In crosshatched trees in crosshatched parks (the green area Madjlyna in Beszél, Kwaidso Park in Ul Qoma) fathers and mothers of a city watch while they train their children to unsee the children playing at their side but in the other city. In the 50s and 60s last century, Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman worked on the interactions between people, especially in public spaces, microsociology. As if it were a theatrical stage, the public space is the space of (re) presentation as a prelude to (re) cognition. In the city and the city only public spaces are obviously susceptible to crosshatch, only some of them are. We can guess the possibility of inattention, of repression of the observation, of some voluntary look. Unseeing implies beyond this the repression of the senses, seeing, hearing, smelling, of any physical contact of any person with the other city. Following Goffman, *Behavior in Public Placesix*, visibility and construction of common imaginaries go hand in hand. In the city and the city it is not visibility but the invisibility of the other the main tool to build identity and community. Because unseeing overrides the possibility of construction of a collective memory between the two cities, in terms of Halbwachs. Following Jan Assmannx, *communicative memory*, a variation of the collective memory but not supported on community or social rites, but in everyday communication, needs of a non-specialized perception, unstable, even disorganized, and is in the basis ("contemplation of the exchange of roles") on the recognition line developed from Hegel to Honneth.

Since the split ("*Cleavage*"), any proper representation and recognition of the other city have been cancelled. Each city has evolved and changed far from the other. We get the impression that in the complex space of Eastern Europe, Beszél is a more Western City, with a language and culture of unequivocal Slavic roots, more sober architecture, with a democratic system not free of corruption; Ul Qoma reminds more of an eastern city of traditions more linked to

the Middle East, a more rigid and authoritarian, single-party system in the manner of an Ataturk or Tito's personalistic parties. Traditionally poorer, Ul Qoma have experienced, despite the implicit blockade of the United States, an economic renaissance that is based on the attraction of foreign investment, and has modernized its physical structure while Beszel suffers of some kind of stagnation. Police instruments one and the other are example of the distance between the two cities.

Michel Foucault, in his annual course at the Collège de France for the 1977-78 academic year on *Sécurité, territoire, population*^{xi}, developed the idea of the role of the police in the construction and maintenance of the geopolitical balance between States in Europe as well as the maintenance of internal order. When defining and determining what is internal to each of the cities is so complicated and subtle, when competitive space is not only physical, but relational, and form and topology, as what is feasible and valid, may be even contradictory readings if you aren't trained in *unseeing*, then the balance and recognition between the police officers of the city and the city is not enough to ensure the maintenance of order in the supersystem. And then it becomes necessary a higher police, a police that acts where endanger the fragility of the system. And so there appears *Breach*. Any violation of the borders, a step not authorized from one to another city, mere physical or verbal contact, smuggling or simply ask for fire or walking a dog in another city are forbidden, repressed and provoke immediate action from rather than the police Beszel or Ul Qoma, but a police force that is above the laws of both, since its purpose is not the maintenance of the order of each, but the order that ensures the identity of each. The commission of a breach involves immediate action of *Breach*, invisible to the eyes of the citizens of each city, permanently vigilant, equipped with some techniques at the service of a reason and a specific power of a higher nature, which acts *ex officio*, and can be invoked by every one of the cities or both in case of suspicion. A man who kills his wife in Beszel, while escaping he enters a shop, change his clothes and leaves the store in Ul Qoma, is untouchable for both one and other city police, but not for *Breach*, which is in charge of capturing him and make him disappear; it is not known how, it simply happens how the man disappears from one and another city. A foreign power, a delegated power, a joint power, nobody knows it for sure, endowed with "incredible, almost impossible to decipher tools", to "organize, burn, restore" order, *Breach* works, is respected and trusted, the fear linked to the own training in *unseeing*. An accident, a fire in Ul Qoma in an almost crosshatched area can be followed through television in Beszel, through foreign correspondents, never *in situ*, because you are not legally on the site, if do not want *Breach* to intervene. And intervention, it cannot be otherwise, always implies violence. Wolfgang Sofsky, in his *Violencexii*, shows us the use of violence not as something that could be considered as part of the malfunction of the social system, but, on the contrary, as inherent in the contract on the basis of it. The law only acquires its foundations when it is used in a continuous and permanent way and, if necessary, with explicit use of force. What is feasible becomes valid through this use. The real, almost natural, possibility of committing a gap, by simply watching the other, Beszelis and Ulqomans, is fully repressed until its practical improbability, through the use of education in a dissociated law from the natural order, because the social order is not the natural order, and the distance, the gap between the two, proportionally determines the amount of technique needed for the maintenance of social order. Quoting Sofsky, "[law]gets recognition and legitimacy in the way that it truly guarantees the order". Violence is inherent to the maintenance of the identity of the system,

the recognition is linked to bullying. And so much violence is applied through weapons as much as implicitly through the practice of the 'organization of the lives, the production of goods and the farming in the fields', building an effective order no longer political but biopolitical.

The social contract needs Beszel and Ul Qoma polices; the contract between both cities needs *Breach*. And the contract implies a "compensatory injustice". Breach is especially hated and respected by the more nationalists groups of each city, "without Breach there is no homeland", despite the misgivings of the partial submission to a "foreign" power, of unfairness, the paradox of the situation: the utopia of the order vs. freedom.

So *The City & The City* becomes, besides, a treatise on the nature of the urban edge, leading to the extreme the establishment of limits as the key operation on the basis of turning physical land into urban space. The first, elementary operation in the construction of the territory is the establishment of a limit: the Etruscan *sulcus primigenium*, result of a pair of oxen plow line; the *choros*, as created by Daedalus to be danced by Ariadna and that Hephaestus points as the source of the trace of any settlement, as Homer describes us; through pointing a here, a there, an inside, an outside, by establishing a system of rules here other than there. The space story is not but the progressive construction of a map of domain, of a map of lines that express the meaning of what any point is if at one side or the other of the drawn line. And the signaling of the points through which the border or limit can be legally crossed is on the basis of the topology, the bridges of Königsberg, the points for controlling what can or cannot be passed to the other side on the basis of a customs system at the border; thus the split between the city and the city, only communicated through a superstructure, the *Copula Hall*, a gigantic building, neither *total* nor *alter*, but a limit, a border that is itself a zone. The interesting thing is that the border is not conceived as a one-dimensional boundary, a line, but as a zone, an area in which happens the conversion of any citizen into a foreigner before leaving to the same space that was entered, a zone where anyone whoever enters just accustomed and forced to unsee a city, leaves unseeing the other. The map with which the visitor leaves the Copula Hall keeps the scale, projection, the conventional symbols of the map with which he has entered, the same territorial frame. But each of the two maps silences a truth, complementary, without simplifying or outlining more than the other. Each map is a map of knowledge, or, better, of recognition. In the same way that the nationalists in the city and the nationalists in the city deny recognition of the other city, so the unionist groups of Beszel and Ul Qoma force the information of their maps hanging in their headquarters testing the nature of the breach, introducing shades in veiled spaces, forcing the representation up to the limits of the interest.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Inspector Borlú, of Beszel, and his *doppelgänger* inspector Dhatt of the *militiya* of Ul Qoma, investigate in the limits beyond what is crosshatched ("here?, what is here?"), under two law systems in two places that are, or not?, the same. The answer to the crime of the young archaeologist of knowledge cannot be solved without a breach which highlights the links and dysfunctions between the actual topology and legal topology of the city and the city, a breach of complicated restoration of order in both. Because if the split is linked to a collective

trauma, repressed up to complete forgetting, absence of a common memory, this split can only be maintained through a necessary conflict, so the legal impossibility of resolution of this conflict is in the basis of the legitimacy of the power in the city and the city, the perpetuation of the system/s of power. The *interstitium*, in which Borlu, at the end of the novel, will go to live, is not only the breach between the city and the city. The *interstitium* is the city and the city, not the negative scenario that is the one for the other, but the dialectical synthesis of both. If violence is inherent to the social system, the conflict is in the basis of its evolution. The city is not the city itself, but the city in relation to the city, Beszel and Ul Qoma, and breach, border, limit, is no more than the necessary operation of differentiation and observation of the difference, of recognition of the difference in the basis of the assumption of the complexity of the urban system. In *The City & The City*, Miéville develops the real possibility as correlate of a utopian fantasy in terms of Ernst Bloch and his *Principle of Hope*, and this development faces us to the nature of the changing of the world, through action, as the only way to make desire possible.

ii Miéville, China. *The City & The City*, Macmillan, Londres 2009. We have worked with the following editions: *Limited Signed Lettered Edition* Subterranean Press, 2009, and the Spanish Translation *La ciudad y la ciudad* by Silvia Schettin Pérez, La Factoría de Ideas, Madrid 2012.

iii The reprint of 1902 *Garden Cities of To-morrow* is undoubtedly the most important text in City Planning ever, and cannot be blamed for the grim and simplistic interpretation-tribute by Le Corbusier in *The Athens Charter* and most of modern functionalist urban planning.

iv Quoted from the Spanish Translation by Elzbieta Bortkiewicz, in *Madurar hacia la infancia. Relatos, inéditos y dibujos*, Siruela, Madrid 2008.

v Nelson, Victoria. *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. y Londres 2001.

vi Schulz, "Traktat o manekinach", en *Cinnamon Shops*.

vii Nelson, *op. cit.*

viii Schlögel, Karl. *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit. Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich y Viena 2003.

ix *Behavior in Public Places. Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*, The Free Press, Nueva York 1963.

x Assmann, Jan, and Czaplicka John. *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, *New German Critique*, 65, 1995 (orig. German in *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1989).

xi Seuil/Gallimard, París 2004.

xii Wolfgang Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt 1996.

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