# Seeing Disorientation: China Miéville's *The City & the City*

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**Abstract** Orientations revealed as false presumably lead to the need for reorientation. Outside this economy, can there be utopian *unorientation* or ambiguous *post-orientation*? The self comes into being in a moment of disorientation, as Althusser's famous scene of being hailed by a policeman on the street makes clear. Althusser represses this moment, but what if we allow for its accompanying self-reflexivity? The fictional cities of China Miéville's *The City & the City* (2009) are set in a fragmented and multi-layered space characterised by displacement and disorientation. This theoretically informed police procedural emphasises disorientation through the form of the detective story and plays with genre orientations through its fantastic/science fictional elements. Most strikingly, it reifies our everyday practices of ignoring certain things around us, using a science fictional novum: the institutionalised practice of 'unseeing'. The novel suggests that the seeing that paradoxically lurks behind unseeing creates disorientation, giving momentary glimpses of ambiguous post-orientations.

## Paris

There is the disorientation of the migrant. There is also the disorientation of the tourist. On my first visits to Paris, I would regularly feel disoriented; not in the small streets of the Latin Quarter, but rather on the wider boulevards. I would be walking along one street and suddenly realise that it pointed in quite another direction from what I thought it should, and momentarily feel lost and out of control.

One explanation for this happening, especially near the Odéon, was that the boulevards set out by Baron Hausmann in the nineteenth century seemed to promise

a safe reference grid, while actually often crossing each other at acute angles. A zone was set up for me – and perhaps for others – in which I experienced a dissonance between physical and imaginary geographies. This was an uncanny, strange area, suggesting the intrusion of a supernatural force or a distortion in space.

Another explanation lay in my attempt to be an anti-tourist, an oxymoronic identity which involves various kinds of unseeing along with seeing. The Eiffel Tower was a cliché and to be ignored, i.e. was not to be used as a landmark, even if it intruded into sight, poking up above the roofs. To look at a map while standing on a street corner would have made me visible as a tourist and by the underlying logic, invisible as a person. Such laws make it easier to get lost. Benjamin writes: 'Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling' (2006: 53).[1]

Becoming disoriented momentarily interrupted my identity as a sovereign subject. Perhaps the hybridity of the anti-tourist subject position invites such fault lines. One learns to encounter such zones with a sense of excitement and of liberation, of *jouissance*; they promise even the utopian possibility of not needing to be oriented, that is, of reaching a state of *unorientation*. Is it possible to resist the economy of the transitory exchange of orientation for disorientation, and then of disorientation for renewed orientation?[2]

One answer to this quandary may be found in the primal scene Althusser presents to us in his narrative of the formation of the subject. A policeman hails us on the street, and we dutifully take up our subject position. Althusser is careful to describe how the hailed individual is turned around, in a 'one-hundred-and-eighty-degree

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[1] 'Sich in einer Stadt nicht zurechtfinden heißt nicht viel. In einer Stadt sich aber zu verirren, wie man in einem Walde sich verirrt, braucht Schulung' (Benjamin 1991: 237).

[2] Compare Franquesa's Lefebvre-inspired critique of an economy by which the mobility 'turn' in the social sciences reinforces the positivism of 'a social reality where things, ideas, and people flow across a seemingly neutral space' (Franquesa 2011: 1012–1013).

physical conversion' (1971: 163).[3] For Althusser, we immediately become subjects, and he erases that moment of hesitation when we are hailed and look wildly around for the unexpected voice. He underlines that he has created this 'little theoretical theatre' for clarity only; 'in reality these things happen without any succession' (1971: 163).[4] Ideology, which makes this immediate subjectification possible, cannot see itself from the outside, according to Althusser (1971: 163–164), contradicting the visibility implied by 'theatre'. But what if we turned this upside down, and took the transitory state of being hailed seriously? Then disorientation would happen every time we stand on the threshold of becoming subjects; and the seeds of disorientation would lie already in our oriented lives as subjects. As I insert myself into the symbolic language of the boulevards, take up my role as tourist and anti-tourist, there is already a slight disjunction, perhaps even suggesting the possibility of resistance to orientation. Any later disorientation is a rehearsal and reminder of that moment.

## The modern city

Paris, Amsterdam, Besźel, Ul Qoma: All are modern cities, places of displacement in a globalised world; the latter two are fictional, appearing in the novel *The City & the City* (2009) by China Miéville.

Disorientation is by no means limited to the urban, the modern and the global. There is a whole tradition of states of disorientation in the literature of deserts, polar ice and the sea, with their sandstorms, snowstorms and fogs. Cities reproduce the shiftiness of experiences similar to such epistemological whiteouts. In cities, the senses can be overloaded to the extent that our surroundings lose meaning, making space mobile, fluid and disorienting.

Iconic figures of displacement enter the scene. The two cities of Besźel and Ul Qoma feature immigrants from the outside. Tourists and professionals visit them: some from the other city, some from the 'West'. The main character, Tyador Borlú, who

[3] '[C]onversion physique de 180 degrés' (Althusser 1970: 31).

[4] '[P]etit théâtre théorique' (Althusser 1970: 31); 'dans la réalité les choses se passent sans aucune succession' (Althusser 1970: 32).

comes from Besźel, visits Ul Qoma. Investigating the murder of a young woman, he crosses the border between the two neighbouring cities in his capacity as a police detective, though he sometimes takes on the role of a tourist. One of his favourite cafés in Besźel is in the Ul Qoma exile community there, Besźel's 'Ul Qomatown'. In such environments, disorientation is likely to occur. Disorientation may sometimes just be a metaphor for less directionally slanted states such as displacement or confusion, but often it is also an effect and a metonym of such moments.

## Orientalism

Situated in post-communist Central or Eastern Europe (or both), the fictive setting of *The City & the City* is sensitive to both the nuances of the political world order and to a literary tradition. A totalitarian communist past replaced by a form of limited turbocapitalism is posited for Ul Qoma; both Besźel and Ul Qoma are caught between globalisation and neo-nationalism, each with their violent aspects in the novel. African and Arab immigrants make their presence felt, along with Balkan refugees. The names and languages of Besźel and Ul Qoma are respectively faux-Hungarian/Slavic/German and faux-Arabic/Urdu. The third, but presumably mythical city mentioned in the book, Orciny, makes reference to the fictional Central European country of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Orsinian Tales* (1976) and *Malafrena* (1979). Miéville himself cites Jan Morris, Alfred Kubin and Franz Kafka as major influences; the concern shown in *The City & the City* with a mysterious and powerful juridical entity, the 'Breach', is a clear reference to Kafka's *The Trial* (1994; orig. *Der Prozess*, 1925).

On the one hand, the setting is redolent of a sense of an imaginary Eastern and Central European space which is both fragmented and multi-layered, both under-represented and over-determined, characterised by Robinson (2007) in his exploration of modernist visions of Eastern and Central Europe as a 'nowhere'. In spite of the origins of the word 'orientation' (to point to the Orient) or the opportunistic neocon renderings in 2003 of Eastern Europe as the 'New Europe', the stereotype of Eastern Europe as a belated region or the complicatedly folded fringe

on Europe's gown still underlies many Western imaginative geographies.[5] As Derrida showed in his essay 'The Other Heading' ('L'autre cap'), originally published in 1990, Western Europe is often figured as a leading direction, as a cap in the French senses of 'head' and 'heading', as a metaphorical capital city with the centralised power of symbolic and economic capital. Derrida's criticism is directed at the inability within this model to open itself to expérience (experiment/experience) rather than just to follow a mechanical programme (1991: 43; 1992: 41).

The very setting of *The City & the City* thus promises to challenge orientations and provide openings to disorientation. Miéville's use of orientalist stereotypes is tempered by the novel's outside gaze on 'Westerners', and indeed its most obvious performative thrust, a critique of the role of 'unseeing' in social spaces in general.

## Detective work

The protagonist of *The City & the City* is a police detective working for the Besźel Poliszai. Working in a noir environment, with a hardboiled attitude incorporating the intellectual, caring and rebellious streaks typical of many latter-day crime fiction detectives, Tyador Borlú goes through many of the topoi of detective fiction. Some of these encapsulate switches from one orientation to another that potentially open up transitory states of disorientation. Detective fiction is about following leads that often turn out to be false – not necessarily dead ends, but the uncovering of evidence which changes the whole frame of reference. Game-changing is particularly marked in *The City & the City*, as the murder Tyador is investigating proves to address the central premises of the whole society to which he belongs, and indeed his own identity. As the investigation progresses, conspiracy upon conspiracy is uncovered, with neo-nationalist politicians, city unification activists, a probably mythical third city, and American hi-tech companies all possibly or definitely connected to the murder. Tyador's role is radically changed as he is first warned that a higher

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[5] Freedman makes the point that the cities sometimes seem to be placed outside Europe, in an 'irreducible margin of indeterminacy' (2013: 21). Indeed, the novel plays on a discourse of 'nested orientalism' or 'nested Balkanism', in which each country in Central and Eastern Europe sees neighbouring countries to the East of themselves as not quite being part of Europe (Bakić-Hayden 1995; Todorova 1997).

investigation bureau (the mysterious 'Breach') will take over the job; then that this takeover will not after all happen; then that he must go to the foreign city of Ul Qoma and work with the police there and in the end that he has become part of the Breach. He undergoes a series of epistemological turns and initiations, broadly indicated by the division of the novel into three parts: 'Besźel', 'Ul Qoma' and 'The Breach'.

The possibility that Tyador will have to give over the investigation to the Breach is raised already in the first section. Such a handover is similar but not quite the same as the handing over of responsibility for an investigation from a local police department to the FBI in a U.S. American crime narrative. In contrast to the regular topos, Tyador welcomes the Breach's expertise and powers, although he persists in his investigations while waiting for the Breach to take over. The real confusion and disorientation sets in when his boss Gadlem informs him that he will, after all, retain responsibility for the investigation, as the conditions for 'invoking' the Breach have not been fulfilled. He finds this frustrating, because he realises that the case might not be solved without the powers of the Breach.

His reaction is confusion – 'Sir? I don't understand . . .' – and then exasperated consternation, 'What? What? What the hell . . .?' (Miéville 2009: 107) – and a certain speechlessness (the ellipsis). Afterwards, he is shown a surveillance video proving that there is no reason to 'invoke' the Breach. Before realising what is depicted, he asks twice: 'What am I looking at?' (Miéville 2009: 108). Fast-forwarding, his boss tells him: 'Deep of the night. Where are we, Borlú ? Detect, detective' (Miéville 2009: 108). When shown a van on the video he writes (in his function as narrator): 'I looked at him for an answer' (Miéville 2009: 108). There is a shuttling back and forth. The fast-forwarding makes 'little cars dance', and Tyador himself manipulates the VCR, 'hurtling the van backwards into my line of sight, then bringing it a few metres forward, pausing it' (Miéville 2009: 108). His boss marks out the mobility in Tyador's detection work, his striving to reorient himself, by theatricalising it: '"There he goes", murmured Gadlem. "He's onto something. He has something, ladies and gentleman"' (Miéville 2009: 108–109). Ultimately, Tyador's disorientation expresses itself physically, in his body: 'I walked back and forth between Gadlem's desk and the frozen car on-screen, the conveyance of the victim' (Miéville 2009: 111). His boss is forced to tell him to '[s]top spinning like a drunk dog' (Miéville 2009: 111).

Tyador must accept his fate however, reorienting himself to continue with the case. The cars stop dancing, he ceases spinning. He learns to become a subject (rather than a drunk dog). He is successfully hailed by his own police officer. But the theatrical element Gadlem introduces into this hailing suggests the possibility that the ideology which makes the scene possible has an outside and can be made visible, that is, made into a 'theatre'. Those who have read *The City & the City* will know that this question of seeing and 'unseeing' is central to the novel's implicit argument about the ways our lives are ordered and oriented.

## Reading work

If you have read the novel, you will also know that I have been purposefully 'unseeing' certain particulars, leaving those who have not read the novel in the dark about its most central premises. The most prominent of these may be summarised as follows. (1) Besźel and Ul Qoma are not neighbouring cities, and not one city split down the middle (as used to be the case in Berlin), but two culturally different cities spatially intermeshed to an extreme degree. (2) Due to some unclear antagonism between the cities, nobody is allowed to see or interact with people, buildings or objects in the other city from the city in which they are located, though they may be moving in the same physical space. (3) Children learn to 'unsee' citizens of the other city as they grow up; visiting tourists, researchers and executives must undergo courses and tests before entering one of the cities and travellers from one city to the other must also train themselves to be able to unsee what they were previously allowed to see. (4) The only way of legally crossing from one city to the other without visiting a third country is to go through the single border control post in an enormous building located at the centre of the cities. (5) Certain physical spaces are shared and others are not; some marginal spaces are disputed and possibly there are some marginal spaces which are not part of either city; some singular spaces of power allow citizens to meet without any unseeing and some belong to the Breach. (6) The two city police forces have jurisdiction over normal crimes; while the Breach is an entity belonging to neither city which attends to all breaches of the rules forbidding seeing and interaction. (7) In addition to these three groups, a possibly mythical fourth one belongs to Orciny, a city said to be located in the interstices between Besźel and Ul Qoma. (8) A special committee of politicians from both cities

liaise between the cities and has the power to call on the Breach to attend to breaches which the Breach has not already attended to by itself. (9) Breachers disappear, at least in some cases becoming part of the Breach. (10) A primordial civilisation existing before the formation of the two intermeshed cities has left behind it mysteriously anachronistic artefacts with strange powers.

This setup creates potentially disorienting urban labyrinths. It also suggests a theoretical sophistication to *The City & the City*, with many of the topoi quite possibly being taken from theoreticians such as Derrida or Bhabha before finding themselves transformed in the novel. The way the word 'breach' means both the crime and the institution that prosecutes the crime hints at the deconstructive; as does the way in which the term 'cleave', with its two diametrically opposed meanings in English, is used of the original act creating the two intermeshed cities. The constant play of third spaces hints at the postcolonial and theories of cultural difference.[6] The setup also smacks of science fiction and the fantastic. The novel plays what becomes an increasingly obvious game with the reader as she attempts to orient herself in the space of genres.[7] In his analysis of the novel, Freedman identifies as a fundamental question its 'generic orientation' (2013: 14). Right from the beginning, the novel successively introduces the central premises above, many in a way that purposefully invite the reader (and in some cases the characters) to believe that the phenomena described are in some way magical or beyond the limits of present-day science and technology. In each case, barring perhaps that of the mysterious artefacts, this proves ultimately not to be the case (compare Freedman 2013: 17). In science fictional terms, this is a text in which all or almost all of the nova involved are social and not technological. Original orientations in the direction of the marvellous are shown to be false orientations, and the reader goes through many transitory states of potential genre disorientation. If genre is a way for the readers to orient themselves while reading, this text brings attention to this fact, and to the always-present possibility that a text may change its genre orientation at some later point.

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[6] In this essay, I focus mainly on the gaze as an (dis)oriented activity. The ways in which the novel elaborates on language, or, as Freedman (2013) has shown, on uneven development, promise fruitful alternative access points.

[7] Compare the reviews summarized in Frelik (2011: 20).

*The City & the City*, through this process of deferral, produces a form of hesitation about explanations that is very similar to the form of indefinite hesitation Todorov (1975, 1976) argues is at the centre of the genre of the pure fantastic. The pure fantastic is, according to Todorov, a genre in which both supernatural and realistic explanations may be given for strange or uncanny events in the text, but which does not make the choice between the two possibilities for the readers. Most fantastic texts are not 'pure', since they usually end by choosing either supernatural or realistic explanations. The genre orientation thus switches in many texts from fantastic to either marvellous (*le merveilleux*, supernatural explanation) or uncanny (*l'étrange*, realistic explanation). In the meantime, the reader (and often a character functioning as an internal focaliser, as in *The City & the City*) is held in a position of what Todorov calls hesitation, or what we might call 'generic disorientation'. In the pure fantastic, this disorientation is never replaced by orientation; except in that this indefinite disorientation is made into an orientation in itself, the genre of the pure fantastic. Perhaps the pure fantastic is, whatever the adjective 'pure' suggests, an example of a *post-orientated*, hybrid genre.

*The City & the City* does not reproduce Todorov's scheme exactly, no doubt because it belongs to another age than that of the nineteenth century fantastic. On the one hand, hesitation is constantly replaced, until it only remains in connection with a few isolated phenomena in the novel's world. These phenomena are: (1) the reason for the original cleavage; (2) the small possibility that Orciny might exist; and (3) above all, the precursor artefacts which may or may not have marvellous powers which would be of great interest to certain American hi-tech firms. On the other hand, hesitation is complicated by the science fictional element in the book, clearly announced by the (alternative) historicity of its fantastic world. The supernatural explanation the reader searches for is magic – in keeping with a fantasy text – or at least a Kafkaesque variant of surrealism, whereas the realistic explanation searched for is pseudoscientific (in keeping with a science fiction text). The successive hesitations or genre disorientations held in place by *The City & the City* are thus between the realistic and the fantastic on the one hand, and between science fiction and fantasy on the other.

This disorientating play with genres is so well constructed as to be continuous, but also so well constructed that it becomes difficult for the reader to unsee the play. In

its games and references, along with its detective providing an allegory of reading, it reveals what Linda Hutcheon would, within her categorisation of metafictions, call a 'diegetic covert narcissism', the models for which are '(1) detective / (2) fantasy / (3) game / (4) erotic' (1984 [1980]: 154). Three of Hutcheon's four models are manifested in *The City & the City*. Much as Tyador's disorientation is theatricalised by his boss, the novel provides readers with a theatre of genre in which our moments of disorientation become visible.

## Border disorientation

Miéville himself identifies the leitmotif of *The City & the City* as the border (Naimon 2011: 56). It is indeed a novel full of borders, especially in the topographical sense, with all the convoluted, intermeshed and interstitial spaces of Besźel and Ul Qoma. It involves also the two cities' borders to the outer world and the strange border crossing point in the middle of the cities, in the building called 'Copula Hall'. Living in or visiting one of the cities involves many epistemological borders, markedly so in the practice of 'unseeing' people, cars, buildings, etc. through the filter of a highly regulated gaze. Topography and epistemology work together in the lives of denizens and visitors, as is made particularly clear when these actually cross the borders of the two cities, either from the outside or through Copula Hall. When crossing these borders in a legal fashion, the border-crossers must change their ways of seeing and unseeing, adapting them to the City (or in some cases, some other space) into which they have entered. Such border crossings constitute temporal borders in their lives, marking out spaces of initiation and *Bildung*.

Indeed, the book explicitly describes these transitory spaces as involving pedagogies: Benjamin's 'schooling' (*Schulung*). Learning to unsee the other, naturalising the practice, takes place from an early age, much as one teaches children in our contemporary world how to behave in relation to motorised traffic. Tourists have to take courses and tests before being given a tourist visa to one of the cities. Citizens must take courses in how to unsee what previously was seen after passing through the border checkpoint in Copula Hall. Actual practices are supplemented by pedagogic simulacra, theory and corrections for minor infringements. The latter hints at an alternative pedagogy, involved in illegal border crossing: being taken in by the

sublime, horrific, Kafkaesque entity of the Breach – and disappearing to some unknown place.

Border crossings like these predictably involve mobility and shiftiness, splitting and mirroring, and liminality. Between the cities of the title lies the overlapping and disorienting ampersand "&". The textual crossing between the two first parts of the novel, 'Besźel' and 'Ul Qoma', which is at the same time Tyador's crossover between the cities Besźel and Ul Qoma as part of his investigation, exhibits many of the aspects mentioned here. Before the crossing, Tyador is subjected to a compressed course (including a session in an 'Ul Qoma simulator' [Miéville 2009: 133], developed by neuroscientists) to get him used to unseeing Besźel once he gets to Ul Qoma; the protagonist-narrator calls this training 'an accelerated orientation' (Miéville 2009: 133, my emphasis), underlining its aim of keeping any disorientation in the crossover to a minimum. At the crossing, he is interrogated by the border control guard, doubling and confirming his identity as a 'hailed' subject. Once through the control point, he finds himself in a space which is theoretically very familiar (he is after all still for the most part walking the same streets as he walks in Besźel), but in which this familiarity is interdicted and replaced by something unfamiliar (the sights and sites of Ul Qoma). He is required to direct his gaze in new directions, and often to walk in other routes. He is also equipped with a supervisory double, his liaising officer in the Ul Qoma militsya, Qussim Dhatt.

Things have to be described twice, in the following quote using the fantasy terminology of the two cities ('crosshatched', 'topolganger', 'grosstopically'):

> In Besźel it is an unremarkable shopping street in the Old Town, but it is crosshatched, somewhat in Ul Qoma's weight, the majority of buildings in our neighbour, and in Ul Qoma its topolganger is the historic, famous Ul Maidin Avenue, into which Copula Hall vents. (Miéville 2009: 132)

The experience is potentially 'traumatic' (Miéville 2009: 133), uncanny and disorienting. 'Weird?' Dhatt says to Tyador, '[g]uess it must be strange' (Miéville 2009: 134). Tyador narrates:

Now light, foreign light, swallowed me as I emerged, at speed, from Copula Hall. I looked everywhere. From the rear of Dhatt's car, I stared at the temple. I was, suddenly, rather astonishingly and at last, in the same city as it. (Miéville 2009: 133)

. . . [T]hese streets shared the dimensions and shapes of those I knew, they felt in the sharp turns we took more intricate. It was as strange as I had expected it would be, seeing and unseeing, being in Ul Qoma. (Miéville 2009: 135)

To reiterate the key phrases in these quotes: 'I looked everywhere' (Miéville 2009: 133); in all directions, in 'sharp turns' (Miéville 2009: 135). Orientations which were different from those he was used to. Very quickly however, Tyador regains his composure:

I had them in the background now, hardly any more present than Ul Qoma was when I was at home. I held my breath. I was unseeing Besźel. I had forgotten what this was like; I had tried and failed to imagine it. I was seeing Ul Qoma. (Miéville 2009: 134)

He returns for the time being to his role as the detective hero, a subject position with a sovereign self and a sense of oriented control.

## Unseeing

*The City & the City* creates a 'little theoretical theatre' of genre, making genre visible – the word *theatre* being related etymologically to the Greek word for seeing. This making-visible of genre, and by extension, of ideology, takes place thanks to successive disorientations. Conversely, the practice of unseeing, so central to Miéville's novel, seems to be one of orientation. In order to unsee something that may not be seen, one must orient the gaze towards something which may be seen. Only in this fashion can one confirm one's identity as belonging to the space one inhabits – the consequence of not unseeing is violent removal from one's world by the Breach. Yet beneath the act of orientation that constitutes unseeing, as is so often hinted at in the novel, there is a moment of disorientation, in the split second

preceding unseeing in which one recognises something enough to realise that it must be unseen.[8]

Like so many science fictional novums (social or technological), unseeing can be read as a reification of something familiar from our own experience. Through the estrangement of the fantastic, we readers become aware of the moments when we ourselves unsee (compare Bairner 2011; Lewis 2013: 52; Marks 2013: 227; Martin 2013: 714) – for us an informal, phenomenological event, which is here given a name. Those who live in tourist attractions often unsee the tourists; there are cultures in which nuns and servants are traditionally unseen, the homeless, the disabled and the embarrassing are unseen, the naked are unseen in a particularly disoriented fashion by the prudish ('I did not know where to look'), racialised others are unseen, and in many cultures all strangers are unseen, or at least their faces ('Don't stare!'). In the split cities in our world (and all cities contain borders) the novel also addresses, people often 'unsee' the other. Freedman sees the 'ideological operation' of unseeing in *The City & the City* as self-contradictory (2013: 18), and Martin (2013: 714–716), inspired by Žižek, identifies it as the post-ideological condition of being aware, but acting as if one is not. Unseeing might be an aspect of discourse in general, with its blind spots, yet it may be useful to retain its specificity. The underlying theatricality of naturalised unseeing makes it different from naturalised blindness.

It is this theatricality Althusser would like us to unsee in his scene of becoming a subject. The scene of the officer hailing one on the street, however, is precisely a reminder of the specificity of *The City & the City*, read as a text about our everyday actions of unseeing. For unseeing here is juxtaposed with policing, another form of gaze.

## The Breach

The first act of unseeing in *The City & the City* happens straight after Tyador's inspection of the crime scene where the murdered person is found. It is described in detail.

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[8] A description of the neuroanatomy of unseeing in *The City & the City* has already been attempted (Voytek 2010).

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 my 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 GunterStrász at all, and that I should not have seen her.

Immediately and flustered I looked away, and she did the same, with the same speed. I raised my head, towards an aircraft on its final descent. When after some seconds I looked back up, unnoticing the old woman stepping heavily away, I looked carefully instead of at her in her foreign street at the facades of the nearby and local GunterStrász, that depressed zone. (Miéville 2009: 12)

For the reader attuned to the subtle paranoia of much crime fiction, this woman may suggest a significant detail to be noted, especially since the narrator-protagonist wonders 'if she wanted to tell me something', in addition to a minor breach being involved. The scene, however, is also an initial introduction to the practice of unseeing or 'unnoticing' and the momentary 'flustered' disorientation it can bring with it, and the reader may well conclude that this is its main function.

By the time the novel again mentions an old woman (198), the first scene may have been forgotten. Tyador, now operating in Ul Qoma, takes a walk by himself, without supervision. He has just eaten dinner at his Ul Qoma counterpart's home, which he knows lies in the physical vicinity of his own home in Besźel. Because of the nature of the two cities, to visit his own home legally, he would have to go to the Copula Hall border crossing point and then double back to the city district of his home. To visit his home in a more direct fashion would be to commit breach. Indeed, since his point of origin is his flat in Besźel, arriving in the street outside it from within Ul Qoma means that he has already doubled back. A description of his attempt to unsee his own home follows. And this edging onto transgression of the rules of breach does not pass unnoticed:

Someone was watching me. It looked like an old woman. I could hardly see her in the dark, certainly not her face in any detail, but something was curious in the way she stood. I took in her clothes and could not tell which city she was in. That is a common instant of uncertainty, but this one went on for much longer than usual. And my alarm did not subside, it grew, as her locus refused to clarify.

I saw others in similar shadows, similarly hard to make sense of, emerging, sort of, not approaching me, not even moving but holding themselves so they grew more in focus. The woman continued to stare at me, and she took a step or two in my direction, so either she was in Ul Qoma or breaching.

That made me step back. I kept backing away. There was an ugly pause, until as if in belated echo she and those others did the same, and were gone suddenly into shared dark. I got out of there, not quite running but fast. I found better-lit avenues. (Miéville 2009: 198 – 199)

Again, this episode does not resolve into a narrative function – much as the old women's 'locus refuse[s] to clarify' (Miéville 2009: 198). To understand it completely, the reader must double back, making a theatre of her own trajectory through the book.

While it is not mentioned directly here, the reader has already learnt to identify threatening and shadowy beings as the mysterious and seemingly all-powerful Breach, through an earlier episode in which an American is deported by the Breach after committing breach. The significance of the Breach's interest in Tyador does not become clear before he himself commits breach at the end of the 'Ul Qoma' part of the book, by shooting a killer who is in Besźel. Just before he does this, he notes, '[a]n old woman stared at me' (Miéville 2009: 237). The old woman cannot herself in fact commit breach by seeing Tyador in any of these situations, because she is herself part of the Breach.

The shooting episode emphasises uncertainty again, lack of clarity and meaning, but also promises a point of no return. As the reader crosses from the 'Ul Qoma' to the 'The Breach' parts of the book, this sense of a generalised transgression is installed as

Tyador leaves Ul Qoma and Besźel and becomes part of the breach. Disorientation is also generalised in the opening paragraphs of Part Three:

> But unclear figures emerged where there had been no purposeful motion instants before, only the milling of no ones, the aimless and confused, and those suddenly appeared newcomers with faces so motionless I hardly recognised them as faces were saying the word. It was statement of both crime and identity.
>
> '*Breach.*' A grin-featured something gripped me so that there was no way in which I could break out, had I wanted to. I glimpsed dark shapes draped over the body of the killer I had killed. A voice close up to my ear. '*Breach.*' A force shoving me effortlessly out of my place, fast fast past candles of Besźel and the neon of Ul Qoma, in directions that made sense in neither city. (Miéville 2009: 237–238)

Tyador has been sent 'not into mindless silence but into a dream arena where I was quarry' (241), the word 'arena' again evoking the theatrical. Breach is now in all directions: 'If you commit it it will envelop you. Breach is void full of angry police' (Miéville 2009: 248). Faced with his new minder – and future colleague – in the Breach, Tyador reaches a maximum of disorientation: 'I was looking around nervily as if to catch sight of something almost invisible in the corners' (243). His minder Ashil slowly brings him back to subjecthood: 'He pointed his right hand at me fork-fingered, index and middle digits one at each of my eyes, then at his own: *Look at me.* I obeyed' (Miéville 2009: 241). Clearly, the double meaning of *breach* – '[i]t was statement of both crime and identity' (Miéville 2009: 237) – is a paraphrase, quite possibly a conscious paraphrase,[9] of Althusser's scene of becoming a subject through being hailed by an officer on the street.

## Utopian moment

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[9] Miéville is a Marxist and has a doctorate in international law, with a critical legal studies slant to the dissertation.

There is something absolute about the Breach; Tyador has been ripped out of the social fabric to which he belongs. At one point he actually relishes what this new border crossing brings with it; walking in the streets again, he can find himself 'pleasantly disoriented' (Miéville 2009: 253). This is the closest Tyador comes in the novel to actively seeking out disorientation. Yet he has regained an apparently true identity as a detective for the Breach, fulfilling a destiny set for him – if we are to read the signals hidden in the episodes with the old woman – and finding a new orientation. Freeing himself from the obligation to unsee may involve a less pleasant form of disorientation: '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' (254). This is however followed immediately by a subjectifying, orienting hailing by his Breach minder Ashil:

> 'Where are you?' Ashil said. He spoke so only I could hear.
>
> 'Are you in Besźel or Ul Qoma?'
>
> '. . . Neither. I'm in Breach.'
>
> 'You're with me here.' We moved through a crosshatched morning crowd. 'In Breach. No one knows if they're seeing you or unseeing you. Don't creep. You're not in neither: you're in both.'
>
> He tapped my breast. 'Breath.' (Miéville 2009: 254)

While subsequent events bring the investigation into the initial murder of the novel to an end, his narrative emphasises that this investigation is really part of another investigation, that of his own breach. The murder of the young woman Mahalia Geary has only become part of the Breach's remit upon Tyador's breach, for the Breach is not concerned with normal crimes. Also, the absoluteness of the Breach is relativised by the way in which the American hi-tech firm involved in Geary's murder disregards the Breach's power. If it had not been for such continual relativisations, the status of the Breach as a new orientation would justify Althusser's wish to unsee the details of the hailing process.

This is not to say, however, that disorientation would promise a possibility of transcendence and of more permanent unorientation. When *The City & the City* suggests an escape from the orientation-reorientation economy, it is shown to be highly problematic. The actual murderer, the Canadian academic David Bowden, attempts to escape Mahalia's killers by placing himself in the same position as the Breach:

> . . . he would be in Breach, which, unbelievably, he was not yet. He walked with equipoise, possibly in either city. Schrödinger's pedestrian . . . He did not drift but strode with pathological neutrality away from the cities' centres, ultimately to borders and the mountains and out to the rest of the continent. (Miéville 2009: 295–296)

Locals are 'unsure where, in fact, to look' (Miéville 2009: 296). Bowden sets up a scene of ambiguous and hybrid orientation, what we might call a post-orientation, a life on the borderline; however, his 'pathological' striding reduces his position to one of reorientation. Similarly, continual confusion about the status of the Breach, in which '[n]o one knows if they're seeing you or unseeing you' (254), might imply that the breach can provide a space of permanent unorientation. Bowden indeed provides Tyador with a model for how to understand his own role as part of the Breach: 'I was learning from him how to walk between them, first in one, then the other, or in either, but without the ostentation of Bowden's extraordinary motion – a more covert equivocation' (308). Whether the novel's last words – 'I live in the interstice yes, but I live in both the city and the city' (312) – describes a state of unorientation is however unclear as long it does not provide a description of concrete practices.

My argument here revolves around the theatrical ambiguity which tinges the world of *The City & the City*, belying Ashil's almost Althusserian statements on the ideological work of unseeing: 'It works because you don't blink . . . No one can admit it doesn't work. So if you don't admit it, it does' (Miéville 2009: 310). Bowden's plan is theatrical in its 'ostentation'; but Tyador's attempt at a 'covert' practice also implies a visibility that must be hidden. These and the other aspects of the novel I have examined here – including the theatricality and hesitation integral to its play with genre – suggest that momentary states of disorientation are necessary to orientation,

and that disorientation is in turn a product of the visibilities, pedagogies and resistances inherent in the spatialities and temporalities we live in, be it as social subjects or more specifically as readers. Disorientation cannot be sought out, but the spaces which produce it – be they cities or novels – can be. Disorientation will, however, always remain momentary.

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