



Williams, R. (2016) Weird counsels: the critic and the critics. *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, 124, pp. 92-98. [Book Review]

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Deposited on: 30 October 2017

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## **Book Review**

### ***Foundation***

*Art and Idea in the Novels of China Miéville*. Carl Freedman, Gylphi: Canterbury, 2015.

*China Miéville: Critical Essays*. eds. Caroline Edwards & Tony Venezia, Gylphi: Canterbury, 2015.

The publication of two books in one year devoted entirely to the work of one young author – the first a monograph by a key authority on sf, the second a collection edited by two of the rising stars of the field – speaks volumes about the importance of China Miéville in the world of fantastic literature. Already the subject of an earlier special issue of *Extrapolation* (50:2, 2009), and numerous stand-alone articles, chapters, conference papers (and one whole conference – from which the edited collection here reviewed grew), Miéville clearly provides scholars with fruitful material for critical work. Both the richness and originality of his fiction and the acuteness of his forays into literary and political criticism have played a part in his celebrity, as well as the resonances of his work with contemporary radical politics, the author’s erudition, and the way his work draws on thick textures of genre tradition as well as those of avant-garde artistic and political movements. But over 6 years since that first special issue, and more than a decade since interest began, what is perhaps most striking is the way that criticism on Miéville appears to be tending to a point, circling many of the same moments in his texts, and coming to much the same conclusions. Has the scholarly conversation become incestuous? Is there perhaps a rich but nonetheless *narrow* seam to be mined in Miéville? Or has Miéville changed the game to such an extent that scholarship finds itself trailing in his wake, essentially repeating him? Suvin once claimed that SF must be wiser than the world it speaks to – must criticism be wiser than the works it speaks of?

It makes sense to start with Carl Freedman’s monograph, *Art and Idea*, both in terms of this review and as essential reading for anyone interested in Miéville’s work. In this book Freedman does what the sf community has come to expect of him: richly informed and insightful criticism conveyed in mellifluous and clear prose. The reader feels in safe hands here, and the book itself is a testament to the guiding theoretical ideal that animates it – that of the necessary sweetness of learning, the *dulce et utile* of any great work. In the preface, Freedman rightly notes the peculiar status of a monograph covering a far-from-finished oeuvre, and proposes not to encompass Miéville, but rather to “lay some foundations on which future Miéville critics can build” (ix). In this aim, he succeeds admirably.

Using Miéville’s first book, *King Rat*, as a kind of study in miniature, Freedman lays the conceptual groundwork for the rest of his argument. He claims that Miéville should be read as striving for a ‘Marxist Urban Sublime’, where sublime means “the precise and powerful expression of lofty thoughts and intense emotions” (2). The ‘urban’ stems from Freedman’s reading that Miéville revives a tradition of the London urban sublime last conveyed by artists like Wordsworth, Blake & Dickens. Miéville does so by drawing on the resources of fantastic fiction

to expand and supplement the realism that (perhaps, as Freedman argues) no longer suffices to capture London's

epistemological nontransparency and hybridity [...] structured more complexly and productive of more different kinds of experience than any single individual can truly take in. (11)

The 'Marxist' part is concerned with Miéville's clearly historical materialist approach to reality, his 'thick' descriptions and world-building that draw from that very thorough and elaborated model of social process, and which endow his creations with a sense of 'reality' that *Lord of the Rings* (as Freedman notes) lacks. Finally, while the sublime is typically connected to the effects of the strikingly singular, with Miéville the effect comes from the radically multiple. For Freedman, Miéville presents an Adornian utopian impulse in the valorisation of heterogeneity – he draws on Adorno's definition of 'peace' as "distinctness without domination, with the distinct participating in each other" (6). Thus, to take *King Rat* as an example, Saul's victory is possible because he is "a figure of dialectical hybridity", and the novel is "an Adornian celebration of heterogeneity and complexity, of overdetermined dialectical combination, and, correlatively, an attack on the totalitarian and (in the end) genocidal idea of purity" (5).

This reading is extended, elaborated, complicated and enriched through the remaining chapters on the Bas-Lag trilogy, *The City and the City*, and *Embassytown*. Each novel is considered to be treating with a different theoretical problem – predominantly from a Marxist perspective – nationalism, imperialism, revolution, or language in *Embassytown* (as well as colonialism). Each chapter is of excellent didactic value as Freedman provides lucid glosses to the necessary background theory and historical context as a prelude to the close-readings. Added to this is the sheer breadth and depth of the literary tradition that Freedman is able to bring to the table – placing Miéville in light of Dickens, DH Lawrence, Wordsworth – influences that usually get elided in the ubiquitous Lovecraft references. Having said that, Freedman does not really mention the Weird tradition at all, which is an odd omission and does detract somewhat from the completeness of his account, though much has of course been said on this relationship elsewhere.

In a final theoretical chapter, Freedman returns to the field for one more sally in the continuing debate over the Suvinian model of 'cognition'. More or less a direct attempt to answer Miéville's claims in *Red Planets* that the 'cognitive effect' is pure ideology and charismatic authority, and not really a form of knowledge as such, Freedman makes yet another ingenious move. He admits Miéville's claim, and counters that that is the best one can hope for from any literature – that this is the particular kind of knowledge that literature is capable of providing – "knowledge on the level of the *vécu*, of lived experience" (138). So not some reified objective knowledge, but rather knowledge of how it feels, or what it's like, to be in the world, and particularly in the capitalist present. Good literature (like Miéville's) provide a model that can help us make more sense of our own lived experience and the larger social forces that inform it, precisely because it presents us, not with 'truth', but with something approaching truth

from a remove, truth complicated and mediated by the fact of its reception by a living, limited individual; truth as it feels like to us.

The book ends with a consideration of Miéville's critical legal text *Between Equal Rights* (2005). Another characteristically lucid discussion ends with a claim that I want think about here as a way of getting to what Freedman, despite the obvious necessity and brilliance of his reading of Miéville, doesn't quite do. The final sentence of the book states "the Bas-Lag trilogy is just as deeply and complexly Marxist as *Between Equal Rights*" (162). At the other end, in the opening preface, he states "my literary-critical interest in Miéville is primarily as a Marxist novelist – with *equal* emphasis on the adjective and the noun" (xi). As I have said, Freedman accomplishes this reading admirably. This book opens the door onto the rich scope of the Marxist tradition that informs Miéville's work, his outlook, his approach, and his politics. And tradition is the key word here. Freedman is – and we should all be thankful for this – the ideal reader to enrich Miéville's work for us with the history that led up to it. But there is a sense that this reading is not giving us Miéville as such, but rather one – central and vital, but nevertheless one – dimension of him. I can't imagine there will ever be a better work published on Miéville and Marxist aesthetics & politics, nor have I read a piece that draws out the non-Weird literary influences so well. To say that this is a foundational work, then, is to both make a claim for its canonical importance in Miéville scholarship, and to acknowledge that it is best understood as the shoulders of a giant, on which future work should stand.

Does the second text here considered, *China Miéville: Critical Essays*, begin to do this work? In part, yes. The collection begins with a preface by China Miéville. Not addressing – at least not directly – the contents of the collection, it's a semi-playful musing on the idea of 'disavowed' literature. In a by-now-standard move for Miéville, and one which echoes the tendency of the Weird to "build its own archive" (Luckhurst 280), he generates a collection of these anti-canonical texts, trying to discern in them a "fundamental *repudiability*" (xvii). A shadowy world of gnostic knowledge is gestured to, but rejected in a deflating gesture (a nod perhaps to the familiarity of the pattern here invoked from his short stories in particular), before positing the possibility of writing a literature that oscillates between dis- and re-avowal. A meditation on commitment, or necessity, or faith? Or maybe a way of dealing with the experience of your work being rewritten via critical discourse, becoming, perhaps, unrecognisable (or all too recognisable). Either way it reads more like an intellectual game than Miéville's usually more textured fictional and critical work.

The preface is followed by a weighty introduction by Edwards and Venezia. It opens with a rather strained and unnecessary attempt to frame itself as an 'unintroduction,' but then proceeds to be a very good example of a normal introduction. It lays groundwork important for any reading of Miéville – groundwork that the collection's essays do not necessarily touch on, and so all the more valuable for that. It covers the Miéville-Suvin theoretical debate, the importance of London (and other cities) to the author, psychogeography, hybridity and the grotesque, genre and genre-blending, and the Weird tradition. It goes some way towards framing Miéville in the Marxist tradition that is so

crucial an influence, draws important links between his work and post-1999 Seattle politics, and rather ingeniously uses the figure of 'breach' to illuminate his oeuvre, both fictional and critical. It ends with a thorough overview of each contribution and stands, I think, as one of the best, short Miéville 101's available.

The collection proper opens with Sherryl Vint's essay 'Ab-Realism: Fractal Language and Social Change', and it is a stunner. In fact, I would rehearse the cliché that if you only read one short piece on Miéville, it should be this one. Vint establishes the notion of 'abrealism', that is

a narrative logic that simultaneously captures the absurdities of 'real' life under capitalism *and* points to the power of narrative to activate the utopian traces of another world that is possible and coexists with this one. (41)

Vint here gets to the heart of what Miéville is about – she provides clear and strong evidence of abrealism across his work, describes how it works, and gestures to many possible examples. Abrealism as a concept is powerfully generative for understanding Miéville's fiction, and it sits well with Freedman's book, giving a more fully Miévillian picture that certainly leans on historical materialism, but adds in some conceptual mechanisms (drawing on Deleuze, for example) that speak a little more precisely to the contemporaneity of the author. Vint and Freedman have a history of disagreeing over the core mechanism of Miéville's work – Vint's early position first elaborated in an essay on *The Scar* ("Possible Fictions: Blochian Hope in *The Scar*," 2009) that Freedman responds to in *Art & Idea*. It is a disagreement about the very motor of Miéville's work, and on the strength of this argument Vint is the more convincing.

In more or less direct dialogue with Vint and Freedman are the chapters by Dougal McNeill and Mark P. Williams. McNeill reads *Iron Council* as a project to renew the fantasy of revolution – akin to Freedman's argument on it – and provides a rich repository of historical events that the text draws on. He claims that the text is both a fantasy and provides a renewed historical tradition in the Benjaminian revolutionary style. Williams goes some way towards making the necessary links between Miéville and post-1999, post-Seattle radical politics – something that is alluded to by others but not drawn out. His basic argument is that Miéville's fiction renders "material/immaterial abnatural resources [...] visible and comprehensible" (260). Abnatural resources are "fantastic extensions of actual cultural practices which reveal shared or communal resources which are not instrumental to capitalism" (241). This otherwise rich essay suffers a little from a lack of clarity (or concreteness). It tries to propose something complex and just falls short of the conceptual clarity required to make it startling. Too many examples are given that don't quite mesh, and the core concept never quite resolves into a sharp tool, but the goal is a difficult one, and there is certainly promise of better things to come.

The rest of the chapters approach Miéville in different ways. Raphael Zähringer thinks about maps and mapmaking in *Perdido Street Station*. Claiming that maps should be objects of lust and power, he goes on to argue that the ones in *PSS* are

not. The positional claims that orient the argument feel thin, which in turn makes the argument less convincing. It is a fascinating subject, but the theoretical support on cartography seemed a little narrow, and given that maps form such a key part of *Iron Council* and *The Scar*, the reader is left wondering why these were not chosen for the exploration, rather than the relatively slim pickings of *PSS*. Joe Sutcliff Saunders gives a clear and strong argument for the importance of Miéville's up-ending of the traditions of children's fantasy in *UnLunDun*, particularly his rejection of the child's need to 'give up' the magical world at the end of the narrative. Paul March-Russell makes an authoritative examination of the trope of invisibility in both Miéville and Christopher Priest. He draws in the history of the trope, looks at the specificity of it in *The City & The City* and Priest's *The Glamour* (XXXX), and concludes that

although both writers demystify invisibility in order to present it as either a natural or a learnt condition to which the individual has to be socialized, Priest emphasises the subjective experience of his characters whereas Miéville foregrounds their objective social reality – albeit one that is irrevocably split. (146)

Ben de Bruyn makes an interesting argument for the importance of the rise of institutionalised creating writing programs to Miéville's work, teasing out with a number of strong examples the critiques of institutionalised creativity that run through it. This is followed by another unusual angle – Matthew Sangster dabbling in Goodreads data to tell us about the audience reading patterns and generic expectations of fantasy trilogies. And this is where the strength of the piece lies – it does not tell us anything much about Miéville's work, other than it confounds these expectations, which one might have assumed, but it's good to have broader evidence. Finally out of the essays proper we have Anthony F. Lang, Jr., placing in dialogue Miéville's legal theory and the way the law plays out in his fiction. While the political and legal theory contained herein is eloquent and authoritative – as one would expect from the author – when it comes to reading the literary texts as models, they are rather obscured by the weight of argument they are made to bear – an unevenness captured by the statement of intent: "I turn to his [Miéville's] fiction to find out whether or not international law can be made to work" (220). One can't help but question the usefulness of such an investigation.

The book as a whole closes with a playful contribution from Roger Luckhurst – an assemblage of scattered quotations from numerous sources, framed as a lost (and 'Weird') konvolut from Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. It's a fun thing to end on, and Luckhurst's intellectual resources make it interesting. The best part for this reviewer are the seven theses on the Weird that close the konvolut – short and clear insights that distil Luckhurst's considerable knowledge of the genre, and which stretch far beyond Miéville's work while also implicating him – a dense and useful section.

To close this review, I'd like then to consider what these texts tell us about the current state of Miéville (and to an extent, fantastic) criticism. The first thing that jumps out from Freedman's book, and the majority of the edited collection, is

that everyone seems to be working with an axiomatic assumption that turns out to undergird, without real efforts at substantiation, almost every contribution. That axiom is: that realism is inadequate to the task of capturing or representing contemporary capitalist reality, and that the fantastic is more up to the job (and interestingly, we have pretty decisively moved from lauding the science fictional to lauding fantasy as a mode). It's important to note that this argument appears to owe its current cache (as far as this reviewer can tell) to a 2002 special issue of *Historical Materialism*, dedicated to the radical potential of fantasy, and edited by China Miéville. In the introduction to the issue, Miéville claims that "[r]eal' life under capitalism is a *fantasy*," and as such fantasy is an artistic mode that "mimics the 'absurdity' of capitalist modernity" and may offer valuable insights into the "peculiar nature of modern social reality and subjectivity" ("Editorial" 40-2). In the same issue, Mark Bould remarks that "it is the very fantasy of fantasy as a mode that ... gives it space for a hard-headed critical consciousness of capitalist subjectivity" ("The Dreadful Credibility" 83-4). This issue, coming out at the beginning of Miéville's career as an author, was very influential on the scholarly field, and its arguments were cemented by, among other things, the popular essay collection *Red Planets* – released in 2009 and edited by China Miéville and Mark Bould. Miéville's own argument – in tandem with Bould's contributions – is now the platform from which Miéville's fiction is judged. This is not necessarily an issue; this reviewer certainly has a lot of sympathy for the adopted stance. But when the theoretical position advanced by the author is then used as an axiomatic basis upon which to valorise the fictional work of that same author, perhaps it is appropriate to take some time to dwell on the ramifications. Miéville is an intellectual and creative force to be reckoned with, and one way of reading the intellectual trend here is that he is creating both the fiction and the stance from which that fiction is then to be judged (and of course, his work cannot help but be the epitome or apotheosis of that perspective). Should we not take the time to consider that, in some important sense, this represents a critical *failure*? Miéville's fiction and his critical stance are both part of the same argument. It seems to this reviewer that critical work should be able to tell you something about the text that moves beyond it, that demonstrates its limits and adds to it. Miéville's own argument about the ideological content of fantastic fiction should here be turned back upon his own output – he is *doing things to the world with words*. There is bountiful charismatic authority invested in him, and a powerful cognitive *effect* that draws its strength from the tight marriage of his fictional and non-fiction work. In order to properly appreciate or criticise what he is doing, surely we need to find a way to think about it that escapes or at least questions the parameters with which the author himself provides us?

To close, I'll propose one such lacuna that emerges from reading these critical texts. Just as many of the arguments here share the same assumptions, many of them also draw from a remarkably similar pool of examples from Miéville's fiction to evidence them. One glaring omission, for this reviewer, is that of the Construct Council from *PSS*. Why is this important? Because the valorisation of Miéville often concerns the 'reality' of his fantasy, particularly in comparison to Tolkienesque fantasy. But just as Tolkein's Middle-Earth returned to an imaginary pre-industrial period of heroic nobility and honour, and the present as such reared its head only refracted through the horror of Sauron and the

labouring Orcs – so Miéville’s key Marxist, revolutionary Bas Lag trilogy is one that does not or cannot contain the present reality of the post-digital revolution. The threat that the Construct Council presents is that of the digital, and it emerges only to be quashed. Miéville’s world-building occurs in a more-or-less 19<sup>th</sup> Century setting, before the information age, before the sharp end of globalisation, before the apparently hopeless present with its specific brand of effervescent but short-lived radical politics. While the pre-industrial imaginary provided the room for fantasy in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, it would seem that, after the enormous changes wrought by the digital revolution, industrial capitalism is now capable of being a ground for nostalgia and narratives of a simpler age – narratives that work fine in that setting, but would be *made unreal* under a genuinely modern digital logic. The thrust of this all-too-brief proposal is that perhaps Miéville is not as ‘realistic’ as everyone claims, and that in fact, we need to work harder to distinguish the difference between something that is ‘realistic’, no matter how fantastic, and something that is rather the close approximation and narrative animation of a critical epistemology that might be palatable to us as critics, but which nonetheless is lacking in the terms we are valorising it. Can we detect a feedback loop here, which needs escaping in order to regain a truly useful critical stance? This work will likely become ever-more important the more that the Miéville phenomenon continues to grow. The two texts here are valuable works of scholarship: Carl Freedman in particular has given us much to learn from, and many of the collected essays add worthwhile knowledge to that firm foundation, but let us not grow lazy heaping praise on those who agree with us.

By Rhys Williams