



“Invisible Borders: the Dynamics of Imagined Urban Life in China Miéville’s *The City & The City*”

LORENNAGRA 

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

RESEARCH

]u[ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the thematic complexity of China Miéville’s *The City & The City* (2009), with a particular focus on the novel’s conceptualization of boundaries and the practice of ‘unseeing’. Through the lens of science fiction and dystopian narrative, Miéville constructs a unique urban landscape in which two cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma, occupy the same physical space yet are perceived as entirely separate through a culturally enforced regime of cognitive discipline. This act of unseeing, the narrative’s central *novum*, functions as a powerful tool of social control, highlighting the intricate interplay between perception, suppression, and surveillance within a dystopian framework.

The paper examines how Miéville employs this speculative mechanism to interrogate contemporary urban realities, where borders and divisions are often more psychological and social than material. By enforcing a cognitive separation between the cities, Miéville mirrors real-world practices of disengagement and the deliberate ignoring of social issues such as homelessness and systemic violence. Unseeing is shown to be not merely an individual choice but a collective cultural process, sustained through societal norms and the omnipresent threat of enforcement by Breach, which punishes transgressions of these invisible boundaries.

By situating unseeing within Darko Suvin’s notion of the *novum* (*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 1979), this paper argues that *The City & The City* offers a critical commentary on the politics of borders and the normalization of exclusion. The novel’s exploration of invisible borders and the fluid urban space challenges readers to reconsider their own engagement with spatial, social, and political divisions, demonstrating how cognitive borders play a central role in maintaining contemporary systems of social order.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Lorenna Agra

University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies (CEAUL/ULICES), Lisbon, Portugal.

lo.lumack@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:

cognitive boundaries, urban dystopia, social control, unseeing

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Agra, L. “Invisible Borders: the Dynamics of Imagined Urban Life in China Miéville’s *The City & The City*”. *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 24, issue 1, art. 10, 2026, pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.239>

In 2009, the publication of [China Miéville's](#) *The City & The City* (*TCTC*) staged a compelling experiment on how nation-states produce—and enforce—borders. A single metropolitan area, somewhere between Eastern Europe and Asia, hosts two distinct city-states whose territories physically interpenetrate yet must be treated as separate through a rigorously policed cultural practice known as ‘unseeing.’ The novel’s murder investigation becomes the narrative pre-text for exposing how spatial perception, ideological conditioning, and surveillance intersect to sustain systems of power. This article argues that Miéville uses the conceit of the split city not merely as a speculative device but as a pointed critique of the sociopolitical mechanisms through which contemporary states manufacture sovereignty, normalize violence, and shape citizens’ spatial habits.

Following the narrative style described by the author himself as akin to ‘noir and hard-boiled and crime procedurals’ (Manaugh), the story unfolds through numerous layers, prompting questions about whether author and novel can be confined to a single genre, be it fantasy, science fiction, or something entirely different. Scholars have often read *TCTC* through the lens of the ‘New Weird’ ([VanderMeer ix](#)), the most recent incarnation of ‘weird fiction’, associated especially with the 1920s, which was used to characterize the writings of H. P. Lovecraft, along with other prominent contributors to the pulp journal *Weird Tales*, first issued in March 1923 ([Shaviro 44](#)).

Similar to its predecessor, the New Weird conveys a certain sense of anxiety and dislocation, characterized by a radically unfamiliar and irrecuperable ‘insistence on a chaotic, amoral, anthropoperipheral universe’, to which no sense or meaning can be assigned ([Miéville, ‘M. R. James’ 112](#)). Yet the work also resonates strongly with urban fantasy, a genre in which the city operates not merely as a backdrop but as an active agent shaping character and plot. As [Irvine](#) notes, urban fantasy foregrounds the city-as-character, its atmospheres, histories, and urban forms generating narrative tension (200–203). [Miéville's](#) oeuvre—*Perdido Street Station*, *Un Lun Dun*, and *The City & The City*—fits squarely within this lineage: each transforms urban space into both stage and protagonist.

According to [Martin \(713\)](#), *TCTC* is not just a tale of two cities but also a tale of two genres. Beyond its identity as a police procedural thriller, the novel also fits into the realm of dystopian science fiction, aligning with influential works like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Miéville’s fictional cities, Ul Qoma and Beszel, are not merely conjoined but ‘intertwined in an intricate conceit which is both topological and metaphysical’, a conceit actively maintained by their own citizens. In this sense, the novel transcends conventional tropes and themes associated with genre fantasy. According to the principles of the New Weird, it seamlessly blends elements of science fiction, fantasy, surrealism, and magical realism. *TCTC* stands as an embodiment of Miéville’s vision for politically active fiction—not merely consolatory, but provocative, urging readers to question and challenge the constructs of their everyday world.

The novel’s doubled geography also invites engagement with theoretical traditions that treat the city as a socially produced space. [Lefebvre's](#) concept of the production of space clarifies how spatial arrangements materialize ideology (41), while [de Certeau's](#) distinction between the ‘strategies’ of institutions and the ‘tactics’ of everyday users illuminates how citizens navigate—and resist—structures imposed upon them (29–31). Likewise, [Debord's](#) reflections on the spectacle illuminate how social relations are mediated through internalized norms (7). This resonates with *TCTC's* depiction of a populace disciplined to see and not see according to state-defined boundaries. Miéville’s Beszel and Ul Qoma echo these frameworks: their borders exist not materially but in the practiced gestures, perceptual cues, and internalized fears that sustain the fiction of separation.

Equally central is the concept of sense of place, which scholars such as Marie-Laure [Ryan](#) and her coauthors, and [Yi-Fu Tuan](#) describe as the affective dimension of spatial experience. The atmosphere—or *genius loci*—of Beszel and Ul Qoma shapes how citizens move, feel, and behave; acts such as breaching or unseeing are laden with fear, disorientation, and cultural memory ([Ryan et al. 7](#); [Tuan 6–7](#)). *TCTC* therefore demonstrates how spatial practices produce subjectivity, and how subjectivity in turn reinforces territorial distinctions.

Genre hybridity becomes, in this sense, formally and politically significant. As [Maczynska](#) argues, Miéville dismantles the familiar metropolis and reconstructs it as a palimpsest of overlapping urban structures (66), a gesture that mirrors the novel's broader interrogation of how societies naturalize arbitrary divisions. Like its complex spatial division, the brilliance of *TCTC* lies in implementing 'a crosshatched form of narrative' ([Roberts 188](#)) which underscores the permeability of borders, whether physical, cognitive, or ideological.

By placing a murder mystery within this unstable spatial framework, Miéville uses the detective's gaze—traditionally a mechanism of truth-seeking—to expose the artificiality of the very truths that structure civic life. *TCTC* thus becomes a politically charged critique of border logics, surveillance regimes, and the everyday complicities that sustain them. This paper examines how Miéville constructs such a system, exploring the novel's reimagining of urban spatiality, its emphasis on cognitive borders, and its portrayal of unseeing as a cultural and disciplinary practice. Ultimately, the novel reveals the permeability—and fragility—of boundaries that are often treated as natural, inviting readers to rethink the mechanisms through which cities and states govern visibility, movement, and belonging. To understand how these abstract dynamics operate at the level of lived urban experience, the following section turns to Miéville's concrete spatial design of Beszel and Ul Qoma.

THE CITY & THE CITY: UNDERSTANDING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

Miéville opens *The City & The City* with a quotation from [Bruno Schulz's](#) short-story collection *The Street of Crocodiles*: 'Deep inside the town there opens up, so to speak, double streets, dop-pelganger streets, mendacious and delusive streets' (53). From the outset, the author signals that the novel will destabilize conventional perceptions of urban space. The narrative follows Tyador Borlú, a detective in Beszel's Extreme Crime Squad, whose investigation of the murder of Mahalia Geary forces him to navigate the twin city of Ul Qoma, despite strict legal and cultural prohibitions against intercity interaction.

The idea that boundaries can lie, initially cast by [Schulz's](#) opening quotation, pervades the narrative and becomes especially relevant as the reader gets acquainted with the spatial and social structures of these city-states. Beszel and Ul Qoma exist as post-Soviet cities straddling the border between Europe and Asia. Beszel, more aligned with the Caucasus, finds itself entrenched in an ongoing economic decline, seemingly unable to break free from the lingering influences of its Soviet and Fordist history ([Martin 712](#)). In contrast, Ul Qoma has embraced the principles and opportunities of neoliberalism. Consequently, its historical city center has undergone a significant transformation, morphing 'at least half-transmuted (...) into a financial district, curlicued wooden rooflines juxtaposed with mirrored steel' (Miéville, *The City* 162).

Spatial categorizations in *TCTC* further reveal how urban governance creates borders that are at once porous and rigid. Beszel and Ul Qoma are not merely neighboring cities; they coexist within the same metropolitan area, resulting in an anomaly that gives rise to overlapping sections in the in-between. [Zähringer](#) states:

the two cities are not divided physically, but mentally: citizens are used to only perceiving what is happening in their city while shielding themselves from impressions of the other city, a subconscious performance called "unseeing". (*Hidden* 19)

In addition, streets and buildings are designated as total, alter, or crosshatched. Total spaces belong exclusively to one city; alter spaces are part of the other city and must be cognitively blocked from perception. Crosshatched areas are shared and named according to each city, with oversight enforced by the authority of Breach. Copula Hall, described as 'the waist of an hourglass, the point of ingress and egress, the navel between the cities' (Miéville, *The City* 69), physically and symbolically represents the fragile interface between these intertwined urban spaces.

The doubled geography of Beszel and Ul Qoma exemplifies [Lefebvre's](#) notion of the *production of space*, according to which cities are not merely physical landscapes but socially constructed environments. '(Social) space is a (social) product' and, therefore, also a political stake ([Lefebvre 26](#)). In *TCTC*, urban space is produced by legal regimes, cultural conventions, and regulated perception rather than by architecture alone. The border between the cities exists because it is

continuously reproduced through social practice, demonstrating [Lefebvre's](#) claim that spatial organization both reflects and reinforces relations of power. Similarly, [de Certeau's](#) distinction between institutional 'strategies' and everyday 'tactics' helps clarify how citizens negotiate these spaces, whether by complying with or subtly resisting the enforced perception of separation (29–31). In the novel, however, these tactics rarely function as forms of resistance, as citizens internalize the cities' borders, performing a cognitive discipline that sustains the fiction of separation.

[Debord's](#) concept of the spectacle—not a collection of images, but 'a social relation between people that is mediated by images' (7)—further illuminates these processes. In *TCTC*, this mediation does not primarily occur through screens or mass media, but through the disciplined organization of perception itself. From childhood, citizens learn to apprehend urban space through a regulated visual and sensory framework that determines not only what may be seen, but how meaning is assigned to what is perceived. Social relations are thus filtered through state-sanctioned modes of looking, rendering the border both omnipresent and immaterial.

In Miéville's cities, spectacle operates as a lived condition: habitualized perception and self-discipline produce compliance with state-defined boundaries even in the absence of physical barriers. The act of unseeing—which will be explored in later sections of this paper—exemplifies this logic: citizens actively participate in sustaining the spectacle of separation by treating the border as an unquestionable reality. What is made visible, what must remain unseen, and how these distinctions are internalized all function to reproduce social order. In this way, the 'spectacle' in *TCTC* is not imposed from above but continuously enacted through everyday practices, aligning [Debord's](#) theory with Miéville's depiction of cognitive governance.

Beszel and Ul Qoma also foreground the importance of *sense of place* as an affective and embodied mode of spatial experience ([Ryan et al. 7](#); [Tuan 6–7](#)). In *TCTC*, place is not simply a location but a felt environment that conditions perception, movement, and emotional response. Beszel—linguistically linked to the Hungarian *beszél* ('to speak')—is characterized by post-Soviet stagnation, architectural decay, and an atmosphere of exhaustion that reflects its economic marginalization. Ul Qoma, by contrast, presents itself as forward-facing and cosmopolitan, shaped by neoliberal redevelopment and Arab-influenced aesthetics that signal prosperity and global integration. These divergent urban atmospheres generate distinct affective orientations: resignation and caution in Beszel, confidence and aspiration in Ul Qoma.

Such atmospheres produce what [Tuan](#) describes as the *experiential perspective* of place, where emotional attachment and fear are inseparable from spatial practice (8–18). Acts of unseeing are therefore not merely ideological but deeply affective, learned through repeated exposure to the cities' respective rhythms and cues. Breaching—whether accidental or deliberate—disrupts this affective equilibrium, producing sensations of panic, disorientation, and existential threat. The fear surrounding breach is not imposed solely through external enforcement: it emerges from an internalized sense of place which renders spatial transgression emotionally unbearable.

In this way, Miéville demonstrates how sense of place becomes a mechanism of governance. The cities' atmospheres—their *genius loci*—shape citizens' emotional responses and behaviors. They do not merely *know* where they belong; they *feel* it, since 'experience is compounded of feeling and thought' ([Tuan 10](#)). Spatial discipline thus operates not only through surveillance or law but through the cultivation of affect, reinforcing the performative power of cognitive borders.

Embedded within a detective narrative, this landscape produces 'palimpsestic, alternative urban structures' ([Maczynska 66](#)), evoking both the uncanny and the politically charged nature of spatial perception. Miéville's layered depiction—fusing realistic urban models with speculative elements such as the potential third city, Orciny—demonstrates the New Weird's concern with destabilizing familiar frameworks while simultaneously engaging the 'everyday, quite quotidian, juridical and social aspects of nation-state borders' ([Manaugh](#)) and highlighting their absurdity ([Schmeink 29](#)).

In sum, Miéville's urban landscape functions as both a cognitive and political experiment: it foregrounds the processes through which space is socially produced, ideologically disciplined, and affectively experienced. The interplay of architecture, perception, and regulation in Beszel and Ul Qoma underscores the novel's broader critique of state power, surveillance, and the naturalization of borders—a critique that this paper will further unpack in subsequent sections.

Because Beszel and Ul Qoma occupy the same physical terrain, the interstitial—or crosshatched—zones become the primary sites where the novel’s politics of space are most visible. These zones are not peripheral to the narrative but central to its critique of how borders are produced, sustained, and enforced. The historical origins of this divided geography remain deliberately obscure. The period before the cities’ separation is referred to as ‘pre-Cleavage’, yet whether the Cleavage resulted from a single city splitting or from two cities converging is unresolved ([Zähringer, *Hidden* 21](#)). This uncertainty underscores a crucial point: the authority of the border does not derive from historical clarity or material fact, but from its continuous enactment in the present.

In this materially shared space, separation operates through cognitive and cultural mechanisms rather than physical ones. Distinctions between the cities are maintained through architecture, economic systems, political organization, clothing, and even language, as Borlú observes in the following passage:

Illitan and Besz sound very different. They are written, of course, in distinct alphabets. Besz is in Besz: thirty-four letters, left to right, all sounds rendered clear and phonetic, consonants, vowels and demivowels decorated with diacritics—it looks, one often hears, like Cyrillic (...). Illitan uses Roman script. That is recent. ([Miéville, *The City* 42](#))

These differences do not reflect ethnic division: they are socially produced cues that guide perception and behavior. As [Kolesnikov](#) notes, Miéville does not invent new races; instead, citizenship is defined through performative adherence to cultural conventions (200). Politically, the cities are sharply contrasted. Beszel functions as a fragile democracy undermined by economic stagnation and ultranationalist militias such as the True Citizens, while Ul Qoma operates under a centralized, authoritarian party system marked by censorship and surveillance ([Zähringer, *Hidden* 22](#)). Despite their geographical interconnection, official interaction is tightly regulated through the Oversight Committee, reinforcing the fiction of sovereign separation. These arrangements render the interstitial zones especially volatile: they are spaces where incompatible political, cultural, and perceptual regimes collide.

Such zones exemplify what [Gomel](#) describes as the ‘lost spaces’ of the divided city: intermediary territories that belong fully to neither side and yet are shaped by both (141). These spaces are inherently liminal, producing what Borlú calls a ‘threatening geography’ ([Miéville, *The City* 19](#)), where every gesture of perception carries political risk. Citizens in *TCTC* seem to exist within a conundrum, where topographical designations become entangled, and no walls or fences mark division. They must continually reconstruct borders through acts of disciplined attention, altering how they see, hear, and even smell the city around them. Interstitial space—these ‘intermediary zones, social and cultural no-man’s lands’ ([Gomel 141](#))—thus becomes a zone of collision where identity is constantly negotiated and transgression always imminent ([Kolesnikov 202–03](#)). This fissuring challenges the traditional notion of the city as a meeting place or common ground, as it becomes increasingly hollowed out.

The novel’s spatial logic aligns closely with [Foucault’s](#) concept of heterotopia:

counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (‘Of Other Spaces’ 24)

The crosshatched zones of *TCTC* function as heterotopic sites in which the rules governing space collapse and reassert themselves simultaneously. These spaces expose the artificiality of the border while intensifying its enforcement, revealing how spatial order depends on constant cognitive labor. Language itself becomes unstable in these zones, as streets bear multiple names and objects resist clear categorization, producing what [Kuehmichel](#) identifies as ‘linguistic, visual, historical, and grosstopical gaps’ (349).

Crucially, these interstitial formations reveal that urban identity in *TCTC* is not stable but a cultural achievement requiring perpetual reinforcement: in the absence of physical barriers,

the cities rely on affective discipline, habitualized perception, and the internalization of fear to sustain separation. The in-between spaces are therefore not failures of the system but its most productive sites: places where power is most intensely exercised because it must be continuously re-enacted.

One of the central mechanisms through which this re-enactment occurs is the practice of unseeing, instilled in citizens of both Beszel and Ul Qoma from infancy and rigorously policed in adulthood. It is to this cognitive and disciplinary process that the following section now turns.

‘UNSEEING’: INTRODUCING THE *NOVUM*

At the core of *The City & The City* lies the practice of unseeing, a cognitive discipline that structures not only how citizens perceive space but also how state power is sustained. Far from a mere narrative conceit, unseeing functions as the novel’s central *novum*: a socially engineered mode of perception that renders borders effective without material enforcement. Through this mechanism, Miéville exposes how modern nation-states depend not solely on coercive force but on the internalization of surveillance and the active participation of citizens in their own regulation.

In his influential theorization of science fiction, [Darko Suvin](#) defines the genre by the narrative dominance of a *novum*, ‘a fictional “novelty” validated by cognitive logic’ (63). The term, borrowed from Ernst Bloch, alludes to a cognitive innovation that represents a comprehensive phenomenon or relationship, deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s usual reality. Its novelty is ‘totalizing’ in that it transforms the narrative universe in crucial ways, providing a means of analytically grasping the story as a whole. Consequently, the essential tension in the story lies between the reader’s empirical reality and the altered logic of the fictional world, thereby estranging the familiar ([Suvin 64](#)).

While *TCTC* resists strict classification as science fiction, its use of unseeing conforms closely to [Suvin’s](#) model: it is a social rather than technological innovation, yet one that governs the novel’s narrative logic and ideological stakes. According to [Schimanski \(6\)](#), the setup resonates with both science fiction and the fantastic; the central premises of *TCTC* deliberately encourage both readers and characters to perceive the described phenomena as somehow magical or beyond the limits of present-day science and technology. Notably, nearly all of the novelties involved are social rather than technological. And, most strikingly, they manifest in the institutionalized practice of unseeing, which reifies everyday practices of ignoring certain aspects of daily life. In this connection, [Suvin](#) emphasizes that a science fiction narrative

is a fiction in which the SF element or aspect, the *novum*, is hegemonic, that is, so central and significant that it determines the whole narrative logic—or at least the overriding narrative logic—regardless of any impurities that might be present. Furthermore, the *novum* intensifies and radicalizes that movement across the boundary of a semantic field (defined by the author’s cultural norm) which always constitutes the fictional event. (70)

Unseeing fulfills precisely this function, operating as a cognitive innovation that restructures social relations, spatial practice, and narrative logic simultaneously. The historical antagonisms between Beszel and Ul Qoma demand that citizens consciously ignore one another despite sharing streets, buildings, and public spaces. Failure to do so constitutes a crime (‘breaching’), punished by a monitoring agency called ‘Breach’ ([Marks 223](#)). The threat of brutality becomes the mechanism through which mass indoctrination operates. Citizens comply not because borders are visible, but because the consequences of perceiving across them are severe. In essence, the physical geography of these two cities is crafted by a dominating force that compels psychological compliance from the general populace. As [O’Connor](#) notes, this discipline extends beyond vision to encompass all sensory registers, producing a population stripped of unsanctioned sensory interaction (83). Urban space, in turn, is shaped less by architecture than by enforced perception.

This system situates *TCTC* firmly within the tradition of dystopian fiction, which has long been concerned with the dangers of surveillance and normalization. Like Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Miéville’s novel depicts a society in which atrocity becomes possible precisely because its governing norms are internalized. The dual-city system in place creates an unwillingness to

see, and rules and norms of their social structures are internalized to the extent that it does not occur to the protagonists to challenge them (Stacy 228). In this sense, citizens become complicit in their own domination. Surveillance succeeds, Miéville suggests, only when it is collectively sustained.

Stacy describes it as a ‘dystopian panopticism’ (231), echoing Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, in which authority (‘the overseer’) sits at a central location and observes each citizen, prisoner, inmate, worker, student or patient. In the Panopticon, subjects never know when they are being watched and therefore police themselves. Those who are seen and surveilled feel the weight of the inspecting gaze to the extent that they internalize its work and become their own overseers (Kuehmichel 353). As Foucault famously observed, such systems produce subjects who ‘become the principle of [their] own subjection’ (*Discipline and Punish* 203). In *TCTC*, Breach remains largely invisible, yet its authority is omnipresent precisely because citizens have internalized its gaze. They do not merely obey the law; they actively perform it through disciplined acts of perception.

As a result, Breach, Beszel, and Ul Qoma collectively contribute to the establishment of a system with no purpose other than to uphold its own logic. While Breach conducts surveillance, remaining invisible to those under observation, the intricate dynamics of observation and unseeing among ordinary citizens serve as a more effective means to ensure their compliance with the status quo. Unseeing, then, is not an absence of vision but a willed refusal to perceive. As Marks emphasizes, it entails ‘refusing, leaving out; shutting out’ (232). The *unvisible*—that which is consciously unseen—plays a constitutive role in personal and collective identity, shaping how citizens understand themselves and their place within the city, and it requires conscious effort. Learned from childhood through ‘intense learnings of cues’ (Miéville, *The City* 65), unseeing becomes, by adulthood, a ‘deep prediscursive instinct’ (Miéville, *The City* 75). As Stacy succinctly puts it, ‘the act of unseeing is a willed failure of vision that requires active participation on the part of the disciplined population’ (231).

What emerges is a model of governance in which individuals function as vectors of the border itself. Through unseeing, citizens carry state boundaries within their own perceptual habits, reproducing them at every moment of urban life. *TCTC* thus demands that readers reflect on the politics of invisibility beyond its fictional cities—political, economic, and social forms of unseeing that structure contemporary life. As Roberts argues, *TCTC* is ultimately concerned with boundaries and with the ways those in power produce, maintain, suspend, and manipulate them for their own benefit (185). By making visible the unseen borders that people police themselves against crossing every day, Miéville highlights how they are fundamentally permeable and exposes how much states stand to gain from citizens’ compliance.

INVISIBLE BORDERS: THE CONVENTIONAL NATURE OF BOUNDARIES

Darko Suvin states:

the alternate reality logically necessitated by and proceeding from the narrative kernel of the *novum* can only function in the oscillating feedback with the author’s reality (...) because it is as a whole (...) an analogy to that empirical reality. (75)

However fantastic—or empirically unverifiable, as Suvin clarifies—the worlds or characters described may be, *de nobis fabula narratur*. In essence, however fantastic or empirically unverifiable a fictional world may be, its cognitive value lies not in prediction but in its capacity to estrange and illuminate the author’s present (78). This logic applies directly to *The City & The City*, which Miéville has described not as a political proposal but as ‘a kind of uncanny extrapolation of the political logic of borders’ (Schmeink 30).

Accordingly, *TCTC* is permeated by anxieties concerning ‘where one border begins and another ends’ and their ‘porous interstices’ (Naimon 58). The novel exaggerates these concerns to render visible the often-invisible mechanisms through which contemporary urban space is partitioned. Critics have drawn divergent conclusions from this strategy. Kolesnikov argues that *TCTC* raises crucial questions about contemporary Europe, where multiculturalism has not only failed to become the norm but has proven to be an ongoing and unsolvable problem (203).

Meanwhile, [Maczynska](#) characterizes it as a ‘visionary satire’, one that offers a ‘subversive reimagining of urban space and perception by dismantling the familiar metropolis’ through palimpsestic and overlapping spatial structures (66).

What emerges as Miéville’s primary concern is not the stability of borders but their fragility and contingency. His attention is drawn not to those parts of Beszel and Ul Qoma that unambiguously belong to one or the other, but to those that are in the border zone, contested (*dissensi*) or shared (*crosshatched*). Since no physical boundaries exist between Beszel and Ul Qoma, it becomes a task for the citizens to continually construct them anew in their minds through the acts of unseeing, unsmelling or unhearing. Breaching these invisible lines becomes punishable and taboo, which means that partition is entirely the result of human consciousness, an attribute of culture, and therefore conditional in nature. For [Kolesnikov](#), human involvement in the socio-historical practice of preserving traditions endows the boundary, or rather the prohibition on its violation (taboo), with ontological, existential meaning (203).

In this sense, *TCTC* dramatizes the paradoxical nature of borders themselves. As [Cooper and Tinning](#) note, they ‘take so many forms, are constituted by such diverse practices and are influenced by so many people that the very idea of the border lacks coherence’ (26). Miéville’s cities exemplify this incoherence: their interwoven geographies multiply borders while simultaneously exposing their artificiality. The novel is indeed saturated with borders, especially in topographical terms, with all of Beszel and Ul Qoma’s convoluted, interwoven and interstitial spaces. *TCTC* delves not only into the internal boundaries between the two cities but also their external borders with the outside world. It highlights the peculiar border-crossing point situated at the heart of the cities—the enigmatic Copula Hall, which underscores the absurdity of rigid separation by concentrating border control at the very heart of shared space. Residing in or visiting either Beszel or Ul Qoma, as [Schimanski](#) remarks, entails navigating ‘many epistemological borders’, most notably through the ‘highly regulated gaze’ demanded by unseeing (6).

This paradox resonates strongly with Wendy [Brown’s](#) analysis of contemporary borders. [Brown](#) argues that the proliferation and intensification of borders in the late modern period does not signal strengthened sovereignty but rather compensates for its erosion under globalization, neoliberal governance, and transnational capital. Borders, in this view, function less as effective instruments of control than as ‘symbolic and affective’ performances that promise protection, order, and identity in moments of political instability ([Brown 78](#)). Their power lies not in their material efficacy but in their capacity to stage sovereignty as coherent and intact.

TCTC dramatizes precisely this logic. The border between Beszel and Ul Qoma is neither fortified nor physically enforceable; instead, it operates as a theatrical assertion of state power, sustained through fear, ritualized perception, and citizen complicity. The omnipresent threat of Breach performs the work [Brown](#) identifies as characteristic of waning nation-state sovereignty (23): it reassures citizens that authority remains absolute even as it depends entirely on their participation. In this sense, unseeing functions as a compensatory practice, transforming individuals into living border technologies that uphold the ‘fiction’ of sovereign separation ([Brown 22](#)). The novel thus exposes how borders endure not because they are physically impermeable, but because they carry emotional weight and dense symbolic meaning.

This logic also aligns with Raphael [Zähringer’s](#) argument that Miéville’s spatial imaginaries consistently undermine the expectation that maps offer orientation or control—an insight developed in relation to *Perdido Street Station* but equally applicable to *TCTC*. Rather than stabilizing urban space, Miéville’s cartography foregrounds the instability of spatial knowledge itself. [Zähringer](#) demonstrates how Miéville’s cartographic imagination exposes maps as ideological constructs that both produce and police the boundaries they claim merely to represent, drawing attention to the power relations embedded in acts of mapping (‘Strange Tricks’ 66–71). In *TCTC*, borders function precisely in this way: not as material facts, but as cognitive maps enforced through habit, fear, and convention.

By introducing the practice of unseeing, Miéville ultimately compels readers to move beyond the binary of visible and invisible. His imagined cities exist at the cusp of the absurd and the logical ([Schmeink 29](#)), and in doing so they draw attention to the fact that all borders of nation-states exist at this very cusp. Through unseeing, the author offers a multilayered commentary on a prominent condition present in contemporary urban landscapes: the conscious

and unconscious detachment of citizens from their surroundings. Borlú's indoctrinated unseeing of Ul Qoma is a mirror of elements of the modern city that members of society daily witness or choose to ignore:

the avoidance of the homeless on the street; our disengagement from acts of racism or violence which we witness; our unwillingness to explore the spaces in between our familiar spaces of existence. (Miéville, *The City* 79)

Unseeing becomes an analogous strategy of not looking at the world, which assumes that one can simply ignore part of one's surroundings.

Taken together, Miéville's work aligns with [Suvin's](#) precepts:

all the epistemological, ideological, and narrative implications and correlatives of the *novum* lead to the conclusion that significant SF is in fact a specifically roundabout way of commenting on the author's collective context—often resulting in a surprisingly concrete and sharp-sighted comment at that. (84)

TCTC exemplifies how significant speculative fiction estranges reality in order to comment sharply upon it. Most notably, it serves as a departure from restrictive traditional norms, ushering readers into 'an alternative timestream' (84) from which to reassess the social and spatial conventions governing contemporary urban existence.

CONCLUSION

The City & The City offers a sustained interrogation of urban life by transforming the city itself into a site of cognitive and political experimentation. Through the New Weird's hybridity of genres, Miéville creates a metropolis divided neither by walls nor fences, but by cognitive borders enforced through fear, surveillance, and collective participation. Beszel and Ul Qoma thus function not merely as speculative settings but as models for understanding how contemporary nation-states naturalize division, discipline visibility, and embed sovereignty in everyday spatial practice.

Central to this critique is the novel's treatment of interstitial space. The crosshatched zones where the two cities overlap challenge traditional notions of cityscapes by exposing the instability of borders and the labor required to sustain them. These in-between spaces are not marginal but structurally essential: they are the sites where cognitive discipline is most intensely exercised and where the artificiality of spatial divisions is most clearly revealed. By compelling citizens to actively reproduce borders through unseeing, Miéville demonstrates how power operates most effectively when it is internalized, habitual, and affective rather than overtly coercive.

The practice of unseeing emerges as the novel's defining *novum*, a socially engineered act of cognitive discipline that governs urban life without relying on material separation. As this article has argued, unseeing functions as a disciplinary technology comparable to panoptic surveillance, producing subjects who police themselves and one another in accordance with state-defined norms. In doing so, *TCTC* extends the tradition of dystopian fiction while reframing it around the politics of space, visibility, and everyday complicity. Surveillance in Miéville's novel succeeds not because Breach is omnipresent, but because citizens have learned to carry the border within their own perceptual habits.

At the same time, the affective dimensions of urban life play a crucial role in sustaining this system. The contrasting atmospheres of Beszel and Ul Qoma generate emotional orientations that make spatial transgression feel not only illegal but existentially intolerable. Fear, disorientation, and belonging become tools of governance, reinforcing borders through feeling as much as through law.

Viewed in this light, *TCTC* resonates with Miéville's broader engagement with urban space across his oeuvre, from *Perdido Street Station* onward, where cities repeatedly function as contested terrains shaped by power, ideology, and resistance. Ultimately, the novel offers what [Suvin](#) describes as speculative fiction's distinctive cognitive value: an alternative timestream that serves as a vantage point from which to recognize the fragility of borders that are often

treated as natural or inevitable. By rendering the invisible visible, Miéville invites readers to reconsider how cities—and the states that govern them—discipline perception, normalize exclusion, and rely upon citizens' participation to sustain systems of division.

In the end, *TCTC* not only serves as a departure from restrictive norms but also encourages an openness to new realities, contributing to a renewed understanding of the complexities of human history, while also urging us to reconsider the fragile, often invisible structures that shape collective experience.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Lorena Agra  orcid.org/0009-0009-3197-3853

University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies (CEAUL/ULICES), Lisbon, Portugal.

REFERENCES

- Brown, Wendy.** *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. Zone Books, 2010.
- Cooper, Anthony, and Søren Tinning.** "Introduction." *Debating and Defining Borders: Philosophical and Theoretical Perspectives*, edited by **Anthony Cooper and Søren Tinning**, Routledge, 2020, doi:10.4324/9781351124881.
- Debord, Guy.** *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by **Ken Knabb**, Rebel Press, 2005.
- de Certeau, Michel.** *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by **Steven Rendall**, University of California Press, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel.** *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by **Alan Sheridan**, Vintage Books, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel.** "Of Other Spaces." Translated by **Jay Miskowicz**, *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/464648.
- Gomel, Elana.** "Divided Against Itself: Dual Urban Chronotopes." *Cityscapes of the Future: Urban Spaces in Science Fiction*, edited by **Yael Maurer and Meyrav Koren-Kuik**, Brill Rodopi, 2018, pp. 139–150.
- Irvine, Alexander C.** "Urban Fantasy." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, edited by **Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn**, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 200–213.
- Kolesnikov, Aleksandr.** "The Specificity of Urban Landscape Arrangement in the Novel *The City & The City* by China Miéville." *Uchenye Zapiski Kazanskogo Universiteta. Seriya Gumanitarnye Nauki*, vol. 160, no. 1, 2018, pp. 198–206, https://kpfu.ru/uz-eng/hum/archive/the-specificity-of-urban-landscape-arrangement-in_356398.html.
- Kuehmichel, Shannon.** "Thriving in the Gap: Visual and Linguistic Meaning Unmaking in *The City & The City*." *Extrapolation*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2014, pp. 349–367, doi:10.3828/extr.2014.19.
- Lefebvre, Henri.** *The Production of Space*. Translated by **Donald Nicholson-Smith**, Blackwell, 1991.
- Maczynska, Magdalena.** "This Monstrous City: Urban Visionary Satire in the Fiction of Martin Amis, Will Self, China Miéville, and Maggie Gee." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2010, pp. 58–86. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40664437>.
- Managh, Geoff.** "Unsolving the City: An Interview with China Miéville." *BLDGBLOG*, 1 Mar 2011, <https://bldgblog.blogspot.co.uk/2011/03/unsolving-city-interview-with-china.html>.
- Marks, Peter.** "Monitoring the Unvisible: Seeing and Unseeing in China Miéville's *The City & The City*." *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2013, pp. 222–236, doi:10.24908/ss.v11i3.4524.
- Martin, Niall.** "Unacknowledged Cities: Modernity and Acknowledgement in China Miéville's *The City & The City* and Marc Isaacs' *All White in Barking*." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 16, no. 6, 2013, pp. 710–724, doi:10.1177/1367549413497692.
- Miéville, China.** "M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire: Weird; Hauntological versus and/or and and/or or?" *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, vol. 4, 2008, pp. 105–128, https://blog.urbanomic.com/urbanomic/archives/2009/09/collapse_volume.html.
- Miéville, China.** *The City & The City*. Macmillan, 2009.
- Naimon, David.** "A Conversation with China Miéville." *The Missouri Review*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 52–66. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/mis.2011.0085.
- O'Connor, Rob.** "A Tourist Guide to Beszel and Ul Qoma: Unseeing, the Brutality of Borders and Reinterpretation of Psychogeography in China Miéville's *The City and The City*." *The Luminary*, vol. 7, 2016, pp. 75–87, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/luminary/issue%207/index.htm>.

- Roberts, Jude.** "Crosshatching: Boundary Crossing in the Post-Millennial British Boom." *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, edited by **Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 183–196.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure**, et al. *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*. Ohio State University Press, 2016.
- Schimanski, Johan.** "Seeing Disorientation: China Miéville's *The City & The City*." *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2016, pp. 106–120, doi:[10.1080/14735784.2015.1122543](https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2015.1122543).
- Schmeink, Lars.** "On the Look-Out for a New Urban Uncanny: An Interview with China Miéville." *Extrapolation*, vol. 55, no. 1, Spring 2014, pp. 25–32. *Gale Academic OneFile*, doi:[10.3828/extr.2014.3](https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2014.3).
- Schulz, Bruno.** *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*. Penguin Books, 2008.
- Shaviro, Steven.** *Post-Cinematic Affect*. O-Books, 2010.
- Stacy, Ivan.** "Complicity in Dystopia: Failures of Witnessing in China Miéville's *The City and The City* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2015, pp. 225–250. *Project MUSE*, doi:[10.1353/pan.2015.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.2015.0021).
- Suvin, Darko.** *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. Yale University Press, 1979.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu.** *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- VanderMeer, Jeff.** "Introduction: The New Weird: 'It's Alive?'" *The New Weird*, edited by **Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer**, Tachyon Publications, 2008, pp. ix–xviii.
- Zähringer, Raphael.** *Hidden Topographies: Traces of Urban Reality in Dystopian Fiction*. De Gruyter, 2017, doi:[10.1515/9783110535853](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110535853).
- Zähringer, Raphael.** "'Strange Tricks of Cartography': The Map(s) of *Perdido Street Station*." *China Miéville: Critical Essays*, edited by **Caroline Edwards and Tony Venezia**, Gylphi, 2015, pp. 61–87.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Agra, L. "Invisible Borders: the Dynamics of Imagined Urban Life in China Miéville's *The City & The City*". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 24, issue 1, art. 10, 2026, pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.239>

Received: 10 September 2025

Accepted: 27 May 2026

Published: 23 October 2026

COPYRIGHT:

© 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Anglo Saxonica is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.