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"A Novel in Every Genre:" China Miéville and the problems of genre classification in the twenty-first century.

Picture the scene. 2003. An excited bookseller - aka me - opens a box to discover the hardback copies of Margaret Atwood's latest novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003). As a fan of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its depiction of a dystopian society I was excited by Atwood's re-engagement with the field of science-fiction. Imagine my horror then as the automatic inventory system categorised the novel as fiction. This was the moment when I realised that genre categories had become problematic.

Since the turn of the millennium genre fiction has been going through a radical evaluation. Contemporary authors are beginning to experiment with the boundaries of genre expectations. Of course writers have always explored the fantastic but historically there has been a conscious distancing between literary fiction and genre. However, in the past decade, literary authors are now using genre traits more openly, with novels such as *The Road* (2006) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) gaining great acclaim whilst portraying themes that are traditionally the territory of genre novels. As a result, texts are now becoming problematic to classify and the once defined boundary between literature and genre is becoming indeterminate. China Miéville is one author leading the way in breaking down boundaries and exploring new forms of genre.

Squid-gods, quantum physics, cactus-people, dimension-jumping law-keepers, sentient machines, sea monsters, body-controlling parasites, golems: these are just a few of the things that you will find in the novels of China Miéville. The influence that genres play upon Miéville's

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work cannot be ignored. Miéville himself has been quoted as saying that he would like to write 'a novel in every genre', stating: 'at a basis I am interested in genre because that was formative for me, as a reader' and that one of his aims is to 'impinge on 'traditional' pulp or generic plots' (Pistelli and Worden interview, 2005). Miéville's ability to shift seamlessly between many genre tropes deliberately reflects the confusion over how to categorise genre in the early twenty-first century.

Miéville's trilogy of books set in the world of 'Bas Lag' - although coalesced by their fantasy, secondary-world, setting - actually contain tropes from a wide variety of genres: *Perdido Street Station* (2000), with the mind-eating slake-moths, is a monster-orientated horror novel; *The Scar* (2002), with its floating pirate-city and colossal sea monsters, conjures up comparisons with the maritime quest-narratives of Jules Verne; whereas *Iron Council* (2004) contains the key elements of the western genre, with dusty plains-travellers, railroads and gunfights. With all of these themes and ideas appearing together, it is no wonder that classifying Miéville's work proves so difficult. However, this is what Miéville is trying to achieve - to create debate over the classification seen in fiction and to challenge the hierarchal snobbery of literary over genre fiction. His work is constantly stretching the barriers between genres to raise the question of what genre actually means in the twenty-first century.

It is clear that certain tropes are recognisable as belonging to certain genres. Therefore, a basic interpretation of genre *must* focus upon classification. Many genre theorists agree with this initial analysis. John Frow describes genre as 'a matter of discrimination and taxonomy: of organising things into recognisable classes' (51). The important word in Frow's initial definition

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is 'recognisable' and this is the key element of genre: the audience is able to identify which genre a text belongs to with little difficulty due to the traits it possesses and the themes it is discussing. In other words, particular genres are about particular subjects or, as the well-known genre theorist Tzvetan Todorov claims: 'a genre, whether literary or not, is nothing more than the codification of discursive properties' (17-18). The act of genrification is the act of identifying characteristics within a text.

It is this that makes genre such an important issue. In the era of commercialism and retail, the ability to classify something is vital in order to sell it to the correct market. This has led to a saturation of genres and subgenres in recent years, resulting in a confusing interpretation of the term. However, this confusion does allow writers, such as Miéville, to experiment with crossing the boundaries and creating something fresh and exciting. Genre does not have to be restricted by its own defining character, but should, in fact, embrace its multiplicity. This deliberate breakdown of genre continues throughout Miéville's career so far: there is not a single novel that is easy to categorise. Miéville's multiplicity and its connection to classification issues is best illustrated by looking at his work through the lens of science fiction and fantasy. However, briefly let's examine Miéville's relationship with literary fiction.

Terry Eagleton observes that 'literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language…the language draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being' (2). A literary novel is self-aware; it has emotional and linguistic depth. Literature tells the reader something about themselves or their world. It helps an individual to ask questions about their own identity and the world in which they inhabit. Literary novels contain certain familiar traits regarding language and style. Therefore, they must be classed as a genre, as a reader has particular

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expectations.

Miéville is conscious of the literary novel - he plays with our perception of what it is. He is able to simultaneously inhabit literary and genre landscapes. He is influenced equally by his attraction in his younger years to role-playing games and to the classic literary novels embraced by academia. This attraction to both genre and literary texts places Miéville in an interesting position. He is able to (what I will call) *cross-inhabit* these landscapes: put simply, he is able to slip back and forth between different genres of fiction at will. He has an intimate understanding and love for multiple forms, and experiments with blurring boundaries and moulding them together into new forms. This cross-inhabitation is clear in his work, with literary self-consciousness and experimentation intertwined with traits of genre and the fantastic. However, Miéville is more interested in genre ideas than literary stylistics; his novels all examine particular social, scientific and political themes through fantastical settings in an attempt to explore the '[usually] unexamined political assumptions of genre' (Pistelli and Warden interview, 2005). Miéville is attempting to show that genre can be political and social; that it is just as capable as literature at exploring real-life issues.

At first glance, Miéville's *Bas-Lag* books appear to be fantasy. Their secondary world setting and fantastical races lend themselves well to the traditional fantasy novels of such authors as C.S Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Yet what we are talking about here are popular fantasy - stories of faery, swords and heroes. This is definitely not what Miéville's work is about. Instead, we need to consider fantasy in another way. Rosemary Jackson defines fantasy as 'the 'real' under scrutiny', that it is representative of a 're-placed and dis-located' version of the world

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which 'is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two' (19). As Jackson points out, even the etymological roots of the word 'fantastic' highlight a glaring ambiguity; the Latin word *phantasticus*, meaning to make visible or manifest (13). To 'make visible' suggests a transition - a deliberate movement between the unreal and the real, therefore highlighting the ability of fantasy fiction to inhabit both spaces. This connection to the unreal also explains the inherent attraction towards the supernatural and 'otherness' that is seen in fantasy. Stories examining ghosts, the afterlife and the uncanny create a feeling of foreboding and uncertainty manifested by our unconscious wariness of anything unnatural. In Jackson's mind, fantasy relates to these kinds of narratives, rather than stories about dragons and elves.

Brian Attebery has also worked upon a definition of fantasy. In *Strategies of Fantasy,* he attempts to unpick the characteristics of fantasy fiction, concluding that 'It is a form that makes use of both the fantastic mode, to produce the impossibilities, and the mimetic, to reproduce the familiar' (16). Successful fantasy uses this element of the unreal to help us see things in a new way, in a similar manner to canonical literature. However, where Jackson and Attebery differ is that Jackson's definition of fantasy - as texts that explore the unreal and the forbidden - excludes and limits texts that, in the twenty-first century, are strongly associated with the fantasy genre. Jackson concludes that such authors as Tolkien and Le Guin 'belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery or romance literature' (9). What is plain to see is that the academic integrity of the fantasy genre has been affected by commercialism. Attebery's definition of fantasy is more understanding of the commercial nature of fantasy. He proposes that we view fantasy as a collective of texts that share common narrative and

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thematic tropes, focused around the unreal. In the centre are the seminal texts of the unreal - Jackson's much-loved texts of the nineteenth and early twentieth century; "La Litterature Fantastique" and the likes of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* - but, more importantly, that the outer fringes of fantasy, with texts that contain only a few fantasy tropes or construct these tropes in a questionable manner, allows popularised examples of the genre, represented most effectively by Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, to be defined alongside more 'literary' examples of fantasy. What Attebery is applying here is an example of 'fuzzy-set' theory, which suggests that genres are 'defined not by boundaries but by a center' (12). Describing genres in this manner, with seminal texts at the centre of a decreasingly-formulaic outer zone, is a useful tool when it comes to defining texts. It allows texts to be compared and contrasted easily and for problematic texts with blurred genre traits to be brought into the collective.

Miéville can undoubtedly be classed as a fantasy writer. His work fits into both Jackson and Attebery's definitions of the genre. His work strikes the correct balance between the real and the unreal - either through the addition of unreal elements to a real-life recognisable setting or the transference of real world politics and social issues onto a secondary world setting. His own personal interpretations of fantasy would align themselves more with Jackson's appreciation. Although an admirer of Tolkien's world creation - and the way he made it central to the project of fantasy literature - Miéville has been critical of Tolkien's influence upon fantasy literature and the development of his theory that the highest function in fantasy is a consolatory happy ending. Miéville perceives Tolkien's view as being problematic, resulting in 'a theory of fantasy in which consolation is a matter of *policy*'. To Miéville, Tolkien's influence is that 'he's *defined* fantasy as literature which mollycoddles the reader rather than challenging

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them' (Newsinger interview, 2000). Miéville's work directly challenges Tolkien's theory of consolation; it is as if his work is deliberately highlighting that modern fantasy is capable of branching away from Tolkienesque values by consistently challenging the reader. Miéville is more aligned with the work of Mervyn Peake, author of the *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946-1959), who like Miéville, bent genre expectations to create social and political commentary. Miéville admires Peake's ability as a writer who is both political and fantastical at the same time, who 'doesn't fit neatly into the [fantasy] genre - though he's revered by fantasy fans - and didn't have the sense of writing in genre tradition, unlike most fantasy writers. He's inside and outside fantasy at the same time' (Newsinger interview, 2000). Miéville relates to and strives to emulate this himself. It is this emulation of Peake that aligns Miéville with Attebery's view of fantasy. Some of Miéville's work is more overtly fantasy than others: however, they all contain elements of the unreal central to the fantasy debate. However, Miéville is more concerned with the outer reaches of Attebery's fuzzy set of fantasy texts. For him, the boundaries of fantasy are fluid and easily broken down.

Instead of using conventional genre classification, Miéville's work is most effectively categorised by Farah Mendlesohn's mode of Immersive Fantasy which 'presents the fantastic without comment as the norm for the protagonist and for the reader: we sit on the protagonist's shoulder and while we have access to his eyes and ears, we are not provided with an explanatory narrative' (xx). In all of Miéville's novels we are introduced to his world with little or no explanation. Insect-headed humanoids and gigantic cactus-men exist side-by-side with more 'normal' races in *Perdido Street Station, The Sc*ar and *Iron Council,* reflecting Kafka's immersive-fantasy opening to *The Metamorphosis*. The bizarre concept of 'unseeing' in *The City*

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and the City (2011) is introduced in a matter-of-fact manner, making it stand out as being strange:

> Immediately and flustered I looked away, and she did the same with the same speed... 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 GunterStrasz, that depressed zone. (14)

The inclusion of the word 'unnoticing' here is what produces the sense of otherness in this passage. Something is not quite right, yet the reader is able to still associate with the scene. These elements work due to the immersive quality of the fantasy Miéville deploys. The real world is presented to us through the slightly-warped lens of genre. This is why Miéville's work is successful fantasy - we do not enter it, but are assumed to be a part of it. He is able to produce a feeling of what we could call 'familiar otherness'; the capacity to view what would be strange to us as normal and matter-of-fact.

Despite this, we are still unable to avoid the sword-and-sorcery connotations associated with fantasy in the twenty-first century. The massive growth of Tolkienesque quest narratives - seen as an ideal serialisation opportunity by the publishing industry - has undoubtedly affected the genre as a whole. Authors such as Tolkien and Le Guin now occupy the centre of Attebery's fuzzy-set of fantasy due to their commercial success and popularity amongst readers. Miéville's work definitely does not sit side-by-side with sword-and-sorcery tales and therefore, solely classifying it as fantasy in the current climate becomes problematic despite the immersive elements that his work possesses.

Science fiction is one of the most popular forms of genre but I would suggest that

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science fiction reflects a recent redefinition of 'genre' as an all-encompassing 'umbrella-term' for a whole selection of different modes of storytelling. Science fiction is a genre that is under constant reinvention and reinterpretation and this is a problem when considering classification of texts. Its name alludes to this: as science itself expands and develops then so do new strands, or sub-genres, of science fiction. For example, the growth of computer technology and cyber-culture gave birth to the subgenre of Cyberpunk in the 1980s. Out of all the genres that exist, science fiction is the one that can be most easily sub-categorised. This is what makes the science fiction genre such an appealing one for writers such as Miéville to explore.

Technology is not the defining characteristic of science fiction; it is merely a conduit through which what Darko Suvin labelled 'cognitive estrangement' successfully happens. Suvin's argument is that science fiction has existed in the form of myth and fantasy since the classical era, that 'although it shares with myth, fantasy, fairy tale, and pastoral an opposition to naturalistic or empiricist literary genres, it differs very significantly in approach and social function...I will argue for an understanding of SF as the *literature of cognitive estrangement*' (3-4). For Suvin, science fiction texts seek rational understanding for the mysteries of the world and make their subject matter recognizable by using the seemingly unfamiliar or future projection as motifs to explore these themes. Science fiction is actually a form that wants to explore the development of the human condition, just like literature. Miéville's novels certainly seem to fit into the categorisation of cognitive estrangement. They are focused upon ideas and philosophies that, at first glance, appear fantastical but upon closer examination reveal something fundamentally important about our own society. For example, The Construct Council from *Perdido Street Station* highlights how our development of robotic engineering may lead to

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sentient machines. The concept of 'unseeing' in *The City and the City* - the indoctrinated conscious sensory avoidance of a twin population - reflects contemporary border control and social issues within modern urban environments. Good science fiction extrapolates ideas and then allows the reader to digest them, process them, and apply them to their own surroundings.

The expansion of both technology and the publishing industry in the last half century has resulted in a diverse range of science fiction texts, therefore diluting the understanding and definition of the genre. Upon creation, subgenres only appeal to small counter-culture groups but can quickly grow in popularity until they become a genre of their own. The phenomenal rise of the steampunk counter-culture movement since the turn of the millennium is a contemporary example of this process. The sub-genres created by the saturation of science fiction have become more dominant and science fiction as a category now, in the twenty-first century, is used more effectively in describing films and TV shows. The contemporary science fiction novel needs further sub-categorisation to be accurately identified. No longer is a novel a 'science fiction novel'; more accurately it would be described as a 'space opera', or an 'alternative history' or a 'cyberpunk' novel. In other words, science fiction has slipped to being a mere 'category' within a commercial power-structure.

This saturation and confusion is something that Todorov is keen to highlight about the history of genre. Confusion over genres leads to the creation of new ones:

> A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination...there has never been a literature without genres; it is a system in constant transformation. (15)

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The creation of new genres is something that Miéville is cited as being responsible for. Critics and reviewers create new classifications in which he can inhabit; for example, terms such as 'new weird' and 'salvage-punk'- both deriving from existing genre classifications. For readers of genre fiction, this deliberate pushing of boundaries and the expectations that they bring can be a fine line between reading satisfaction and annoyance. This, however, is a challenge that Miéville embraces claiming that 'in an ideal world you'd hope you're pushing readers enjoyably out of their comfort zones with all sorts of things' (SkellieScar interview). What Miéville is highlighting here is how genre is able to shape and influence the thoughts of writers and readers. People engaged with genre are ruled by the traditions, history and development of that genre: expectation plays an important role. As Robert Eaglestone declares: a science fiction novel *without one aspect* of science fiction is...just a novel' (36). This viewpoint separates genre fiction from literary fiction: genre becomes restricted by the very thing that people like about it whereas literature is able to talk about anything and, therefore, transcend initial classification. Science fiction has been defeated by its own popularity and replaced by the sub-genres it created. Miéville is keen to explore this motif, with his work constantly shifting between sub-genres within the same novels. For example, *Perdido Street Station* slips seamlessly between the technological-Victoriana of steampunk and the hard-sci-fi depiction of quantum physics. He is constantly challenging his reader's perception of genre.

This sub-categorisation is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, science fiction novels have become more accepted by the literary establishment in recent years due to their new-found ability to shake off the historical connotations of the pulp era. Emily St John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* (2014) - about the survival of humanity and human culture after the world is

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decimated by 'Georgia Flu' - won the Arthur C. Clarke award for Best Science Fiction Novel whilst also being nominated and shortlisted for multiple literary awards. *Never Let Me Go* was shortlisted for both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Booker Prize. *The Road* won its author, Cormac McCarthy, the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. The embracing of science fiction tropes by contemporary literary authors has shown that the barriers between genre and literature are breaking down. However, some degree of literary hierarchy still exists. This brings up full circle back to Margaret Atwood. Ursula Le Guin's review of *The Year of the Flood* seeks to question Atwood's choice to distance herself from the category of science fiction:

> To my mind, *The Handmaid's Tale, Oryx and Crake* and now *The Year of the Flood* all exemplify one of the things that science fiction does, which is to extrapolate imaginatively from current trends and events to a near-future that's half prediction, half-satire. But Margaret Atwood does not want any of her books to be called science fiction…she says that everything that happens in her novels is possible and may even have already happened, so they can't be science fiction, which is "fiction in which things happen that are not possible today." This arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awarders. She does not want the literary bigots to shove her in the literary ghetto.
>
> (Le Guin, *The Guardian*)

Does Le Guin have a point? After all, Atwood's novels listed here do examine science fiction tropes such as genetics, apocalyptic epidemics, and dystopian future societies. Why then is she so dismissive of the genre label, insisting that her works is more accurately described as 'speculative fiction'? Is it a case of 'literary acceptance'? Atwood is keen to defend herself against Le Guin's questioning, recognising the multi-layered diversity of science fiction and its ability to cross-inhabit other genres easily. For Atwood, 'when it comes to genres, the borders

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are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth...inter-genre visiting have been going on in the SF world - loosely defined - for some time' (7). Atwood's reaction here highlights the problem that science fiction as a genre classification now faces. Her response to Le Guin's comments is to create and apply a sub-genre label to her work. The definition of the 'speculative fiction' subgenre becomes more significant than the discussion of science fiction itself.

Miéville appears to be enjoying the act of deliberately questioning genre classification. His novels are playing with preconceived ideas of what a science fiction or fantasy novel should be. Whereas Atwood goes to great lengths to identify her work as something that is not 'science fiction', Miéville seems to relish the problems that classification brings, inviting the reader to create their own. Miéville suggests that genre boundaries are meaningless and, as a direct result, the fiction becomes free from expectation and more stimulating.

Miéville is a writer who is forcing us to re-examine how we classify genre fiction. His work straddles different genres, exploring tropes found in literary fiction, fantasy, science fiction and others. He plays with readers' expectations, sending them in directions that they were not expecting to find. He is able to adopt recognisable genre traits and subvert them into new forms. Genre writers in the twenty-first century have become freed from the restraints of association, able to embrace genre fiction's new-found multiplicity. Genre is even able to find its place amongst the hallowed ground of literary fiction; the boundaries vanishing more all the time. Attebery's theory of 'fuzzy sets' becomes a useful model. Genre is no longer about boundaries and classifications, but centres and blurred edges - the outer rings of Attebery's

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'fuzzy sets' happily co-existing together. In the twenty-first century genre has become more than a collective of taxonomies; it is now an exploration of how those taxonomies can be stretched and explored. Writers are now able to inhabit the spaces in-between genres, moving in-and-out with relish and excitement to create texts that are rich, experimental and enlightening. The death of classification is the birth of a new all-encompassing form of genre, and the freedom for writers to explore it.

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