The Novel Today: Recent British Fiction
Lecture 11:
Weird Fiction: China Miéville

1) The Genre-Dissolving Weird
2) Expanding the Boundaries of Crime Fiction:
   ***The City and the City* (2009)**
3) Expanding the Boundaries of Science Fiction:
   ***Embassytown* (2011)**

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1) The Genre-Dissolving Weird

Weird Fiction (cf. Miéville 2009)

If considered at all, Weird Fiction is usually, roughly considered as a rather breathless and generically slippery macabre fiction, a dark fantastic ("horror" plus "fantasy") often featuring nontraditional alien monsters (thus plus "science fiction"). Though particularly associated with the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, the stop-start existence of which began in 1923, classic Weird Fiction predates it […] It has had colossal impact across work in all media, with under-investigated generically problematizing implications […]

In his "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" (1937), Lovecraft describes his desire to "escape from the prison-house of the known" and his fascination with "shattered natural law of cosmic alienage or 'outsideness'". The focus is on *awe* and its undermining of the quotidian. This obsession with numinosity under the everyday is at the heart of weird fiction […]

One can argue that the frenzied succession of adjectives in Lovecraft, alongside his regular insistence that whatever is being described is "undescribable" is, in its *hesitation*, its obsessive qualification and stalling of the noun, an aesthetic deferral according to which the world is always already unrepresentable, and can only be approached by an asymptotic succession of subjective pronouncements. Thus the form of writing is a function of sublime backwash, these baroque stylings a philosophy of militant adjectivalism struggling against a nounism that implies, carelessly speaking of "dog" and "door" as if that were the end of the matter, that such unrepresentable Reals are containable in our inadequate philosophical symbolic system. This is not Promethean but myopic. By contrast the careful and precise hysteria of "Pulp Modernist" Weird Fiction looks like radical humility in the face of Weird ontology itself.

The New Weird

The New Weird is a literary genre that began in the 1990s and developed in a series of novels and stories published from 2001 to 2005. The writers involved are mostly novelists who are considered to be parts of the horror and/or speculative fiction genres but who often cross genre boundaries. Notable authors include China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer, K. J. Bishop and Steph Swainston … According to Jeff VanderMeer and Ann VanderMeer, in their introduction to the anthology *The New Weird (*2008), the genre is "a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy." (Wikipedia)

The Novels of China Miéville:

The Bas-Lag/New Crobuzon Series
Perdido Street Station (2000); *The Scar* (2002); *Iron Council* (2004)

King Rat (1998)
The Tain (2002)
Un Lun Dun (2007)
The City and the City (2009)
The Kraken (2010)
Embassytown (2011)
Railsea (2012)
This Census-Taker (2016)
The Last Days of New Paris (2016)

(+ short fiction, comics, political and academic writing)

In addition to popular success and critical acclaim, Miéville attracted academic attention early in his career, becoming considered an exemplary figure within the 'British Boom' of science fiction and fantasy (SF/F), which scholars argued saw the genre infused with a powerful new kind of inventiveness and purpose.

(Edwards & Venezia 2015, 2)

[Miéville] has shifted the longstanding academic focus on the ideological character of realism towards the ideological character of capitalist reality itself: "'[R]eal' life under capitalism *is a fantasy:* 'realism,' narrowly defined, is therefore a 'realistic' depiction of 'an absurdity which is true', but no less absurd for that" (Miéville 2002, 42). What is needed, then, is a mode of writing that somehow manages to crack the walls of this ideological totality by pointing out that "this 'real' world is no less fantastical than are the worlds created by non-realist genres"; the resulting "ab-realism specifically targets the fragility and constructedness of this capitalist realism, refusing its pretence that the world-as-narrated is the same as the world-as-lived" (Vint 2015, 41). This re-politicised deconstructive bent clearly builds on the realism – modernism – postmodernism trajectory […], but it also insists on an alternative mode of writing unfettered by the limiations of realism and its later deconstruction on purely epistemological grounds.

(Reinfandt 2017, 77-78)

With this poetics, Miéville is indeed at the forefront of a broader development which "supplant[s] not only the notion of genre itself, but the very foundations of the modernist barricades that had long been thought to insulate literary culture from the vernacular fiction of the pulps and other forms on noncanonical expression. (Wolfe 2011, 23) Perhaps it is only now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that the novel has realized its ambition of being a 'genre without genre' (Cunningham 2016) in a fully inclusive sense which encompasses both genre fiction and literary fiction.

(Reinfandt 2017, 78)

2) Expanding the Boundaries of Crime Fiction:
   The City and the City **(2009)**

"An eye-opening genre-buster. The names of Kafka and Orwell tend to be evoked too easily for anything a bit out of the ordinary, but in this case they are worthy comparisons."

(*The Times*)

Inspector Tyador Borlú, the first-person narrator of the novel, and Constable Lizbyet Corwi investigate the murder of a young woman in the Central European city-state of Besźel. Their investigations point to Besźel's 'twin city' Ul Quoma and unearth political machinations involving the legend of Orciny, a third city 'between' Besźel and Ul Quoma.

Four Parts:

Part One: Besźel (ch. 1-11)
Part Two: Ul Quoma (ch. 12-22)
Part Three: Breach (ch. 23-28)
Coda: Breach (ch. 29)

End of chapter 1:

As I turned, I saw past the edges of the estate to the end of GunterStrász, between the dirty brick buildings. Trash moved in the wind. It might be anywhere. An elderly woman was walking slowly away from me in a shambling way. She turned her head and looked at me. I was struck by her motion, and I met her eyes. I wondered if she wanted to tell me something. In my glance I took in her clothes, her way of walking, of holding herself, and looking.
With a hard start, I realised that she was not on GunterStrász at all, and that I should not have seen her.
Immediately and flustered I looked away, and she did the same, with the same speed. I raised my head, towards an aircraft on its final descent. When after some seconds I looked back up, unnoticing the old woman stepping heavily away, I looked carefully instead of at her in her foreign street at the facades of nearby GunterStrász, that depressed zone.

Terminology:

- the Cleavage
- Language(s): Besź vs. Illitan
- Space(s): total, alter and crosshatched areas
- to unsee
- breach / Breach
- Copula Hall
- unifs

Chapter 3:

I lived east and south a bit of the Old Town … It is a heavily crosshatched street – clutch by clutch of architecture broken by alterity, even in a few spots house by house […]
Laced by the shadows of girdered towers that would loom over it if they were there, Ascension Church is at the end of VulkovStrász […]
In the morning trains ran on a raised line metres from my window. They were not in my city. I did not of course, but I could have stared into the carriages – they were quite that close – and caught the eyes of foreign travellers.
They would have seen only a thin man in early middle age in a dressing gown at his morning yoghurt and coffee, shake-folding a copy of a paper – *Inkyistor* or *Iy Déurnem* or a smudgy *Besźel* Journal to keep my English practiced.

Ending:

I have a great deal to learn, and no choice but to learn it, or go rogue, and there is no one hunted like a Breach renegade. So, not ready for that or the revenge of my new community of bare, extra-city lives, I make a choice of those two nonchoices. My task is changed: not to uphold the law, or another law, but to maintain the skin that keeps law in place. Two laws in two places, in fact.
That is the end of the case of Orciny and the archeologists, the last case of Inspector Tyador Borlú of the Besźel Extreme Crime Squad. Inspector Tyador Borlú is gone. I sign of Tye, avatar of Breach, following my mentor on my probation out of Besźel and out of Ul Quoma. We are all philosophers here where I am, and we debate among many things the question of where it is that we live. In that issue I am liberal. I live in the interstice yes, but I live in both the city and the city.

3) Expanding the Boundaries of Science Fiction: *Embassytown* (2011)

"The tag line, surely, should be 'Miéville; The Writer Too Good For The Booker"
(*Scotland on Sunday*)

"The originality of *Embassytown* arises partly from its fusion of two traditions in which the complicity of language and power has been examined and worked through with particular urgency. The first, of course, is science fiction […] The other is postcolonial fiction […] In this sense, *Embassytown* plays out as a novel of metropolitan-colonial conflict, holding out the hope that language might not serve only as a tool of oppression, but be reclaimed as the instrument that makes resistance possible."
(*Observer*)

From
http://lizcoshizzle.tumblr.com/post/56314421600/so-heres-why-you-should-read-embassytown:

this is an ariekei, a sentient species native to the planet the book takes place on

- the coral thing has eyebuds on it, which get described as like… pulling in, when it blinks, and they "crane their eyecorals" to look around
- the fan thing in black is its auditory sensory organ
- the caterpillar thing is biotechnology, which is actually what they use to power everything. even their houses are alive
- it has two mouths, and can't understand anything as a sentient species if it doesn't speak specifically with one united mind behind two voices
- they get sweet nicknames by the main character, like Spanish Dancer and Baptist, awww
- they're very polite.

The Arikei have two speaking orifices, one on their fan wing and one on their gift wing. Their Language has to be uttered through both simultaneously (in the book their utterances are thus rendered as fractions with different constituents – when they later fall into language these are harmonized). For them, Language, thought and reality are one and inseparable. Accordingly, they can neither speculate nor lie. Especially the latter capacity of humans is a source of endless fascination to them, which they try to emulate on 'Festivals of Lies'.

Coordinates:

- Arieka, the Arikei
- Language (vs. languages like the terre Anglo-Ubiq)
- the City vs. Embassytown
- Hosts vs. Ambassadors
- humans/terres vs. exots vs. automs
- shiftparents
- Embassytown is a colony of Bremen on Dagostin
- terretech vs. biorigging
- the immer vs. the manchmal:
  "The immer's reaches don't correspond at all to the dimensions of the manchmal, this space where we live. The best we can do is say that the immer *underlies* or *overlies, infuses,* is a *foundation,* is *langue* of which our actuality is a *parole,* and so on … Arieka … sits alone at the edge of the known immer, so far as the immer can be known. Without expertise and bravery, and the skill of the immersers, no one could get to my world." (34)

Characters

- Avice Benner Cho – Embassytown native and Immerser, husband to Scile and lover of CalVin.
- Scile – non-native linguist and husband to Avice; believes that Language should remain as it is regardless of the consequences.
- $\frac{Cal}{Vin}$ (or CalVin) — Ambassador of high standing, lover of Avice Benner Cho.
- $\frac{Mag}{Da}$ (or MagDa) — head Ambassador.
- $\frac{Ez}{Ra}$ (or EzRa) — new, Bremen engineered, Ambassador consisting of two non-identical people. Also known as the "God Drug".
- Bren – ex-Ambassador still living in Embassytown and advisor to Avice, one half of the "cleaved" Ambassador BrenDan.
- Ehrsul – an "autom" (from automaton), best friend of Avice.
- Wyatt – Bremen's contact on Embassytown.
- Hasser – a human "simile" used by the Ariekei as part of Language. Killer of $\frac{Surl}{Tesh\text{-}echer}$.
- $\frac{Surl}{Tesh\text{-}echer}$ (or Beehive) — the most successful Ariekei liar ever. Is murdered by Hasser during the Festival of Lies.
- Spanish Dancer – an Ariekei with markings reminiscent of a Spanish dancer who is interested in the similes and a follower of $\frac{Surl}{Tesh\text{-}echer}$.
- YlSib (formerly $\frac{Sib}{Yl}$) — ex-Ambassador living in the Host city; Bren's contact.

(Source: Wikipedia)

Avice as a simile:

There was a human girl who in pain ate what was given to her in an old room built for eating in which eating had not happened for a time. (28)
⬇
(something is) like the girl who ate what was given to her

"Similes start […] transgressions. Because we can refer to anything. Even though in Language, everything is literal. Everything is what it is, but still, I can be *like* the dead and the living and the stars and a desk and a fish and anything […] I had to be hurt and fed to be speakable, because it had to be true. But what they *say* with me […] That's true because they *make* it. Similes are a way out. A route from reference to signifying […] If similes do their job well enough, they turn into something else. We tell the truth best by becoming lies […] I don't want to be a simile anymore […] I want to be a metaphor." (345)

Structure:

- Opening in medias res: arrival of the new Ambassador EzRa
- Proem: The Immerser
     0.1 (Childhood); 0.2 (Becoming a Simile); 0.3 (Becoming an Immerser)
- Part One: Income
        Latterday 1-3 (picking up from opening)
    alternating with
        Fomerly 1-2 (picking up from the Proem)
- Part Two: Festivals – Latterday 4-8 alternating with Formerly 3-6
- Part Three: Like As Not – Formerly 7-10
- Part Four: Addict – (Latterday) 9-13
- Part Five: Notes – (Latterday) 14-16
- Part Six: New Kings – (Latterday) 17-19
- Part Seven: The Languageless – (Latterday) 20-24
- Part Eight: The Parley – (Latterday) 25-29
- Part Nine: The Relief – (Latterday) 30-31

Surl Tesh-echer's pioneering lie:

Before the humans came we did not speak so much of certain things.
Before the humans came we did not speak so much.
Before the humans came we did not speak.

Spanish Dancer's pronouncements in Anglo-Ubiq:

- thank you / no thank you
- metaphor / metaphor; lie that truths / lie that truths;
  truthing / lie
- I regret nothing / I regret
- embassy / town; town / embassy;
  embassytown / embassytown (last word of the novel)

(for a detailed reading cf. Zähringer 2017)

A Map of (Post-)Modern Fiction

Modes:	Documentary Fiction	Realist Fiction	Revisionist Fiction	Implicit Metafiction	Explicit Metafiction
Scales:	external/environ-mental reference illusion 'real' comm./ character comm.	←——————————→ ←——————————→ ←——————————→			internal/sys-temic ref. 	auto-referentiality anti-illusion lit. comm./ narr. comm.
'Programs':	(Avantgarde) ↑	Realism	Romanticism →	Modernism	← Aestheticism ↑
Orientations of Meaning:	obj. (subj.) [(lit.)]	obj. subj. (lit.)	(obj.) subj. lit.	(obj.) subj. lit.→lit.	[(obj.)] (subj.) lit.

(cf. Reinfandt 1997, 240)

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