A lot of today’s discussions of genre move away from the notion that speculative fiction, with its roots deep in pulp literature, is too ‘low culture’ to be considered for academic research. Even previous definitions of genre and related categories are in the process of transformation. One such contemporary consideration that might be useful for the investigation of speculative fiction and in particular transcendent (sub-)genres like Weird Fiction is China Miéville’s suggestion of a distinction not between genres, or between ‘(mainstream) literary fiction’ and ‘genre fiction’ but rather between “the literature of recognition versus that of estrangement” (Crown). This categorisation foregrounds the effects a piece of literature has on the reader and proves interesting in the context of anti-escapist literature. Moreover, if we take a closer look at the moments of estrangement that occur in various texts of Weird Fiction, we find that they seem to be markers of crisis. Once the crisis is acknowledged, it is interesting to see how different writers (of classic or ‘Haute Weird’ and of contemporary Weird fiction) deal with it.

Especially H.P. Lovecraft’s fiction, whose racist, misogynistic and generally elitist elements are well-known, turns out to be highly problematic. China Miéville, who writes in a tradition established by Lovecraft, seems to have found ways to critically raise this issue and establish his own counter-discourse in the process.

"H.P. Lovecraft" by Abigail Larson (http://www.abigaillarson.com), used with kind permission.

1. **Weird Monsters as Metaphors of Crisis**

A seeming contradiction we encounter in Weird Fiction, especially in the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, is the way he deals with the unrepresentable. His bizarre and revolutionary teratological creatures are usually called ‘indescribable’ by the various narrators of his fiction while at the same time “possessing meticulously itemized surplus specificity of
It was a terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train – a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us, crushing the frantic penguins and slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter. Still came that eldritch, mocking cry – “Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!” and at last we remembered that the demoniac Shoggoths – given life, thought, and plastic organ patterns solely by the Old Ones, and having no language save that which the dot groups expressed – had likewise no voice save the imitated accents of their bygone masters. (Lovecraft 1931: 97)

This apparent contradiction, this trying but failing to adequately describe what cannot be represented within the parameters of the human mind, does make sense when we take a look at this letter that William Hope Hodgson wrote from the front of World War I, in which he compares the battlefield to the post-apocalyptic landscape from his earlier novel *The Night Land*:

What a sense of desolation, the heaved-up mud rimming ten thousand shell craters as far as the sight could reach, north and south and east and west. My God, what a Desolation! And here and there standing like mute, muddled rocks – somehow terrible in their significant grim bashed formlessness – an old concrete blockhouse, with the earth torn up around them in monstrous craters and, in some cases, surged in great waves of earth against the sides of the blockhouses. The sun was pretty low as I came back, and far off across that Desolation, here and there they showed – just formless, squarish, cornerless masses erected by man against the Infernal Storm that seeps for ever, night and day, day and night, across that most atrocious Plain of Destruction. My God! Talk about a lost World – talk about the END of the World; talk about the “NightLand” – it is all here, not more than two hundred odd miles from where you sit infinitely remote. (Hodgson 2005: 384)

Considering this correspondence of fiction and reality, it seems feasible that Weird Fiction can function as another way to look at war, to represent it from a different perspective, and with different means, and that the monsters of Weird Fiction have always been (among other things) personifications of monstrous ideologies.

The fantastic has always been indispensable to think and unthink society, but traditional monsters were now [i.e. after the First World War] profoundly inadequate, suddenly nostalgic in the epoch of modern war. Out of this crisis of traditional fantastic, the burgeoning sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality, Weird Fiction’s revolutionary teratology and oppressive numinous grows. (Miéville 2009: 513)
As metaphors (as opposed to allegory), and as manifestations of the Weird, the monsters and spaces of Weird fiction are by definition inexplicable, indescribable, defying logic. This is exactly why they work as a way to talk about war and other traumatic, reality-shattering events that can never really be represented in any medium without inadvertent failure. As China Miéville says in his definition of the genre in The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction, “[.] Weird does not so much articulate the crisis as that the crisis cannot be articulated” (514). Recognizing them as political crises reconstituting themselves in the medium of text as putatively ontological ones, via a weird and teratological hinge, allows us to politically read monsters defined by their opacity to metaphor.

2. The Weird as Literary Infection

In his “Afterweird” to Ann and Jeff VanderMeer’s 2009 The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories, China Miéville describes Weird Fiction as not only a structure that transgresses genres, but, even more radically, a parasite that “passes from us into pages, infects healthy fiction” (1115), that we recognize just was we “recognize the ways we don’t recognize it” (1115) – categorizing it as a sort of ‘literature of estrangement’ if anything (cf. Crown) – that eats its way into other books, other genres, fiction or nonfiction, via the reader’s mind – implying that it changes the reader’s perception of the world.

One example to illustrate this parasitic element is the eerie way Dannie Abse’s poem “In the Theatre” evokes a similar scene from Lovecraft’s “Herbert West – Reanimator”. The poem is set in an operating theatre in 1938, during an operation to excise a brain tumour while the patient is fully awake, and is labelled “A true incident” (Abse 1977). Thus, the incident presumably postdates the publication of “Herbert West – Reanimator” by 16 years. Following Miéville’s theory of infectious literature, we may assume that reality (once more, just as in the case of Hodgson’s letter and The Night Land) echoes (Weird) fiction. The moment of horror occurs at the poem’s climax, when the patient reacts to something caused by the overworked and exhausted doctor’s tools in his brain, and subsequently dies:

Then, suddenly, the cracked record in the brain,

    a ventriloquist voice that cried, ‘You sod,
leave my soul alone, leave my soul alone,’—
the patient’s dummy lips moving to that refrain,
the patient’s eyes too wide. And, shocked,
Lambert Rogers drawing out the probe
with nurses, students, sister, petrified.
‘Leave my soul alone, leave my soul alone,’
that voice so arctic and that cry so odd
had nowhere else to go—till the antique
gramophone wound down and the words began
to blur and slow, ‘… leave … my … soul … alone …’
to cease at last when something other died.
And silence matched the silence under snow. (Abse 1977)

The scene from “Herbert West– Reanimator” that seems to correspond to this incident takes place in the scientist’s laboratory, during an experiment on a fresh corpse that Herbert West is trying to bring back to life by injecting it with his new and improved serum.
[T]hat very fresh body, at last writhing into full and terrifying consciousness with eyes dilated at the memory of its last scene on earth, threw out its frantic hands in a life and death struggle with the air, and suddenly collapsing into a second and final dissolution from which there could be no return, screamed out the cry that will ring eternally in my aching brain:

“Help! Keep off, you cursed little tow-head fiend—keep that damned needle away from me!” (Lovecraft 1922: 49)

Even though the intent seems to be a different one – in Abse’s case the salvation of the patient’s soul, in Lovecraft’s the corpse’s dread of being brought back to life – there is an obvious similarity in the moment of unnatural exclamation and in its description. In both instances the horror clearly hinges on the doctor’s intrusion and the patient’s risk of being irredeemably lost and unable to fight back.

A similar moment that can also be read as an ethical crisis, can be found in the description of a newly mechanised abattoir from Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel The Jungle. Its wording eerily recalls the monster from William Hope Hodgson’s short story “The Hog”, featuring the detective of the supernatural (or rather ‘abnatural’), Thomas Carnacki.

It was all so very businesslike that one watched it fascinated. It was porkmaking by machinery, porkmaking by applied mathematics. And yet somehow the most matter-of-fact person could not help thinking of the hogs; they were so innocent, they came so very trustingly; and they were so very human in their protests – and so perfectly within their rights! They had done nothing to deserve it; and it was adding insult to injury, as the thing was done here, swinging them up in this cold-blooded, impersonal way, without a pretense of apology, without the homage of a tear. Now and then a visitor wept, to be sure; but this slaughtering machine ran on, visitors or no visitors. It was like some horrible crime committed in a dungeon, all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory.

One could not stand and watch very long without becoming philosophical, without beginning to deal in symbols and similes, and to hear the hog squeal of the universe. (Sinclair 1906)

In Hodgson’s story, Carnacki first quotes from one of his omnipresent (fictitious) obscure texts: “In blood there is the Voice which calleth through all space” (Hodgson 2006a: 168), implying that spilled blood attracts monsters. The description of the actual apparition of the monster, and the accompanying sounds, reads like a proper instant of trauma with its repetitions, its stops and starts, trying but failing to describe the experience:

As it [i.e. the apparition of a pig’s hoof and leg in the air] gradually disappeared I heard a low grunting […] which broke out suddenly into a *diafaeon* of brute sound, grunting, squealing and swine-howl ing […] – a grunting, squealing, howling roar that rose, roar by roar, howl by howl and squeal by squeal into a crescendo of horrors – the bestial growths, longings, zests and acts of some grotto of hell… It is no use, I can't give it to you. I get dumb with the failure of my command over speech to tell you what that grunting, howling, roaring melody conveyed to me. It had in it something so inexplicably below the horizons of the soul in its monstrousness and fearfulness that the ordinary simple fear of death itself, with all its attendant agonies and terrors and sorrows, seemed like a thought of something peaceful and infinitely holy compared with the fear of those unknown elements in that dreadful roaring melody. (Hodgson 2006a: 175)

Symptomatically for a text of Weird fiction, this story is all about fear of the unfamiliar and about abysses full of monsters that open up behind our familiar everyday world, that have always been there, unknown to us. In addition, the Hog itself possesses “what I might term for want of a more exact phrase, a psychically *infective* force, such force being more readily transmitted through the eyes than any other way, and capable of producing a brain storm of an extremely dangerous character” (Hodgson 2006a: 180). Again, the Weird is characterised as parasitic. Additionally, the protagonist's failure to
describe the monstrous, followed by a very detailed account, takes up a theme from H.P. Lovecraft’s Weird fiction.

3. H.P. Lovecraft and the Indescribable:

H.P. Lovecraft’s monsters were clearly products and representations of his fears and obsessions – to which his work also owes its almost hallucinatory intensity, as argued by Michel Houellebec in *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (107). Lovecraft’s narrators repeatedly make a point of stressing the indescribability of the cityscapes and creatures they encounter, which they will inevitably follow up with highly detailed descriptions that must necessarily fail – as here, for example, in two passages from “The Call of Cthulhu”:

[From some undetermined point below had come a voice that was not a voice; a chaotic sensation which only fancy could transmute into sound, but which he attempted to render by the almost unpronounceable jumble of letters: “Cthulhu fhtagn”. (Lovecraft 1926a: 205)]

The Thing cannot be described – there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled. […] The Thing of the idols, the green, sticky spawn of the stars, had awaked to claim his own. [T]he mountainous monstrosity flopped down the slimy stones […] The awful squid-head with writhing feelers came nearly up to the bowsprit of the sturdy yacht, but Johansen drove on relentlessly. There was a bursting as of an exploding bladder, a slushy nastiness as of a cloven sunfish, a stench as of a thousand opened graves, and a sound that the chronicler could not put on paper. (Lovecraft 1926a: 224)

"Cthulhu Rising" by John Coulthart (http://www.johncoulthart.com), used with kind permission.

Often these descriptions can only take the form of the incoherent ramblings of the insane, as in this description of the monster from “The Dunwich Horror”:

Curtis was past all coherence, and even isolated replies were almost too much for him.

‘Bigger’n a barn… all made o’ squirmin’ ropes… hull thing sort o’ shaped like a hen’s egg bigger’n anything with dozens o’ legs like hogs-heads that haff shut up when they step… nothin’ solid abaout it – all like jelly, an’ made o’ sep’rit wrigglin’ ropes pushed closit together… great bulgin’ eyes all over it… ten or twenty maouths or trunks a-stickin’ aout all along the sides, big as stove-pipes an all a-tossin’ an openin’ an’ shuttin’… all grey, with kinder blue or purple rings… an’ Gawd it Heaven – that haff face on top…’.

(Lovecraft 1929: 294)

Still, especially taking Lovecraft’s personal history, obsessions and phobias into account,
these monsters can all clearly be read as a congregation of his embodied fears: the horror of miscegenation, of hybrid cultures, of the perceived threat to Lovecraft's illusory status as a 'Victorian gentleman' posed by workers and immigrants, of what he considered the 'downfall' of society. Striking examples of this can be found in many of his stories, among them "The Shadow over Innsmouth", "Pickman's Model", "The Horror at Red Hook" and "At the Mountains of Madness".

He said Pickman repelled him more and more every day, and almost frightened him towards the last – that the fellow's features and expression were slowly developing in a way he didn't like; in a way that wasn't human. (Lovecraft 1927: 191)

[…] I began to see a hideous relationship in the faces of the human and non-human figures. He was, in all his gradations of morbidity between the frankly non-human and the degradedly human, establishing a sardonic linkage and evolution. The dog-things were developed from mortals! (Lovecraft 1927: 195)

‘Oh, oh, my Gawd, that haff face – that haff face on top of it… that face with the red eyes an’ crinkly albino hair, an’ no chin, like the Whateleys… It was a octopus, centipede, spider kind o' thing, but they was a haff-shaped man’s face on top of it, an’ it looked like Wizard Whateley's, only it was yards an’ yards acrost….’ (Lovecraft 1929: 297)

"Wal, Sir, it seems by the time Obed knowed them islanders they was all full o’ fish blood from them deep water things. When they got old an' begun to shew it, they was kep' hid until they felt like takin' to the water an' quittin' the place. Some was more teched than others, an' some never did change quite enough to take to the water; but mosily they turned out jest the way them things said. Them as was born more like the things changed arly, but them as was nearly human sometimes stayed on the island till they was past seventy, though they’d usually go daown under for trial trips afore that (Lovecraft 1936: 527).

For out of an opened door in the Gilman House a large crowd of doubtful shapes was pouring — lanterns bobbing in the darkness, and horrible croaking voices exchanging low cries in what was certainly not English. The figures moved uncertainly, and I realized to my relief that they did not know where I had gone; but for all that they sent a shiver of horror through my frame. Their features were indistinguishable, but their crouching, shambling gait was abominably repellent. (Lovecraft 1936: 541)

It was then that the most horrible impression of all was borne in upon me – the impression which destroyed my last vestige of self-control and sent me running frantically southward past the yawning black doorways and fishily staring windows of that deserted nightmare street. For at a closer glance I saw that the moonlit waters between the reef and the shore were far from empty. They were alive with a teeming horde of shapes swimming inward toward the town; and even at my vast distance and in my single moment of perception I could tell that the bobbing heads and flailing arms were alien and aberrant in a way scarcely to be expressed or consciously formulated. (Lovecraft 1936: 542f)

Again the protagonist’s inability to describe what he perceives as monstrous serves as a marker of crisis, in this case again pointing out the writer’s extreme racism and paranoia. Symptomatically, the greatest moment of horror for the protagonist of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is finding out that he himself is descended from Obed Marsh and has already begun his transformation into one of those repulsive degenerate creatures (552-3). The only way out is choosing death (cf. his uncle’s suicide) above insanity (i.e. embracing his heritage).

As China Miéville points out in his introduction to the Modern Library Definitive Edition, in “At the Mountains of Madness”, Lovecraft employs an ingenious double twist, enabling the readers' identification with the monsters by having the protagonist declare “They were men!”, only to then present the Elder Things’ own nemesis as the ‘true monster’ when the enslaved shoggoths’ uprising is presented as the downfall of the Old Ones’ civilisation (xxi-ii).
Nnedi Okorafor’s Word Fantasy Award statuette (source: http://nnedi.blogspot.co.at)

Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* won the 2011 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel. When she showed her award statuette, which is a bust of H.P. Lovecraft, to a friend, “[h]e looked like he’d seen an ugly ghost”, she recounts on her blog (Okorafor 2011). She was even more furious when she was pointed out the poem “On the Creation of Niggers”, published in 1912, in which Lovecraft explicitly characterises black people as sub-human:

> When, long ago, the gods created Earth
> 
> In Jove’s fair image Man was shaped at birth.
> 
> The beasts for lesser parts were next designed;
> 
> Yet were they too remote from humankind.
> 
> To fill the gap, and join the rest to Man,
> 
> Th’Olympian host conceiv’d a clever plan.
> 
> A beast they wrought, in semi-human figure,

> Filled it with vice, and called the thing a Nigger. (quoted in Okorafor 2011)

Okorafor hadn’t been aware of how foregrounded and direct Lovecraft’s racism was. “This wasn’t racism metaphorically or abstractly rearing its ugly head within a piece of fiction”, she writes, “this was specific and focused” (Okorafor 2011). In the course of the ensuing (internet) debate, she asked China Miéville for his opinion on the matter. First, he elaborated on Lovecraft’s racism:

> Yes, indeed, the depth and viciousness of Lovecraft’s racism is known to me …It goes further, in my opinion, than ‘merely’ “being” a racist – I follow Michel Houellebecq (in this and in no other arena!) in thinking that Lovecraft’s oeuvre, his work itself, is inspired by and deeply structured with race hatred. As Houellebecq said, it is racism itself that raises in Lovecraft a ‘poetic trance’. He was a bilious anti-semite (though one who married a Jew, because, if you please, he granted that she was ‘assimilated’), and if you read stories like ‘The Horror at Red Hook’, the bile you will see towards people of colour, of all kinds (with particular sneering contempt for African Americans unless they were suitably Polite [sic] and therefore were patricianly granted the soubriquet ‘Negro’) and the mixed communities of New York and, above all (surprise surprise – Public Enemy were right) ‘miscegenation’ are extended and toxic. (quoted in Okorafor 2011)

Nnedi Okorafor goes on to describe the dilemma of liking something (a piece of literature, a film), of even deeming it a stylistic masterpiece, and simultaneously being confronted with the fact that it is politically and ethically problematic (giving novels by Stephen King, Norman Mailer and Gabriel Garcia Marquez as examples). What China Miéville says in his response to her implies that it is perfectly legitimate to like something
problematic if you find a way to deal with it. Rather than being rendered a conversational taboo, glossed-over, whitewashed by contextualisation (as in the widely used invalid argument ‘...but he was a child of his times’), the issue must necessarily be made a subject of discussion. China Miéville’s way to deal with Lovecraft and his literary heritage is to raise awareness by deliberately pointing out the political and ethical problematic posed by his works, and by stressing the value that the controversial award statuette represents – and then turning it to face the wall:

So where does that leave the World Fantasy Award? Well, in my case, I have always done something very specific and simple. I consider the award inextricable from but not reducible to Lovecraft himself. Therefore, I was very honoured to receive the award as representative of a particular field of literature. And the award itself, the statuette of the man himself? I put it out of sight, in my study, where only I can see it, and I have turned it to face the wall. So I am punishing the little fucker like the malevolent clown he was, I can look at it and remember the honour, and above all I am writing behind Lovecraft’s back. (quoted in Okorafor 2011)

Not only is Miéville ‘writing behind Lovecraft’s back’; he has revolutionised Weird Fiction by taking up a lot of the issues that come up in Lovecraft’s fiction and re-writing them from a very different political perspective.

5. China Miéville’s Revolution: Turning Lovecraft Upside-Down

Joyce Carol Oates once called Lovecraft the “King of Weird” in an article (2010). Given this, I argue that China Miéville is a revolutionary of Weird. In his works, he is turning Lovecraft’s problematic ideology upside down. Not only is it now possible to side with the monsters, but through his detailed depictions from a wide variety of perspectives the readers also gain insight into the mechanisms that create and shape monsters. This obviously relates to Remaking – but also to the hegemony of cultural discourse, value systems, hierarchies of power, etc. We also encounter new versions of Lovecraftian monsters turned upside-down ideologically: now racism is the monster, misogyny is the monster, and so on. Contrary to Lovecraft’s implicit world-view, the ‘downfall’ here is not a threat that comes from below (as in ‘lower’ societal strata), but rather from above, through the abuse of power.

Even the handlings from Perdido Street Station, parasitic monsters that control their host bodies by usurping their minds, are afraid to speak or act outside government regulations, for fear that their whole community might be exterminated. The Council could always justify such acts by claiming that they were committed for the sake of the city’s safety (Miéville 2000: 551). Ostensibly for the same reason the community of Cactae (cactus people) does not reveal the fact that the novel’s main monsters, the slake-moths, are nesting inside the Glasshouse, a dome which houses the city’s (technically independent) Cactae ghetto, preferring to try and fight them by themselves.

While never offering definitive answers or ‘cures’, China Miéville’s stories succeed in breaking up hierarchies and boundaries, and in changing the reader’s own world-views, both through having marginalized characters refuse to act according to (literary or societal) norms, (readers’ or other characters’) expectations or other artificial categories, and through acknowledging the inherent potential of counter-movements.

Moreover, he often embeds additional references and correspondences to non-fiction and to extratextual reality into his narratives that provide an opposite effect to estrangement – a horrific recognition of the readers’ own world that renders Miéville’s stories effectively anti-escapist. A striking example of this is the specific, innovative way in which he mixes the un- and abcanny – the repressed returning and the utterly alien, lurking unrecognized behind quotidian façades (cf. Miéville 2008b) – in his Hellboy story “A Room of One’s Own”. Rather than in the outside world, the central adventure takes place inside the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense (BPRD) headquarters, where Hellboy and his friends and co-workers are confronted with an evil taken from another work of (horror) fiction, namely a ‘working’ version of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s
yellow wallpaper from her eponymous short story. Hellboy becomes more and more obsessed with the wallpaper’s design, claiming that he sees a woman behind the pattern that he has to rescue, and finally a shadowy figure begins to manifest that can be recognised as Gilman’s physician Dr Silas Weir Mitchell who is also mentioned in “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

Just as it’s possible to read Gilman’s story as a Gothic tale and/or a feminist (horror) story, we can also choose to read “A Room of One’s Own” for its inherent politics. Already the title with its allusion to Virginia Woolf seems to suggest that it is more than just your ordinary monster story, reminding us of the roles of women as both narrators and characters of fiction and also hinting at the blurred boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Moreover, even before the words “yellow” and “wallpaper” are first used in conjunction, the item itself is described using words that make the connection very clear and simultaneously suggest a context of disease: “jaundice-colored” (Miéville 2008a: 229); “the sickly buttery walls” (229); “the ill uncleansmoldering faded color” (231); “its sickly colors”; “its ugly compulsive designs” (235). When finally the story’s ‘monster’ appears, the same language of disease, uncleanness and the abuse of power is used to describe the doctor’s ghost: “The shadow stained the air” (Miéville 2008a: 238); “the oppressive yellow atmosphere” (238); “so yellow the slippery color seemed visible like urine even on the black and white [surveillance] screen” (240). Through this toxic portrayal, Miéville makes it very clear that in this case (and by extension also in Gilman’s story, as well as in her life) the real sickness, misogyny personified, is the physician. In a further ingenious twist, Silas Weir Mitchell’s treatise Fat and Blood is repeatedly quoted verbatim in “A Room of One’s Own”:

“You must morally alter as well as physically amend,” [Liz] read from Fat and Blood. “You need to control the woman ‘with a firm and steady will… with no regard to her complaints…’ [...]” (quoted in Miéville 2008a: 237)

“‘If circumstances oblige us to treat such a person in her own home, let us at least change her room, and also have it well understood how far we are to control her surroundings.’ [...]’ (It’s all about power. [...]” (quoted in Miéville 2008a: 238)

Thus, much like Hodgson in his letter, but deliberately so within a work of fiction, Miéville shifts the perspective by moving the problematic element, the source of the diegetic crisis, into nonfiction, and thus back into our reality where it originated. Through this ingenious re-reversion from reality to fiction and via nonfiction back to reality, Miéville opens up various additional contexts. While it is still possible to read this for pure entertainment (and Hellboy, and the monsters), it doesn’t require much effort on the reader’s side to get caught up in the literary and political implications and to take them back into the everyday world, which makes this a prime example of anti-escapist fiction.

A juxtaposition of two selected scenes from “At the Mountains of Madness” and Perdido Street Station perfectly illustrates Miéville’s revolution of the Weird Tale – the way he takes Lovecraft’s problematic world-view and establishes his own counter-discourse:

In “At the Mountains of Madness”, after repeatedly calling the Old Ones and their practices “inhuman” (Lovecraft 1931: 36), the instant the protagonist is able to ascribe rationality and the use of scientific method to these aliens, Lovecraft has him exclaim, “[W]hat had they done that we would not have done in their place? [...] Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star spawn – whatever they had been, they were men!” (92).

In contrast to this, China Miéville implies the opposite – “I (too) am a monster” – in Perdido Street Station when (one of) his protagonist(s), Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin, realizes that he is constantly on the brink of committing the same crime as – or at least one potentially corresponding to that of “choice-theft” committed by Yagharek, the friend he has turned from because he came to see him as a monster. Having learned that Yagharek’s crime – one that his victim had told him couldn’t be translated, couldn’t be conceptualized in his cultural frame of mind – had been rape, he doesn’t even wait to confront him and possibly hear his story (that Yagharek had secretly been yearning to tell for some time) – but leaves without looking back, while being obviously aware that he
himself could have committed "choice-theft" before, while he was with his traumatized girlfriend, who had been kept prisoner by a crime lord, and whose mind had been half-drunk by a slake-moth which left her incapable of coherent communication and possibly even unable to make her own choices:

Since recovering Lin, twice had he woken with the warmth and pressure of her against him, his prick erect and eager. He had rubbed his hand over the swell of her hips and down her parted legs. Sleep had rolled off him like fog as his arousal grew and he had opened his eyes to see her, moving her beneath him as she woke, forgetting that Derkhan and Yagharek were sleeping nearby. He had breathed at her and spoken lovingly and explicitly of what he wanted to do, and then he had jerked backwards in horror as she began to sign babble at him and he remembered what had happened to her. (Miéville 2000: 839)

In the context of other 'unspeakable things' in Weird Fiction, the impossibility of communicating Yagharek's crime and its meaning already points toward its traumatic nature. All that is communicated to Isaac is an approximation like the many failed attempts to describe Lovecraft's 'outer monstrosities', Hodgson's Hog, etc. Nevertheless, Isaac recognizes the pattern from his own experience. "Who am I to judge?" he adds pages later, after meeting Yagharek's victim Kar'uchai (Miéville 2000: 852).

Who am I to judge? he thought in sudden hollow uncertainty, the ground taken from under him. [...] He kept glancing at Lin’s thighs. Her bruises had almost gone, but his memory of them was as savage a stain as they had been.

They had mottled her in suggestive patterns around her lower belly and inner thighs.

Lin shifted and woke and held him and shied away in fear and Isaac’s teeth set at the thought of what might have been done to her (852).

This shift in perspective recalls the ending of Lovecraft’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (when the protagonist comes to realize that he has started his own transformation into one of the monsters) with one difference: an element of personal choice.

There is the additional factor that neither Isaac nor Yagharek is necessarily a monster at all times, or in every aspect of his personality and identity. In China Miéville's fiction, ‘Monsters’ are just like ordinary ‘persons’; they too can possess complex multi-faceted, heterogeneous, performative and dynamic identities. Which also implies that transformations are possible in any direction.

This argument is both valid for bodily transformation – which in the Bas-Lag trilogy mostly takes the shape of Remaking, ostensibly as a form of punishment, with the additional functions of dealing out handicaps, and above all, of stigmatizing certain undesirables – and for character development going as far as ‘metaphorical Remaking’:

In The Scar, the character of Tanner Sack undergoes voluntary Remaking as a way of adaptation to a new environment. For the first time this procedure is presented as a way of potential improvement, including an element of personal choice. On the other hand, in Perdido Street Station both the characters of Yagharek and Jack Half-A-Prayer decide to make the stigmata they have been dealt, their individual weaknesses, their strengths and thus manage to render the arbitrary meaningful.
This takes us back to the basic argument: that if monsters are metaphors, they cannot be reduced to representations of one (expected) meaning. The meanings they represent are constantly shifting according to ideological, historical and cultural context and to shifts in the hierarchy of power. Both through the narrativisation of political concepts and metaphors and through inducing the reader to reverse this process, to re-conceptualize the narrative and reconnect it to a meta-level, China Miéville succeeds in revolutionizing the Weird Tale and in producing successful anti-escapist literature.

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**About**

Christina Scholz is currently writing her PhD thesis on China Miéville’s fiction. Her fields of interest include the further theorisation of Weird Fiction, Hauntology and the Gothic imagination, the interrelation of genre fiction and other forms of art, and depictions of war, violence and trauma in the arts. Her Master’s thesis, *Thanateros: (De)Konstruktion von männlichen Heldenbildern im Mainstream-Film*, has been published by AV Akademikerverlag in 2012. Her online publications include an article in *Alluvium* and a forthcoming short story in *The Big Click*.
Miéville's penchant for computer games and glitches is noticeable in several of the texts, and recurring themes include diseases jumping over from other species—much like bird flu, but in these cases contracted from buildings, or from the Earth, or from other dimensions—and also boats, in the water beneath which something is lurking. As in the card game, we encounter unexpected breaks of the (narrative) rules throughout Three Moments of an Explosion, and every time a character says "I don't get it," we know exactly how they feel. And/but (or "bund," as one of Miéville's stories suggests) at the same time, we're enjoying ourselves such a lot. Take, for example, "The Condition of New Death": a bewildering story that was almost definitely inspired by computer games. Christina is currently teaching at the University of Graz, and spending their free time investigating alien event sites. Christina's most recent publication is Dun da de Sewolawen: The Heart of Silence, a Weird Zeuhl novelettino published by Polyversity Press (Feb 2018). ...more. Christina Scholz's books. Christina Scholz Average rating: 4.52 · 23 ratings · 5 reviews · 7 distinct works. Dun da de Sewolawen: The Heart of Silence.