Monitoring the Unvisible: Seeing and unseeing in China Miéville’s *The City & The City*

Peter Marks

University of Sydney, Australia. peter.marks@sydney.edu.au

**Abstract**

Surveillance deals with ‘seeing’ in various forms, and with notions of visibility and invisibility, of what can and cannot be seen. This article extends that spectrum, by considering ideas of ‘unseeing’ and ‘unvisibility’ as explained and explored in China Miéville’s 2009 novel, *The City & The City*. In a scenario that involves people from two cities inhabiting the same space (what Miéville calls ‘topolgangers’), but required to consciously unsee those from the other city, as well as the actual physicality of that other space, the novel challenges readers to contemplate the limits of seeing, and the possibilities and complexities beyond our current understanding. The article deals with the ways surveillance theorists such as Susanne Lace and Gary T. Marx comprehend visibility, as well as with the real world situation of Israel and Palestine. It suggests how *The City & The City* might productively add to our understanding of what we see, how we are trained to see, and what we might unsee, examining the intriguing implications of that expanded visual awareness.

**Introduction**

I could not see the street or much of the estate. We were enclosed by dirt-coloured block, from windows out of which leaned vested men and women with morning hair and mugs of mugs of drink, eating breakfast and watching us.

(Miéville 2009a: 3)

Surveillance involves watching and being watched, even if the watchers above seem benign, and the watched person above is himself a professional observer: Inspector Tyador Borlú, of the Besžel Extreme Crime Squad. These sentences open China Miéville’s *The City & The City* (2009a), an audaciously creative novel fusing Dashiell Hammett, Franz Kafka and George Orwell in a noirish tale of multiple murders, false secrets, political deception, and a feared surveillance agency with shadowy powers, called Breach. But the comment in the second sentence about being watched ultimately is no more important than the relatively workaday first sentence, which notes Borlú’s inability to see. It sets up a fundamental and consequential set of tensions and asymmetries in the novel around visibility—between the visible, the invisible, and what Miéville intriguingly terms the ‘unvisible’ (2009a: 86), that which is consciously unseen.

Visibility is central to surveillance, as David Lyon makes plain: ‘Surveillance is about seeing things and, more particularly about seeing people’ (Lyon 2007: 1). Models based on regimented visibility have underpinned surveillance arrangements and practices, while the titles of Surveillance Studies play on versions of visibility and visualisation: *The Transparent Society* (Brin 1998); *The Glass Consumer* (Lace 2005); *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility* (Haggerty and Ericson 2006); *iSpy: Surveillance*
and Power in the Interactive Era (Andrejevic 2007), among many others. Given the centrality of visibility to Surveillance Studies, what might the ‘invisible’, and the related act of ‘unseeing’ in The City & The City, add to our understanding? How does unseeing fit into broader patterns and forms of monitoring in the novel? How does it affect identity? What is its impact on the designation and control of spaces? As I aim to show, The City & The City productively suggests ways of thinking about what surveillance sees and does not see.

We need initially to understand the novel’s peculiar aspects, for while The City & The City conforms to the generic codes of the police procedural or murder mystery, in important ways it is weird. It opens with Borlú investigating the murder of an unidentified woman soon established as Mahalia Geary, an American archaeology postgraduate who doing research in Besźel on somewhere called Orciny. Borlú’s investigations reveal that she was murdered in Ul Qoma, and that her body was carried across the border and dumped in Besźel. Eventually, he finds and apprehends the killer. So far, so conventional—the only odd elements being the place names, not found on any actual map. This hints at something strange, but only in that the places are invented; in a work of fiction, this can be readily accepted. What makes the situation weird is that Orciny may not exist at all, and that the city-states of Besźel and Ul Qoma, and their inhabitants, occupy the same geographical space. These places are, in one of the novel’s many knowing neologisms, ‘topolgangers’ (2009a: 159). To make sense of the processes of seeing and not seeing, readers must come to terms with the complex geographical scenario Miéville imagines. Borlú notes how the system operates should a citizen of, say Besźel, travel to Ul Qoma, which to outsiders occupies the same space:

If someone needed to go to a house physically next door to their own but in the neighbouring city, it was a different road in an unfriendly power. That is what foreigners rarely understand. A Besź dweller cannot walk a few paces next door to an alter house without breach.

But pass through Copula Hall [a massive central checkpoint] and she or he might leave Besźel, and at the end of the hall come back exactly (corporally) to where they had just been, but in another country, a tourist, a marvelling visitor, to a street that shared the latitude-longitude of their own address, a street they had never visited before, whose architecture they had always unseen, to the Ul Qoman house sitting next to and a whole city away from their own building, invisible there now they had come through, all the way across the Breach, back home.

(2009a: 86)

What in normal cities might mean a simple physical move next door, in The City & The City requires passage through the transitional space of Copula Hall, where visas and identities are checked, and a reorientation of perception so that, when the individual emerges on the other side, what had only recently been seen (Besźel, in this case) must now be unseen, and what had only recently been unseen (Ul Qoma) must now be seen. A further range of divisions and gradations add to the spatial complexity: there are ‘total’ zones (fully the world of either Besźel or Ul Qoma); those seen as ‘alter’ (fully the world of the other city); areas referred to as ‘crosshatched’ (points of intersection); and those designated ‘dissensi’, disputed sectors claimed by both city-states. Citizens must go through Copula Hall to ‘cross’ from one city to another. Crucially, the historical antagonisms and cultural differences between the states and their citizens demand that both groups ‘unsee’ each other, consciously ignoring those who inhabit the same streets and spaces. Not to do so constitutes a crime, called ‘breach’, punished by the monitoring agency called Breach. These elements reconfigure the generic codes of the mystery novel, for while Borlú is an Inspector, there are things, people and spaces that he cannot legitimately ‘see’, including Ul Qoma and its inhabitants. When he needs to cross from Besźel to Ul Qoma to continue his investigations, he must learn
to unsee the Besżel aspects of streets he has left and to which, corporally, he has returned. Instead, he must now see Ul Qoma.

These inventions exemplify the ‘New Weird’, defined as ‘a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realist, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy’ (VanDerMeer and VanDerMeer 2008: xvi). Miéville has written about ‘Weird Fiction’ for an academic audience (Miéville 2009b), and science fiction authority Roger Luckhurst calls him ‘a scholar of the tradition of weird fiction, which he [Miéville] defines as “breathless and generically slippery macabre fiction” (‘Weird Fiction’: 510’ (Luckhurst 2011: 29). Luckhurst gives the novel the hybridic label ‘gothic science fiction’ (2011: 29-30). He also links literary genre and topology, quoting Laura Salisbury’s comment that ‘generic transgression is figured in terms of topological complexity’ (Salisbury, quoted in Luckhurst 2011: 30). Generic transgressions certainly create problems for Borlú in his efforts to carry out what in another place might be straightforward detective work. Just as obviously, the topological oddities in The City & The City challenge comforting notions about personal, cultural and national identity founded on connection to place. The requirement to unsee particular things or people destabilises any assurance about what is or is not visible. By adding the concept of unseeing to the mix, Miéville requires that we think beyond the binary division of visible and invisible. We might reflect on how systems require us to ignore certain realities and ‘forget’ problematic memories, on how we are socialised to choose endorsed points of attention. If peer-to-peer surveillance in a celebrity culture invites increasing visibility, it does not sanction all types of visibility. And powerful elites manage corruption by making it invisible.

I now turn to ways in which surveillance scholars have thought about visibility and how it informs notions of identity and place. I interweave The City & The City’s weird aspects, exploring how they push beyond the known—as they are designed to do.

Ways of Seeing Visibility

Lyon’s entry on ‘Visibility’ in Surveillance Studies offers a useful starting point:

The state of being seen is apparently trivial, but in cultures where surveillance increases the ‘seeing’ of populations both literally and metaphorically and where some people deliberately expose themselves to sight, visibility becomes very important for social order and change. The epistemology of seeing is central to Western cultures and influential in others, which helps place in context the social significance of surveillance and visibility.

(Lyon 2007: 204)

Susanne Lace offers one version in The Glass Consumer, commenting that ‘[w]e are all “glass consumers”; others know so much about us, they can almost see through us’ (Lace 2005: 1). She argues that, in age of massive computerised holdings of information, consumers face potential or inherent risks depending on how personal information gets used, and by whom. Lace extends the glass metaphor, noting that the ‘properties and capacities of glass—fragility, transparency, the ability to distort the gaze of the viewer—[mirror] our own potential vulnerability’ (2005: 7). She uses glass metaphorically to capture the dangers of having one’s information visible to unknown scrutineers. The qualifications in these statements, though, are telling: others can almost see through us; glass, while transparent, can also distort. Although glass can be seen through, it is not invisible, and in Lace’s first use of the metaphor selected consumer information relevant to particular observers gets seen. If others can almost see through us, the degree of penetration is varied, as must be the consequent ‘knowing’. Those looking for specific information fail to see information ‘invisible’ to their technology.
The anxiety surrounding this form of seeing comes from the suspicion that the almost-seen-through individual might have little control over what that viewed information shows, and how it gets used. The ‘transparency’ of glass is problematically ambiguous, for while something transparent can be seen through, the *Shorter OED* also defines ‘transparent’ as meaning ‘detected; manifest, obvious’; an example might be a ‘transparent falsehood’. Even if something is believed to be transparent in the first sense, the possibility remains that supposedly ‘pure’ information gets distorted by the medium through which it is seen. These uncertainties raise doubts about the nature and effect of transparency and visibility.

*The City & The City* explores these uncertainties through the murder victim herself. Initially, she is simply:

> [a] young woman, brown hair pulled into pigtails, poking up like plants. She was almost naked, and it was sad to see her skin smooth that cold morning, unbroken by gooseflesh. She wore only laddered stockings, one high heel on.  
> (2009a: 4)

Her anonymity, her invisibility, is reinforced by her being partly covered with a mattress, which prompts Borlú’s assistant, Lizbyet Corwi, to observe: ‘Couldn’t actually say she was well hidden, but it sort of made her look like a pile of rubbish’ (2009a: 4). Disrespectful treatment undermines her claim to full personhood, the phrase ‘made her look like a pile of rubbish’ emphasising the importance of vision to interpretation. While her actual body is seen, her identity at this early stage remains unknown. The arrival of the pathologist, Stepen Shukman, at the crime scene begins to bring her into focus, especially the revealing fact that she was killed elsewhere. Another inspector, Bardo Naustin, makes a judgement call: “First impressions, Inspector. This area, beat-up, naked? And . . .” He pointed at his face her exaggerated makeup. “Hooker” (2009a: 9). Shukman is correct, while Naustin is proved wrong, but the revealing distinction is that, working from similar information, they make distinct interpretations, the second resulting from Naustin’s misogynist gaze. As we would expect in such a novel, one of Tyador Borlú’s defining characteristics is his ability to dismiss the irrelevant and misleading, to uncover and correctly interpret clues. Even so, he follows several bogus leads, fooled because Mahalia Geary, whose name first appears only on page 71, has used invented names that make her visible but difficult to trace.

Geary’s archaeological research explains the subterfuge, for she had been trying surreptitiously to establish the reality or otherwise of Orciny, a state that predates Besźel and Ul Qoma and, for some residents of those places, continues to exist invisibly between them. There are dangerous implications in proving the existence of Orciny. Archaeologist David Bowden supposedly had uncovered evidence for it, writing a controversial and now suppressed text, *Between the City and the City*. Mahalia Geary’s murder is tied to questions of Orciny’s existence or non-existence, so that part of Borlú’s investigation requires that he establish whether Orciny is real. As with the addition of the term ‘unvisible’ to visible and invisible, the ambiguous reality and status of Orciny complicates the identity of Besźel and Ul Qoma. Borlú himself is dismissive, describing Orciny to Geary’s parents, who come from the United States to collect their daughter’s body, as ‘a sort of folk tale’, adding:

> ‘It is not so really like the Breach, Mrs Geary. Breach is real. A power. But Orciny is . . .’
> I hesitated.

> ‘The third city’, Corwi said in Besź to Thacker [a United States diplomat accompanying the Gearys]. When he showed no comprehension, she said, ‘A secret. Fairy tale. Between the other two’. He shook his head and looked, uninterestedly, *Oh*.  
> (2009a: 98)
Where the foreigners Thacker and Mrs Geary cannot comprehend Orciny or the implications of its indeterminate existence, and Borlú and Corwi are dismissive, others believe, granting it extraordinary powers. One radical, Pall Drodin, like Corwi calls it ‘the third city’, one that exists ‘between the other two. It’s in the dissenisi, disputed zones, places that Besźel thinks are Ul Qoma’s and Ul Qoma thinks are Besźel’s…Orciny’s the secret city. It runs things’ (2009a: 61). For believers, Orciny wields hidden control. Ultimately, we find that Orciny is a hoax perpetrated by David Bowden. He murders Mahalia Geary when, against her own hopes that such a place exists, she finds out the truth. But for much of the novel Orciny’s ambiguous visibility affords it a paradoxical existence, confirming its secret nature and the conspiracy theories of people like Drodin. Simply as an idea it subverts the legitimacy of the two known and actual cities, implying concealed power structures. As long as Orciny is believed in, what is taken by those believers to be partially transparent exerts influence over their thinking and actions, and consequently over those who do not believe. This peculiar outcome suggests complications that can arise from the various meanings of ‘transparency’, and from circumstances that are neither simply visible nor invisible.

Gary T. Marx notes in various articles that the line between the visible and the invisible is not always well defined or even easily definable. He reflects on the ‘dated nature’ of the definition of surveillance based on the idea of ‘close observation’, with its:

seeming restriction to visual means as implied in ‘observation’. The eyes do contain the vast majority of the body’s sense receptors and the visual is a master metaphor for the other senses (e.g., saying ‘I see’ for understanding or being able to ‘see through people’). Indeed ‘seeing through’ is a convenient shorthand for the new surveillance.

To be sure the visual is usually an element of surveillance . . . Yet to ‘observe’ a text of a printout is in many ways different from a detective or supervisor directly observing behaviour.

(Marx 2002: 11)

Marx classifies ‘Traditional Surveillance’ relative to ‘The New Surveillance’ on a table that charts particular ‘dimensions’ of surveillance relevant to each type. One dimension is ‘Visibility’. Marx explaining that while the table displays ‘discrete either/or possibilities’, ‘there may be continuous gradations between the extreme values (e.g.: between the visible and invisible)’ (2002: 14). Marx focuses here not on what is seen and not seen by surveillance, but on the visibility or invisibility of the surveillance methods: ‘(of the actual collection, who does, it, where, on whose behalf)’ (2002: 28). The City & The City describes, in Marx’s terms, a relatively ‘traditional’ surveillance society. Neither Besźel nor Ul Qoma is a high-tech future world dominated by sophisticated surveillance paraphernalia. There are CCTV cameras, and Corwi does use ‘data mining’ to track down the van that transports Mahalia Geary’s body (2009a: 147), but computer surveillance is relatively unimportant and that Borlú has no informed awareness of its use. There are passes and visas, and Copula Hall functions as the key intersection between the cities, but the atmosphere suggests a contemporary Balkan state more than some futuristic world. Miéville aims to keep his readers off-balance by depicting something that might plausibly exist in the contemporary world. The complicating additional factor, though, is the agency Breach, which I consider later. As we have seen, though, The City & The City signals that gradations of visibility might extend not simply between the visible and the invisible, but beyond them into the invisible.

The invisible is that which is consciously unseen. Besźel are Ul Qoma are ‘topolgangers’, states that inhabit the same space. The respective inhabitants of these interpenetrating cities are not permitted to acknowledge each other, even when they are in the same space, what the novel labels being ‘grosstopically’ (2009a: 98) near to each other. Failure to unsee potentially is an offence. An early
example of active unseeing occurs at the end of the first chapter when Borlú sees an elderly woman walking along a street he takes to be GunterStrász in Beszél:

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 the nearby and local GunterStrász, that depressed zone.

(2009a: 14)

Borlú’s disoriented and disorienting realisation, with his immediate and, to the reader, perplexing response that he ‘should not have seen her’ (why?) followed by his ‘unnoticing’ the woman, propels us into a world where acts of unseeing, making people and places from the ‘topolganger’ state unvisible, are sensible and required. This weird scenario, recognisable yet eerily different, should prompt us consider the possibility of unseeing in our ‘real world’.

Marx (2003: 371) comments that ‘[t]here is frequently a gap between visible conforming behaviour and less visible attitudes, emotions and fantasies’. Surveillance ‘targets’, he argues, ‘often have space to manoeuvre and can use counter-technologies’ (2003: 372) to neutralise surveillance systems. This assertion addresses the subjects of surveillance as opposed to the methods of surveillance considered in his earlier article, but Marx recognises that ‘[m]ost surveillance systems have inherent contradictions, ambiguities, gaps, blindspots and limitations’ (2003: 372). Interactions between targets and systems add gradations between the visible and the invisible, Marx contending that ‘[t]he strategic actions of both watchers and the watched can be thought of as moves in a game, although unlike traditional games, the rules may not be equally binding on all players’ (2003: 374). He lists ‘11 types of response to privacy-invading surveillance’ (2003: 374), including ‘discovery’ (finding out if surveillance is taking place, so as to evade it); various ‘avoiding’ and ‘distorting’ moves; ‘switching’ strategies, where an ‘authentic’ surveillance result is transferred to an inauthentic subject; and ‘piggybacking’, where an illegitimate individual uses a legitimate individual to infiltrate spaces or systems. Two other manoeuvres are ‘blocking’ and ‘masking’. The first defies the surveillant’s ‘desire to read the signals given off by the subject’. The subject seeks ‘to physically block access to the communication or to render it (or aspects of it such as the identity, appearance or location of the communicator) unusable’ (2003: 379).

As with Lace’s metaphorical use of ‘glass’ and ‘transparency’, the qualifications here are worth considering. Only aspects of communication are blocked, and the capacity remains limited to blocking only one aspect from a list including—but not exhausted by—identity, appearance or location. Given the interactive moves in games played by watchers and watched, many gradations might result just in the ‘blocking’ response. ‘Masking’ involves the same shielding of information as does blocking, but also entails ‘deception in respect to the identity, status, and/or location of the person or material of surveillance interest’ (2009a: 380). Crucially, ‘the surveillance mechanism operates as intended but the information collected is misleading and useless’ (2009a: 360). Visible information gets gathered, but the subject supposedly under scrutiny retains a degree of invisibility, of not being watched as him- or herself. Marx’s list presents an array of surveillance counter-moves, suggesting the limitations of a simple visible/invisible binary for surveillants and subjects.

In The City & The City Mahalia Geary uses false names to mask her identity so that she can continue prohibited research on Orciny. Her murderer, David Bowden, actually engages in far more sophisticated blocking and masking moves once his crime is uncovered, using the peculiar elements of topolganger
states and the requirement to unsee to help him escape. Not only are the architecture and culture of Besźel and Ul Qoma distinct enough to require unseeing by citizens and tourists, but tourists are taught to recognise the different gestures, and ‘supposed differences in national physiognomies’ (2009a: 93). Bowden exploits these aspects to position himself between the gestures associated with Besźel and Ul Qoman citizens, taking himself outside the normal range of intelligibility. As the pursuing Borlú realises:

> Bowden was instantly visible. That gait. Strange, impossible. Not properly describable, but to anyone used to the physical vernaculars of Besźel and Ul Qoma, it was rootless and untethered, purposeful and without a country.

(2009a: 353).

Bowden is visible, but unclassifiable as Besź or Ul Qoman. He uses the distorted transparency suggested by Lace to stay in plain sight while remaining ‘untethered’. Given the logic of unseeing, anyone in either city who sees him might be breaching. This would prompt Breach to arrest the seer, enabling Bowden to escape. He aims to use this paradox to flee from both cities by moving in indeterminate spaces. Borlú memorably describes Bowden walking ‘with equipoise, possibly in either city. Schrödinger’s pedestrian’ (2009a: 352), referencing physicist Erwin Schrödinger’s mind experiment where it could not be known whether a cat in a sealed box was alive or dead, or both. Unable to be fully seen or properly located, Bowden almost escapes. His efforts, foiled when Borlú arrests him, demonstrate Marx’s view that surveillance necessarily generates resistance. They show how the obligation to unsee might be used against surveillance practices.

Marx’s neutralising and resisting manoeuvres offer subversives an inventive catalogue of counteractions. *The City & The City* goes further in depicting different resistant individuals and groups acting concurrently, sometimes in opposition to each other. As well as individuals with specific motives such as Geary and Bowden, there are also organised nationalist groups like Ul Qoma First or True Citizens, who are ‘[m]ore radical in their secure Besźel-love than [another group, the] National Bloc’. These groups politicise the act of unseeing, True Citizens being described as ‘marchers in quasi-uniform and makers of frightening speeches. Legal but not by much’ (2009a: 101). There are unificationist groups, such as the Besźqoma Solidarity Front, which aim to reunite the city-states. On the walls of its headquarters, the Front has ‘a large-scale map of Besźel and Ul Qoma. To avoid prosecution the lines and shades of division were there—total, alter and crosshatched—but ostentatiously subtle, distinctions of greyscale’ (2009a: 56). The map depicts the present, and the hoped-for alternative. ‘Prosecution’ is a key word in the previous quotation, and the Front, despite its aspirations, largely stays in hiding. Indeed, Borlú dismisses resistance groups, noting:

> In typical political cliché, unificationists were split on many axes. Some groups were illegal, sister-organisations in both Besźel and Ul Qoma. The banned had at various points in their history advocated the use of violence to bring the cities to their God-, destiny-, history-, or people-intentioned unity.

(2009a: 52)

There even had been what Borlú regards as fictional resistant groups, sources for:

> folktales of renegades who breach and avoid Breach to live between the cities, not exiles but in-siles, evading justice and retribution by consummate ignorability. Pahlanuik’s novel *Diary of an Insile* had been illegal in Besźel (and, I was sure, in Ul Qoma), but like most people I had skimmed a pirated edition.

(2009a: 161)
The reference to Chuck Pahlanuik, creator of *Fight Club*, gestures to the quasi-reality Miéville creates in the novel—Pahlanuik has *not* written *Diary of an Insile*. The term ‘consummate ignorability’ hints that even fictional renegades can elicit unseeing from others, rather than merely indulge in it themselves. Clearly, resistant groups have failed in the past, and while there is a brief insurrection later in the novel, it is put down quickly by Breach. That failure, though, underlines the reality that most citizens in both states conform to the prevailing situation, making sure to unsee and make unvisible as demanded.

Importantly, unseeing is not natural, and is taught, as well as being enforced. When Borlú travels to Ul Qoma, where he suspects (correctly) that Mahalia Geary has been murdered, rather than in Besţel where her body is found, his interpretive faculties get officially reoriented. This entails immersion in the Ul Qoman language and reading documents on that city’s history, geography and law. He understands that the chief concern is ‘to help a Besţ citizen through the potentially traumatic fact of actually being in Ul Qoma, unseeing all their familiar environs, where we lived the rest of our life, and seeing the buildings beside us that we had spent several decades making sure not to notice’ (2009a: 160). Unseeing in this circumstance requires making unvisible the environment one normally perceives, rendering the ‘new’ habitat visible. This willed act allows him to operate legitimately and successfully in Ul Qoma. Borlú describes part of this process:

> They sat me in what they called an Ul Qoma simulator, a booth with screens for inside walls, on which they projected images and videos of Besţel with the Besţ buildings highlighted and their Ul Qoman neighbours minimised with lighting and focus. Over long seconds, again and again, they would reverse the visual stress, so that for the same vista Besţel would recede and Ul Qoma shine.

(2009a: 160)

Through this process the previously unvisible becomes visible, and vice versa. Something different applies to ‘outsiders’ from beyond the borders of both cities. When Mahalia Geary’s American parents enter Besţel to retrieve her body, because of the traumatic circumstances of her murder they are not required to undergo the ‘mandatory training’ given to ordinary tourists. Nor need they pass ‘the not-unstringent entrance exam, both its theoretical and practical-role-play elements, to qualify for their visas’. Tourists, in order to enter, normally would be trained to:

> know, at least in outline, key signifiers of architecture, clothing, alphabet and manner, outlaw colours and gestures, obligatory details—and depending on their Besţ teacher, the supposed differences in national physiognomies . . .

> After a two-week or however-long-it-was course, no one thought visitors would have metabolised the deep prediscursive instinct for our borders that Besţ and Ul Qomans have, to have picked up the real rudiments of unseeing. But we did insist that they acted as if they had. We, and the authorities of Ul Qoma, expected strict overt decorum, interacting with, and indeed obviously noticing, our cross-hatched neighbouring city-state not at all.

(2009a: 93)

The complexities of unseeing are clear here, and it is revealing that unseeing in normal circumstances is central even to gaining tourist visas. Yet a small degree of flexibility is also allowed even for actual citizens, for while unseeing is mandated, people from one state occasionally fail initially to unsee those from another. When these infractions are sustained and conscious, Breach steps in, although if the errors are minor, unavoidable and quickly corrected, no sanction gets imposed. The trigger mechanism for Breach is activity that indicates a citizen continues to see someone they should have unseen. The example of the old woman in GunterStrász shows that even minor instances create anxieties, about the identity of the seen person, and for the person (in this case Borlú) failing to unsee. He hangs in a curiously
suspended, provisional state between the mistake, its recognition, and its correction. Only the absence of arrest by Breach reconfirms his former identity as law-abiding citizen.

**Visibility and Identity**

*The City & The City’s* weird take on seeing and unseeing opens up the complicated relationship between surveillance, visibility and identity. Benjamin Goold observes the connections between these elements by distinguishing between ‘two fundamentally opposed conceptions of identity: the narrative and categorical’ (Goold 2007: 54). Goold explains that:

> individuals typically seek to make sense of their own identities by constructing narratives about themselves and those around them, and it is through these narratives that an individual is able to develop a sense of self that is fluid and that recognises the existence and autonomy of others.  

(2007: 54-5)

Narrative identity is not solipsistic, incorporating a vital social element, and is grounded on stories fashioned by one’s own unconscious. Goold’s view roughly accords with neuroscientist Susan Greenfield’s argument that the brain ‘gives you that unique consciousness that no one else can hack into, and on top of that a self-consciousness: a continuing experience of your own special identity’ (Greenfield 2008: 18). In both cases, that internal, unhackable narrative identity is ‘invisible’ to others.

In contrast to narrative identities, Goold comments, ‘categorical identities stress the importance of particular personal characteristics with a view to determining whether an individual belongs to some pre-defined group’ (2007: 55). Where narrative identities produce personal stories, categorical identities produce data that governmental and commercial agencies use to classify, assess and administer those whose information has been collected. The information creates ‘visible’ identities or collations of identities. Administrators prefer categorical identities to hidden narrative identities. Goold admits that the two forms of identity can co-exist, but adds that ‘while the personal narratives for the most part remain the dominant means by which we understand identity in modern society’, there has been ‘increased competition and conflict between narrative and categorical identities’ (2007: 56). Surveillance agencies seemingly regard an individual’s ‘invisible’ narrative identity as less valuable than their ‘visible’ categorical identity. Ironically, a categorical identity conferred by belonging to a pre-determined group to some degree erases the individual’s distinctiveness in favour of a more amorphous collective identity, especially when such information gets integrated into ‘big data’ sets. That profusion of data can be misinterpreted or misused. Shoshana Amielle Magnet argues that biometrics fails in part because, in an effort to improve the speed of identification, biometric scientists rely on ‘soft biometrics’, explicitly dividing participants into racial categories based on facial measurement, or organising ‘the data according to gender’ (Magnet 2011: 14). Despite what she calls ‘the rhetoric of scientific neutrality’ (2011: 50), certain characteristics get ‘seen’, which inevitably means that others—to put it in the language of *The City & The City*—are actively ‘unseen’. The consequence, she claims, is that:

> rather than telling stories of mechanical objectivity, race neutrality, and the guaranteed detection of formerly invisible bodies, biometric technologies continue to tell stories heavily inflected by the intersection of bodily identities.  

(2011: 50)

Seeing and unseeing, in this reading, remain heavily inflected by cultural biases that can be manipulated to produce a pre-conceived outcome. The technology depicted in *The City & The City* is far from anything approaching ‘big data’, but the conscious and constant seeing and unseeing by members of both Ul Qoma and Beszel constitute a crude form of social sorting in which cultural biases are critical. Crucially, this
sorts takes place not through technological means at a distance (or separate) from the inhabitants, but through regular lived experience, producing uncertain identities that potentially are continually under threat of erasure. Coincidentally, unseeing reinforces segregation and mutual suspicion.

**Visibility and the Identity of Place**

The threat to identity extends beyond the individual to the states themselves. The possibility that Orciny exists creates the equivalent of existential crisis for Beszel and Ul Qoma, undermining their respective status and raising questions about who really controls power. Orciny delegitimises established authority with the other two cities. The murky history of those cities complicates matters. Beszel’s ‘dark ages’, we read, ‘are very dark. Sometimes between two thousand and seventeen hundred years ago the city was founded, here in this curl of coastline’. But there is another level of potential confusion, for Beszel’s founding came at the same time as another’s [Ul Qoma], of course. The ruins are surrounded now or in some places incorporated, antique foundations, into the substance of the city. There are older ruins too, like the mosaic remnants in Yozhef Park. These Romanesque ruins predate Beszel, we think. We built Beszel on their bones, perhaps. (2009a: 51)

The novel reminds us that surveillance is mapped onto or integrated with established social and cultural foundations.

These circumstances share elements of the actual situation in Israel and Palestine as set out by Ariel Handel in *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine* (in Zureik et al. 2011: 259-75). Handel writes that in the wake of the 1967 war, the Israeli Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, argued that rather than interfere in the daily lives of Arabs in the OPT (Occupied Palestinian Territories), Israeli authorities should downplay their presence. ‘This type of control’, Handel argues,

known as ‘invisible occupation,’ is the opposite of inclusive surveillance . . . It seeks neither to contain the Palestinian population in the OPT nor expel it. Rather, it could be termed ‘indifferent’ surveillance: as long as the population remained quiet, the control array cared for neither it nor its actions.

(Handel 2011: 267)

The tension in the phrase ‘invisible occupation’ registers the paradox of Dayan’s proposed approach. Something invisible might have little agency, but here the power disparity is obvious and the invisible, overwhelming threat latent: the occupying power only remains invisible while the occupied people stay ‘quiet’. The term ‘quiet’ obviously implies more than the people remain ‘inaudible’, for it involves not making one’s presence felt, of remaining metaphorically invisible. The ‘reward’ is that occupied people are ignored.

Handel distinguishes between ‘inclusionary surveillance’, which aims to ‘embrace’ its citizens along the lines sketched ‘from Deleuze (1992), through Giddens (1985) to Torpey (1998)’ (Handel 2011: 259) and ‘exclusionary surveillance’ of the sort carried out in Israel/Palestine. In the more confrontational situation:

1 The current article has no pretensions to contribute to that fraught political discussion.
exclusionary surveillance *ignores* specific populations. . . its main goal is to reduce the state’s responsibility towards the subjects. The state does not ‘chase’ its subjects in order to catalog and embrace them; rather, it chases them and spies on them in order to prove that they *do not* belong to it.

(2011: 264, original emphasis)

As with the term ‘invisible occupation’, the emphasised word ‘*ignores*’ has instructive connections to visibility and invisibility. To ignore means something more than not seeing, with the *Shorter OED* defining the word as: to ‘refuse to take notice of; to leave out of consideration, shut one’s eyes to’. To ignore does not denote an *inability* to see, but requires a conscious act that suggests *The City & The City*’s ‘unseeing’: refusing; leaving out; shutting out. We find these acts central to the novel’s notion of the invisible. Handel records that numerous checkpoints make present day travel by Palestinians extremely challenging. Combined with what he reads as arbitrary rules about that movement, they create an intended ‘spatial uncertainty’. He explains that: ‘spatial uncertainty makes nearly every movement dangerous or at least problematic. The checkpoints’ friction becomes unbearable and encourages people to stay at home’ (2011: 270). He adds: ‘The goal of spatial uncertainty is to minimize Palestinian movement’ (2011: 270). Handel understands spatial uncertainty in terms of a one-sided state of affairs in which Palestinians are required to negotiate regular checkpoints whose arbitrary rules are designed to minimise their agency. The strong implication is that Israelis are not subject to such rigours and therefore do not experience anything like the same degree of anxiety and uncertainty.

In *The City & The City*, though, citizens of both cities are required to see and unsee within a set of accepted standards. Both groups experience a relatively equal amount of spatial uncertainty. This observation is not meant to downplay the actual conditions in Israel and the OPT. Borlú explicitly rejects any easy conflation of the situation depicted in the novel with other places. Recalling a conference he went to when young, he tells Corwi that the conference was called ‘Policing Split Cities’. They had sessions on Budapest and Jerusalem and Berlin, and Besźel and Ul Qoma.

‘Fuck!’ [replies Corwi]

‘I know, I know. That’s what we said at the time. Totally missing the point . . . I could feel my freebie evaporating in a gust of other people’s patriotism. My super said it wasn’t just a misunderstanding about our status it was *an insult to Besźel*.’

(2009a: 91, original emphasis)

Besźel and Ul Qoma, Borlú insists, are topolgangers, not split cities, and the differences need to be noted. That said, the thought experiment Miéville establishes allows us to conceptualise spatial uncertainty for real world groups, even those who superficially would seem to profit from their circumstances. If nothing else, the equality of spatial uncertainty in the novel, with its hints of mutual restriction and anxiety, provides a starting point from which we might calibrate uncertainty in the real world at local and international levels. Miéville sensibly warns us, though, against constructing facile parallels.

An illuminating comparison might be made in the case of tourists. We are told that they are required to pass a test that shows they at least understand in outline the cultural attributes of Besź and Ul Qoma and distinctions between them, and to act ‘as if they had’ picked up the rudiments of unseeing. Extrapolating to the real world, we might think of tourists, especially ‘westerners’ in ‘exotic’ locations where they fear the local food and water, searching for the safety of trusted fast food chains, picking out iconic golden arches or fictitious chicken-cooking southern colonels from among the blizzard of indigenous signs. The local product is unseen in favour of the known foreign product. In *The City & The City*, the move from
Monitoring the Unvisible

One’s own city to the other requires that individuals similarly unsee what they are familiar with and see the formerly unfamiliar. More mundane examples abound, as anyone who has searched for a department store, government agency or public toilet will testify; the visually irrelevant is unseen in favour of signs that point to the desired destination. In more negative terms, people in occupied territories are forced to read the place they inhabit in terms of the checkpoints and restricted areas set up by outside forces. These become new co-ordinates by which such actors orient themselves to the world, necessitating an active seeing of the occupier’s points of reference and a relative unseeing of one’s own. The result is a form of Handel’s ‘spatial uncertainty’. Formerly visible spatial markers become not invisible (they still exist and are known to exist by the occupied) but are rendered unvisible, get consciously ignored, are unseen, so that individuals can operate successfully within an oppressive surveillance regime.

Monitoring Unseeing

The acts of unseeing and making unvisible people and places by citizens from Besźel and Ul Qoma contribute massively to personal and national identity and to societal organisation. But though these acts are compulsory, they require conscious effort, especially in ambiguous situations. When unseeing does not occur, through carelessness or conscious rebellion, citizens are deemed to have ‘breached’, and therefore to have invoked the draconian powers of Breach. While easily the most powerful surveillance force in the novel, Breach itself is mostly visible by its effect. As with much else in this linguistically inventive work, the word ‘breach’ has several meanings. A breach can be a gap (as in, ‘Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more’, from Shakespeare’s *Henry V*), pertinent enough for a world where the borders between Besźel and Ul Qoma are porous physically and visually. ‘To breach’ also can mean not to keep a pledge or a promise, or in the active mode knowingly to break a law. In the novel, failure to unsee, if continued too long, is unlawful and activates Breach. Active breaching means consciously disobeying the prohibition against seeing, or disregarding the status (‘crosshatch’, ‘alter’ and the like) of parts of either or both cities. In the active mode, breaching requires disregarding the geographical and personal uncertainty imposed on and expected of the inhabitants. But Breach has wider cultural aspects, being a game played by children, showing how dominating powers can be appropriated into popular culture and thereby normalised or subverted. Ironically, breach is a game Borlú never liked to play (2009a: 46). And Breach the agency has other devotees: ‘There is no theology so desperate that you can’t find it. There is a sect in Besźel that worships Breach’ (2009a: 46). We need only look to the CIA, the former KGB and Mossad to understand the idea of security agencies being revered and feared, while Britain’s MI6 has that cultural icon, James Bond.

Breach being worshipped is not solely satirical, for it reinforces the force’s almost god-like omniscience and omnipotence. As Borlú reflects: ‘Between the cities, Breach watched. None of us knew what it knew’ (2009a: 151). Soon after, he comments about its mystery and power: ‘Breach were beyond our control or ken’ (2009a: 152). And yet that same power is invoked repeatedly in times of insecurity, as though the agency is the only force capable of restoring order, or of maintaining the status quo. Which is its primary function, for ‘the only violation Breach punishes [is] the existential disrespect of Ul Qoma’s and Besźel’s boundaries’ (2009a: 135). The relationship is symbiotic, as Borlú recognises, for the ‘two cities need the Breach. And without the cities’ integrities, what is Breach?’ (2009a: 84). Yet he appreciates the imbalance in the relationship, declaring that invoking Breach to deal with acts of breaching makes, ‘Besź laws and Ul Qoma laws . . . kind of irrelevant. The . . . sanctions available to Breach are pretty limitless’ (2009a: 96). Breach thus holds the ambivalent position of many surveillance practices and agencies, being feared as an intrusive force and required as the maintainer of order.

The phrase ‘Breach watched’ echoes *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s ‘Big Brother is Watching You’, and the realisation that Breach’s powers ‘are pretty limitless’ recalls George Orwell’s Thought Police. But there exists a fundamental difference between the novels, for while the former’s oppressive monitors are omnipresent, Breach is far less tangible, as an exchange between Borlú and the unificationist Pall Drodin
records. Asked by Borlú whether he has seen Breach, Drodin fires back: “‘Course not. What do I look like? Who sees it? But we know it’s there. Watching. Any excuse…we’re gone… Do you know how many of my friends have been taken. That I’ve never seen again? We’re more careful than anyone’” (2009a: 63). His response prompts Borlú to observe ruefully:

It was true. A political irony. Those most dedicated to the perforation of the boundary between Beszél and Ul Qoma had to observe it most carefully. If I or one of my friends were to have a moment’s failure of unseeing (and who did not do that? Who failed to fail to see, sometimes?) so long as it was not flaunted or indulged in, we should not be in danger.

(2009a: 63-4)

The rhetorical question, ‘who failed to fail to see sometimes?’, neatly captures the paradoxes in the cities, the uncertainty undermining Borlú’s personal narrative. The threat mollifies and terrifies simultaneously:

I had seen Breach before, in a brief moment. Who hadn’t? I had seen it take control. The great majority of breaches are acute and immediate. Breach intervenes. . . Trust to Breach, we grow up hearing, unsee and don’t mention the Ul Qoman pickpockets or muggers at work even if you do notice, which you shouldn’t, from where you stand in Bezel, because breach is a far worse transgression than theirs.

(2009a: 79)

Citizens of both cities unsee Breach to save themselves from breaching. But the first brief moment of recognition reinforces Breach’s overwhelming power, shackling the inhabitants to the regime of seeing and unseeing that keeps them subservient.

If ‘the powers of Breach are almost limitless. Frightening’ (2009a: 83), there remains a slight but important qualification in the word ‘almost’. Breach’s existence suggests that unseeing needs monitoring and enforcing, confirmed in repeated instances where Borlú and others tread dangerously close to breaching. That Breach is dangerously powerful but in certain circumstances necessary, an oppressive, uncontrolled force central to the identity of Beszél and Ul Qoma and their citizens, signals the complex role it plays in the maintenance of order.

The underlying ambivalence and ambiguity surrounding Breach is best signalled by Borlú as the fleeing David Bowden deftly manoeuvres between the two cities:

Bowden still had not committed to where has was. I said ‘Which city are you in?’ . . .

‘Either’, he said.

So I grabbed him by the scruff, turned him, marched him away. Under the authority I’d been granted, I dragged Breach with me, enveloped him in it, pulled him out of either town into neither, into the Breach.

(2009a: 361-2)

The novel’s coda, titled ‘Breach’, sees Borlú coming to terms with the consequences of this act. Bowden is dealt with summarily, but Borlú himself has breached by arresting him, and so gets arrested. He also learns that, having breached, he will ‘never unsee again’ (2009a: 371), and therefore cannot return home. Yet his independence and skills make him an attractive new recruit for Breach. In fact, he finds that all of Breach’s agents formerly have breached. His Breach contact, Ashil, also explains the full relationship between the cities
It’s not just us keeping them apart. It’s everyone in Beszél and everyone in Ul Qoma. Every minute, every day. We’re only the last ditch: it’s everyone in the cities who does most of the work. It works because you don’t blink. That’s why unseeing and unsensing are so vital. No one can admit it doesn’t work. So if you don’t admit it, it does. (2009a: 370)

Miéville understands that surveillance systems, like other forms of power, need general complicity for monitoring to succeed. Unable to leave, Borlú accepts what is essentially press-ganging into Breach. ‘My task is changed’, he explains: ‘not to uphold the law, or another law, but to maintain the skin that keeps the law in place. Two laws in two places, in fact’ (2009a: 373). One consequence reconfigures his identity, as he registers when noting that this is ‘the last case of Tyador Borlú of the Extreme Crime Squad. . . I sign off Tye, avatar of Breach’ (2009a: 373). Accepting his new identity and job meshes with an understanding of his new, indeterminate location:

We are all philosophers here where I am, and we debate among other things the questions of where it is that we live. On that issue I am a liberal. I live in the interstice yes, but I live in both the city and the city. (2009a: 373)

Fittingly, The City & The City ends on this note of provocative and productive uncertainty, calling on its readers to keep considering its inventions, conundrums and paradoxes. Borlú’s personal and indeed his national identity have moved from the fixed to something more provisional, akin to what Zygmunt Bauman sees as the condition of ‘liquid modernity’, and which he and David Lyon comprehend in terms of ‘liquid surveillance’ (Bauman and Lyon 2013). This tangential position questions the accepted account of identity and reality. The phrase, ‘we are all philosophers here where I am’, asks readers to engage sceptically with their own situations and identities. The City & The City offers a kind of weird prism through which to re-view the world, and understand better how we ourselves see and unsee. Given the centrality of visibility to surveillance, the questions asked, the complex situations depicted, and the diverse motivations and responses of the novel’s characters, provide a well-stocked mental laboratory to test out our ideas.

**Conclusion**

David Lyon recognises that novels and films ‘help us get our bearings on what surveillance is about’ (Lyon 2007: 139), while Torin Monahan recently notes the ‘emerging “cultural studies of surveillance”’, declaring that ‘research on cultural practice is currently providing a venue for marginalized disciplines within the field to . . . inject alternative concepts and content areas into the collective conversation’ (Monahan 2011: 502). He adds that this cultural turn invites ‘critical reflexivity’ for the field and its members. We might take critical reflexivity and collective conversation beyond the boundaries of academia into the public realm, for works such as Miéville’s enjoy an audience most surveillance scholars cannot contemplate reaching. Its literary quality garnered positive reviews from mainstream newspapers in the UK, such as The Times, The Independent, The Guardian and The Times Literary Supplement. It won the Hugo Award for Best Novel (2010) and The Arthur C Clarke Award (2010) for the best British science fiction novel. It deserves a place on the bookshelves of surveillance theorists interested in the ways that literary fiction critically examines the topic. The ideas of unseeing and the unvisible, of topolgangers and grosstopical closeness are weird, but usefully so, provoking us to rethink how we understand visibility and place. The book’s richly imagined characters offer subtle, plausible ways of addressing complex and fluid notions of personal, social and national identity. That said, The City & The City does not address all aspects of contemporary surveillance; no individual text could do that. We do
better to treat it as only one of myriad creative responses to surveillance, responses that collectively help us see what remains invisible and unvisible.

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