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ARTICLE

Bringing Infrastructural Criticism to Speculative Fiction: China Miéville's "Covehithe"

Andrew Hageman
Luther College, Decorah, IA, US
hagean03@luther.edu

This article unites infrastructural criticism, speculative fiction, and ecocriticism. Bruce Robbins, Patricia Yeager, and other scholars have been building the field of infrastructural criticism over the past ten years, but this work has largely focused on infrastructure within realist fiction. Because speculative fiction often emphasizes infrastructural objects and systems as the techno-scientific developments that differentiate their imagined worlds from ours, these narratives offer highly productive cases for rigorous analysis of those parts of the world that enable water, petro-culture, electricity, and telco flows and connections. This article presents through sustained close reading an ecological and ideological critique of the infrastructures at work in China Miéville's short story "Covehithe" followed by consideration of how to develop this short story as a test case for a method of applying infrastructural criticism to other speculative fictions.

Keywords: Anthropocene; Infrastructural Criticism; Climate Fiction; Petro-Culture; China Miéville; Speculative Fiction (SF)

In the past ten years of contemporary literary criticism, significant innovations have been in operation across the field of Infrastructural Criticism. Scholars including Bruce Robbins (2007), Patricia Yeager (2007), and Michael Rubenstein (2010) among others have contributed to an emergent practice of attending rigorously to objects and systems of infrastructure in contemproary literature. In "The Smell of Infrastructure: Notes Toward an Archive," Robbins writes, "The smell of infrastructure is the smell of the public" (2007:26). This remark points to the largely shared objective among Infrastructural critics of reading objects and systems in order to underscore their role in how capitalism functions, is represented, and may be critiqued and/or changed. For Robbins, and for others, infrastructure embodies some of the contradictions at the

very core of capitalist production: circulation, consumption, and waste processing. This infrastructural focus offers an increasingly focus since the ring roads and subway or trolley systems of a city are where ruling ideologies are made concrete. Values, both conscious and unconscious, are embodied, on display, and at work in telco networks and waterways. Yet it is all too easy, customary even, to overlook infrastructure when reading a place, inside a work of fiction or through experiential encounters.

To date, Infrastructural Criticism has largely, though not exclusively, been developed through the analysis of realist fiction. This tendency seems attributable to the areas of literature that the vanguard scholars of this new approach were already working in rather than as an intentional exclusion. The aim of this article is to extend this infrastructural reading approach to speculative fiction—science fiction, fantasy, the weird, and other genres that feature futuristic and/or non-realist narrative elements—a literary realm that foregrounds infrastructural objects and systems among the techno-scientific developments that differentiate imagined worlds from the eras of the writers who build them. Speculative fiction brings this layer that is core to the functioning of social and individual life into prominent and focused view. Just think of the attempts to render so-called "cyberspace" in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and its progeny, the space elevators in Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy (1992–1996), and the highways and oil pipelines of Lagos in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) to name but a few examples. These examples should help make it clear that a critical approach that focuses intently on objects and systems of infrastructure promises to deliver robust analytical insights when it is brought to bear on works in a genre that brings precisely those objects and systems to the forefront of their narratives. What's more, the Infrastructural Criticism already in print frequently connects with ecological, class, postcolonial, and other forms of critique, and the extension into speculative fiction promises to deepen and enrich these connections. The miniscule sample of speculative novels listed in this paragraph, alone, exemplify the intersections of political economy, ecological challenges and opportunities, and colonial histories that are encoded in techno-scientific infrastructures and are primed for sophisticated analysis.

To advance the application of Infrastructural Criticism to speculative fiction towards this essay's literary object of inquiry, consider the following juxtaposition of two brief quotations. The first is a question: "What is it like to be stuck, night and day, dreaming of infrastructure?" (Yeager 2007: 15). Patricia Yeager posed this question in her "Introduction: Dreaming of Infrastructure" contribution to a Cities-focused issue of *PMLA* to encourage critical readers to note that large numbers of humans who live in poverty suffer gravely at the level of infrastructure in terms of their access to running water, electricity, urban transit, internet access, and so on. Yeager's broader aim is to encourage scholars and readers to examine infrastructure as a focal point beyond the more conventional emphases on character and emplotment through which to analyze narratives. The second quote comes from China Miéville's "Introduction" to his incandescent account of the Russian Revolution called *October*: "The year 1917 was an epic, a concatenation of adventures, hopes, betrayals, unlikely coincidences, war and intrigue; of bravery and cowardice and foolishness, farce, derring-do, tragedy; of epochal ambitions and change, of glaring lights, steel, shadows; of tracks and trains" (2017: 2). While Miéville represents 1917 as having all the elements of a thrilling narrative, he bookends his list describing the year with "epic" and "of tracks and trains," granting prominence, perhaps equivalence, to the scale of the ideals, victories and reversals in play across this time, and the objects and systems of infrastructure that facilitated or thwarted these ambitions and actions. This article argues that that the connection of politics and aesthetics through infrastructure is a signature of Miéville's writing, and offers a useful means of using Infrastructural Criticism to read speculative fiction.

To enter a work of fiction by Miéville is to enter a world that is equally engrossing and unsettling. The settings of his texts often feel extremely close to our shared reality, yet there are always odd beings and objects and systems that distinguish Miéville's worlds as weird. Between the elements of his fiction that are familiar and those that are strange, the reader's mind toggles uncertainly. This experience attunes us to the notion that diverse worlds can coexist while also going unnoticed by each other. Sometimes these worlds also systematically ignore or exclude others because

ideological momentum prevents them from being perceived, or sometimes worlds are hidden until events forces them to collide. Among the speculative objects and systems that create these effects in the writings of Miéville, infrastructure looms large. The myriad and mysterious railway systems of *Railsea*, the municipal transit stations that are pivotal places in *Perdido Street Station* and *The City and The City*, the dimension-spanning bridge in *UnLunDun*, and the oil rigs in "Covehithe" all offer insights into the role of infrastructure across his canon to date.

The short story "Covehithe" from Miéville's 2015 collection *Three Moments of an Explosion: Stories* contains infrastructural speculation that creates a powerful contribution to the contemporary aesthetics of global climate change and the Anthropocene. The story features a father and daughter who are on the English coast in Suffolk hoping to spot an occurrence of an recent global phenomenon of defunct or destroyed oil rigs coming to life, emerging from the sea beds, and then laying eggs on shore to hatch baby rigs that wander around drilling at will. The father previously work for a military unit that was subcontracted to stop the returned rigs from returning to shore, and he recalls his previous work while ruminating on the meaning of these new specters of petroleum infrastructure. The story ends with the pair witnessing a massive rig called P-36 Petrobras making landfall.

It is immediately apparent that "Covehithe" engages the complicated dynamics of climate change though via a distinctly weird approach. As scholars like Timothy Morton (2013), E. Ann Kaplan (2015), and Adam Trexler (2015) have suggested, it is not easy to grasp or represent climate change as a massive and inevitable disaster that has been set into motion; in reality, we are only able to perceive the edges of that shadow looming over us. While one narrative approach to climate change SF is to project forward into post-disaster life, or the absence of future human life, "Covehithe" captures our contemporary experience of life suspended between two deaths. To do this, Miéville encodes infrastructure as an index of human extractivism, focusing on human political economic systems built upon and sustained by extraction of elements such as petroleum for circulation and consumption in the global capitalist market. Human readers are hyper-aware that as a species we have been extracting and burning coal and oil and gas—the infrastructures of harvesting,

circulating, and consuming these are everywhere—yet it is easy to persuade ourselves that the ecological debt for this can be postponed, maybe even forgiven. In "Covehithe", it is impossible to ignore the fact that through a series of weird oil rigs this debt has suddently beome due or, more likely, toxically overdue. As such, the short story offers an aesthetic encounter that engenders a powerful, if painful, ecological consciousness that positions so-called externalities as anything but external.

As "Covehithe" begins, the author outlines a multi-sensory account of its setting:

> This close to the waves the land felt, as the girl said, misbehavicious. A good word to make her feel better. In the leafless trees of this region were cold, random, and silent flares of light. Touch the soil, as Dughan did, and as his daughter did too at the sight of him, and it felt greasy, heavy, as if someone had poured cream onto loam […] They continued on the road past a sign forbidding exactly this last short walk, on tarmac so old it was becoming landscape. Perspective was peculiar. The smell should have been sappy and muddy and of the sea. (2015: 301)

The experience of embodied presence in this place is encountered through vision, touch, and smell, each of which report sensations of strangeness. Facilitating this journey is a swathe of petroleum that has been extracted, refined, poured, and smoothed over the land as tarmac. This tarmac infrastructure, which likely originated with an oil rig, is itself disintegrating due to a lack of infrastructural maintenance, particularly in the face of the coastal erosion for which the actually-existing Suffolk County hamlet of Covehithe is already an infamous example of sea-level rise coast erosion to come. In this liminal space where petroleum infrastructure is falling into ruin, Miéville inserts the free-floating sentence "Perspective was peculiar." It's as if we can already see the infrastructure of today from the future when it will be artifactual ruins. But Miéville isn't exactly making an Ozymandian gesture at the feebleness of human ambitions and work. Instead, the all-too-lively oil rigs gesture at an immediate need for human beings to invent and deploy alternative energy infrastructures since our petro-culture legacy is already haunting us and the rest of the planet.

Eventually the rig does appear, emerging from its ocean-bed peregrinations, and the initial description places this weird being into conversation with the lineage of speculative fiction:

> No downcast beams to light up what was coming, breaking water, way off the coast. It was only moonlit. A tower. A steeple of girders. Streaming, and rising. The girl stood. The metal was twisted. Off-true and angular like a skew-whiff crane, resisting collapse. It did not come steadily but lurched, hauling up and landward in huge jerks […] The towerwork was on a platform. In the glow of the thing's own flame they saw edificial flanks, the concrete and rust of them, the iron of the pylon barnacled, shaggy with benthic growth now lank gelatinous bunting. (2015: 302–303)

Readers of SF will recognize in this scene echoes of the Martian fighting-machines of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Just as Wells's speculative fiction was an inverted colonization narrative that brought to light England's extractivism of land, resources, and aboriginal labor in Tasmania, so "Covehithe" presents an inverted invasion that places a contemporary human extractivist relationship with petroleum in a disturbing allegorical light. In this reading, the rigs embody the history of petroleum cultures and markets, as their jerky movements and struggles to avoid collapse come to reflect the long history of economic and ecological booms and busts that have been integral to a world built on fossil fuels. Centuries of industrialization and globalization are condensed in the rigs as objects of infrastructural and ideological centrality. As towers or steeples that emanate light, the rigs also resemble ancient church ruins, and in the actually-existing Covehithe St. Andrew's Church stands as an example. As such, the oil rigs can be read as signs both of the ruling order of life and the fabric of society and in the world of Miéville they have come to surpass our ability to use and control them.

Following this account of the Petrobras, the short story pivots back to the father's past, as an advisor and combatant against the first rigs to emerge from the seas:

> National governments subcontracted strategy to the UN Platform Event Repulsion Unit: scientists, engineers, theologians and exorcists, soldiers, veterans like Dughan of those first encounters. He learned new motions, the vastly swaying skittishness and violence of the revenant rigs. His UNPERU colleagues strove to decode this hydrocarbon Ragnarok. Twice, Dughan even boarded pitching, stinking decks to transmit to them close-up footage, from which they learned nothing. They tried to figure out what economies of sacrifice were being invoked, for what this was punishment. (2015: 305)

Via an explicit association between the revenant rigs and Ragnarok, the author highlights a cultural allusion to Norse mythology as documented in Snorri Sturlusun's thirteenth-century *Prose Edda* that casts a major transition to the order of oil as made visible through infrastructure. Ragnarok, with its vision of the world sinking in water, is an appropriate source of mythic inspiration for a speculative fiction about climate change, and there are reflections in Miéville's tale of the final crossing and subsequent destruction of the bridge Bifrost—one of the Aesir's major infrastructural works. Like the short story, Ragnarok is also an apocalypse that is foretold. Like fossil-fuel driven climate change, it is a foregone conclusion recorded in inherited narratives that the contemporary world faces a paradigm shift. Yet in Miéville's fictional world, governments and the UN are baffled by the rigs, and choose to tackle their threat with a combination of religion, science, and military force, as a way of (ultimately unsucceasfully) discovering what historical actions are responsible for the return of the rigs in the present. The rigs underscore how the people in this story, and many readers living outside the story, practice a committed disavowal of fossil-fueled climate change. While such ecological consciousness can be elusive in reality, a story like Miéville's provides a speculative encounter with petroleum energy infrastructure that through its weird estrangement that forces us to confront a vision of the future we might prefer to ignore.

The story then returns to the present, as a security officer apprehends Dughan and his daughter and recommends that for their safety they leave the area. As they leave, and the story ends with a final glimpse back:

> Dughan turned and took in the length of Covehithe beach. They were out of sight, but he looked in the direction of the graveyard, and of St. Andrew's stubby hall where services continued within the medieval carapace, remains of a grander church fallen apart to time and the civil war and to economics, fallen ultimately with permission. (2015: 311)

Like the oil rigs, the church in this closing visual is a zoomorphized infrastructural object by the descriptor "carapace." The new church built within the ruins of its predecessor seems to point to the stubborn inertia of ideology and the infrastructures that perpetuate it. Just as the spectral rigs point to the capacity for fossil fuel ideology to resist giving up the ghost, the passage implies that what ideological and infrastructural inertia override as well as repress are "time, civil war, and economics." Extrapolating directly from this list of three terms, the story clearly implies that history, dissent, and class antagonism are bundled up with petroleum culture. This final image leaves readers with a clear call to action, to engage with the history of antagonisms embedded in petro-culture in order to confront and ameliorate the ecological crises human beings have initiated.

To underscore the revolutionary ingenuity of infrastructure in Miéville's "Covehithe" as well as the promise of bringing Infrastructural Criticism to speculative fiction, consider how this short story contrasts with Peter Berg's realist oil-rig centered film *Deepwater Horizon* (2016). That film, inspired by the destruction of the oil rig Deepwater Horizon and massive oil spill that ensued, offers a number of visual sequences of destruction, yet the story emphasizes the individual resilience and moral/spiritual compass of the good people involved in opposition to the greed of the bad. Notably, though unsurprisingly, absent from the film is substantial critique of the petroleum culture of which this infrastructural disaster is just one instance. As such, the film enables spectators to continue dreaming of oil, so long as greed is eradicated or at least ameliorated. By contrast, "Covehithe" ends with a call to linger and explore and struggle with the very fabric of the fantasies that allow the dream of oil to remain alive even when people recognize that this dream is already an Anthropocene nightmare that is set to keep growing more vivid and intense.

To conclude, the aim of this essay is to demonstrate the robust potential for performing infrastructural analysis on works of speculative fiction. The particular case of Miéville's "Covehithe" points a way forward for critics working on speculative fiction with an eye towards ecology and climate. Such ecocritical work could advance by bringing this infrastructural method to a vast body of texts that similarly feature extractive infrastructures, from the underwater pipelines in Okorafor's *Lagoon* and the post-petroleum infrastructural ruins in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* to asteroid mining in James S. A. Corey's *The Expanse*. Or, to conduct ecologically-oriented infrastructural analysis on speculative fiction beyond extraction, critics could focus on waste management infrastructures such as those in the Strugatsky Brothers' novel *The Doomed City* and the Hugo Award winning novelette "Folding Beijing" by Hao Jingfang, not to mention the clandestinely powerful rubbish dumps of New Crobuzon in Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*. The infrastructural objects and systems in these and other speculative fictions are poised to make ideologies, contradictions, devastations, and opportunities comprehensible as well as imaginable in startling ways when critics attend to them as conduits to alternative futures.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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