

# The Slow versus the Spectacular: Environment, Violence and Representation in China Miéville’s “Polynia” and “Covehithe”

Khanh Nguyen 

Graduate Student, Department of English, Aarhus University, Denmark  
khanhnguyen0910@gmail.com

## Abstract

“Polynia” and “Covehithe” are two short stories from China Miéville’s 2015 collection *Three Moments of an Explosion*. Present in both is an “ecosystem” of spectacular violence that the author builds through, first, the graphic description of violence, second, the encapsulation of eye-witnessed violence in visual objects that resemble what the Marxist philosopher Guy Debord terms “spectacles” and, third, the manipulation of textual spectatorship. To construct a chilling and eerie atmosphere for his narratives, Miéville can be said to have drawn heavily on HP Lovecraft’s weird tales. Nonetheless, behind the spectacles of violence represented in “Polynia” and “Covehithe” is not the cosmic horror typical of Lovecraft but a different kind of horror, heavily anchored in our reality, possessing new and increasing urgency: the horror of global warming and environmental degradation, or, as in the words of Rob Nixon, of “slow violence.” Consequently, there happens in “Polynia” and “Covehithe” what is similar to an act of translation, of the slow into the spectacular. I argue that this translation provides a potential answer to Nixon’s pressing question about how to surmount the representational challenges created by slow violence in order to render it more urgent and engaging. This argument is furthermore related to broader discussions about the relationship between literature and the media, fiction’s engagement with the environmental crisis, as well as the differences between Old Weird and New Weird.

**Keywords:** slow violence, the spectacle, ecocriticism, weird fiction

[H]ow can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (Nixon 3)

Inherited from late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century writers such as Arthur Machen and HP Lovecraft, weird fiction as a literary tradition has taken a new shape in the hands of contemporary authors. In this contemporary guise, it is usually referred to as “the New Weird,” a hybrid genre which “seeks to engage with questions of politics and morality” and is “self-reflexive in its awareness that literature and the world of which it is a part are both ‘politically constructed’” (Weinstock 184). In this sense, the New Weird is more concerned with the real world than its predecessor, even though its political and moral engagement still relies very much on elements

of the otherworldly and the fantastic. A Marxist academic and political activist, China Miéville is also considered a central figure in the New Weird whose creative and critical works "have been important in mapping out the terrain encompassed by the movement." In this paper, I will examine two short stories by Miéville that illustrate both what New Weird fiction is and how it enters into conversation with the contemporary world.

Published in his 2015 collection *Three Moments of an Explosion*, "Polynia" and "Covehithe" are very explicit in their environmental concerns. The narrative in "Polynia" follows the massive icebergs which appear mysteriously in the sky of London, causing chaos and even fatalities. "Covehithe" chills the reader with its description of spectral oil rigs coming back to life. In both, Miéville stages a weird encounter between humans and the natural world, in which the latter seems to possess agency, refusing to yield itself to the former's comprehension.

Taking Miéville's obvious engagement with the environment in "Polynia" and "Covehithe" as a point of departure on the one hand and guided by Cheryll Glotfelty's succinct definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the environment" (xviii) on the other, I will attempt at an ecocritical reading of these stories. Human-nature relationship, as will be shown, is dialogic rather than unidirectional, its nuances permeating many aspects of our everyday life. Specifically, my analysis of "Polynia" and "Covehithe" will focus on the author's representation of violence. I argue that while violence in these two stories is depicted in spectacular terms, it is through Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" that its true nature can be properly comprehended. Consequently, there happens in these two stories what is similar to an act of translation, of the slow into the spectacular. I posit furthermore that this translation provides a potential answer to Nixon's question, as quoted above in the epigraph of this paper, about how to render slow violence more urgent and engaging.

Clothed in autobiographical form, "Polynia" can, from a certain angle, be read as a simple story about growing up, about childhood mischief and adventures. "Covehithe" likewise gives the feel of a bedtime diary entry narrating a father-and-daughter picnic in the Eastern coast of England. The presence of the child protagonists brings to these stories a sense of innocent light-heartedness, which on the contrary can call attention to the violent reality where these kids find themselves. Furthermore, the pervasive violence depicted in both texts is of a particular kind: it is dramatic, fearsome, but also awe-inspiring. It is, in a nutshell, spectacular. The child characters are victims of violence, but in immediate terms they are also its consumers, thus a canvas onto which the spectacular effects of violence are projected and highlighted. This "ecosystem" of spectacular violence that Miéville builds in both "Polynia" and "Covehithe" can be understood metaphorically as a three-story construction, each level of which represents a tactic that the author employs to first establish the spectacular effects of violence, then lock them into a

cycle of perpetuation and finally extend them beyond his narrative worlds towards the reader.

The first level consists of the author describing violence in spectacular terms, foregrounding its theatrical and larger-than-life qualities. In “Covehithe,” Miéville goes to great lengths to set the stage for the resurrected oil rig’s entrance into the narrative: “There was no light but the moon and those occasional sourceless mineral glows. Somewhere some insane bird, not a nightingale, was singing” (340). Sound and light were somehow suspended, and there was a sense of anticipation, not just from the human characters, but also from the whole landscape. When the uncanny tower finally appeared, it did so with awkward but exaggerated gestures. Its immensity was accentuated, so that its capacity for violence, though not yet exercised, was duly acknowledged:

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 sea at its base spread flat and fell away from suddenly rising intricate blockness, black, angled and extruded. (Miéville, “Covehithe” 341)

In “Polynia,” “hundreds of thousands of people” were “out in the streets and gaping skyward” in startlement at icebergs “the size of cathedrals, looming above the skyline” (Miéville 3). It should be pointed out that while violence is usually understood as acts or agents that cause damage or casualties, another meaning of the word involves “strength of emotion or of a destructive natural force” (“Violence”). One can therefore argue that the Petrobras 36 oil rig in “Covehithe” and the icebergs in “Polynia,” by their mere presence and the ferocity that they hint at, qualify as instances of violence.

On the second level, violence is encapsulated in visual objects, where their effects are perpetuated and multiplied. If above, the violence caused by the oil rigs or the icebergs is experienced only by their direct witnesses, on this level its effects go beyond the circle of immediacy to intrude upon those who might not have observed those events in person. These instances of violence, which might well have been spectacular when they took place, are turned into what the Marxist philosopher Guy Debord calls “spectacles.” Debord’s arguments in his book *Society of the Spectacle* therefore provide useful tools to understand violence in the two stories examined here. According to the French philosopher, “in societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation. ... [I]t [the spectacle] is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness” (Debord 7; emphasis in original). In other words, life is no longer experienced authentically via sensory and intellectual channels but through the spectacle, which is only a poor representation of life itself (Schirato 139). The spectacle becomes the center of attention and is given free rein in people’s consciousness.

This vision that Debord sketches out seems to be exemplified in both "Polynia" and "Covehithe," where technologies such as the mobile phone become an indispensable part of the people's life, while the media serve to both satisfy and reinforce their obsession with the spectacle. When the first spectral oil rig made its presence in "the earlyish year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century," wrecking a fishing boat and washing "two traumatised survivors" ashore, its apparition, though wholly unexpected, was timely recorded and disseminated. This left the authorities at a loss of ways to "suppress civilian footage of what had come back" (Miéville, "Covehithe" 343). The idea of the society of the spectacle is carried to extremes in "Polynia," where the spectacle is not simply "a collection of images" but, as Debord observes, "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (7). The appearance of the icebergs, despite – or maybe because of – their strangeness and incomprehensibility, seems to be welcomed with excitement by the people. Their whereabouts and movements were carefully observed and reported. Any expeditions to the icebergs, whether conducted with governmental authorization or illegally by urban explorationists, were minutely videotaped or, better yet, livestreamed. These footages were followed with enthusiasm by the Londoners below, though the narrator admits many years later that what they saw was neither extraordinary nor astonishing: it was basically "the sort of thing you'd expect from any arctic adventure. Freezing winds, terrible ice, so on" (Miéville, "Polynia" 7).

Thus, unsurprisingly, when the expeditionist Lund made her catastrophic fall from the iceberg Mass 6 because of its clash with Mass 3, an accident that can rightly be considered the culmination of the story's violent atmosphere, the event was also recorded, ironically by the victim's own helmet camera. Miéville gives an account of the tragedy through a few subjective, unemotional sentences:

Lund staggered as her nook tilted. Her brace held, the brace cord did not snap, but the ice in which it was tethered crumbled. In seconds she slid down angles it had taken her hours to ascend. We saw the footage from her point of view. She careered down a chasm that now sloped hard and became a funnel. ("Polynia" 9)

Lund came down in front of a supermarket. "Mercifully, the camera gave out before she hit the ground," so the moment of her fatal landing was not recorded in the videotape (Miéville, "Polynia" 9). However, the locals had had enough time to take and upload pictures of her disfigured body before the police arrived at the scene. The kids found the pictures and showed them to each other "with a complex of emotions" that the narrator could not "put into words." Many years later, he confesses to "still have the image somewhere," and that the "hollow feeling" in his stomach "was never mere ghoulishness" (Miéville, "Polynia" 11).

The narrator's peculiar emotive response to the images of Lund's dead body is an example of the "hypnotic behaviour" Debord refers to in arguing that "when the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings – dynamic

figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior” (11). The physical body, by dint of being captured by the onlookers’ mobile phones, was transformed into an image, or *a spectacle* in other words. This spectacle, despite being a mere representation of what happened, does not stop being real. Instead, it is as real as what it represents, still capable of eliciting the viewer’s emotional engagement. While in “Covehithe,” the footage of the oil rig Ocean Ranger gives a “stomach dropping” feeling to its viewers (Miéville 345), the video of Lund’s descent is even more violent in its effects. The narrator recounts: “I watched the file many times, though my parents told me not to. I’d slow it down, feeling sick and adrenalised as Lund descended” (Miéville, “Polynia” 9). As if watching were not enough, he also wanted to be in the video, to be part of the spectacle: when his friends were not watching, the narrator would secretly stretch out his hands into the air, imagining that he had managed to save Lund from her tragedy (Miéville, “Polynia” 11). Here the line between the virtual and the real has been blurred, exemplifying Slavoj Žižek’s assertion: “It is not reality that entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality” (16). Perhaps the spectacle of violence is even more real than the violence of which it is a representation, because, as the narrator of “Polynia” attests, its effects are capable of being perpetuated and multiplied.

The third level in the ecosystem of spectacular violence in “Polynia” and “Covehithe” involves what can be called “textual spectatorship,” wherein the boundary between the textual and the visual is challenged, and the reader, through the act of reading, comes very close to viewing. Consider the following excerpt from “Polynia,” for example:

The camera pans up. Filling the night sky overhead, astonishingly close, is a jagged field of ice. It looms, and it’s approaching. It’s so low that the longest extrusions dangling from its underside reach down below the level of the Shard’s tower point. On which, the camera briefly shows, two explorers wait. ... What we know is that there’s a sound of percussion, and shouting, and the footage cuts to that from a helmetcam, and for less than two seconds you can see someone dangling from high-tensile cable. With that literal cliff-hanger, the video pauses for several seconds, entirely dark. To open again on Ryan’s face, filling the frame. (Miéville 14-15)

The language used here is very cinematic, conveying both sounds and images. The sentences are constructed to serve an obvious agenda: to show the reader what the characters were watching on a screen, or, better yet, to *become* that very screen. This virtual reality effect is also achieved through the reader’s identification with the characters’ gaze. We are encouraged to approach the scenes from their perspective, and are allowed to see only what they can see. It therefore feels as if we were among the Londoners gazing skywards at the strange sight of the icebergs, or sitting there together with the daughter and the father watching the fantastical show that the oil rig Petrobras 36 put on for them. In essence, Miéville’s manipulation of textual



spectatorship means that violence's spectacular effects are felt not only within the narratives but also beyond.

"There were a few nights in Dunwich, where the owner of the B&B kept telling her guests they were lucky to have found a room," thus goes the opening sentence of "Covehithe" (Miéville 337). In this gesture of intertextuality very typical of weird fiction (Noys and Murphy 128), Miéville is relying on the fictional Dunwich of HP Lovecraft to provide a chilling atmosphere for his non-fictional town of the same name. The monsters in both "Covehithe," "Polynia," and "The Dunwich Horror" are massive, trail-leaving creatures. Their appearance in all three stories summons a team of scientists from various disciplines, who travail in search of answers to the questions that the monsters pose. The similarities, however, do not go far beyond that. Across the Atlantic, the devil of Dunwich is eventually pushed back to where it belongs, but in Miéville's England, the anomalies stay and are somewhat normalized. The spectral oil rigs gradually became almost an attraction to tourists, while BBC announced that "it has commissioned a drama series" about the London icebergs (Miéville, "Polynia" 12). Lovecraft's horror is cosmic in nature, floating in the outer space, only now and then paying us a visit. In contrast, the horror that Miéville hints at is of a different kind: It is heavily anchored in our reality, possessing new and increasing urgency. The horror in "Polynia" and "Covehithe," it could be argued, is the horror of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

In coining the term, Nixon proposes a paradigm shift in how violence should be conceived of and engaged with: we ought to move our focus from the violence that is "immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space," "erupting into instant sensational visibility" to the violence that is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2). He thus defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2).

The concept was introduced in the hope of providing an innovative analytical tool that can be more effective in dealing with contemporary challenges. Nonetheless, it is inherently related to other sociological and ecological concepts and discussions. Also sharing Nixon's concern about the need to expand the definitional range of violence is Johan Galtung, who half a century before coined the term "structural violence," understood roughly as a form of violence that is hard to get rid of because it is already built into social structures and institutions. Nixon acknowledges the many overlaps between his concept and Galtung's. Nonetheless, he considers slow violence, owing to its ability to "foreground questions of time, movement and change," better equipped to "engage directly with our contemporary politics of speed" than structural violence, limited by its "static connotations" (Nixon 11). Nixon ties his discussion of slow violence to an exploration of what he calls

“the environmentalism of the poor.” He argues that “it is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence. Their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives” (Nixon 4). It is easy to see that here he is aligning himself with a broader debate about environmental justice, where the unequal distribution of environmental harms at the expense of citizens of countries from global South and economically disadvantaged people in general is called into question. Another concept which Nixon does not mention in his book but is nonetheless relevant to both slow violence and the argument to be advanced in this essay is “hyperobject,” coined by Timothy Morton. While the focus on speed in Nixon’s concept is absent from Morton’s, both engage with the question of scale. According to Morton, one of the defining attributes of hyperobjects is their nonlocality, meaning that these things are “massively distributed in time and space” (Morton 1). In a similar vein, Nixon sees slow violence as overspilling the “clear boundaries in time and space” (Nixon 7). Most importantly, both hyperobject and slow violence include instances where harmful impacts are caused by man to the natural world.

China Miéville is himself an ardent critic of capitalism who is at the same time very active in green politics (“The Limits of Utopias”). Meanwhile, before published in *Three Moments of an Explosion*, “Covehithe” had been featured in *The Guardian’s* Oil Stories series. Its publication on the magazine’s website was hash-tagged, tellingly enough, with keywords such as “oil,” “oil spills,” “Deepwater Horizon oil spill” (Miéville, “Covehithe by China Miéville”). It is not difficult to see that behind their bizarre and childish veneer, both “Polynia” and “Covehithe” convey serious environmental concerns. The stories engage with two phenomena that can easily fit into the definition of slow violence and that Nixon himself also addresses in his book: the thawing of the Earth’s cryosphere and marine pollution from oil spills.

The temporal dissonance, that is to say the *slowness*, in Nixon’s definition of slow violence is clearly exemplified in Miéville’s stories. A surprise came later in “Polynia” when it was found out that one of the masses above London is identical to an iceberg photographed during “a southern mission” years before the narrator was born. One of the characters thus exclaimed in amazement: “First they melt and now, look, they come back” (Miéville 13). The many years between when the icebergs were documented and the moment of their coming back illustrates the time gap between when slow violence takes place and when its effects begin to manifest. Miéville’s narratives also show that slow violence is massive in scale rather than confined to any particular locality. The author carefully weaves into his story of petroleum apparition truthful information about major oil spill disasters from across the globe: Petrobras 36, Rowan Gorilla I, Piper Alpha, Ocean Express, just to name a few. Also mentioned is the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, one of the most notorious marine catastrophes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and one that, as could be inferred from the publication of “Covehithe” in *The Guardian*, Miéville was engaging most directly with when writing the story.

In "Polynia," while massive icebergs showed up in the sky of England – the birthplace of the first industrial revolution and economic liberalism, other strange incidents were taking place elsewhere: "[B]rain coral, pillar coral, and prongs of staghorn coral" appeared on the facades of the European Parliament (Miéville 12). And factories in Japan had to close because they were "filled up with undergrowth from the rain forest" (Miéville 22). Interestingly enough, the narrator grew up to become an import-export officer, managing international supply chains (Miéville 23). Between the lines of these seemingly random details, Miéville appears to be pointing his finger at those complicit in, if not responsible for, the "global weirding" (Friedman) in his story: the free market, our politics, our industries, globalization, all of which are present in Nixon's discussion of slow violence.

In its ecological concern, slow violence begs the question about humans' treatment of nature, which is also engaged with in the two stories. Human-nature relationship in "Covehithe" is characterized by exploitation and subjugation. But the natural world seems to have been pushed to its limits and could not help but strike back. The beach where the father and the daughter stood to wait for the oil rig to show itself was drastically eroded. "The sea's taking it all back, ... There used to be a lot more coast here," the father remarked (Miéville, "Covehithe" 339). Simon Estok argues that "[o]ne of the methods of refusing to recognise and accept these [nature's] agencies and of attempting to assert and maintain control over nature is discursive and has to do with naming things" (5). If so, in "Polynia," such a strategy does not work and is even parodied. Naming as a way of subjugating nature under our control becomes a mere children's game: the narrator named his favorite berg "Ice Skull," simply because it looks like one (Miéville 13). Meanwhile, the masses "rocked sedately from side to side" in the sky of London, heedless of whether they are given any name or not (Miéville 4).

But just as harmful as denying nature's agency is prescribing agency to nature in a manner that would serve human interests. This way of looking at the natural world is problematized in Nixon's book. As an example, he gave an account of official responses from the oil industry in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which frame the incident not as "an environmental disaster" but "a natural phenomenon" (Nixon 21). From this fallacy, another more erroneous argument was advanced: "Oil has seeped into this ocean for centuries, will continue to do it. ... We will lose some birds, we will lose some fixed sea-life, but overall it will recover" because nature "has a way of helping the situation" (Nixon 21-22). This strand of thought, according to Nixon, is dangerous because it taps into the "natural agency" logic as a way of rectifying the harmful impacts we cause to the natural world, while leaving unaddressed the question of "the long-term cascade effect of the slow violence, the mass die-offs, of phytoplankton at the food chain base" (Nixon 22). It is clear from "Covehithe" that nature is not our "volunteer clean up crew" (Nixon 22). When the oil rigs came back out of the water after many years, their body still bore decipherable stenciled markings and pain remnants, dripping "seawater,



chemicals of industrial ruin and long-hoarded oil” (Miéville 343). They conjured up from the depth of the oceans what we humans dumped down, rusted but refusing to simply disappear: “steel containers,” “old hoists,” “lift shafts,” and the list goes on (Miéville 341).

Lovecraft defines weird fiction through, of other things, “a malign and particular suspension” of the laws of nature (446). However, in “Covehithe” and “Polynia”, the laws of nature are only extended and intensified. Although the resurrection of the icebergs and the oil rigs is narrated in peculiar terms, these events happened with perfect logic: humans destroyed the oceans and caused the thawing of polar ices. What comes back, though slowly, is nothing but the consequences of our actions. It is almost mockingly that Miéville tells of the government’s incomprehension at the return of the oil rigs in “Covehithe”: “They tried to figure out what economies of sacrifice were being invoked, for which this was the punishment” (344).

If the phenomena that Miéville engages with in “Covehithe” and “Polynia” could be put under Nixon’s label of slow violence, then the writer does something very interesting in writing these stories. In Miéville’s words, marine pollution and the loss of cryosphere are no longer attritional and unnoticeable. Rather, they are depicted as shocking, hyper-visible and extraordinary. What the author does is, figuratively speaking, translating slow violence into spectacular violence. In the following section, that act of translation will be examined. So far in this paper I have tried to establish a logical relationship between what Miéville depicts and Nixon’s concept. The argument I am going to advance next is not that the author proactively and consciously makes use of spectacular violence as a strategy to represent slow violence, as perceived and defined by Nixon. What I want to posit is that the said relationship could be understood within a broader discussion about the representational obstacles that writers who want to engage with slow violence have to face as a result of the incongruity between its very nature and our visually oriented society.

In the first place, due to our customary conception of violence, which is usually understood as explosive events or actions that are clearly delineated in both time and space, slow violence is often not considered violence at all. Furthermore, the slowness of slow violence seems at odd with our age where the present “feels more abbreviated than it used to” and it is not uncommon for one to always have “the sensation of not having enough time.” This results in an incompatibility between our “rapidly eroding attention span” and “the slow erosions of environmental justice” (Nixon 8). As a consequence, slow violence often escapes our attention. To challenge this requires us to bring slow violence to the fore, to make it more visible. But such a task is difficult in itself due to its very nature. Slow violence causes representational obstacles that anyone who wants to engage with it, whether imaginatively or otherwise, has to reckon with. Since it is dispersed in both time and space, the effects of slow violence are hard to capture. If a hyperobject’s nonlocal quality means that any of its “local manifestations’ ... is not directly the hyperobject” itself (Morton 1), then the same

argument can be made for slow violence: the impact that it creates at one place at a particular point in time is probably only one node in a network of impacts that spreads across both spatial and temporal scales. Nixon also points out in his analysis that the question of representation is related to the politics of memory: "In the long arc between the emergence of slow violence and its delayed effects, both the causes and the memory of catastrophe readily fade from view as the casualties incurred typically pass untallied and unremembered" (8-9). Writing about slow violence is thus complicated by its predisposition towards disremembrance. But at the same time, writing presents itself as an effective tool to lock slow violence into record, to keep it from straying into oblivion.

"How will writers ... navigate the possibilities – and possible perils – opened up by a new media culture characterized both by extensive, instant connectivity and by impatient, distractive staccato rhythms?" asks Nixon (276). For him, the relationship between literature and mass media can be supportive and competitive at once. However, he also makes it clear in his book that the media are both poorly equipped and unwilling to engage with slow violence.

On the one hand, slow violence does not constitute a desirable resource that the media can use to compete better in the economy of attention. Through their veneration of the spectacular and the sensational, the media usually exclude slow violence from their coverage (Nixon 6). Furthermore, since the media world is dominated by the rich, poor people, who according to Nixon are the primary victims of slow violence, have to look elsewhere for a platform to voice their problems (Nixon 4).

On the other hand, there is a certain incompatibility between the plotline of slow violence and the narrative conventions of modern visual media, which makes the latter ill equipped to represent the former. Taking as an example the violence done to the body of the poor by chemical and radiological pollution, Nixon argues that "[f]rom a narrative perspective, such invisible, mutagenic theater is slow paced and open ended, eluding the tidy closure, the containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat" (6). In other words, the long-running effects of slow violence cannot fit into the typical narrative told by contemporary visual media, with their demands for a neat and contained structure, as well as a clear delineation between those who win and those who lose.

The media's failure to give due attention to slow violence, whether through their unwillingness or inadequacy, leaves a vacuum that, according to Nixon, writers have to fill in. He entrusts these people with the task of bringing representational fairness to slow violence. In poor people's battle against the slow working of environmental injustice, Nixon sees writers as playing "a mediating role in helping counter the layered invisibility that results from insidious threats, from temporal protractedness, and from the fact that the afflicted are people whose quality of life – and often whose very existence – is of indifferent interest to the corporate media" (16). Much like JG Ballard when he argues that in a world where fiction is already everywhere,

“the writer’s task is to invent reality” (qtd. in Bukatman 117), Nixon believes writers can challenge the invisibility of what otherwise needs to be seen:

In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (15)

The challenges posed by slow violence are daunting but not insurmountable. Through a brief analysis of Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, he outlines a set of strategies for engaging imaginatively with slow violence:

To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time. The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency. (Nixon 10)

This said, not only do “Polynia” and “Covehithe” engage with slow violence, these two stories fit into the agenda that Nixon sets out for imaginative writings. As argued earlier, they make hyper-visible threats that are “inaccessible to the immediate sense.” By bringing into our attention the consequences of our actions from long ago, “Polynia” and “Covehithe” disrupt slow violence’s “temporal protractedness.” The “formless threats” of polar ice loss and marine pollution are given shape in Miéville’s writings, manifesting themselves through the “iconic symbols” of the icebergs and the moving oil rigs. Genre-wise, the New Weird proves itself capable of the task. Continuing the Lovecraftian Old Weird’s tradition of undermining the quotidian, this genre provides Miéville with ample space to venture far into both human imagination and the natural environment. But the New Weird is different from its predecessor in its “new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming” (Noys and Murphy 125). Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy posit furthermore that “[i]n contradiction to Lovecraft’s horror at the alien, ... the New Weird adopts a more radical politics that treats the alien, the hybrid, and the chaotic as subversions of the various normalization of power and subjectivity” (125). The uncanny oil rigs and the icebergs depicted by Miéville offer a good illustration for this argument.

In Nixon’s discussion, the writer’s engagement with slow violence does not stop at making it visible. For him, after the question of representation is the question of activism. As a result, the central figure in his quest for environmental justice is

the writer-activist who is able to mobilize their representational power to engage “nonliterary forces for social change” (Nixon 32). Consequently, he disapproves of the view that “ecocriticism’s singular contribution to environmental studies ought to be centered on the aesthetic,” arguing instead that the more pressing challenge for the field is “how to articulate these vital aesthetic concerns into socioenvironmental transformation” (Nixon 32). Here Nixon meets with Estok, who believes that engagement per se does not qualify as activism and advocates for a stronger concern from ecocritics about stimulating practical changes in real life (5). In “Polynia” and “Covehithe,” the author engages with slow violence and manages to overcome the representational obstacles that it creates. But in response to Nixon’s, as well as Estok’s, subsequent question about activism, Miéville’s answer is vaguer. It is hard to argue, and probably beyond the scope of this paper to do so, whether or not “Polynia” and “Covehithe” carry any activist agenda. Just as difficult to determine is whether their readers are motivated into any practical actions after reading these stories.

Nonetheless, this call for activism brings us back to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, a real-life event that looms large in “Covehithe.” In the aftermath of the incident, a lawsuit was filed against the multinational oil and gas company BP. A question thus arose as to the exact amount of oil discharged to the ocean, which would in turn determine the company’s financial liabilities. In the face of this legal question, the company demanded access to private email correspondences from scientists who studied the accident. This was after the scientists had provided the company “with more than 50,000 pages of documents, raw data, reports, and algorithms” that they used in their research, in short everything the company would need for its analysis. This absurd request, which represents “not simply invasion of privacy, but the erosion of scientific deliberative process,” was eventually yielded to (Keim). As Nixon’s analysis of the connection between slow violence and “the environmentalism of the poor” makes clear, much like other forms of violence, slow violence involves asymmetry in power between its victims and perpetrators. The victims are common people whose voices are usually unheard. The perpetrators of slow violence are powerful global corporates and interest groups who have control over what kind of stories are told and, as a result, what liabilities they have towards their actions. In “Covehithe,” Miéville engages with sea pollution in general and the Deepwater Horizon incident in particular. Obviously he is not a scientist and no company will demand from him any information related to the story. But thinking about “Covehithe” and Miéville’s engagement with marine catastrophes in relation to the BP lawsuit can help us look beyond Nixon and Estok’s emphasis on activism to see what fiction writers are capable of doing in this age, where the politics of what is allowed to be visible becomes ever more complicated.

Before the conclusion, I would like to return to Guy Debord’s spectacle, of which he wrote: “The tautological character of the spectacle stems from the fact that its means and ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern

passivity. It covers the entire surface of the globe, endlessly basking in its own glory” (Debord 10). Perhaps no moment in contemporary history illustrates this argument better than 9/11, where the media, through its graphic coverage of the event, turned the spectacle of terrorism into the terrorism of spectacle, perpetuating its traumatizing effects not only within the US but also on a global scale. And much like Nixon in the face of slow violence, the American writer Don DeLillo also saw in the aftermath of this event a representational vacuum that writers have to fill in. For DeLillo, it is through writing that we are able to make sense of 9/11’s cruelty and senselessness. In his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” he wrote:

But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us. . . . The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel. In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space. (DeLillo 39)

Writing more than a decade apart, both Nixon and DeLillo see language and narratives as tools for meaning-making, and the figure of the writer as someone capable of shedding light on contemporary events and phenomena. However, what they were trying to engage with is different in nature: 9/11 was abrupt and sensational, whereas Nixon’s violence is attritional and anonymous. In both cases, the writer is faced with formidable representational obstacles, which are made even more complicated by modern visual media. In response to these obstacles, both DeLillo and Miéville perform an act of conversion, though the two writers were necessarily going in opposite directions. As his words in the quote above and his own works demonstrate, DeLillo engages with 9/11 by slowing down the spectacular: he is interested in looking beyond the event’s facade of cruelty to provide it with tenderness and meaning, in exploring the deep wounds it leaves in the American consciousness. Meanwhile, Miéville shows in “Polynia” and “Covehithe” that it is through spectacularization that slow violence’s resistance to representation can be tackled effectively.

Due to the many similarities they have in themes and symbols, “Polynia” and “Covehithe” offer themselves as two strong pillars on which the arguments in this essay can be conveniently based. However, it should be noted that many of the points made with regards to these two stories could be made in relation to other texts in the collection as well. In fact, the spectacle of violence is ushered in right at the moment the reader picks up the book and reads its title: *Three Moments of an Explosion*. In “The Condition of New Death,” another story in the collection, death itself is spectacularized and rendered weird. Similarly, Miéville’s experiment



with textual spectatorship is conducted elsewhere in the collection as well, only more drastically: In "The Crawl" and "Escapee," the narrative takes the form of a 2-minute video trailer, with notes for timing and voiceover, as well as detailed description of what is being shown on the imagined screen. The border between the textual and the visual, which is challenged in "Polynia" and "Covehithe," is almost eradicated in these two stories.

This said, reading not only the two stories examined here but also other texts in the collection with an eye for violence as one of Miéville's primary concerns promises to offer the reader interesting interpretations, as well as a deeper understanding of the author's stylistic and thematic focuses. More importantly, I believe attention paid to how violence is represented in Miéville's fictional worlds will shed light on the nature and logic of the violence that our contemporary society is plagued with: the violence that is real, pervasive, non-textual, caused by, as in the words of the ecocritic Simon Estok, "the tangible reversals that are increasingly becoming the 'new normal' of our sad and diminished lives" (6).

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