

## Hidden in Full View

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# Hidden in Plain Sight: The Organization of Public Secrecy in Miéville's *The City and the City*

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## *Abstract*

In this article, we explore China Mieville's novel, *The City and the City*, as a literary experiment with the dynamics of public secrecy (Taussig, 1999). While organisational secrets and secrecy have recently gained some attention, the concept of public secrecy remains underexplored in organisation studies. This article engages with public secrets as an intrinsic part of organisational life and as a framework for paying attention to the politics of organising.

First, we focus on the novel's invention and use of the verb 'unseeing' to bring out the embodied and sensuous aspects of public secrecy. Second, we unfold how the novel inspires a reconsideration of the concept of public secrecy by bringing back an attention to the content of secrecy often overlooked in the current literature's focus on secrecy as social processes (e.g. Costas and Grey, 2016). Although, such 'hidden secrets' may turn out to be less spectacular than expected, we shall argue that it is exactly their mundaneness which is key to their political importance.

**Keywords:** organisational secrets; public secrecy; China Mieville; the city and the city; fiction in organisation studies; embodied unseeing

**Reference:** Otto, B., Pors, J. G., & Johnsen, R. (2018). Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's *The City and the City*. *Culture and Organization*, 1–13.

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## ***Introduction***

“Is it more foolish and childish to assume there is a conspiracy, or that there is not?”

— China Miéville, *The City and the City*

Public secrets are endemic in and around organizations, but despite their pervasiveness, the phenomenon of public secrecy has rarely been studied systematically by organizational scholars. This can partly be explained by the very nature of the phenomenon and the difficulty to study that, which by definition is not openly acknowledged. Yet the absence of such studies, we would argue, is also related to a conceptual shortcoming regarding the notion of secrecy in management and organization studies. Until recently, extant literature in the field has predominantly considered secrecy in two ways. Either, as a functional element of organizations in terms of the need to protect sensitive information of a company or employees. Alternatively, in its negative connotation as a strategy to protect the revelation of wrongdoings or signs of organizational dysfunctionality. A newer stream of literature, however, shifts attention beyond the functional and normative aspects of secrecy towards understanding secrecy as a dynamic process with performative capacities (Costas and Grey 2016; Courpasson and Younes 2017; Ringel 2018; Otto, 2018). Inspired by Costas and Grey’s book *Secrecy at work. The hidden architecture of organizational life* (2016), these recent contributions consider secrecy a social practice ubiquitous in and constitutive of organizational life. As stated by the authors, what such a perspective implies is that ‘the content of what is kept secret is not in itself very important for [the] analysis’ (ibid, 8). Instead, it provides a social account of what secrecy *does*, in which secrecy – following Simmel – is understood as a relation between people that creates social orders, in/exclusions and boundaries between people (Costas and Grey 2016, 11; Horn 2011, 110; Simmel 1906, 486). Such an approach focuses on the social and constitutive *effects* of secrecy, seeking to add

new insights to organizational processes such as power relations, group formation, or identity processes. From this perspective, public secrecy is an interesting concept to study because it is not so much about the nature of what is hidden, but about the skills and effects of ‘knowing what not to know’ (Taussig 1999). Public secrecy is not about overlooking, missing something, or simply not noticing. To be privy to an open secret<sup>1</sup> requires a deliberate act of avoidance constituting a ‘fundamental tension (...) between the private act of noticing and the public act of acknowledging’ (Zerubavel 2008, 2). This tension is constituted by “unmentionables” or “undiscussables” that evoke an act of ignoring the obvious, as it is the case when Parker argues: ‘we all know that contemporary work is not what it seems. Organizations continually tell us that they are doing things because they care about customers, employees, environment, *when we know that this is at best an evasion, at worst a lie*’ (Parker 2016, 107, our emphasis).

Viewed in this light, public secrecy is the *collective* effort of ‘a group of people [who] tacitly agree to outwardly ignore something of which they are all personally aware’ (Zerubavel 2008, 2). As Taussig points out, ‘knowing what not to know’ thus constitutes a form of power integral to the general functioning of social institutions that requires an array of social competences (Taussig 1999, 6pp). ‘Knowing smiles’, for example indicate that one knows the cues of the secret, essential to an understanding of the order of things (Ledeneva 2011, 721). Likewise, as Zerubavel argues, maintaining a state of denial usually involves the kind of quasi-sensorial shutoff suggested by widespread metaphors such as ‘looking the other way’, ‘turning a blind eye’, ‘turning a deaf ear’, ‘biting ones tongue’, or, the three monkeys who hold their mouth, ears and eyes (Zerubavel, 2008, 4). In this manner, public secrets are pervasive, mundane, and collective, requiring learned skills performed through embodied practices.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the notions of ‘open secret’ and ‘public secret’ interchangeably.

In this article, we draw on China Miéville's novel *The City and the City* (2009) to elaborate on this dimension of secrecy. Taking the concept of public secrecy (as *one* modality of secrecy) as a starting point, we are interested in how (public) secrecy is embodied and performed. Miéville's novel is a revelation of not only the city of Beszel to which the main protagonist detective Borlú belongs, but also the city of Ul Qoma. The two cities co-exist in physical space, but are two distinct cities with carefully policed borders. The result is that the citizens of the two cities constantly have to 'unsee', 'unnotice', 'unhear' and physically avoid bumping into people or things from the other city. The social and political arrangement of the two cities is thus premised on a public secret compelling their citizens to deny the fact that people occupy the same topographical space, and are intrinsically and intimately linked with each other. In this manner, the novel captures the social aspects of public secrecy, revealing how they ultimately constitute organizational processes and illustrating the minutiae, the details and embodied ways in which people deal with and perform the co-existence of two or multiple realities by – in the words of Miéville – 'unseeing' its contradictions. Given the paradox of openly studying public secrecy itself, the analysis of the novel provides a 'sensuous site' or research (Otto and Strauss, forthcoming) to begin conceptualizing the everyday practices required to maintain public secrecy. However, as we will illustrate, the novel also provides insight to why focusing exclusively on the performative effects of public secrecy also runs the risk of depoliticizing the processes of concealment. If the 'performative' understanding of secrecy focuses primarily on un-noticing what is visible to everyone, our reading of *The City and the City* shows that other secrets (can) hide in the gap between the two realities of how things are assumed to be and the way things are in practice (Ledeneva 2011; Fletcher 2010; Zerubavel 2008). In the novel, the open secret of the two cities existing together (rather than apart) enables particular citizens to benefit from the 'blind spots' emerging in practices of unseeing. Their existence is concealed *in between* the city and the city, in those spaces where people fail to look when they look away. By addressing secrets 'hidden'

in the public secret, we aim to remind current approaches to the social and performative dimension of secrecy not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. In a world, where the visibility and importance of secrecy has become a strategic move to justify certain actions (J. Bratich 2006; Bratich 2014), one should certainly continue to pay attention to the ‘secret as such’.

In the following, we will review the literature on secrets, secrecy and public secrecy as discussed in the field of organization studies. This is followed by a methodological section arguing that China Miéville’s novel provides us with a sensuous site of research to understand the embodied and affective practices of public secrecy. In the analysis, we explore how *The City and the City* can be read as a study of public secrecy. First, we take a point of departure in the novel’s invention and use of the verb ‘unseeing’ to bring out the embodied and sensuous aspects of public secrecy. Second, we will draw attention to how public secrecy generates a third space that can hide ‘other’ secrets. This aspect, we will argue, should be added to the current understanding of public secrecy that emphasizes the processes and performative aspects of public secrecy. We end with a discussion of how our findings may speak to the existing literature on organisational secrets and public secrecy.

### ***Secrets, secrecy and public secrecy in organization studies***

Secrecy in its negative connotation is considered as something dysfunctional or illegitimate that disrupts the smooth functioning of the organizational norm. Practicing secrecy, in this case, relates to protecting some specific act of wrongdoing, misconduct, fraud or violation vis à vis company norms – the revelation of which might harm the organization and its public image. In this sense, secrecy as an organizational practice carries negative connotations in relation to illegitimacy (De Maria 2006), clandestine organizations (Stohl and Stohl 2011), knowledge hiding or silence to cover up mistakes, wrong-doing, or un-ethical practices (Connelly et al. 2012; Milliken and Morrison 2003; Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin 2003). Pertinent examples are, of course the ENRON case, or the more recent case of Volkswagen equipping around 8.5 million diesel cars with cheating software, which led to

emissions on the road being much higher than in the required laboratory test (<https://euobserver.com/institutional/141670>).

In addition to the perspective on secrecy as an organizational dysfunction, another strand of literature engages with secrecy as a necessary, mundane and/or normative practice ensuring the smooth and ethical functioning of organizational everyday life (Anand and Rosen 2008; Dufresne and Offstein 2008; Costas and Grey 2014). Here, organizational secrecy is related to the protection of valuable or sensitive information, such as pay secrecy (Belogolovsky and Bamberger 2014; Colella et al. 2007).

In the economic literature on innovation, the discussion on appropriability regimes considers secrecy as a protection mechanism that is directly relevant for the company's incentive to invest in innovation (Teece 1986). Trade secrets, non-disclosure agreements, non-competition agreements, codes of conducts, rules and structural isolation are direct and formal modes of protecting valuable or sensitive company information. Modes that are more indirect include compartmentalization of the secret amongst different employees, administrative and operation protection, and, fostering a disciplined culture through trainings for employees (e.g. Bos, Broekhuizen, and de Faria 2015; James, Leiblein, and Lu 2013; Liebeskind 1997).

What these studies have in common is that they consider secrecy as antonym to transparency, disclosure, publicity and openness. The inherent quality of a secret is considered in its hidden, confidential, concealed and un-known *content*. Such an 'informational approach' (Costas and Grey, 2016) has a limited perspective on secrecy as 'the contents in a box or envelope' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 286 in Bratich 2006, 494). More recent literature in organization studies is interested in secrecy as action, process and in its performativity as it expresses and affects the sociality of organizations (Costas and Grey 2016, 2014; Parker 2016; Ringel 2018; Courpasson and Younes 2017; Otto 2018). Influenced by sociological and anthropological thinkers such as Simmel, Goffmann, Canetti and Taussig, this literature neither focusses much on the content of secrecy, nor on its



normative or functional implications. Following Sissela Bok's definition of secrecy as 'the methods used to conceal (...) and the practices of concealment' (Bok 1989, 6), Costas and Grey define secrecy as 'the ongoing formal and informal social processes of intentional concealment of information from actors by actors in organization' (2014, 1426). This shifts interest in secrecy from a functional perspective and towards the phenomenon's capacities as a social process and practice – one that is ubiquitous in and constitutive of organizational life. Secrecy from this perspective is a social interaction (Simmel, 1906), which conducts power relations (Canetti, 1984) and that therefore has implications for organizational thinking. Secrecy serves to create boundaries and distinctions between people, a sense of exclusivity or extraordinariness that exercises *power*, shaping organizational identities and affecting decision-making (Costas and Grey, 2016). By moving beyond an understanding of secrecy as a protection mechanisms and considering it instead as performative social interaction in organization, the concept can be considered in its productive relationship to organizational issues, such as the role of gossip (Puyou 2018; Clegg and van Iterson 2009; Noon and Delbridge 1993), social control (Di Stefano, King, and Verona 2014; Loshin 2007), trust (Oliver 2009; Grey and Garsten 2001), creativity (Courpasson and Younes 2018, Otto, 2018), or, transparency (Ringel 2018).

Within this newer strand of secrecy literature, only few contributions discuss the role of public (or open) secrets as the act of ignoring the obvious. These few contributions mobilize the concept of public secrecy to understand leadership in non-hierarchical organizations (Costas, 2008), organizational identity and exclusion (Ringel, 2018), and the (non)politics of accounting (Radcliffe 2008; Funnell 2011).

For example, Costas' interpretation of Lars von Trier's movie *The Boss of it All* (2006) describes public secrecy as the collective effort to avoid recognizing the negative aspects of corporate leadership in a corporate culture of 'equality' and 'non-hierarchy'. In a more recent contribution,

Ringel (2018) shows how public secrets work to irritate and create confusion among new organizational members. In his case on the German Pirate Party, Ringel explains how these parliamentary rookies were completely thrown off-guard by the informal inter-party communication rules of the German parliamentary system when they were represented for the first time. The public secret of the incongruity between back-stage and front-stage communication among parliamentarians was not compatible with the party's ideals of radical transparency. Resistance to comply with this open secret left them 'cut off' from important networks and 'estranged' from a certain form of parliamentarian belongingness (Ringel, 2018: 10).

Radcliffe's methodological and critical contribution aims to expose and expound the public secret, that the disastrous status of Cleveland's public schools is not caused by overspending of public funds (and thus require more cuts), but is shaped by the economic and racial inequalities that pervade the American public school system as such. Inspired by Taussig's notion of the defacement, Radcliffe criticizes 'government auditors' apparent pragmatism by focusing on mismanagement rather than making a political statement (...)' (Radcliffe, 2006, 123). In a response to Radcliffe, Funnel suggests that rather than perceiving the auditors' actions as complicit in re-enforcing a public secret to avoid political consequences, one must acknowledge and underline the constitutional and institutional context of auditors as the foundation of their legitimacy and independence (Funnel, 2011: 718). This discussion in the journal *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* is important for our understanding of public secrecy as it contrasts the (negative) political implications of being complicit in public secrets with the necessary and functional role of public secrets to maintain legitimate and credible foundations of organising.

These contributions illustrate that secrecy and publicness are not two sides of the same coin, but exist in a twinning relationship, enhancing, constraining or stimulating each other (Birchall 2011). A public secret becomes a tool to hide away the contradictions, which emerge in the tension between knowing

and not knowing, between the experienced and the acknowledged, to keep and maintain social order and ideology (Costas and Grey, 2016; Horn, 2011; Zerubavel, 2008, Taussig, 1999). They also point to the inherent vulnerability of public secrets, as they exist in the inherent and constant tension between concealment and revelation (e.g. Simmel, 1906). The literature shows that secrecy and the visibility of organizing are inextricably intertwined (Parker 2016, 106). Take for example Schoeneborn and Scherer's (2010) study of Al Qaeda, which illustrates how the terrorist network is characterized by a relationship between extreme visibility and extreme invisibility. As Parker indicates by suggesting that the secret and the non-secret organization may not be as different as we assume (Parker 2016, 106), this point may be more generally applicable. By engaging with the embodied, sensuous and often unconscious qualities of public secrecy as they shape everyday life in and of organizations, we aim to build on this literature.

### **Methodology: fiction and the embodied qualities of public secrets**

There is by now a strong tradition in organization studies to draw on fiction to enrich organizational analysis (Czarniawska-Joerges 1994, 1999; C. De Cock 2005; Peter Case and Gaggiotti 2016; Holt and Zundel 2014; Sliwa et al. 2013; Munro and Huber 2012). In relation to the embodied affects of organizing some authors have turned to the novel's 'literary imagination' to reveal processes involving emotions (Case 1999), temporal or atmospheric affects (Steyaert 2015; Ratner, Bojesen, and Bramming 2014) or the embodied dimensions of space (McCabe 2014). Such studies show that novels can 'mediate the present through their aesthetics and in their affective richness [as it does] not fundamentally differ from life' (Otto and Strauss, forthcoming). The novel's fictitious story is a 'creative processing' of a particular reality and can thereby serve as 'new site of experience', or, more precisely a 'sensual site' of experience. Considering the embodied aspects of secrecy with the novel, our aim is to break out of hermeneutic inclination in organization studies to reveal, make transparent and demonstrate. Instead, we propose a performative exercise in dwelling on the (public) secret itself.

In so doing, we draw on the analytical strategy proposed by De Cock and Land (2006) of enhancing the sociological imaginary of organization studies through the ability of fiction to exaggerate, thus unsettling our customary thinking of public secrecy as an organizational phenomenon. This resonates well with what Miéville himself aims to do with his novel. In an interview, he states:

My intent with *The City and The City* was...to derive something hyperbolic and fictional through an exaggeration of the logic of borders, rather than to invent my own magical logic of how borders could be. It was an extrapolation of really quite everyday, quite quotidian, juridical and social aspects of nation-state borders: I combined that with a politicized social filtering, and extrapolated out and exaggerated further on a sociologically plausible basis, eventually taking it to a ridiculous extreme. (Miéville 2011b)

Besides its ‘logic of borders’, what makes *The City and the City* useful to us is its exaggeration of the public secret. As we shall unfold below, the novel invites us to visit with a society build entirely upon the willingness of people to ‘unsee’ and ‘unnotice’, that which exists right in front of them.

Although Miéville’s work is often labelled as fantasy, this category is not exactly fitting. In fact, for reasons that we shall return to later, he specifically acknowledges the ‘long and honorable tradition of anti-fantasies’ (Miéville 2010). Furthermore, his work is characterized by a deep interest in sociological and philosophical problems and theorizing. His writing is strikingly attuned to recent theorizing on new materialities, object oriented ontology and speculative realism. Although such phenomena emerge from Miéville’s literary experiments as strange and somewhat uncanny, his writing represents a thorough engagement with contemporary social, political and organizational issues. In our reading of *The City and the City*, we consider this engagement with public secrecy crucial as it allows us to discuss ‘very phenomenon of undiscussability’ (Zerubavel 2008, 16). The novel allows this by overriding the paradoxical nature of the public secret as being apparent to everyone, but not discussed. Moreover, writing and publishing on a particular public secret, one

inevitably threatens its very existence – as was Radcliffe’s intention on his article on public accountants in Cleveland (Radcliffe, 2012). However, the difficulty of discovering, studying and exposing public secrets does ‘not dispel the importance of conceptualizing the value of unknowns within organizations. Rather, it magnifies the importance (...).’ (McGoey 2012, 559). Adding to this, we aim to consider that ‘what we ignore or avoid socially is often also ignored or avoided academically, and conspiracies of silence are therefore still a somewhat undertheorized as well as understudied phenomenon.’ (Zerubavel, 2008, 13).

As a novel, *The City and the City* offers up a rich field for observation of the embodied aspects of public secrecy. Miéville describes the acts of ‘un-noticing’ and ‘unseeing’ of visible and materially present objects, as well as the subsequent reflection on this act by the protagonist. In so doing, Miéville offers what might be termed a ‘sensuous site’ for research, allowing us to get a better understanding of the dynamics of collective denial and the embodied expressions related to it – like the patterns and repercussions of not looking, not listening and not speaking. In our reading, we focus on how individuals mobilize different ways of registering and censoring, distracting, negating and controlling the scope of their own and the attention of others. The public secret in *The City and the City* is the intimate and interdependent relationship of the citizens of both cities that is actively ignored and denied by their mundane performances of unseeing. These practices produce a peculiar attention arrangement with a variety of effects. By seeking to expound such arrangements, we also (and not unlike the novel’s murdered female protagonist) aim to ‘deface’ the consequences of the carefully maintained collective denial and explore what emerges from its cracks.

By asking what can we learn about the embodied functions of public secrets in and around organizations, the novel draws attention to how organizational membership requires us to learn to master the reading of small – for the un-trained eye, ambiguous – signs and details and to see (and ‘unsee’) in accordance with customary organizational sense-making. Such otherwise trivial elements

are key to developing an understanding of that which is not articulated, because as Ledanova reminds us: ‘one cannot study open secrets by speaking about them directly, they have to be taken into a comfort zone. In a way, studying paradoxes requires a correspondingly paradoxical methodology’ (2012: 724). Reading and analysing Miéville’s exaggeration of a public secret in the *The City and the City* constitutes our way of ‘indirectly’ engaging with a pervasive, but not directly graspable phenomenon.

### ***Exploring the City and the City***

*The City and the City* begins as a traditional detective story. Tyador Borlú of the Extreme Crime Squad is assigned the task of investigating a murder in the city of Beszel. He arrives at the scene of the crime to inspect the corpse of a young woman and the narrative unfolds from here in the style of a police procedural. However, by the end of the first chapter things take an uncanny turn:

*An elderly woman was walking slowly away from me in a shambling sway. She turned her head and looked at me. I was struck by her motion, and I met her eyes. I wondered if she wanted to tell me something. In my glance I took in her clothes, her way of walking, of holding herself, and looking. With a hard start, I realized 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, unnoticed the old woman stepping heavily away, I looked carefully instead of at her in the foreign street at the facades of the nearby and local GunterStrász, that depressed zone. (Miéville 2011, 14)*

What in this passage initially appears to be the description of a minor, everyday event – seeing someone else on the street – is in fact a crucial turning point. Borlú’s discovery that the woman he was looking at ‘was not on GunterStrász at all’ changes the setting of the novel from a murder mystery, complete with all its familiar elements of a dead body, a maverick detective and a case to be solved, to the nagging and distinctly uncanny feeling that something very strange is going on. At first, the fact that Tyador Borlú lets his gaze drift across GunterStrász reads as somewhat unrelated to the core plot structure of the scene. However, what happens when we are told that the woman he

sees there ‘was not on GunterStrász at all’ and that he ‘should not have seen her’ is a sudden reversal of plot and the setting. What performs to build suspense is no longer primarily the puzzle of ‘whodunnit’, but the intellectual uncertainty about the narrative setup. As the first chapter comes to an end, the reader has acquired information about the age and appearance of the body, the time of death and the scene of the crime, but when it comes to understanding life in the city of Beszel, the mystery has just begun.

The intricacy of Miéville’s *The City and the City* is its slow, but never completely revealing disclosure of not only the city of Beszel to which Borlú belongs, but also of the city of Ul Qoma. The two cities are separated by their historical trajectories, culture, language, and politics, but they are geographically and topographically the same. While the former is an essential and constantly reiterated part of the citizens’ identity and discourse, the latter is – despite its obviousness – ignored and denied. This public secret is related to the co-existence of multiple social and political spaces and the intricate and interdependent lifestyles of citizens from both cities. The collective denial is performed in the everyday life of the cities: since they exist in the same physical space, what you should not see is everywhere around you. Some areas are busy in one city and not in another, thus making co-existence a bit easier. However, there are also streets and areas of great importance for both cities, where doing your daily business without breaching the borders to the other city is more challenging. At a first glance, life in the two cities appears to unfold with minimal obstruction by their strange overlapping. However, look again, and what is ever so striking is the continuous practical, cultural and corporeal work it takes to maintain the public secret and thus, for people to stay in their own city and not see the other one. In this manner, the narrative focuses not only on the content of the secret (the fact, that the woman walking towards you is physically there), but also on the skills and the laborious efforts associated with keeping the public secret. People, houses and things must be cautiously circumvented and avoided. Work is continuously being done in order to perform

the limits between Beszel and Ul Qoma and set them apart as two different and distant social and political realms.

As the narrative of novel unfolds, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the histories of the two cities were never simply reducible to a binary logic. Take the possibility of the *third* city - Orciny, the mythical and undivided city from ancient times. In addition, there is Breach, the powerful and impervious meta-authority, which appears to the citizen's compliance with the logic of 'unseeing', which keeps them in their own city.

In the following sections, we explore *The City and the City* as a literary experiment with the logic of public secrecy. First, we focus on the novel's invention and use of the verb 'unseeing' to bring out the embodied and sensuous aspects that it brings about. Second, we will unfold how the novel inspires a reconsideration of the concept of public secrecy by drawing attention to gaps in which other secrets can hide. As we shall illustrate, these 'hidden secrets' are less mysterious than could be expected. Yet, we shall argue, exactly their mundaneness is the key to their political importance.

### ***Practices of Unseeing***

As an intricate part of their everyday life, the citizens of the two cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma are forced to navigate through spaces that are either 'total' (almost only part of one city), alter (total for the other city), or 'crosshatched' (intensely shared). The latter, obviously, is the most difficult to maneuver without breaching – that is, performing the illegal action of interacting with things or people from the other city and thereby trespassing on the public secret.

Miéville invents the verb 'unseeing' to describe the everyday routines of not interacting with the other city. The people of the two cities have learned this skill from infancy:

*'The early years of a Besz (and presumably an Ul Qoman) child are intense learning of cues. We pick up styles of clothing, permissible colours, ways of walking and holding oneself, very fast. Before we are eight or so most of us could be trusted not to breach embarrassingly and illegally ...'* (Miéville 2011, 80)



*Unseeing* indicates that there is constant work done in order to be part of the public secret, however minor or habitual that work is. There is a small hesitation before one can allow oneself to see, namely placing the objects to be seen in either of the two cities. Are people, streets, buildings, posters, trash, traffic jams or urban plants homely or foreign? – ‘Most of those around us were in Beszel so we saw them.’ (Miéville 2011, 21) With a quick flash, objects are first categorized, and then, secondly, judged and as a result seen or ‘unseen’: ‘Downtown was busy. I stop-started, excusing myself to citizens and local tourists, unseeing others with care.’ (Miéville 2011, 16). As Borlú asserts while investigating a lead in a different part of his town: ‘In Beszel it was a quiet area but the streets were crowded with those elsewhere. I unsaw them, but it took time to pick past them all.’ (Miéville 2011, 31)

In order for the unseeing to work, you need to register and categorize the objects not to be seen as well as constantly come up with tactics, routes around, everyday choreographies in order to avoid, not to collide with the alter objects. Unseeing implies that you *do* see, out of the corner of your eyes or sometimes more directly:

I turned back to that night-lit city, and this time I looked and saw its neighbour, Illicit, but I did. Who hasn't done that at times? (Miéville 2011, 49)

This suggests that it is not uncommon to sneak an occasional look at the other city and that it is a collectively shared experience to sometimes see what you are not supposed to see. The skill to master is not only to unsee, that is, to ‘know what not to know’, but also to know the difference between an innocent glance and a highly illegal act. For some people, in some situations, a little bit of breaching is rather mundane. However, other situations unseeing can be extremely dangerous, like when an activist group proponing the unification of the two cities believe themselves carefully watched by ‘Breach’ and cannot afford any misconduct. As an unificationist explains to Borlú: ‘We are more careful than anyone.’ And Borlú confirms: ‘It was true. A political irony. Those most dedicated to the perforation of the boundary between Beszel and Ul Qoma had to observe it most carefully.’

(Miéville 2011, 63-64) Unseeing, in other words, is not only a matter of having learned to ‘know what not to know’, but also of having learned exactly *when*, by *whom*, and *how* not knowing is to be conducted.

The art of ‘unseeing’ involves all of the senses, for example ‘(un)hearing’:

‘In Beszel the area was pretty unpeopled, but not elsewhere across the border, and I had to unseeing dodge many smart young businessmen and –women. Their voices were muted to me, random noise. That aural fade comes from years of Besz care. When I reached the tar-painted front where Corwi waited with an unhappy-looking man, we stood together in a near-deserted part of Beszel city, surrounded by a busy unheard throng.’ (Miéville 2011, 54).

Here, Borlú finds himself surrounded by a busy crowd of people, yet with his well-trained ear he manages to experience their presence as ‘random noise’ and hence the place as a near-deserted neighborhood of his own city. Moving around in the city without breaching involves all of the senses and no detail is too small to carry important information about belonging and identity. Signs are decoded in architectural style, modes of conduct, dress, social mannerisms, postures, bodily movements or cultural norms: ‘On the streets at least one of the passerby – I could tell by the clothes, the colours, the walk – was not in Beszel.’ (Miéville 2011, 49). The practice of ‘unseeing’ entails a constantly practiced awareness of the surroundings, but also of the information you ‘emanate’ yourself. It requires selective hearing, selective seeing, and selective speaking, much as it does to avoid seeing the homeless person squatting near the train station or shutting off the presence of others on a busy subway train. It is a skill acquired as you are continuously exposed to and affectively overwhelmed by the presence of what you deny to acknowledge, invoked by the embodied and sensuous capacities that shape how you perceive. Such skills are part of who we are, of our sensory apparatus, the way we walk and hold ourselves, forever shaping identity and our sense of belonging. In this manner, being part of the collective efforts to maintain the political order is an embodied, sensuous and highly politicized capacity (Zerubavel, 2008). Even if people appear conscious of what

they are not seeing, ‘unseeing’ also involves acutely trained senses, embodied gestures and deeply ingrained postures, which constitute the collective attention arrangement that marks the socio-political order. One cannot easily detach oneself from this collective ‘knowing what not to know’ since it is an embodied part of who we are: it is a tension in our muscles, in the angle of our back, in the colours and design of our clothes, in the training of our eyesight – it is ingrained in our entire sensory apparatus.

### ***What the hidden hides – gaps and crevices in the public secret***

As already touched upon above, public secrets make up a gap between what is informally experienced and what is publicly acknowledged (Ledeneva, 2012, Fletcher, 2010, Zerubavel, 2008). As a literary experiment, the logic of Miéville’s *The City and the City* performs and, at the same time works to, unsettle this gap by drawing attention to what it occludes. In this section, we discuss how *The City and the City* directly and indirectly point to ‘peripheries’ and ‘blind spots’ emerging with and between the narrative’s multiple realities.

Not surprisingly, the political set-up of the two cities co-existing in the same physical space is inhabited by all kind of profiteers. For example, small-time crooks illegally import cheap brand copies and dodgy CDs from one city to the other (Miéville 2011: 38). With some creative action, the ‘unseen’ joint topography of both cities allows them to place and pick up goods at the same spot, as it is located in different cities. They smoothly and un-noticeably cross the border, while being in the same, yet not identical, place. They may even be so inventive to find a little negligible spot here and there that everyone in Ul Qoma thinks is in Beszel, and everyone in Beszel considers Ul Qoma, but which in fact is in neither. They take advantage of the fact that ‘[a]s the two cities had grown together, places, spaces had opened between them, or failed to be claimed.’ (Miéville 2011: 2013) Other, less shady people and organizations also benefit more overtly from the collective denial that separates the two cities, like the substantial number of diplomats needed to negotiate and maintain the smooth co-

existence of the two cities. In addition, the tourist industry prospers from providing guided tours twice in the same street, displaying different buildings and sites – perhaps silently hinting at the implicit ‘third’ attraction to outsiders: the spectacle of crossing a border and returning to the same, but now different street.

Moreover, the ‘folds’ between the cities also give rise to a secret of a potentially more spectacular nature, namely the myth of the *third* city, the above-mentioned mythical, pre-separation *Orciny*. As the plot of the novel unfolds, we learn that the murder victim is Mahalia Geary, a foreign PhD student, who had become obsessed with finding (out about) *Orciny*. As Inspector Borlú descends into his investigation, he is drawn into the whispered rumours of such a third space existing interstitially in-between the two cities:

*“On top floors, in ignorable Roman-style town-houses, in the first wattle-and-daub dwellings, taking up the intricately conjoined and disjointed spaces allotted in the split or conjugation of the tribes, the tiny third city Orciny ensconced, secreted between the two brasher city-states.” (Miéville, 2011: 62).*

The third space emerges in places where the people of the cities look away (or ‘unsee’). Rumour has it, that its population walk the streets, ‘unseen by the populations of Beszel and Ul Qoma, each thinking they were in the other. Hiding like a book in a library.’ (Miéville, 2011: 298). *Orciny* is shrouded in the mystery of the religious or cultic (Horn, 2011: 108) that can ‘elicit awe’ (Luhmann, 1989: 138). As such, the myth of the third city stimulates all kind of things: imaginaries such as children's fables, tales of old women based on the secret city. Intricate conspiracy theories worthy of the Illuminati, activist groups aiming to recover the glory of *Orciny*, and academic research triggered by the *Orciny* myth.

However (spoiler alert!), referring back to Miéville’s reference to his own work as a part of a ‘long and honourable tradition of anti-fantasies’ (Miéville 2010), the revelation of *Orciny*, when it comes, is quite disappointing. Ultimately, it turns out that the whole idea of a third city is simply a myth,

exploited by a North American corporation smuggling goods between the two cities. Mahalia Geary ‘wasn’t righting antique wrongs or learning any hidden truth,’ Borlú asserts (Mieville 2011, 322). She died because she became involved in an operation of illegal, commercial trade with archaeological artefacts. The anti-fantastical gesture here is concerned with the manner in which this piece of information works to ‘deflate’ the mystery. Orciny, Inspector Borlú concludes, is nothing but ‘the crap’ that ended up getting a young girl killed for a handful of ‘foreign bucks’ (Miéville 2011, 340). Hidden in between the cities is not a mystery, but the most mundane of facts: that some unnamed multinational has economic interests in maintaining the status quo, maintained by the public secret. Like a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, this narrative deflation works to transport the reader back to the mundane and ‘secretly familiar’ (Taussig, 1999: 51) hidden in plain sight. The fact that a ‘secretive’ force is operating in the gaps between the two realities, which makes out the public secret, is the entirely mundane force of monetary greed (Freedman 2013). Our point is simple, yet it is one that Miéville’s novel drives out with painstaking precision: if we reduce our perspective on (public) secrecy to their performative effects, to its modes of organizing, we risk becoming blind to that which it also hides and who benefits from it: not the spectacular, but that which exactly *is not* and appears trivial and mundane. The fact that multinationals exploit defunct political systems is nothing new. We all know about it. Yet, the fact is not politically unimportant. The mundanity of what is hiding in our public secrets, we argue, contributes to the powerful workings of public secrets. Such secrets survive revelation because they are embodied, inhabited and socialised, they provide the ‘grease which allows the wheels of society to function (...) without which structure would shatter’ (Taussig, 1999: 60). Moreover, public secrets make themselves immune to spectacular revelation exactly by being unspectacular – by being mundane, and by being partly known in advance.

In sum, in the interstitial cracks, folds and peripheries generated by public secrecy we find a parasitic force: The potential and capacities of these small, seemingly trivial hidden spaces are an essential and

powerful player maintaining and exploiting the socio-political order of the city and the city. While these ‘fringe zones’ produce ‘secrecy effects’ (Derrida, 1994) that lead to powerful and performative myths (Simmel, 1906), they also provide secret spaces for hiding something ‘real’, actual informational content or concealment of wrongdoing.

### ***Discussion and Conclusion***

In our literature review on the notion of secrecy in management and organization studies, we highlighted how recent studies of secrecy have redirected attention from the importance the content of the secret as such and towards a preoccupation and fascination with the performative mechanisms, modalities and effects of secrecy (e.g. Costas and Grey, 2016; Ringel, 2018; Horn, 2011). Indeed, as shown, some of the contributions in the field focus exclusively on the social effects of (public) secrecy (e.g. Radcliffe, 2012; Costas, 2009). With our reading of Miéville’s novel, we hope to have added to this debate in two ways.

First, our reading of *The City and the City* emphasized the role of embodied practices in the processes through which the power of the public secret materialize. We draw attention to the practical skill involved in the everyday enactment of the open secret (deciphering signs, muting distinct sounds as random noise, moving through a crowd of people that is not there). We also explore the affective dimension of such an effort (fear of misreading signs and breaching, being shocked by seeing someone getting hurt in a car crash, then unseeing it). The practices of ‘unseeing’ exemplified by Miéville in *The City and the City* are a provocative gesture of attention to the work continuously being done by organizational members in the construction of conventional ‘attention arrangements’ (Zerubavel, 2008: 33). However, they also constitute an attack on such arrangements, in the way art usually challenges social conventions. The notion of ‘unseeing’ highlights public secrecy as form of power, as well as a process of individualizing the complexity of deciphering signs and enacting

organizational norms. Miéville's novel draws attention to how organizational membership requires us to learn to master the reading of minute – and for the un-trained eye, ambiguous – signs and details; and to see and 'unsee' in accordance with customary organizational sense making. We have sought to illustrate that being privy to public secrecy is an embodied skill and an integral part of subjectivity, which cannot simply be removed or even challenged by revelation as it is part of who you are, and, thus, not so easy to consciously stop doing. Perhaps, we have sought to suggest, public secrets are not only mastered by people; they also constitute a form of power that masters them.

Second, and relatedly, reading the novel reminds us not to throw out the baby with the bathwater when analysing the powerful effects of (public) secrecy. Take, for example, Ledenova's discussion of public secrets in the post-Soviet period. She states that 'We might all smile in the recognition of the gap between formal pronouncements and realities of the post-Soviet period, but these general "open secrets" about Russian privatization will remain "*secrets*" for the majority of the public when it comes to detail' (Ledenova, 2012: 723, our emphasis). Similarly, in Fletcher's analysis of the public secret of adventure tourism which suggests that these trips are safe, even though they are sold and experienced as risky also shows that the real hidden secret is that 'of course, [tourists] could die' (Fletcher, 2010: 18). Moreover, while we all 'know' that our consumption of social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter is more censored than we openly acknowledge, the work of internet content moderators (those who decide which content is abusive and disturbing and should therefore be deleted) is actually a job characterized by extreme secrecy. The work is outsourced to anonymous workers who work in remote places under dire conditions, contracted through intermediaries by major social media companies, watching highly disturbing internet content day in day out. It is something that affects everyone with a social media account, but actively hidden and concealed in the crevices of the social media landscape. Put differently, by addressing the mundane secret hidden in the public

secret, we aim to remind current approaches on the social and performative effects of secrecy also to pay attention to the ‘secret as such’. This is important because, as Bratich suggests, in an increasingly disorganised and uncertain world, secrecy proliferates and the visibility of secrecy has become a strategic move to justify certain actions (Bratich, 2006; Bratich, 2014).

What *The City and the City* may offer to organisation studies is an attention to how the fact that nothing spectacular is hiding in the gaps between the two realities of public secrecy does not mean that it is not politically significant. The fact that that which hides in the gaps is often anti-fantastical, flat and unspectacular does not make it less politically significant. Instead, it may add to the power of public secrets that they cannot be fought with spectacular revelations. Thus, the novel can be read as an invitation to organisational scholars to keep doing the meticulous work of analysing how different kinds of organising allow for certain kind of things to be seen, and to be judged as here or elsewhere. It is an invitation to keep directing attention to how, as organisational members, we are enmeshed in politics and our everyday choreographies have political effects. Public secrets, we have sought to show, are an intrinsic part of organisational life and a promising a framework for paying attention to the politics of organising. This is not necessarily the act of revealing spectacular secrets, but also the art and the laboursome work of describing and re-describing that what we thought we already knew such as flow of capital, human greed and compliance to social pressure and habits.

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