

Heidelberg University English Department
Lecture Series: Another Place, Another Time

The Cities and the Cities: Urban Fantasy Fiction

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Annika Elstermann: Welcome to this episode of the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Another Place, Another Time*. Today I'll be speaking with Christian Schneider, who's a lecturer at the International Study Center in Heidelberg and co-host of a literary podcast called *Outside of a Dog*. He wrote his PhD thesis on the Gothic mode in graphic literature, and today we'll be talking about different types of Urban fantasy.

In terms of fantasy fiction, there are a lot of different subgenres and some people when they hear fantasy the first thing they might think of is elves and dwarves and sword fights. So, maybe let's start with: What is fantasy as a very, very broad definition and then we can move on from there to Urban fantasy.

Christian Schneider: That is, as you said, a very, very difficult definition, so to say. While some people will define fantasy not as one overarching term but—Theramenes for example talks about a fuzzy set of different things that are somehow connected. And, in general, fantasy seems to be concerned with something that is not real. So fantasy deals in the largest sense with things that are impossible in our terms of reality, of what is real. Rosemary Jackson has said that it has been applied rather indiscriminately to any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation. So that includes Myths and Legends, Folklore. That includes forms of Magical Realism, that includes the Realist texts. but also other genres that are very close to fantastic are things like Science Fiction or Horror. So it's hard to really define fantasy and it's also hard to define 'the fantastic', which is often the mode connected to that.

And the fantastic—there is a very famous definition by structuralist Tzvetan Todorov, who basically says that the fantastic is that moment when we are faced with something that we cannot explain. That moment of facing something that just doesn't make sense in our world and that moment either then turns out to be something that's rationally explainable or it turns out that it is actually something supernatural. But for Todorov basically the fantastic is that moment of uncertainty, this moment of ambiguity. Which at first glance sounds rather cool but there are a lot of problems with it like practically, what does that mean? Like what is the fantastic? That covers a lot of things, that covers again magical realism, or the works of Edgar Allan Poe or Kafka and it makes sense to include these as fantastic. But Fantasy that may be in our minds and practice is something a bit different.

AE: To me, there also seems to be a huge difference between these points of what is real and what is possible. Because what is not real can also be something which maybe at one point was real or which is real for another person, whereas that which is not possible is something which very clearly is a thing that no one on this earth has experienced before, for instance.

CS: Absolutely and I mean that, again, what is the difference then between SciFi and Fantasy. If we talk about that old definition of magic as sufficiently advanced technology, that basically acts the

same as magic for example. But what really is the difference, basically. I think that fantasy, there is one aspect to it that we really need to consider and that is the aspect of world-building. SciFi, there is usually, again, depending on the genre of course, something like a space opera would be dealing with that in a different way, but usually SciFi is based on something in our world, a sort of projection into the future how certain things might develop.

Fantasy doesn't really care about that, fantasy is not based on that— fantasy can be pure fabulation and often that means fantasy includes the construction of a world that is entirely different, ontologically, from our world. Not in all aspects, because that— such a world would be difficult to describe— [AE: Inaccessible.] Yeah, exactly. But at least, it is a world that functions according to its own rules, it has its own geography, sociology and so on, and there's a term that has been coined by Tolkien, the godfather of modern fantasy, "the secondary world", it is a world that is different from ours – it is not necessarily approachable from our world, there are things that can be recognized, but still fantasy deals with these secondary worlds in one way or another.

AE: Now, we haven't introduced this term yet, but there is this distinction as well between High Fantasy and Low Fantasy and High Fantasy is what I meant earlier or what I mentioned earlier in the sense of you have swords and big quests and the forests— *The Lord of the Rings* essentially and that kind of subgenre of fantasy, whereas what we are going to talk about today, Urban Fantasy, is something that is fairly distinct from this sense of open spaces or forest and nature and maybe something closer to some aspects of mythology as well.

CS: Definitely, the old separation between High and Low Fantasy, was often concerned with the role magic plays: That in High Fantasy magic is basically everywhere, it's something that's quite sublime, whereas in Low Fantasy the focus is more on magic as something that is more practical. In a more typical distinction High Fantasy would be something like, imagine *Lord of the Rings* for example, whereas Low Fantasy is something like the *Conan the Barbarian's* for example, by Robert Howard it's not really about these highfalutin quest narratives but more about adventure and magic only plays a role in so far as it adds some intrigue to these adventures. And urban fantasy can be sometimes seen as part of the latter and we talk about that a little bit, that magic is something that used to be quite integral to fantasy is not something that really happens a lot within urban fantasy, but still this is a kind of old separation and urban fantasy by definition is something that is a little bit newer and I think you need a different approach to explain how it functions and how it works, basically.

AE: Would you say that urban fantasy has a literary tradition that is linked to city literature and to narrating urban spaces, generally?

CS: Absolutely! It's quite interesting actually that one theorist talked about that urban— Basically says there are different traditions to urban fantasy that even in traditional fantastic accounts there are descriptions of cities— Think for example about Thomas Moore's *Utopia* which is kind of a more philosophical approach but nevertheless you could there's a fantastical city, or the cities in *Gulliver's Travels* by Swift. But one source of this urban fantasy tradition is actually more modern and it is a kind of modernist approach to describing cities, which you have for example in authors like John Dos Passos in the US. Watching the development of the city and watching this new way of living together in a metropolis through the fragmented perspective of a modernist view and that actually has a very

alienating character, that is something that sees the city as something that's somehow unnatural to a certain degree, that is foreign, it's alien and that may actually be fantastic to a certain degree. And a lot of urban fantasy, at least some urban fantasy that I'm going to talk about kind of takes that up as well. But we can maybe talk about genre a little bit later on, but urban fantasy is not necessarily just indebted to fantasy. One thing that I might have to talk about is what do we mean when we talk about urban fantasy, because I think there's at least three different ways of how we can define it. The most prevalent thing you will find when you look at urban fantasy is a very distinct genre, a genre that includes a lot of works and that is basically stories in our world where there is some sort of fantastical element. There's a quote that I wanted to read in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, it has been defined, this genre:

The subgenre of stories set in an alternate version of our modern world, where humans with special talents and supernatural beings, most typically vampires, werewolves, shapeshifters and very human-like elves or fairies, interact via adventure, melodrama, intrigue and sex.

CS: This is often very close to the genre of paranormal romance, so a very popular example of this would be *Twilight*. *Twilight*, in this definition, is urban fantasy. At first glance you would say, well, *Twilight* is not particularly fantastical, it's vampires, yes, but there's no secondary world, and on the other hand it's also not very urban, it takes place in a small town in the north-west of the US, but according to this definition *Twilight* and all its kind of successors are urban fantasy. So would be another very popular fantasy series, *Harry Potter*. *Harry Potter* would be urban fantasy according to this— Yeah, it's our world, but it is a world in which magic is real and magicians then are kind of the focus of that, even though this world is basically ours. While this is certainly helpful and it's important to talk about that when we talk about the enormous popularity of these genres, the thing that I find kind of interesting is that these genres are not necessarily very urban, like if we define urban not just as modern in some way, or our world in some way, but actually connect it to cities, well, there is not a big city that we can talk about in *Twilight*. *Harry Potter* takes place partly in London, but there's nothing really about London that's interesting, apart from Diagon Alley and maybe Sirius Black's disappearing house, but most of it takes place in Hogwarts. And Hogwarts, even though it's located somewhere in Scotland, might just as well be in Middle Earth. It's so far away removed from our world that there is nothing really urban about the world of *Harry Potter*.

AE: Yeah, like those parts which do take place in London – in the books at least, it's a bit more pronounced in the movies – but in the books at least they're almost exclusively in the hidden parts of the city, which aren't— Diagon Alley isn't particularly urban and neither is Grimmauld Place, that's not what we would associate with what you mentioned earlier, this metropolis urban space. And then towards the end of the series you get sprinkled in some street names and place names that you know, but the city itself doesn't play much of a role, completely agree with you there.

CS: Yeah, and you could argue that the one place that is kind of the most obviously urban is Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$, because that is really an actual place by now at least, it's an actual station and it's a kind of portal between the real world and the magical world, but it's still clearly separated. And, as we'll find out, urban fantasy can be a little bit more ambiguous, but you mentioned those hidden places and I think that's a tradition that is very obvious in at least one strand of urban fantasy, because if we see urban fantasy as somehow the connection between cities and urban spaces, then one tradition is the

kind of fantastical treatment of actual urban spaces, that you take actual cities and kind of see the fantasy elements within them, and that is often basically what John Clute, again, in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* calls 'behind the Wainscots'. It's kind of the hidden world, the undercity. An example for that would be *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman, which is a novel that also takes place in London, but it actually takes place wholly in London, London is basically almost like a protagonist in the book, it's like a normal londoner who kind of stumbles into this underground version of London with lots of magic, lots of weird beings, and it is literally the underground because a lot of these folkloristic or mythical creatures are actually based on the underground. For example there is an Angel that's named after the underground station 'Angel' and the station Seven Sisters leads to actually seven sisters being in the story. There Gaiman actually takes up the city of London and imagines a mythical dimension to the city, especially the underground.

AE: Which literally stretches over the geographical space of the city. Over – I shouldn't say over, but under – the literal underground underneath the city and a sort of a parallel world to it. We'll come back to this later on as well but you see intersections with the 'real physical space of the city' all the time. And it also helps this book or I think it's part of what makes this book is of course that there are many, many myths associated with the London underground as well and lost tubes stations which have been closed down and so on and canals which lead to nowhere and— these things exist in physical, in our reality.

CS: Absolutely and I think that's exactly the point of that strand of urban fantasy; that it kind of sees modern cities as magical places and kind of reintroduces, like you mentioned, myth, mythology and folklore into them. And it can be traditional folklore, like these cities can for example house the Seelie and Unseelie courts of traditional fairy myths, there can be vampires or werewolves, but it can be modern as well. But it's kind of this folkloristic view of a city where the old kind of stories, the old myths haven't died out but simply taken a new form, often, as mentioned, in kind of a hidden form. There is another strand, however, of both fantasy cities and urban fantasy.

AE: This is now the third one that you mentioned?

CS: Exactly, that's the third one. It's kind of the mirror image of the second one and that is if we have descriptions of urban spaces actually in fantasy worlds, in secondary worlds. In traditional fantasy, if we think about, again, *Lord of the Rings* cities are not that important. He mentions usually it's more about woods or about plains or about mighty mountains or something like that. If we think of a city in *Lord of the Rings*, it's maybe Minas Tirith, where we know it's a city where people live but we don't really hear a lot about the infrastructure, about how the sanitation works, for example, or how—

AE: Or how common people live there! You get to hear [**CS:** Exactly!] of this Steward of Gondor and you get to later on hear of the returned king but you don't get to hear how the blacksmith lives his life.

CS: Absolutely! And there is a different tradition within fantasy that has a different view on cities; one example for that, one of my favorite examples to use is Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels.

AE: I think those are the most productive examples to use here.

CS: I mean, if you read the Pratchett novels they start out as basically just parodies of traditional fantasy, like the heroic sword and sorcery fantasy but later on it becomes clearer and clearer that Pratchett is very very interested in how the city works, in this case Ankh-Morpork. And a lot of the later novels are about the modernisation of the city, how a city would react to modern things being introduced, like the mail or newspapers and stuff like that. And of course, the city of Ankh-Morpork is still a fantasy city; you have trolls living next to dwarfs, living next to werewolves but Ankh-Morpork is a city and the – as you mentioned, the kind of working class, the normal people – are very much the focus. Pratchett writes a lot about the Nightwatch which is describing how police work works in the city. And in this respect it's kind of the mirror: it's not London being turned into a magical place of myth, it's rather a fantastical city turned into kind of a normal city. It's making the magical mundane to a certain degree and this is very interesting because, again, this is based on this kind of modernistic version of the city, and there's another quote that I want to give here, what the kind of difference, what connection between these two strands of urban fantasy is:

Both trade in the sublime but one locates the sublime in the eruption of reawakened supernatural powers into the urban landscape, whereas for the other that urban landscape is itself the location of the sublime.

CS: So either you say oh there are actually magical beings in the canals of the city, or you say well, you have a canal system with all its intricacies in itself is kind of magical and should be more the focus of that city space.

AE: Do you have any hypotheses on why is Pratchett writing fantasy novels? Because the themes that he explores, like you said, they are themes which you might also be able to explore in sort of real world settings, alternate history settings and so on. A lot of the fantasy elements that he uses also have to do with— so for instance the werewolves are stigmatized of course and then a lot of the werewolf story lines have been this coming to terms with this being Other and living with the Other and so on. The vampires have this sort of abstinence league which is very similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, all of these different things. Why does Pratchett use the fantasy world rather than write a city novel?

CS: I can only speculate there but Pratchett I think uses fantasy to a similar degree how he uses humour, how he uses satire, to subvert things. It's something quite interesting that we think about fantasy as something that is rather stale, that rather seems to kind of uphold the status quo, and if you think about traditional fantasy there seems to be something to that, that fantasy is a conservative form of literature. The Return of the King kind of says, yeah, everything will be back to its natural order, this healing of the world. But it doesn't have to be like that because if we talk about the fantastic as something that disrupts our reality, that has a lot of subversive potential. And actually Rosemary Jackson, who I mentioned earlier, has written about fantasy as the art of subversion. That the fantastical can have something that is deeply unsettling in a way, because it yields with things that are not real and that'll question what is actually real, what do we accept as the status quo? And so Pratchett I think uses his satirical strand of writing and describing a city from a fantasy viewpoint to just make his criticism and kind of subversive focus all the more obvious. If he was writing about London it might almost be boring but if you write about Ankh-Morpork and how horrible the people there are and how horrible the power structure is and so on that gives us this moment of recognition

of like oh, this is actually about us, actually about our cities. So there is this alien or othering notion of fantasy can be used to subvert things as well and especially if people write about things that are normal in our world, like urban life, that's pedestrian, that's very banal, but if you write from a different perspective it becomes exciting but it also becomes a little subversive like, why are things the way they are? Is London basically just another fantasy that we're kind of partaking in and see as normal?

AE: Yeah! A couple of points here, which I find very very interesting: one of them is, it's kind of this double layered distancing. So, within the theme of this lecture series, *Another Place, Another Time*, you could argue that Tolkien draws up the other place, other time thing, he designs the ultimate world, a lot of fantasy fiction is based off Tolkien, and it comes with genre expectations then. So you have these expectations: trolls are stupid, vampires – of course, Tolkien doesn't have any vampires – but vampires if they exist are evil and those things and then in Pratchett he suddenly— you come in there with these expectations but of course there aren't real reasons for these expectations. Because if we say the troll is a fantastic being that doesn't exist in our world why should we have this assumption that the troll is stupid? And then Pratchett comes along and takes it, kind of twists it again from the original twist, twists it over again and suddenly you learn in Pratchett's world that the trolls aren't actually stupid: Their brains are silicon-based and are just slower when it gets hot and if its cold then they're actually very very clever. And this sort of thing happens all the time. I think this kind twice removal from the original is interesting.

And like you said, because it is subversive it helps us also question assumptions that we might have about our world and in that sense I absolutely agree with what you just said that the moment of recognition is made stronger through the original alienation. You read about a very different world from ours and suddenly you recognise a bit of humanity, or you recognise a strange bureaucratic structure that we are also familiar with, that we might take for granted in our world but suddenly realise, why are we doing things like this anyways? It's a very effective strategy I think as well. And of course then his Ankh-Morpork has many features of London but it also has many features of ancient Rome, of the Roman Republic and so on as well.

I think this is such a— Pratchett is such a fruitful topic for this that we could probably talk for hours just about this! And I'm sure we'll come back to this but I also wanted to return to the second point that you made, or the second type of urban fantasy you mentioned, namely the city which is one that exists in our world but then you get the fantastic within that city, so examples like *Nowhere*. Maybe we can talk a bit more about this sort of urban fantasy.

CS: Yes, definitely! This is also based on a kind of literary tradition that is kind of secrets of a city tradition. We have for example Eugène Sue, who wrote about the mysteries of Paris and we have some similar traditions about other cities. London, obviously again from our English-speaking perspective, one of the more important ones, and this is often about what I've mentioned about the unseen aspect. At first glance that might be a little bit more adhering to the traditional fantasy that there is some magical realm that is separated, it's different from our world. But that can also be surprisingly inherent to a city, that can be surprisingly subversive as well and this is connected often to the notion of psychogeography. Psychogeography is a concept that goes back to the French situationists, kind of leftist thinkers in the 50s and 60s, who started thinking about the geographies

of cities in a different way, that geographies of cities are basically made to keep us in certain places, to move us from our place of living to our place of work and back, and they started what they called 'dérive', that kind of means meaningless, random walks through the city to kind of explore the cities in a new way, to discover new places. And there is a strand of urban fantasy that is very much based on that. There are works of literature based on psychogeography, so writers like Ian Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd and Allan Moore are very much based on the exploration of urban spaces connecting it to history, connecting it to society, but there is something fantastical about those as well, again, places you wouldn't necessarily expect, places you never necessarily see. *Neverwhere* is a good example for that, that there are other forms of, or there are other works that kind of deal with that. Ben Aaronovitch's very popular series *Rivers of London*, for example, is a sample of that as well.

AE: And like *Neverwhere* also picks up a lot on local place names and hidden geographical and geological elements even in that case. Rivers, like actual rivers, the title of the first book, *Rivers of London*, rivers underneath the city or rivers which have— which existed at one point but don't anymore and so on. There is an aspect in both *Neverwhere* and in the *Rivers of London* series which is kind of, the main character in both cases is an ordinary person in the beginning and then kind of stumbles into this hidden world. But then there's also an aspect to this once you've entered the hidden world you can't really leave it anymore, right? Right? [**CS:** Absolutely.] These two are essentially—they exist in the same space, in the same geographical space, but they are in some way very separate.

CS: Yes, and it's interesting that these two cases still have something of the kind of traditional fantasy, maybe of this notion of portal fantasy. Farrah Mendelsohn, who I mentioned earlier as well, has a very very helpful distinction between different forms of fantasy based on how the supernatural is introduced to the world. She talks for example about the classical portal fantasy, where you—or basically, the protagonist enters a magical world often on a kind of quest; classical example would be the *Narnia* books where you literally enter through a portal into Narnia, but even *Lord of the Rings* is like that if you see the hobbits as kind of stumbling into the wider world and in those cases where you have the outsider entering this kind of undercity in some way that's still a classical example of that fantasy.

In contrast to that, Mendelsohn also mentions the immersive fantasy, where basically the protagonist is already part of the city. There's not really this exploration, they're not really on a mission, and have to find what's going on, who's this, what kind of power does this have, and here there's again something interesting, she says "These protagonists, then, in order to introduce the reader to the world, have to be antagonists.". They are rebels in a certain way, they are outsiders, and this is something that is very prevalent in the work of a writer who I want to mention a little bit because in my opinion they're the best way of kind of understanding the potential of urban fantasy and also how these different strands can work in different ways, and that's China Miéville, an English writer, very dedicated leftist, political writer but he is writing SciFi and fantasy and very often urban fantasy, in very clearly urban settings. China Miéville has, on the one hand, written about fantastic cities and secondary worlds, there's *Perdido Street Station* which takes place in the metropolis of New Crobuzon, and New Crobuzon is a fantasy city but is very much again focused on infrastructure, it's also clearly a parody of Tolkien sometimes because in New Crobuzon for example you have cactus people that are basically just people with cactus parts and that is kind of Miéville's comment on

those typical D&D fantasy races that are just animals turned into—

AE: I thought – this is kind of a prickly person [laughs].

CS: Oh definitely! But he takes it very seriously at the same time, for example those cactus people start out as a parody but later on he describes writing them and saying “hang on, they’re not good with plants! Why should they be good with plants simply because they are plant-based? Not all humans are good with people.” So he is really thinking about the construction of characters in this urban space and his protagonists are often not magicians or fighters, they are scientists, or artists or criminals and on the other hand, he’s also written about London, part of that tradition as well, he’s written *Kraken* which is very much about the same occult underground as *Neverwhere*, he’s written a young adult fantasy novel, *Un Lun Dun*, which is about literally the mirror image of London, and one of his most interesting books is *The City and The City*, which is not even that fantastical, it’s more a kind of sociological fantasy about a city-state in somewhere in Eastern Europe that can kind of shares its geographical position with another city-state.

AE: I think this is, like you just said, it’s not obviously fantastic in the sense of there isn’t magic here or at least not magic that people use, but I’m actually really excited to talk about this because I think it’s a perfect example for what we’ve been discussing here, *The City and the City*.

CS: Yeah, it brings all things together and it brings kind of into focus what a city can be. These two city-states share the same place but they are separated by what seems to be different dimensions. There are certain places where there are cross-hatches, where they can move from one to the other but generally people are trained to not see the other city or even forbidden. But the more you read the novel the clearer it becomes that this is basically just a social construct, that these two cities are just one city, this one city is based basically on some mythical older city, but that’s not even the point, the point is that these people are trained to disregard the people from the other part even though there is no reason to do so.

AE: When you see something like, you can see out of the corner of your eye, a building that belongs to the other city or you can see people that belong to the other city and then you have to unsee it in a way, which is essentially just pretending to yourself that you didn’t see what you just saw and sometimes the characters aren’t even certain at first whether what they’ve been seeing is actually something from the other city, but then, it’s because of style of clothing or something like that, they realise oh I just saw something I shouldn’t have seen and there are spots in the city where this happens more often. You mentioned already that this is a social commentary and I was going to ask about this: Is there an aspect of class— what a leading question! [laughs] I’m going to ask it like that anyway: Is there an aspect of class to this construction in *City and the City*?

CS: One hundred percent. I mean, even disregarding Miéville’s leftist position, but the city states are very different from one another, one of them is more run down, has more economical problems, the other one is almost like a middle-Eastern tiger state, a lot of glass and chrome and they’re very different economically, they’re very different culturally and there is always this notion of class. What’s also interesting is that as it turns out in the end – spoilers for the book! – the kind of bad guy— this is a criminal investigation, the bad guy in the end is basically a foreign financial investor, so there is a lot of criticism regarding capitalism and how basically capitalism profits from kind of separating the

two city-states in that way. And that makes it a very, very clear metaphor, like, sometimes, I don't want to say heavy-handed but at least very obvious and you could very well map these two city-states Beszel and Ul Qoma on to any modern city where you have very disparate parts of the city with very disparate income-levels, where the rich are basically trained to unsee the homeless on the streets or the workers that have to take separate entrances to the same building they work in. So, that is a very clear metaphor and I think it is to a large part focussing on class, however not only. *The City and the City* describes the modern city as this kind of place where you have these very, very diverse elements, something that in spatial studies is often called a 'third-space'. A third space that is somehow real, real urban spaces, somehow imagined, how we think certain things are, how we kind of tell stories about certain parts of the city, how we perceive them and the actual city is the kind of third space that is developed out of both. *The City and the City* is basically that in a story-form; it takes up the notion of a fictional city, so it's a little bit like a secondary world, but it's still very much set in our world, so it's connected to how we see urban spaces. Let us mention there's not really magic in there but the fantastical view of something that seems to be impossible is still very much there. So in a lot of ways it is a novel where you could write basically hundreds of essays about how urban spaces and how urban fantasy manifest in there.

AE: I had a conversation— this is a very odd anecdote now, I need to mention this because this wasn't my original idea. I had a conversation a couple of years ago with a bookseller at a second hand bookshop when I bought one of Miéville's manifestos, which he also writes, he also writes manifestos [**CS:** Yes!] and we had a brief conversation about *The City and the City* and this bookseller who, his historical connection to this is that he read *The City and the City* and that he read it as a direct allegory for east and west Berlin [**CS:** Absolutely] a national divided city in recent history, where one— which is also the case with Ul Qoma and Beszel, one half, or one part of the city, one aspect of the city is leaning more towards capitalism and adapting to the western world and the other part of the city is going in a different direction and a different way and this sort of thing is framed. I thought that was a very interesting take, because of course, my reading was also what you just mentioned, this unseeing other people's lives, unseeing the lives of people who live in the same geographical space as you do because you are not supposed to see them. A kind of a class separation issue which – we can come back to this later on – also has to do with the metropolis and alienation and anonymity and so on. I thought it was an interesting perspective that this very different person had, on this world-building: that there are of course similar examples for this in real-world history, the bureaucracy and so on in *The City and the City* also, it makes sense when you think about it. If you want to travel from this one city to the other city, even though they are in the exact same space, you can't just, or you're not allowed to and thus can't just shift your mind and think I want to be in Ul Qoma now, and now you see the other buildings, but you have to go to a border check-point, essentially. Go there, check in to the other city and then leave and walk along the exact same streets before but now you're allowed to see the other part of the city.

CS: I mean, again, this is something that I think Miéville is very aware of, there's a mention in the book about someone visiting a conference about separated cities and they're listing like Berlin, Jerusalem, Beszel and Ul Qoma and that is something that is very clearly a perspective that Miéville has regarded as well, but I think it's, yeah, like you mentioned, it's interesting that you can have these separate perspectives and they're still both true, definitely.

AE: With the, kind of class separation issue, this is also something which we can find in *Neverwhere*, because the people that— Richard, right? The main character? [**CS:** Yes!] – is able to see people who he would before have ignored. Not because he didn't actually see them, not because they weren't in his physical space, but because he just looked past them. So these are beggars on the streets, essentially. These are groups of people that now he can see and they're surprised when he then does see them, after he has entered the alternative world, he doesn't only see them, but he perceives them, he recognises them as existing and so on. But then also after he has been in this— it's not even another world, it's not even another dimension. But in this underground parallel of London for a while people can't see him anymore [**CS:** Exactly.] so this is, I think even more pronounced than in *The City and the City*, I mean a class thing, a separation of different groups in a city.

CS: He's literally slipped through the cracks basically and that is— the cracks, in this case, the cracks between one world and the other, but that's the same thing we say about people who have fallen out of our normal societal norms: the homeless people, the crazy people on the street, the people we are trained to ignore, we are trained to not see or perceive in some way. That is definitely something that is always there. There is for example also a strand of Young Adult fiction that goes in the direction of this, for example *The Borribles* Trilogy by Michael de Larrabeiti, that is basically the kind of Peter Pan-esque lost children in the London underground and they have their kind of parallel society there and are being hunted by the police for living this kind of illegal life. And Miéville has written *Un Lun Dun* which is basically a version of London about all the things that are disregarded of our world, considered discarded, thrown away, ignored and they end up in this other city in this certain way. So that's, this notion of class, this notion of the underbelly, this notion of the other side that we usually don't perceive is something that is very, very pronounced.

And again you can make the argument that one aspect about urban fantasy is definitely not just about the space that appears with a different kind of space and with a different perspective on this space than traditional fantasy, but it is very much this political notion of fantasy as something that can be very subversive. It's not just some— a wish fulfillment, some heroic fantasy but it can be something that takes a look at existing structures, urban structures, power structures and doubts them, questions them in some way. And there's a very famous comment, again, by Miéville, it is famously— Tolkien basically said something along the lines of 'Why should I despise escapism? Escapism is something that is good and even understandable' and it's often paraphrased – even though Tolkien didn't say it like that – it's often paraphrased as "Only jailors have something against escapism." And Miéville commented on that and said, well this is just basically Opium for the Masses then. Tolkien gave his escapism an emancipatory gloss, claiming that jailors hate escapism. This is precisely untrue, jailors love escapism, what they hate is escape.

So if this respective fantasy is not a means of escapism, of kind escaping normal life, but rather looking at normal life which in our world is often urban life and kind of see how we can maybe change things to a certain degree.

AE: Or, also, taking things that don't work in our world and putting them, like amping it up and thus showing how wrong things are if you really look at them. I think, kind of the ghost of [Michel] Foucault is very strong in strand of conversation right now, so I just want to mention a couple of things here, regarding— For people who might not be so familiar with Foucauldian theory, with the

jailor and so on as well. So if you take these, what we've been talking about for the last couple of minutes, this idea of that which is different and that which people in urban life are generally trained not to look at and that which goes against social expectations and so on, Foucault of course has this line of critical thinking where those people who are regarded as (in air quotes) 'mad' by the society, so those people who do not conform to social rules are locked away in prisons, in mental institutions and so on so that the only people who remain in visible society are the people who conform to the standard, to the status quo and that which is mad is put out of sight. And now Miéville and also Gaiman in *Neverwhere* they bring those back, right? [CS: Yes.] This is part of what they do, they bring that which might in our society, and definitely is in our society as well, relegated to the fringes, they put the focus on the fringe and make us look at this sort of thing.

I think that this is very interesting, that this is something which fantasy does, where when you have a fantastical aspect to the city, it's not just that suddenly we're looking at the lives of— it's not a documentary on the lives of homeless people or whatever, but that this comes with the fantastical genre and with very fantastical aspects as well.

CS: There is, to come back to this kind of spatial theory that Foucault also talks about the heterotopias, about certain spaces that have this kind of liminal status, that they're not spaces we usually spend a lot of time in but they have a special meaning, for example hospitals, the graveyard, schools, so places where we go for a specific period of time, for a specific moment, but they're not really places that we live in, they are these transitional places. If you connect this to the fantasy then urban fantasy basically sees inside these heterotopias and sees that the heterotopia is the, maybe, kind of normal space that everything is a heterotopia once you start thinking about what is normal and what is not normal. I think that is definitely something that a lot of these writers are also aware of.

I think they are very, very self-conscious writers in this modern version of urban fantasy because they interact with this traditional image of fantasy they have, but also because they are aware of the kind of theories, the kind of discourses regarding narratives, regarding urban spaces and so on. It's a very intellectualised genre in a lot of ways, even the more folkloristic tradition, because there you obviously have to be aware of oh, this is a very old story, this is the narrative of Tam Lin, or this is the narrative of Gilgamesh but in new kind of cloak so that is maybe some criticism some people might point to this, that's the kind of primal quality of fantasy, the Beowulf, the Gilgamesh, the Achilles notion of the fantastical myth is very, very intellectualised and very, very reflected. But maybe that's just again a mirror image of our extremely complex lives in very complex urban city spaces.

AE: In side note to this would be that it's one thing, something that would make Pratchett, again, stand apart from a lot of writers is that he does have this intellectual complexity, in that you can find very, very detailed and specialised information about, say, Victorian education in his novels or whatever, but he also has this extremely accessible texts that you can also read without knowing any of that. But you just said the textual complexity can also indicate the kind of complexity of our modern urban lives, something to draw the arc back to the topic you briefly touched upon earlier, would you say that there are aspects of fantasy, of urban fantasy, which express you know similar anxieties to, you mentioned, modernist fiction earlier and you mentioned authors like Dos Passos before, would you say that there are similar anxieties about living in a city which are expressed through contemporary urban fantasy?

CS: I would say so, yes. I think the difference to a certain degree is it's less the shock of living in a city that a lot of the modernists seem to have, or 'oh this is something new, we have to adapt to this new way of living', this is more a realisation of how much life has changed since starting to live in the city. Maybe it's also kind of a reclaiming sometimes, this kind of rediscovery of the city as a place where we meet just as much myths and folklore as we did in earlier times, or where we don't just have to stand there passively and kind of wonder what is going on but kind of try to see behind the superficial structures. So there is definitely a similar impulse, it is maybe less, I don't want to say naive but it's maybe less thunderstruck than some of the modernist approaches were and it's more kind of coming to terms with the fact that we have been changed by living in cities and that means we maybe are becoming a little bit more like fantastical creatures to a certain degree. I don't know, that's just speculation at this point, but the impulse of seeing the city as a place that changes people, that is connected to an anxiety of a certain degree, I think.

AE: Another hypothesis, which— this is just thinking out loud now, but another hypothesis would be that maybe you can actually place this in a very direct tradition to the earlier novels about metropolis, large cities like New York and London and so on as well by saying that one of the problems is alienation and extreme individualisation in the sense of you're isolated, everybody is just doing their own thing, this isn't village life, people live in big buildings, don't know what their neighbours names are and so on. So you have this alienation and atomisation of individual lives and then people are looking for connections. And this is one thing, I mean this brings in the class issue, of course, part of this is you're not looking at the suffering of other people, you're not even looking at the lives of other people, even if they aren't necessarily suffering, and the other thing also is maybe a historical connection to people who lived in that city before you. This is something which is very important in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* and also Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* series, like we said before, they are— the myths mentioned in these stories, a lot of them are based on myths that exist about London, they are not invented by the authors. And in the *Rivers of London* books I remember that there's like magic and ghosts and spirits and so on which exist in the city and they are the strongest in the stones of old buildings. So you have this connection to the people who were there before you, which could also be an expression of some kind of anxiety of isolation, you need to find some kind of connection. If you can't find a connection to the people who live next door to you, maybe you can find a connection to the people who lived there five hundred years before you or something like that.

CS: Absolutely, and I mean I mentioned psychogeography earlier, one important part of psychogeography, or one important aspect of it is this notion of the lives of people before us influence our lives, that is, like you mentioned, still there, the echoes of the old buildings, that, for example, the negative notion of the violence that was committed at a certain place, at a certain time, for example in Alan Moore's *From Hell* the murders of the prostituted Whitechapel is kind of still felt in the streets of the East End to a certain degree, this kind of reverberates and we can never really get rid of it. That's the more negative, the kind of gothic notion, but you're right, there is something more positive as well, this kind of connection that while it is not a village anymore, you could have kind of this village life to a certain degree in your part of town, kind of connecting to the people in your house, in your block, along your street, and that connecting is one notion that has always been part of urban life, and that can be something quite magical to a certain degree.

AE: I think the question that remains, but that also we cannot answer here, is something which you've also brought up earlier, is this potentially revolutionary or is it escapism, does this, like you said, is this Opium of the Masses or is it something which could show us, which could highlight problems in our world, show us alternatives and so on. But this is actually, I mean this fits because this a threat that has kind of been drawing through this lecture series so far, that it might not be the revolution in itself, but we cannot have any kind of revolution without it I think.

CS: Yeah, I think it is a perspective, and that's the important thing. The fantastic is a perspective on things where you try to find something magical or something alienating in the world around you, whether you say oh it's the fairies that stole my clothes, or whatever and grasping the impossible I think helps us maybe to kind of understand it and if you want a revolution then thinking the impossible is not the worst thing you can do basically.

AE: You mentioned the connection of fantasy to mythology as well, that you could also see the more traditional, that you could see mythology and folklore and so on as part of the fantastical. Which, of course, mythology you could say as a very, very crude take on it, parts of mythology, the gods, the giants and those things and various mythologies, the reason behind them was to debate or come up with explanations for natural phenomena which at that point humanity could not otherwise explain. Whereas with urban fantasy, with the type of urban fantasy that we have mostly been discussing so far it seems to me to be sort of the reverse, that we use the fantastical to draw attention to things which do exist in the real world, which have very real explanations behind them as well, but which have become almost mythical and overlooked themselves.

Or maybe we could put it like that: myths, mythologies provided answers or gave possible answers to at the time unanswerable questions and phenomena and so on and went kind of in the direction of explaining those, whereas today urban fantasy and if we see it in that same tradition kind of modern mythology can make us question circumstances which might seem unquestionable or self-evident because it's our daily lives and everything that surrounds us and everything that we have been kind of raised with and educated to accept.

CS: Yeah, but, you mentioning kind of the gods, the heroes of myth makes me think of another entirely uninteresting strand of urban fantasy that I hadn't even thought about before, superheroes.

AE: Yeah, I was actually going to ask, I mean I keep coming back to this whenever I talk to you because you did your dissertation on graphic novels and that of course play a role there and to me the way your first of your three definitions of urban fantasy that you mentioned before, kind of the living together with supernatural beings, werewolves, shapeshifters, human-like elves and fairies and so on. Of course if you take *Superman*, the comic books, you have Superman living in the city, so you have this— and you are an expert on this, so maybe in closing you can say a few words about superhero comics.

CS: Well, you might argue that superheroes, if you are very nitpicky, are more SciFi than fantasy because there's usually a kind of explanation, oh Superman is an alienation, Batman is just a rich guy—

AE: A lot of gadgets. . .

CS: A lot of gadgets and a weird psychological problem but if we kind of see it from that perspective then yes, superheroes can definitely be seen as very archetypal heroes, are very much like Hercules or Gilgamesh and, you mentioned it, superheroes are absolutely super connected to cities. Superman – Metropolis, Batman – Gotham City, every superhero has their own city, Spiderman is in New York, in the film and in the comics, New York is basically an integral part of Spiderman's personality.

AE: Yeah, because Spiderman is also so much about local communities and he's so tied into that New York identity.

CS: Exactly, exactly! And so, you could definitely see superheroes as at least ideologically opposite of the kind of urban fantasy that I was focusing on. They are much more affirming, they are not as critical, they are not as doubtful, not as postmodern about cities. It's more this kind of like yes, even within the cities, even in those seemingly so pedestrian, banal places, there is this need for having a hero, there is this need for being saved, there is this need of looking up to god or a mythological hero and the superheroes kind of fulfilled that. And while it would be very, very easy to just say, yeah this is just wish fulfillment in a certain way, I think absolutely there is something to this thing: how closely they are connected to a city, and how closely they also represent this kind of, again, fragmentation, this kind of you have this secret identity, you have this kind of ambiguity about the superhero, who are they really and all that and I think that is connected to that. Again, I think Spiderman is the hero of New York City, but Peter Parker is a product of New York City as well, a typical New York City boy and I think if you go down this road you will come to very different conclusions regarding the message, but there are definitely parallels to the more critical thinking of Gaiman or Miéville that there is something about cities that is, well, fantastical.

AE: Yeah, that's a very nice note to end on! Thank you very, very much for taking the time to do this!

CS: Thank you for having me, it's always a pleasure.

AE: And thank you all very much for listening. Next week I'll be speaking with Sebastian Tants about one of Herman Melville's lesser known novels, *Israel Potter*.